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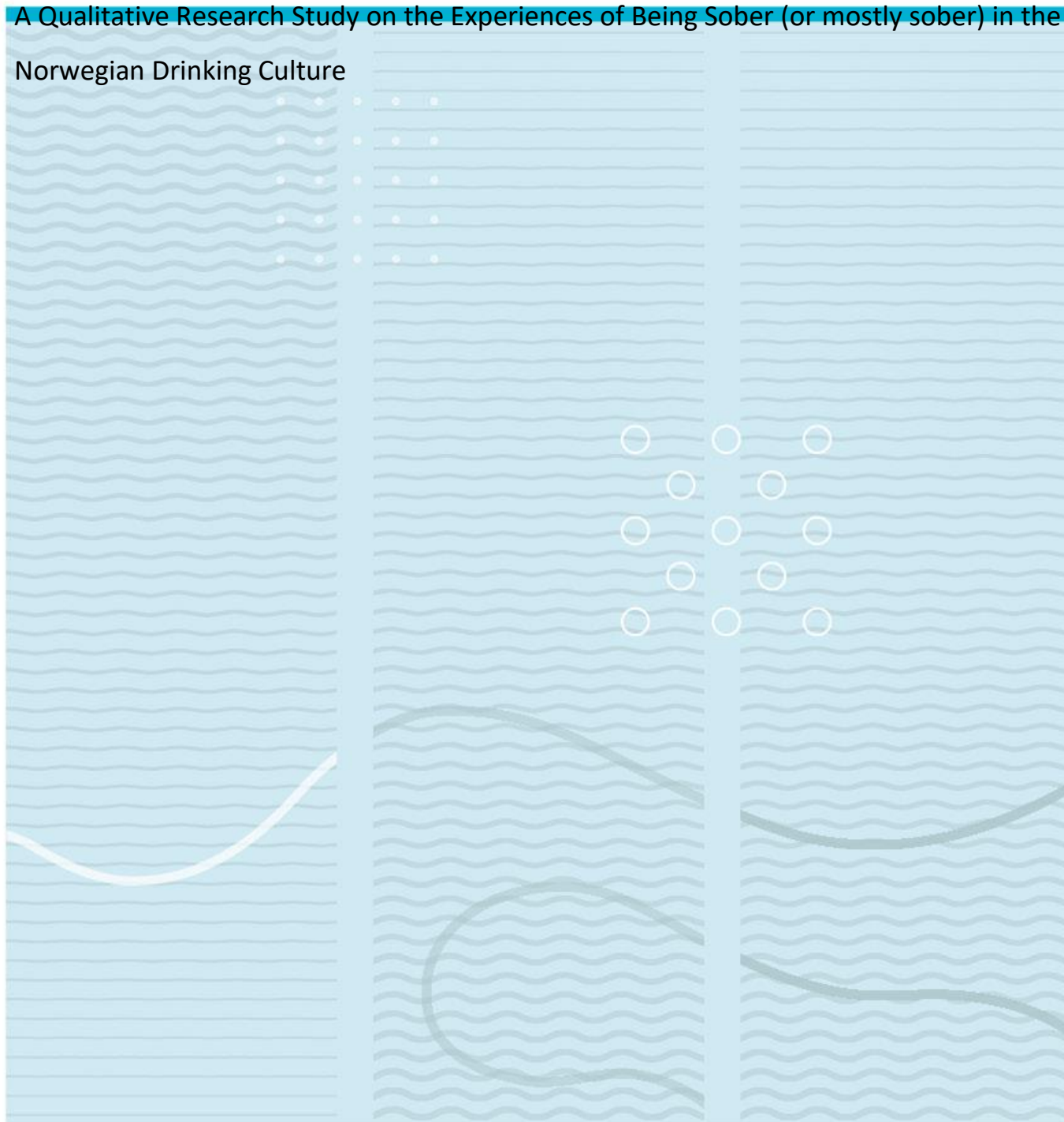
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*"It's Almost Like Going to a Party with Pink Sequins and an Umbrella on your Head"*

A Qualitative Research Study on the Experiences of Being Sober (or mostly sober) in the Norwegian Drinking Culture



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## Abstract

In this study, titled *“It’s Almost Like Going to a Party with Pink Sequins and an Umbrella on your Head”*: A Qualitative Research Study on the Experiences of being Sober (or mostly sober) in the Norwegian Drinking Culture, I have interviewed twelve non-drinking (or mostly non-drinking) individuals in order to find out how they experience being sober in the Norwegian drinking culture.

The research topic is **how non-drinking individuals experience being sober in the Norwegian drinking culture**. This study shines light on the discourses of being sober, how abstinence from alcohol is being perceived by drinkers and how the non-drinkers perceive the drinking culture that surrounds them. I have also explored the concepts of identity and deviancy in relation to the non-consumption of alcohol.

The study has found that there is a conflict of discourse between the two sides (drinking vs. non-drinking), which one could state is a hegemonic struggle of contrasting values. Non-drinkers may experience stigmatization in forms of drinking pressure and the social obligation of justifying their non-drinking to drinkers. The study has also found that different types of cultural capital affect how individuals develop a relationship (or non-relationship) to alcohol use.

## Foreword

Writing this paper has been an intensive journey.

I would like to thank my mentor, Ellen Schrumpf, for all the good advice and guidance she has given me. I would also like to thank the University in Southeast Norway and the lecturers who have provided me with four semesters of an enriching education.

I would like to thank my friends and other loved ones, for always lending me an ear to listen about the process of writing a master thesis, and especially my colleagues who helped, listened, encouraged and cheered for one another in our messenger group.

And finally, I would like to thank the participants of this study. I have learned so much from talking to them, and it is their willingness to share their sobriety narratives that have made this paper possible.

Porsgrunn, May 2022

Marija Bliznac

## 1.0 Introduction

### 1.1 Research Topic

If we take for granted the existence of (alcohol) drinking cultures, whether they refer to a national drinking culture, a drinking culture among a certain group of people, or a personal drinking culture, we must also assume that there exists an opposite to said culture, namely, a counterculture of being sober.

The research topic for this paper is **how non-drinking individuals experience being sober in the Norwegian drinking culture**. In order to explore this topic, I have identified three research questions that I will answer in this paper:

1. How does the non-use of alcohol affect non-drinker's identities?
2. Are non-drinkers considered deviant in a 'wet' society?
3. How is the Norwegian drinking culture perceived by sober individuals?

### 1.2 Why is it important to investigate this?

I have several reasons for wanting to investigate this. Some of those reasons are personal, since I myself opted for a Munkholm instead of a Carlsberg as a lifestyle choice, and I felt, frankly, that voices of people such as myself were not heard of enough. This lifestyle change has led me to investigate the concept of (alcohol) drinking culture and the narratives around it. Some research suggests that the concept of non-drinking and the identity and consumer choices it involves are under-researched, and especially within cultural studies (see for example Race and Brown, 2016). I will go into this claim in further detail in the theory chapter.

Alcohol dependency, on the other hand, is extensively researched. It only takes one google search and at hand are countless studies on the practice of drinking extensively. However, alcohol dependency is only the end-stage of a life lived with a bottle in one hand, there are other stops on that train before it reaches its final destination. Once you are at the final stop, there are plenty of options – rehabilitation institutions, medical options, well-established peer fellowship

organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous and so on. If you choose to leave the train before its final stop – you might find yourself looking into a half empty landscape. However, things are being built there, trendy concepts such as sober-curiosity, various online self-help or sober groups, dry January, alcohol-free parties etc. might just give you a sense of being understood. I find these between-stops and its travelers interesting, and since they are under-researched, I find it useful and important to conduct research into it myself.

### **1.3 What is the goal with this research?**

My goal is to create and gain deeper knowledge into the practices of alcohol (non) consumption. As I stated before, if there is a drinking culture, there must be a non-drinking culture and my goal is to gather in-depth knowledge and information about people who have stopped drinking after being part of a drinking culture, and also people who never drank much to begin with.

While researching for this master thesis proposal, I have come across different and interesting research in various fields on topics related to my research interest. Emma Bannister, Maria G. Piacentini and Anthony Grimes (2019) for example, have done research into the concept of identity refusal in non-drinkers. Emily Nicholls (2021) has explored the practice of refusal to consume alcohol and how it affects the consumer-identity in women using online sober support groups. Pauline Garvey (2005) has explored the Norwegian drinking culture from an anthropological standpoint.

The above-mentioned research is a light overview of the body of work I will be drawing from and ideally adding too.

### **1.4 Notes on Methods and Theory**

This study is a qualitative research study. I have used open-structured interviews to gather in-depth knowledge on the experiences of being sober in the Norwegian drinking culture. The study has been approved by NSD (Norsk Senter for Datainnsamling) and the participants have consented

to being interviewed and for the interviews to be recorded and subsequently transcribed. They were given the option of retracting their participation in the study at any point.

This study is inspired by critical discourse analysis, since the empirical data that was analyzed is based on personal discourses around sobriety in a dominant drinking culture. Critical discourse analysis is often used in qualitative studies within the Cultural studies discipline. However, I have built my analysis on different interdisciplinary approaches. The theories and theoretical terms in this paper draw from anthropological, consumer and sociological research done within the research realms of alcohol consumption studies.

### **1.5 Progression of the Paper**

This study is organized into seven chapters and their subchapters. You will first be reading about the methodology I have used to gather and analyze the empirical data in this study.

The methods chapter is followed by theories, terms and previous research into the topic of alcohol (non) consumption and the Norwegian drinking culture. The theory chapter also serves as a theoretical frame that sets the study into a certain context.

The analysis of the empirical data is divided into three parts – the first one investigating the sobriety-identity connection, the second one approaching the question of whether not drinking means being marked as deviant in a drinking culture, and finally the analysis of the discourses that reveal how the drinking culture is perceived by its non-participants.

The conclusion and answer to the findings follows the analysis chapter, which is then followed by a list of references and annexes.



## 2.0 Methods

### 2.1 The Open, Individual Interview and the Interview Guide

In this qualitative study, I have gathered empirical data about the experiences of being sober or mostly sober in the Norwegian drinking culture. As Dag Invar Jacobsen explains in his book about research methods, the open individual interview is best suited when:

- a) relatively few subjects are being interviewed,
- b) when we are interested in what each individual has to say and
- c) when we are interested in how the individual interprets and applies meaning to a certain phenomenon (Jacobsen, 2015, p. 146-147). (My translation)

I am interested in individuals' interpretations of themselves and others within and outside of the Norwegian drinking culture and have therefore concluded that the open individual interview will be the best suited method to do so.

I have also produced an interview guide which I followed, although non-rigidly. I have used it more as a topic reminder, so that I could touch upon the topics that I considered important for the study (See annex 2 for the interview guide). Anneke Meyer writes that:

...a relatively unstructured approach has the advantage of giving respondents space to explore issues they consider important, while a more structured approach allows for easier comparison between interviews because the same topics have been covered through the same questions. (Meyer, 2006, p. 82)

For the most part the conversations had a natural flow to them, and some of my participants answered some of the questions I have written down without being prompted to do so. During our conversations new topics arose which I later included in the following interviews. Many of my interviewees were very opinionated and had a lot of thoughts and ideas they wanted to share, which added depth into the interview process and the subsequent texts that were produced.

### 2.1.2 The question of objectivism in relation to my own sobriety

In this project, I am both the researcher and theoretically seen a member of my own target group of informants. My interest in the subject itself stems from my own participation in the Norwegian (and Bosnian) drinking culture, and my subsequent decision to quit consuming alcohol. As I was very well aware of the fact that this subject is personally related to me, I have from the beginning on attempted to minimize my expectations on agreeableness, as this was a personal concern of mine *before* I even started actual work on the project. By agreeableness, I mean the idea of expecting that my informants will share my view on the subject.

Anne Ryen writes in her teaching book about the qualitative interview:

The researcher is part of the society he or she researches. Scientists are also a part of the society and the social life. The demand for objectivism or neutrality in relation to the research issues at hand of the researcher become very problematic. The researcher's own experience background can influence both the setup and the execution of the social sciences study (Ryen, 2017, p. 43). (My translation).

As I mentioned before, I am not only a part of the society in general, but I am, broadly speaking, belonging to the group of people I wanted to interview. At first, I was apprehensive about this, yet I would argue that the fact I am "one of them" made possible for a connection based on understanding and trust.

### 2.1.3 Presentation of Participants

As the title of the study suggests, the participants of the study are individuals who live sober or mostly sober within the Norwegian drinking culture. Their motives and reasons for not participating (or not actively participating) in the Norwegian drinking culture were quite different and to be found out during the interview process. In that regard, I could say I did not focus on the motives for not drinking in the recruitment process, although I had as criteria that I wanted to interview individuals who had *some* experience with alcohol use, exempting individuals who never

participated in the drinking culture because of, for example, religious reasons. I also exempted individuals who had a history of documented alcohol dependency, although it needs to be stated that I have not been contacted by individuals who had such a background with alcohol, which I will say is because of the content of the advertisements which was targeted at what one would describe as social/former social drinkers or mostly sober individuals.

In the following part, I will present in more detail the participants of this study and what their relationship with alcohol is, according to them. I will include information about their nationality, because I consider it relevant to the study in terms of comparison between different drinking cultures that some of the non-Norwegian informants talk about. All the informants are currently living in Norway and thus geographically situated within the realms of the Norwegian 'drinking culture'. I will also include information about where I first established contact with each informant, in order to discover a connection between informants recruited via the same source.

**Kim** is a 31-year-old Norwegian man. He has been sober for 6 years (since the age of 25), and explains that his decision to become sober is motivated by his psychological health issues. He has never been a big drinker, so the decision came relatively easy to him, but he states that he misses the taste of a glass of red wine with dinner, for example, something he does not dare to consume because he is worried it will worsen his anxiety. Kim has showed interest in this study via the social media site Reddit and its Norway subreddit.

**Mads** is a 35-year old Norwegian man. He has been sober since he was 28, and he quit drinking because he was diagnosed with ADHD, and having been prescribed Ritalin, he had been advised by his doctor not to drink while taking the medicine. He had been an active participant of the Norwegian drinking culture before quitting, and he liked to go out and party with friends. At some point he also worked in the service industry as a bouncer and had thus witnessed the "downsides" of the Norwegian drinking culture while sober at work. Mads has also been recruited via Reddit.

**Ramona** is a 38-year old German woman who has been living in Norway for over 15 years. She has been 'mostly' sober her entire life since she first tasted alcohol while a young woman in Germany. She says she drinks 'when she feels for it' but that this happens rarely. She references prior relationships as motivators for not drinking and describes several family members who had a

problematic relationship with alcohol as negative roles models. She never really liked drinking and being drunk, but states, unprompted, that this does not have anything to do with a religion for example. Ramona has messaged me after seeing my advertisement for this study on the University of Southeast Norway's facebook account.

**Oscar** is a 31-year-old Norwegian man. He, similarly, to Ramona, is mostly sober and never was a 'big drinker', and especially not after getting his driver's license. He states, however, that he is familiar with the so-called Norwegian drinking culture and mentions that his mother is a psychologist specializing in addiction. He claims that this had an influence on him, but otherwise states that his parents drunk 'normally' which in his opinion means drinking some alcohol in the weekends, but never 'getting drunk'. Oscar is an informant I first had contact with via Reddit.

**Inger** is a 44-year-old Norwegian woman. She quit drinking alcohol two years ago. Before that, she had a "normal relationship with alcohol, in light of what is considered normal in Norway.". Inger quit drinking because she asked herself what good does drinking do her, if she feels bad the day after? She states that she had not been drinking often, but when first drinking, she drunk too much. Inger contacted me after the organization DNT- Edru Livstil wrote an article about this study.

**Iben** is a 45-year-old Danish woman living in Norway. She has not had any alcohol in 14 years. Iben states that she quit drinking because of "fingers pointing at her". When I asked her to elaborate what she means by that, she stated that because of her work (she has a high paying job) people were always expecting her to buy rounds of drinks. She also states that her activity as an athlete is an important factor in her sobriety. Iben contacted me after reading about this study in the article by DNT – Edru Livstil.

**Håkon** is a 57-year-old Norwegian man. He states that his relationship with alcohol was "a typical Norwegian" one, before he quit drinking two years ago. He also states that, since he is from the north of Norway, where drinking is a central activity, he was simply born and raised into this drinking culture. He says of himself that he has been on both sides of the fence, meaning he has been both drinking and sober. He currently works for a temperance organization. He also contacted me after reading the article written by DNT – Edru Livstil.

**Gustav** is a 37-year-old Danish man living in Norway. He quit drinking completely 7 years ago when he learned he was going to be a father. Gustav himself grew up with a parent addicted to alcohol, and this had great influence on him. He himself had been quite a heavy drinker before he quit. Similarly to Iben, Gustav focuses a lot on exercise instead of participating in the drinking culture. He has also become interested in this study after reading the DNT – Edru Livstil article.

**Jon** is a 47-year-old Icelandic man living in Norway. Jon refers to himself as a ‘sober alcoholic’ who has been off the drink for over 18 years. Jon is somewhat of a unique informant; he is the only one who messaged me after seeing my advertisement on the sober group A-larms facebook page and he is the only informant who considers himself having a problematic relationship to alcohol. He works for different temperance organizations and is very dedicated to the concept of *recovery*.

**Benas** is a 30-year-old man originally from Lithuania but living in Norway. Benas has been an active participant in the drinking culture, going out and partying “like everybody”. He has found a healthier pastime activity by taking up running as a hobby. He is quite reflected on the fact that drinking was affecting his life in a negative way, and he is very satisfied with his new sober self. Benas is a person I have asked to participate in this study in-person because he is an acquaintance.

**Denis** is a 37-year-old man originally from Bosnia and Hercegovina. As he stated himself, his relationship with alcohol is a very complex love-hate one. He also stated, ironically, that alcohol saved his life many times as he was self-medicating with it due to trauma he has experienced during his life in Bosnia and Hercegovina. He started considering quitting alcohol about two years ago, and he has had several attempts of quitting before he quit this time around. I asked Denis to participate in this study in person, as he is an acquaintance of mine.

**Sofie** is a 28-year-old Norwegian woman. She has been sober for 10 years. However, she only tried alcohol a few times before making the choice of stopping consuming alcohol. She states she found out pretty fast, within two weeks, that alcohol was not something she liked. Sofie is an informant who contacted me after reading the article on DNT – Edru Lifestyle webpage.

#### 2.1.4 Recruiting

I have approached the activity of finding participants for this study through what Anneke Meyer calls “purposive sampling strategy” (Meyer, 2008, p. 78). Further on, Meyer writes that there are “... many possibilities of generating access (to informants)” (2008, p. 80). I have combined several strategies, however, most of them were internet-based advertisements via different social media platforms.

Following is a summary of the recruitment process.

##### **Reddit**

My first round of recruitment for participation in this project went via the social media platform [www.reddit.com](http://www.reddit.com). Reddit is an online meeting and discussion forum, where likeminded or geographically connected people come together in so-called subreddits. The subreddit that sparked my interest in studying sobriety is the international r/stopdrinking subreddit. This is a subreddit I frequented during the first months of my own sobriety, where users discuss quitting drinking alcohol and encourage each other to stay sober. Another subreddit that was of high importance for this project is the Norway-oriented subreddit r/Norge. I have seen several posts regarding sobriety and the clash with the Norwegian drinking culture and have therefore decided to reach out to users there, so as to keep the scope of my study geographically relevant to Norway. I had to ask permission of the r/Norge moderators, and they kindly let me advertise for this project to their users. Since the original advertisement did not result in a big enough response, they allowed me to advertise a second time, but clearly stated that that would be the last time I would be allowed to advertise for the project on r/Norge. I ended up talking to three informants that have contacted me via Reddit. See annex 3 for the reddit advertisements.

##### **DNT – Edru Livstil**

Since the two abovementioned reddit advertisements have not yielded in enough informants, I had to look for them elsewhere. A quick google search took me to the website of the oldest Norwegian sobriety organization – DNT Edru Livstil (Transl. DNT – Sober Lifestyle). I contacted

their then general secretary Åsmund Kleivenes who wrote an article about my project and called for interested individuals to contact me. I got contacted by seven individuals, of which five ended up being my informants. Another one retracted his participation in the project, and yet another one did not meet the criteria of having experience with alcohol.

### **Facebook / A-larm/ “Oh is that your master thesis topic? I know someone...”**

Since the beginning of the recruitment process, I had great expectations from my posting on the social media platform [www.reddit.com](http://www.reddit.com). When this did not yield in enough informants, as I stated before, I had to think of other means to attract interested individuals to the study. I posted on my own personal facebook account about the project, as well as on the Facebook page of students at the University of Southeast Norway, and on the Facebook page of the sobriety group “A-Larm”. I got contacted by some interested individuals in this way. Two of my informants I met by sheer accident, as I was talking about my project in a social setting, and they turned out to be members of my target group of informants.

## **2.2 The Ethics, The Data and The Anonymization**

Part of the preparatory work for this project was getting the study approved by NSD (Norsk Senter for Forskningsdata) (see annex 1). The study was approved on the 05.11.2021. All the interviews apart from one (which was a face-to-face interview) were conducted via Zoom and recorded with the built-in voice recorder on USN SAFE, which is my university’s remote desktop and cloud storage solution. It is there the data is being safely kept, as well as the transcriptions. All of the recordings and transcriptions will be deleted by the end date of this project, approximately May 2022. All the emails and social media messages will also be deleted. Before the interviews, the participants received an information letter about the project, and I have, after consulting with NSD, decided to record their consent to participate before conducting the interviews. This was done by me stating the date of the interview, and them reading their name and the consent part of the information letter before we started talking.

For the sake of easier reading, all the informants have been given pseudonyms as part of the transcription process. Potentially revealing details about their employment and other potentially identifying aspects have been excluded or changed in the process of analyzing the material, thus ensuring their anonymity.

### **2.3 Data Collection Process**

As previously mentioned, the interviews which are the ground for analysis for this study, have all except for one been conducted over the online meeting platform Zoom during autumn and winter 2021. I have finished transcribing the interviews at the end of January 2022. As the interviewing process was happening in the time of the Covid 19 pandemic, it was only natural and expected that the interviews will be conducted online or by telephone, and this circumstance has probably also contributed to the number of informants I ended up interviewing. It also made it a lot easier to reach out to a larger number of people, which then again made it possible for me to pick more targeted informants, since the geographical locations of the informants were insignificant. Since this is a study about non-consumption of alcohol, the questions I asked were direct and open. I was interested in how a certain individual places themselves within and outside of the context of what we call “the Norwegian drinking culture”, and the most important information was to be extracted from what the informant communicated verbally. By comparison, the interview I conducted face-to-face ended up being a lot of small-talk and insignificant information, whereas the interviews conducted online had a more compact and direct nature to them, as well as a clearer direction.

### **2.4 The Empirical Data**

The empirical data in its original form consists of twelve interviews that lasted everything from 20 to 50 minutes. Some of the participants were more concise and direct with what they had to say about the subject, while others took more time and went into more details. I have during all the interviews had in mind that the participants differ in character and personality, which is why I felt free to judge for myself when a participant had said what they meant about the topic. This



resulted in my concluding that it did not matter how long the interview was, and that the “less is more” principle indeed rung true for some of the interviews. With those participants I was worried about diluting their points of view if I started digging around more, so I let the interviews end at what sounded like a natural ending to our conversation. When I felt I had covered all the topics I found important to include in the interview, I asked the participant if there was something they wanted to add which I may have not asked about. With some participants, this led to the opening of new topics to discuss, whereas others claimed that they had nothing to add. Aeron Davis writes that:

Data is collected through the research process rather than just being collected for analysis. Hypothesis and theories may evolve with the research. Consequently, interview questions and observation practices need to adapt too. (Davis, 2008, p. 65)

In its transcribed form, the empirical data is about 100 pages long. It has been transcribed in the style of edited transcription, which means I have excluded repetitive sentences, most non-word noises, and unfinished sentences without meaning to them. Great detail has been paid to preserving the meaning of the participants’ utterances in a written form, and at times this was made possible by compounding half-sentences and omitting redundant sentence fillers. Most of the interviews were conducted in English, others in Norwegian. I asked the participants beforehand if they felt comfortable speaking English to me, to which most of them answered positively. The interviews originally in Norwegian were translated by me.

#### **2.4.1 What Kind of Empirical Data is Produced by Interviewing?**

Interviewing is an active process of empirical data production. It is the interviewer and interviewee who produce knowledge together. The interview knowledge is being produced in a conversational relationship; it is contextual, linguistic, narrative and pragmatical.” (Kvale & Brinkmann 2015, p. 36)

Further on in the book, Kvale and Brinkmann elaborate on these perspectives, and in my understanding, the main traits of knowledge produced in an interview are highlighted as follows (Translated from Norwegian by me):

- Empirical data is contextual: the knowledge that is produced in one situation, cannot automatically be transferred – or compared to – another situation. The interview takes place in an intrapersonal context, and the meaning of the interview statements is related to their context.
- It is linguistic: language is the tool of the interview process, and the interview product that is created as a result, is linguistic in the form of oral statements and transcribed texts that are to be analyzed.
- It is narrative: stories are effective ways to find meaning in our social reality and our own lives. The interview is an important platform to gather narratives that inform us about the human *betydningsverden* (world of meanings)
- It is pragmatic: when the human reality is being understood as a conversation and an act, empirical data becomes the ability to act effectively. The question of legitimacy as to to what extent a study is scientific, or if it leads to true empirical knowledge, has today a tendency to be replaced by the pragmatic question of whether a study produces useful empirical data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2016, p. 78-79)

In light of the above explained concepts of empirical data, I can say that the data produced out of the interviews I conducted was a direct result of the conversations between my informants and me. We have created the language and the narrative together, in the context of our time and the circumstances we live in. This by default means that we are both comfortable in our narratives, as well as limited by them.

## 2.5 Analysis

Anneke Meyer, referencing Steinar Kvale (1996) states that:

... the analysis of cultural consumers tends to take place on two levels. On the first level, analysis focuses on the transcripts. An ad hoc method of meaning generation... (2008, p. 82)

The second level would be categorizing the material, or coding, which I have done manually on the computer. I have then identified three different major topics within the empirical data:

1. Sobriety in relation to identity
2. Sobriety as deviancy
3. How the Norwegian drinking culture is perceived by non-drinking individuals

Categorizing the analysis chapter proved itself to be a challenge because the separate topics I have identified ended up being intertwined and relevant from the point of view of different analytical approaches.

I have then, referencing the theories and terms I have found relevant to this research, analyzed the material. Some of the informants are more prominent in the analysis, simply because they had more to say about the topic than others.

### 3.0 Theories, Terms and Previous Research

#### 3.1 Discourse Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis and Discursive Psychology

This study is inspired by critical discourse analysis, which is an often-used tool for analysis within the field of cultural studies. In their book *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, Marianne W Jørgensen and Louise Phillips state that all the discourse analytical approaches they discuss draw on structuralist and post-structuralist language theory (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p.13). In the analysis of my own empirical data, I will mostly draw from this body of work in discourse analysis.

**Discourse Theory**, according to Jørgensen and Phillips, is a marxist-structuralist theory constructed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) where “Marxism provides a starting point for thinking about the social, and structuralism provides a theory of meaning.” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 28). The authors also state, however, that discourse theory in and by itself lacks specific methods and approaches to analyzing discourse, and that it is a good idea to supplement the theory with discourse analysis approaches of which the linguist Norman Fairclough is a key thinker of. Within discourse theory, I find the concepts of identity and group formation especially relevant to my own study. Jørgensen and Phillips ask: How can we conceptualize the actors who participate in the struggles about the definition and shaping of reality? Referencing Laclau and Mouffe, Jørgensen and Phillips state that a certain discourse can never be established firmly, there will always be several discourses who conflict with each other. Using Athusser’s concept of interpellation, individuals are interpellated or placed within certain positions by the way they talk. One conclusion on identity they draw is that identity is always “*relationally* organized, the subject is something because it is contrasted with something that it is not” (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 42). In terms of group formation, the authors, inspired by Laclau and Mouffe, state that group formation is to be analyzed according to the same principals as the identity of an individual, as the line that separate the two is often blurred. Their example of this unclear distinction between the two concepts is the individual identification as a “man”, and the group identification as “men” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Related to the term of group formation, the authors also focus on the concept of *representation* “Because groups are not socially predetermined, they do not exist until they are constituted in discourse. And that entails that someone talks about, or on behalf of, the group.” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p.44).

According to Jørgensen and Phillips, “For **Critical Discourse Analysis** discourse is a form of social practice which both *constitutes* the social world and is *constituted* by other social practices.” (2002, p. 56). What does this mean? In simple words, it means that discourse is simultaneously the *creator* of and the *creation* of social processes. Further on the authors suggest that in critical discourse analysis “it is claimed that discursive practices contribute to the creation and reproduction of unequal power relations between social groups...” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 57), and in this study, this is the relation between non-alcohol drinkers and alcohol drinkers. The authors state that these effects are understood as “*Ideological effects*” (2002, p. 57). As previously mentioned, Norman Fairclough is a key thinker within critical discourse analysis, and it his three-dimensional analysis model that I will base my analysis on. Jorgensen and Phillips explain that the analysis which draws on this model should focus on the following:

- The linguistic features of the text (text)
- Processes relating to the production and consumption of the text (discursive practice)
- The wider social practice to which the communicative event belongs (2002, p.61)

It is also interesting to add, in the context of this study, as Jørgensen and Phillips explain, that discursive relations are sites of social struggle and conflict. (2002, p. 66), and that, referencing Fairclough:

The concept of hegemony gives us the means by which to analyse how discursive practice is part of a larger social practice involving power relations: discursive practice can be seen as an aspect of a hegemonic struggle that contributes to the reproduction and transformation of the order of discourse of which it is part (and consequently of the existing power relations. (2002, p. 68)

Hegemony is a term that represents the domination of one group over another, and in this context the domination of the drinking culture and its values over the values of non-drinking.

Although **Discursive Psychology** is an approach mostly reserved for psychological research, as Sørensen et. al state in their work about the new cultural studies, there is one variant of discursive

psychology which overlaps with discourse analysis, namely the concept of positioning (Sørensen et. al, 2008, p. 111). I find this concept relevant to the study I am conducting. The authors also state that the most important is, as one positions themselves, they also position the other at the same time, and that thus all positioning is relational (2008, p. 111). Jørgensen and Phillips, relevantly to the abovementioned concept, state that:

Positioning is viewed as an integral part of the processes by which people construct accounts of themselves in interaction with others. These processes are understood as processes of negotiation as people actively take up positions within different, and sometimes competing discourses. (2002, p. 93) (My translation)

### 3.2 Sobriety: A Question of Identity?

In *Who Needs Identity?* Stuart Hall (1996) claims that identities are a product of the marking of difference and exclusion, rather than they are a sign of an identical, naturally constituted unity (an identity in its traditional meaning). He further claims, referencing Michele Derrida, Ernesto Laclau and Judith Butler, that identities are constructed through difference and that this entails that it is only through the relation to what it is not and what it lacks that the 'positive' meaning of any term – and thus its 'identity' can be constructed (Hall, 1996, p. 4-5). One could assume that in non-drinkers then, the identities are constructed by being different and excluded (from a dominant drinking culture), however, what if the non-drinker refuses the assumed identity that goes with the act of not consuming alcohol?

In the paper *Identity Refusal – Distancing from non – drinking in a Drinking Culture* Emma Bannister, Maria G Piacentini and Anthony Grimes (2019) explore the concepts of identity refusal in non-drinkers following Susie Scott's 'Sociology of Nothing' (2017). By identity refusal Bannister et. al refer to the positions their informants take in order to disengage with the collective identity of the non-drinker. They have developed two overall identity refusal positions – namely resistance and othering (Bannister et. al, 2019, p. 749). The former is where individuals adopt a distancing through resistance position which results in a rejection of the relevance of non-drinking to their identities. The latter is where individuals seek to distance themselves from what is perceived as

the identity of the non-drinker. These positions may be recognized as a direct result of the negative cultural implications not-drinking often entails. Bannister et. al draw comparison between not drinking as an (negative) inaction, and for example not smoking (positive) and not eating pizza (neutral) inaction (2019, p. 758).

In the article *A Sociology of Nothing / Understanding the Unmarked* (2017), Susie Scott states that “*Nothing* is a sociologically neglected terrain, comprising negatively defined phenomena, such as non-identification, non-participation and non-presence.” (Scott, 2017, p. 3). Scott also suggests that we should, alongside asking how people performatively do nothing, ask why they might “not do” or “not be” potential things (2017, p. 4). She also proposes a distinction between two modes of social action that accomplish negative social phenomena:

1. Demonstrative ‘acts of commission’ (doing nothing)
2. More passive ‘acts of omission’ (not-doing, not-being something) (Scott, 2017, p. 15)

For this study, the first set of acts (acts of commission) are particularly interesting, because as Scott claims they “occur when we choose to avoid doing/being something, through conscious disengagement or dis-identification...” (Scott, 2017, p. 5). Scott also poses an important question directly related to this study, namely: How do we experience the things we do not do, and what stories do we tell (or not tell) about them? (Scott, 2017, p. 6)

Emily Nicholls (2021), the author of the study *Sober Rebels or Good Consumer-Citizens? Anti-Consumption and the ‘Enterprising Self’ in Early Sobriety* investigates how newly sober women negotiate sobriety within a drinking culture. Her article’s starting point is from a consumption perspective, or rather from an anti-consumption perspective. In the abstract of the article, Nicholls states that: “A refusal to consume risks positioning the self outside of the established neoliberal order, particularly as traditional models of sobriety and ‘recovery’ position the non-drinker as diseased or flawed.” (Nicholls, 2021, p. 768). The author found that in order to accomplish an ‘enterprising’ self while not consuming alcohol, her informants describe a “...particular journey... through contrasting a powerless, ineffectual and inauthentic drinking self with a successful sober self who retains control over their life...” (Nicholls, 2021, p. 769). It is important to note that the informants for this project have been recruited from a sobriety facebook group for women who do

not drink, and where an alcohol-free-lifestyle was celebrated, which stands in contrast to traditional narratives of 'alcoholism' within the recovery communities. Emily Nicholls (2021) also states that the informants were recruited based on non-experience with traditional recovery groups or institutions, which I would argue serves to tell a tale of a 'new kind of sober' that is beginning to emerge in the western world, if not globally.

With the concept of the 'negotiating selves' in mind and drawing from Chris Barker and Emma A Jane's summary of Anthony Giddens' approaches to self-identity and structuration theory. Barker and Jane state that for Anthony Giddens (1991) "**self-identity** is constituted by the ability to sustain a narrative about the self... Identity stories attempt to answer the critical questions: what to do; how to act; who to be" (Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 261). Further on in outlining Giddens view on identity, Barker and Jane write that identity is not a set of traits we have, but is something we think we are, and it is prone to change with the change of circumstances and is thus considered a *project*. Thus, considering this study, one could argue that sobriety is a project that is being negotiated in the context of the drinking culture.

### 3.3 Drinking Culture as Structure and Non-drinking as Agency

In outlining Anthony Giddens' (1984) **structuration theory** (another theory I find relevant to this study) Barker and Jane state that "Structuration theory centers on the way agents produce and reproduce social structure through their own actions." (Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 279). A focal point to Giddens' structuration theory is the concept of the "duality of structure, by which structures are not only constraining but also enabling" (2016, p. 280). What does this entail? Barker and Jane present the answer to this by drawing on the example of the mother: Being a mother can, for example, mean that she cannot take paid employment in some areas of the world, but it can also mean that she gets to be a mother – spend time with her children and so on (2016, p. 280). Another important concept within structuration theory is the concept of re-creation. Individuals do not bring into being regularized human activity just by being, but it is continually re-created by them "via the very means whereby they express themselves as actors." (Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 279.)



Regarding the concept of agency, Barker and Jane explain that through the lens of cultural studies, agency is *socially produced* (2016, p. 281.). This means that agents do not act purely out of free will, but that it is the social circumstances that determine how agency develops. The authors do not claim that individuals possess no free will to act in one way or another, but that the way they act is affected by “... differentially distributed social resources. This gives rise to various degrees of the ability to act in specific spaces” (Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 281). I find the concept of agency useful in analyzing the different motivations my informants have for not drinking, as well as the negotiation narratives they use when in “dialogue” with participants of the drinking culture.

### 3.4 Non-drinking as an Act of Deviance

Arnold Birenbaum and Edward Sagarin (1973, p.71) talk about people who may be described as occupying socially defined statuses, for example the person who receives an income, but does not pay tax, or a person who is head of a household but does not provide for his family. They depict these inactions as a failure to meet normative requirements, but in the same instance they pose the question about why it is expected that a person should drink (alcohol). The ‘deviant actor’ in the world of Birenbaum’s and Sagarin’s article *The Deviant Actor Maintains his Right to be Present: The Case of the Non-drinker* (1973) is the abstaining individual, and since alcohol is considered sacred, the deviant actor in a particular social gathering is not only being offered a drink, but also “commanded” and “summoned” to recognize the sacredness of an occasion. Birenbaum and Sagarin add that behind the question of “would you like a drink” lays not only its literal meaning, but a call for the alteration of the meaning of the situation, and by refusing to participate, the deviant is rejecting the new direction of the meaning others want to put on the situation (1973., p. 71).

On the other hand, the authors suggest that the refusal to drink can become an interesting topic in and by itself, serving as a sort of entrée to the activity of socializing within a party. They also organize non-drinkers as deviants into categories:

1. Total abstainers vs. more flexible and partial ones
2. Former drinkers vs. those who never drunk

3. Former excessive drinkers who have become total abstainers (Birenbaum & Sagarin, 1973, p. 76)

They conclude their research by stating that the nondrinker cannot be accurately labeled as a deviant, but he is *unmarked*, tolerated but not approved (Birenbaum & Sagarin, 1973, p. 80). Further on, on the same page, they state that “His nonconformity is troubling to others; it is upsetting but only mildly so and is easily overlooked if he does not insist on imposing his mode of behavior on others.”

Nancy J. Herman-Kinney and David A. Kinney (2012) have also explored sober as deviant in their study *Sober as Deviant: The Stigma of Sobriety and How some College Students “Stay Dry” on a “Wet” Campus*. Their study focuses on the experiences of non-drinking among “dry” students living on “wet” campuses. They have taken a closer look at stigma-management strategies students employ in order to avoid being labeled as deviant. The authors have also identified different motivations (negative associations and positive associations) for not drinking which I find relevant to my own study. The identified negative associations which I find relevant to this study are as follows:

1. The taste of alcohol
2. Family Alcoholism
3. Personal, Negative Experiences with Alcohol
4. Desire to Remain in Control (Hermann-Kinney and Kinney, 2012, p. 73-76)

Among the positive associations Herman-Kinney and Kinney identify in their paper are for example religious and athletic identity, which I find relatively irrelevant considering that the study that I am conducting has no specific locational context other than the informants all being geographically situated within the Norwegian drinking culture.

Canadian sociologist Erving Goffmann has been a central figure in research on deviance and stigma associated with it. He states that, “identity norms breed deviations as well as conformance” (Goffmann, 1963, p. 162). Here, again, we face a situation of binary concepts. The norm, which in the context of this study means participating in the drinking culture, is to drink, and the choice not to is a deviance. Goffmann suggests two solutions to this issue of deviance:

- One solution was for a category of persons to support a norm but be defined by them- selves and others as not the relevant category to realize the norm and personally to put it into practice.
- A second solution was for the individual who cannot maintain an identity norm to alienate himself from the community which upholds the norm, or refrain from developing an attachment to the community in the first place (Goffmann, 1963., p. 162-163)

In a similar tone, Goffmann names two categories of *sympathetic others* - namely The Own and The Wise (1963., p. 31). The Own, as the name suggests, are members of ones one group, that share the same stigma. The Wise are "...the marginal men before whom the individual with a fault need feel no shame nor exert self-control, knowing that in spite of his failing he will be seen as an ordinary other." (Goffmann, 1963., p. 40).

Regarding the concept of stigma, Erving Goffmann (1963) states that stigma is always involved in situations where there are identity norms involved. If one claims that a non-drinker is stigmatized in a drinking society, he or she can employ what Goffmann calls *techniques of information control*, such as concealment or cover (1963, p. 117).

### 3.5 Habitus and Cultural Capital

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is a prominent theorist within sociology and cultural studies. The theories he developed have been a toolbox many a cultural studies scholar has reached into for analyzing their empirical material. I have also found several of Bourdieu's theories to be relevant to my study on the experience of non-drinking individuals in the Norwegian drinking culture. As Sørensen et. al write in their outline of Bourdieu (all the following citations from Sørensen et. al are my translations) it is foremost three of Bourdieu's concepts that are dominant in his cultural sociology – namely the concepts of *habitus*, *symbolic capital* and *social fields* (Sørensen et. al, 2008, p. 208).

Further on in their outline, the authors explain Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* as the habits and resources that are established early in life, through upbringing, circumstances, schooling and so on, and that it is those habits that later determine how an individual chooses to express themselves culturally. It is interesting to note, that also *habitus* exists on a binary field, and as the authors state, it is both "structured and structuring" (Sørensen et. al, 2008, p. 209). Bourdieu's *habitus* is also an embodiment of *cultural capital*, which Bourdieu claims is the "type of symbolic capital that dominates in the modern society..." (Sørensen et. al, 2008, p. 209).

There are two more types of capital according to Bourdieu – economic and social capital. The term economic capital explains itself, while by social capital Bourdieu means the social connections which can help one attain economic or symbolic values. (Sørensen et. al, 2008, p.209). Concerning the concept of a social field, it can be defined, as Sørensen et. al state, citing Donald Broady "... partly as a limited or fenced social field where individuals and institutions dispute over values common to them, partly as a system of relationships between positions" (Sørensen et. al, 2012, p. 210).

Bourdieu draws a line between production and consumption fields. However, as Sørensen et. al explain, it is not only material culture artefacts which are being produced within the (cultural) production field, but also belief systems and cultural values (2008, p. 210). As the authors further state, the production fields are in perpetual conflict, and there exists a dominating as well as a dominated position within them. (Sørensen et. all, 2008, p. 213). We can, for example, think about the (cultural) production field in the following way regarding (alcohol) drinking cultures: a movie depicts a group of friends hanging out and drinking in a bar. In this way the dominant drinking culture and its discourses are being reinforced, and the perceived normality of such a social gathering that involves alcohol re-approved. Regarding the consumption fields, Sørensen et. al, again referring to Bourdieu, state that "Similar to the production fields, consumption fields can be defined as systems of relations between positions maintained by individuals, groups and more loosely related social categories which differ from each other in questions of taste and lifestyle." (2008, p. 213).

One could argue that two such consumptions fields could be recognized as "mainstream culture" and "subculture". Heith Copes and J. Patrick Williams (2007) in their study about the Straight Edge

youth subculture, claim that in order to study a subculture, one must identify the mainstream culture against which it stands as an opposite. John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts state, in the introduction to *Resistance Through Rituals*, a collection of subculture studies, state that:

The culture of a group or class is the peculiar and distinctive 'way of life' of the group or class, the meanings, values and ideas embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in mores and customs, in the uses of objects and material life. (Clark et. al 1991, p. 10)

In the abovementioned study on the Straight Edge subculture, Heith Copes and J. Patrick Williams (2007) have developed a theory they name techniques of affirmation. They write that "techniques of affirmation are discursive devices that shield individuals from the temptation of wrongdoing; that is, they sharpen the moral force of internalized subcultural norms instead of blunting it." (Copes & Williams, 2007, p. 259)

These techniques stand opposed, as the authors state (Copes & Williams, 2007) to *neutralization theory*, developed in 1957 by Gresham M. Sykes and David Matza as an explanation on how "classic" delinquents make sense of their deviant behavior. In my understanding, neutralization is to be understood as a technique to 'soften' one's bad behavior and justify it to some possible extent or even engage in denial. As opposed to "classic" deviancies and strategies to cope with them on an individual level, sober people may employ the abovementioned techniques of affirmation, which are:

1. Acknowledgment of responsibility
2. Acknowledgment of injury
3. Acknowledgment of the victim
4. Discounting condemners
5. Reference to prior relationships (Copes & Williams, 2007, p. 248)

### 3.6 Previous research: Alcohol use in the context of Cultural Studies

As Kane Race and Rebecca Brown (2016) write in their article about cultural studies approach to drug and alcohol use in *The Sage Handbook of Drug and Alcohol Studies*, it is rather complicated to determine what exactly is to be included into a discussion about cultural studies approaches to drug and alcohol use (Race and Brown, 2016, p. 100-101). They state that since cultural studies are a field that both borrows to and takes from other disciplines – sociology, anthropology, ethnography and so on, it is hard to determine what kind of research could be placed under the flag of ‘cultural studies’ regarding alcohol (and drug) use. In the article, Kane and Brown have attempted to search for developments within the field, in books and anthologies marked as cultural studies. This has proven to be a rather fruitless endeavor, to the surprise of the authors “... when one considers that youth subcultures, popular culture, and the identities, meanings and pleasures of consumption have featured as constitutive themes and analytic objects for the field of cultural studies.” (Race and Brown, 2016, p.101).

I agree with Race and Brown in this statement, as I myself have found it complicated to find cultural studies literature relevant to my own research question which is the experience of being sober in the Norwegian drinking culture. I would like to add, however, that cultural studies as an independent discipline is relatively ‘young’ in comparison to the other traditional and more established social science disciplines, and that as such it is continuously in process of adding new knowledge to its literature and exploring new perspectives. I believe the research I am conducting with this thesis will be adding to this relatively under researched area within cultural studies – living sober within a well-established drinking culture.

Another important and interesting discussion about cultural studies approach to alcohol (and drug use) that Race and Brown address in their article is the influence cultural studies has on other disciplines that conduct research on alcohol and drug use. They cite Graeme Turner who positions cultural studies as “an enabler of the development or renovation of other disciplines” (Race & Brown, 2016, p. 100). Race and Brown also write that:

Indeed, we suspect that many drug and alcohol researchers (those working in qualitative traditions in particular) would affiliate themselves or significant aspects of their scholarly formation with work from cultural studies, at least in part. (2016, p. 100)

Bearing this statement in mind, one must yet again consider the interdisciplinarity of modern social sciences, where theories devised, and research conducted, can be affiliated with multiple disciplines at the same time.

Geoffrey Hunt, Molly Moloney and Kristin Evans (2009) address the meeting between disciplines in their article about epidemiology meets cultural studies in the research about youth cultures, clubs and drugs. In the abstract of the article, they write that:

The cultural studies approach acts as a much-needed corrective to the epidemiological research through its introduction of a focus on pleasure, subjectivity, and social context and by more fully attending to youth perspectives. (Hunt et. al, 2008, p. 601)

I would argue that the answer to why cultural studies needs to be more involved in research on consumption AND non-consumption of 'risky' substances can be found in this statement, as a nuanced understanding of a certain risky phenomenon is key to preventing negative consequences of it. Since my research is focused on individuals who do not participate in the drinking culture, and their perception of it, I will add that it is of utmost importance to understand the ones who *do not* consume risky substances, as this adds a much-needed contrast to the discourse on activities within a drinking (or drug using) culture, particularly when not-doing or doing-in-another-way are the focus of the research.

### 3.7 Notes on the Norwegian Drinking Culture

In the introductory chapter of her book about the Norwegian drinking culture in the last 200 years, the Norwegian historian Ellen Schruppf (2003) explains how the aggressive temperance movement in Norway shaped the perception of alcohol use within the Norwegian drinking culture. Here also, as Schruppf notes, research into the pleasures of drinking has not been focused on, writing a one-sided history of the issue. The focus has been on the problems of alcohol consumption, and the temperance movement's rise and fall, where the "... Norwegian temperance project formed an understanding that there does not exist a middle ground between *abstinence* on one side, and *alcohol abuse* on the other" (Schruppf, 2003, p. 11). Further on, Schruppf references the American anthropologist Joseph Gusfield (1987) who claimed that modernity brought with itself a certain shift in how people lived. "Hedonism, play and intoxication" started belonging to what was designated as free time, affectively casting it out from what was considered working time (Schruppf, 2003, p. 12) (My translation). According to Norwegian social anthropologist Runar Døving in an interview with Bente Bolstad (2007), the current Norwegian drinking culture mirrors these historical findings. *Voksnes Lørdagsgodt (the adults' Saturday candy; my translation)* is what Døving calls the way alcohol is being consumed in Norway, in the article *Hardt Arbeid, FYLL I Helgen* (Bolstad, 2007, p. 2). He further claims, in the same article, that children are being groomed to enter the current excessive drinking culture by the route of the Saturday candy – you work and go to school on weekdays, in order to let loose on a Saturday evening. Children and adults alike.

Pauline Garvey (2005) also conducted research on the Norwegian drinking culture. Garvey conducted a study on a group of friends in the town of Skien in Norway and described the perceived rules and norms that make up the drinking culture. She finds, for example, that there is no alcohol pooling at parties in private homes, and that her informants drink little to no alcohol during the weekdays. Referencing Tian Sørhaug (1996) Garvey writes that drinking in Norway is mostly an activity reserved for special occasions, but that as such "... drinking can be both heavy and intense and almost ritualistic in its departure from the profane routines of daily life." (Garvey, 2005, p. 90).



Norwegian sociologist Willy Pedersen (2015) has also done extensive research on the Norwegian drinking culture. In his book *Bittersøt: Ungdom, Sosialisering, Rusmidler* he writes that drinking habits spread to their surroundings, that they exhibit traits of a "... collective character. The drinking habits of the individual are synchronized with those of their surroundings." (Pedersen, 2015, p. 60) (My translation). Regarding the question of the non-drinker, Pedersen states that they have been under researched (2015, p. 74). He also writes that he has found, in his own research, that non-drinkers can be apprehensive about disclosing their non-drinking status, and some of the individuals he interviewed stated that they have been stigmatized to some extent, as well as not invited to social activities because of their sobriety (Pedersen, 2015, p. 75) (My translation).

## 4.0 Analysis

Before I delve into the analysis of the empirical data, I find it important to repeat the research topic of this paper: **how do non-drinking individuals experience being sober in the Norwegian drinking culture**. In order to explore this topic, I have identified three research questions that I will answer:

1. How does the non-use of alcohol affect non-drinker's identities?
2. Are non-drinkers considered deviant in a 'wet' society?
3. How is the Norwegian drinking culture perceived by sober individuals?

Some of the interview excerpts in the discussion that follows include conversations where my questions are included, for the sake of coherency and in order to prevent diluting the context in which meaning was established. In those interview excerpts, my questions are preceded by the abbreviation *Int* (Interviewer) and the answers are preceded by the interviewees pseudonym. In those excerpts that do not include my questions, the question or topic has been introduced, and the pseudonyms of the interviewee stated before presenting the excerpt.

## 4.1 Identity and Sobriety

In this subchapter, I will investigate the discourses that reveal the connection between not drinking alcohol and the perception of self-identity.

### 4.1.1 A Question of Involvement in Temperance Organizations?

One of the questions from the interview guide to this study centered on how sobriety affects the participants' identity. Upon asking, Jon had this to say about the sobriety-identity connection:

*... so today (sobriety), it's everything, it's my job, it's my life, I love being sober, I love recovery, I love to study it, I love to try to understand it, not from the professional point of view, but from the user point of view. I don't care what happens in the schools and how people try to find out sh\*t, I lived it, I helped people, I study it probably more than people who go to school, but I don't care about the theories that are behind it. I just want to see how people practice sobriety*

From this quotation, one can see that for Jon, sobriety means 'everything'. His whole sense of identity is constructed around not drinking alcohol. As mentioned in the presentation of the participants, Jon is the only participant of this study who referred to himself as a (sober) alcoholic, and I have decided to begin the analysis to this study with presenting his self-identity narrative, because it stands in contrast to what most other informants had to say about identity in relation to alcohol consumption. In the theory overview, I mentioned Althusser and the concept of interpellation. Jon, by the way he talks, can be said to be talking himself into the center of his own sobriety narrative. Anthony Giddens considers that identity can change as circumstances change and is thus considered a project, and if we apply this thought to what Jon said, we can say that his identity changed with the change of circumstances and is thus a project. As previously mentioned, and according to several theorists, identity can be constructed only in contrast to what it is not, and I find it appropriate to contrast Jon's sober self with his previous drinking self. Upon asking him what his relationship with alcohol was before quitting, Jon said:

*I started to drink when I was 13. I have only once drunk only one beer. My whole drinking life I never drunk alcohol without getting drunk.*

Although I am aware of the limits and questions of objectivity when it comes to interpretation, if we compare Jon's two statements through the lens of discourse analysis, we can see that Jon inhabits two conflicting discourses, the discourse of his sober self against the discourse of his former drinking self. The discourse of his sober self being in the present, and the discourse of his drinking self being placed in the past. Another contrast within the two statements is the "active enthusiasm" we can read from the non-drinking discourse, strengthened by the utterance of the "love" towards being sober, vs. the passive, fact-based statements regarding his former drinking self. "(Sobriety) is everything, it's my life..." stands in contrast to "My drinking life", which belongs in the past. When I interviewed Jon, I also took notes and noticed this "active enthusiasm" that we see in the first citation by the way he spoke.

As I mentioned in the presentation of Jon, he works within the field of recovery and temperance. Another informant that is involved (albeit not as a career choice) in temperance organizations is Sofie, and she answered the question about identity and sobriety by saying that:

*I would say it's a really big part of me. Almost all of me actually because I wouldn't be who I am today, I was always extroverted and happy to talk to people, but I guess I wouldn't be this extroverted if my friends didn't drag me out every weekend, as their driver, where I joined them even though they drank, because I got to be social. If I chose to just stay home and just drive them (without going out), maybe I wouldn't be this social person that I am today. So good with customers at my work as I am and stuff like that. I would have never met my husband (laughs), because I actually dared to come out as who I was. I was an abstinent and I dared to be that. I dared to be different than everybody else.*

As we can see in the opening part of Sofie's answer on identity and sobriety, similarly to Jon's "everything", sobriety is "almost all of her". It is, however, interesting to look at the transition between marking 'sobriety' as "almost all of her" to beginning to talk about how going out with her friends even though they drank helped her in life. Sunniva Heggem Lundin (2008) wrote in her master thesis paper that several researchers have found that youth who do not drink have a lower

degree of social integration than those who do drink (Lundin, 2008, p. 43) (My translation), which makes Sofie's experience about how going out with her drinking friends helped her likely to be coming from a place of theoretical probability.

If we think back to the theory overview, I mentioned the concept of 'positioning' within discursive psychology. Marianne W. Jørgensen and Louise Phillips (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 93) described positioning as a part of the processes of negotiation as people take positions within different and at times competing discourses. Sofie, although sober, negotiated her position within the drinking culture by going out with her friends, as a driver. Through her narrative about herself as a sober person, she positions her friends at the opposite side of herself at the metaphorical table which is the drinking culture. She also positions herself within competing discourses - her own sobriety discourse and the drinking discourse of her friends whom she socializes with even though they are drinking. Both Jon and Sofie embrace their sober identities and put them in the forefront of their personalities, however, Sofie keeps contact with the drinking culture, whereas Jon avoids it, as we can see in this following citation:

*At first. The first years maybe. But in a way I have chosen to be surrounded by other people in recovery. I do not associate with people I do not know. I don't know why I should do that, so the people that I have around me, are either in recovery or they know I am in recovery. And it's just such a big part of my life and probably the only thing that I have not fucked up in my life. So it's just who I am. Everybody knows and if they don't know I don't need to know them.*

This is how Jon addressed my question on if he gets asked why he does not drink.

Both Sofie and Jon are deviating from expected identity norms by being non-participants in drinking activities, and I would like to refer to the solutions Erving Goffman recognized in relation to the issue of deviance by giving a short summary of said solutions:

1. Individuals that support a norm but are recognized by themselves and others as not being the type to put it into practice.
2. Individuals that cannot meet the expected identity norm, so they alienate themselves from the community that upholds it or avoid developing an attachment to it in the first place.

In my perception, Sofie falls within the first category, whereas Jon is a better fit for the second one. Sofie, by associating with her drinking friends even though her behavior can be marked as deviant within the drinking discourse, is in a way supporting the drinking norm by going out with her drinking friends and being their driver. Jon, a previous upholder of the norm, is now alienated from the community which upholds it. Jon exited the drinking culture and became deviant, whereas Sofie had always been deviant yet still associates with her drinking friends. In the later parts of this study, Sofie's involvement in the drinking culture and her volunteer activities within temperance organizations and projects will be further elaborated on.

I mentioned Jon and Sofie first in this analysis, because they both put sobriety in the forefront of their personalities and they share a common trait of being involved with temperance organizations, Jon professionally and Sofie as a volunteer. I believe that there is a connection between involvement in temperance organizations and "active enthusiasm" around one's own sobriety discourse in relation to self-identity, but in order to establish that, we must look at how the other informants connect their sobriety to their identity. I will address this in the following part of the discussion.

#### **4.1.2 "I don't think about it that much": Denying the Significance of Sobriety in the Identity Project?**

I have mentioned the concept of identity refusal developed by Emma Bannister, Maria G. Piacentini and Anthony Grimes (2019). Let us look at what Kim answered when I asked him how his sobriety affects his identity:

*Sobriety in itself has very little influence (on identity), I was always a person that drunk relatively little anyway, I can count on two hands how many times I have been drunk, and when I drank, I felt relatively normal, I wasn't one of those people who that change their personality a lot, that becomes totally different when drinking, I was more relaxed in a way, so. But I don't think it had a lot of influence on identity.*

Kim, as a non-drinker in a drinking society, is inevitably a potential target for being ascribed certain identity traits reserved for non-drinkers in drinking societies. This is where the previously mentioned concept of identity refusal comes in – one could say that Kim engages in the practice of distancing (from the collective drinking identity) through resistance, which is a rejection of the relevance of non-drinking to his personality. Another informant who rejects the relevance of non-drinking to their identity is Ramona:

*I don't think about it that much. I don't think alcohol has any value, or I don't use time on it at all. I don't think about it, I don't feel I need to have it, and it doesn't affect me either, since I am not surrounded by people who get drunk and become mean to me, so in regards to that it doesn't affect me either... My identity, I don't know, if I was just drunk and just going to parties, it could be I would be a different person, but I want to be nice to people, and one can quickly do some stupid things when drunk, one says things or behaves very annoyingly, and I don't want to be that person.*

However, one could say that through the imaginary-discourse of who she would be if she was drinking, she does put significance on her non-drinking personality, by saying she wants to be nice to people, meaning that she potentially would not be if she was drunk, and that she is when she is sober. I asked Ramona a follow-up question after she stated the above, which was if this had something to do with liking to be in control, and she answered:

*Yes of course I like that, but I don't want to do or say stupid things, so I like to have control over myself, no doubt about that. But exactly because I have experienced how people can be when they are drunk. When they begin screaming at each other, or kissing someone else, and their partner is sitting in the room beside, so I have experienced a lot of strange things. And when people don't remember things afterwards, I don't want that kind of black hole, I want to know what happened, like I said, I go out to concerts a lot, and I think it's a tragedy that people don't remember the concerts they have been to anymore. I don't get it... they use 400-500 kroners on a concert and you go there drunk and you don't remember anything afterwards, so, no... or people get angry at you, because you spilled beer on someone...*

Like I mentioned before, several theorists state that identity can be constructed only in relation to what it is not, and even though Ramona claims her sobriety does not affect her identity much, the discourse in her statement suggests otherwise: she is establishing her non-drinking identity through what she *is not doing* but believes drinking people *are doing*. By describing what she experienced as a sort of sober observer, it could be noted that she also is engaging in one of the techniques of affirmation I mentioned in the theory chapter, developed by Heith Copes and J. Patrick Williams, namely the discursive technique of *discounting condemners*. By describing *them* as drunk to the point of not remembering concerts they used money on, she is condemning these drinking individuals, strengthened by her mid-sentence utterance of "... so, no...", and thus reinforcing her own seemingly positive identity as a non-drinker.

Another informant that seems to not be putting too much significance on sobriety in his own identity – project is Benas. When I asked him if he often thinks about his alcohol use and his now non-drinking, he had the following to say:

*No I don't think a lot about this. I was drinking or something, but now I'm just enjoying every day, I never felt so great I could say, in my life. I am 30 years old and I never had that much energy when I was younger you know. I can like run a lot and stuff like that. And every day you are just fresh and then you see maybe some people coming with the hangovers, and you don't have that, it's just an amazing feeling. All the time you are just fresh...*

Similar to Ramona, Benas claims he does not think about his relationship with alcohol often, which brings to mind the concept of *nothing* mentioned in the theory chapter. As I already mentioned, *nothing* comprises negatively defined phenomena, such as non-identification, non-participation and non-presence (Scott, 2017). Benas quit drinking, and thus accomplished the negative social phenomena of *not-doing* something, and in this case not-drinking. Judging from his own statement, however, this action of stating that he does not think about his non-drinking often, seems to be a more passive act of omission, rather than a demonstrative act of commission. I have taken this statement by Benas out of the context of a larger cohesive conversation, which I will talk more about in the following sub-chapter. However, to show that Benas engages in the identity refusal position of resistance in relation to his sobriety, I will include here a part of our



conversation about his drinking vs. non-drinking self. After asking him if his decision to quit drinking has anything to do with the history of alcohol abuse in his family, he answered the following:

*I don't know, maybe not? I don't know actually the exact reason why I stopped drinking, but maybe just everything came at the same time, you know. So like I didn't feel good and... Before I stopped drinking I was in Mexico for three months, and there was like a beer marathon, you know. It was a lot of alcohol and stuff and I just couldn't do anything you know, we were just drinking, almost every day like having some beers and stuff. Nothing like crazy but... I was just like I don't know I wasn't productive, I was just like a piece of meat you know (...) I was just like sitting, just existing I don't know. Just like that you know I was just like sitting, just existing I don't know. Just like that you know.*

When I then asked him if his “being like a piece of meat” and “just existing” was because of his drinking, he stated this:

*Yeah, definitely. And my body was like so tired all the time and you know, I couldn't look at myself anymore. How to move and I was literally like a piece of meat. Now I know how you can feel good, you know. How different it can be for you. When you are like active and sober all the time. Just amazing this energy and everything. So productive and... Yeah. All the time.*

Cross-examining these statements Benas uttered, shows us that he inhabits two conflicting discourses, similar to Jon in the first subchapter of the analysis. The discourse of his former drinking-self, and the discourse of his now sober-self. He reflects upon his drinking times by stating, twice, that he felt like a *piece of meat*, which I interpret as that he was not feeling good, or even alive. The identity refusal position Benas takes cannot be interpreted out of one single sentence, but rather is to be read out of the larger discourse that are the above quoted conversation excerpts. He claims he does not think about his sobriety much, yet when I asked him if he thinks his “just existing” was because of his drinking, he answered with ‘definitely’, which in itself is a strong word that reinforces the conflict of discourse between his former drinking self and his present sober self as well as resistance towards accepting sobriety as a relatively important

part of his identity. The analysis of Benase's statements stand on an overlap of two analytical perspectives, namely the identity refusal perspective, and the perspective of creation of a 'better' self in sobriety, which is the topic of the next subchapter.

#### **4.1.3 Negotiating Sober Identities: Constructing 'better' selves?**

I mentioned Emily Nicholls and her study on how newly sober women negotiate sobriety in a drinking culture. Inspired by this study, I will investigate how my informants negotiate their newly found sober selves by contrasting discourses of their old drinking selves against the discourses of their present sober selves. As I mentioned at the ending of the previous subchapter, the statements of Benas lay on an overlap between the perspectives of identity refusal and negotiating a 'better' self as a sober individual, so I will start this subchapter with yet another excerpt from my interview with Benas, for the sake of continuity regarding the abovementioned overlap. I asked him if he ever feels outside because of his non-drinking, for example in social situations:

*Yeah maybe in the beginning it was strange, but I was always like struggling to be social with people and everything, so I was practically like if I know it's going to be a lot of people or something, I was like drinking before going to any event. Like warm me up so I can relax and stuff like that. Then I wasn't me anymore, so I was just like... And then it's like the next morning when you are sober you just don't want to remember that day, that wasn't you, there was like a shame or something, very strange feeling, like you don't accept yourself when you are like drunk, you know, you are so different. So when people like say when you are drunk you are your true self, I don't agree with it. It's like completely opposite you know. When you are like sober and stuff then you are yourself. And now it's much nicer to go through that being not social or a bit shy you know, anxieties or something, to go through when you are sober, then you really feel like you did something, like before it was just drinking and then you can talk to people and stuff, but you never going to go through it completely, like when you are being sober.*

As we were able to learn in the theory chapter of this study, Marianne W Jørgensen and Louise Phillips asked how we can (through discourse analysis) conceptualize the actors who participate in the struggles about the definition and shaping of reality. Benas starts with explaining how in the beginning of his sobriety, it was strange to socialize with people while being sober. From how he remembers himself when he was drinking, he informs us that he drank alcohol even before going to events, because he felt socially awkward, yet when he got drunk, he did not feel like 'himself' any longer. In the theory chapter we have learned that techniques of affirmation are discursive devices that shield individuals from being tempted to 'do wrong', and the technique I recognize in the narrative of Benas is the acknowledgment of injury. By stating that he felt shame after drinking, he acknowledges that he has injured himself by drinking.

Linguistically, it is interesting to notice the transition from 'I' to 'you' in the narrative above. When he talks from the personal 'I' perspective, he is shaping his former reality as a drinking individual. When the narrative transitions into 'you', it is as if Benas is sending out a message that can potentially be interpreted as him creating a more universal reality of how sober living is better living.

The entire exchange above can be interpreted as a sort of journey of acceptance of himself that Benas undertook, contrasting his negatively perceived drinking self, which was not his true self, to his now sober self which is more his true self. This is similar to what Emily Nicholls found in her study about how sober women negotiate their position in a drinking culture, where her informants described a journey from a powerless, ineffectual and inauthentic (drinking) self to a successful sober self. In the following excerpt from the interview with Benas, we can also see the "active enthusiasm" discourse I mentioned before with Jon:

*It's like really good everything. I am more myself and I have more energy to do things, maybe I didn't have that before, and I feel much better saying things to maybe someone when I'm like sober than not, you know, then I feel like I<sup>1</sup> said it, your mind is sober and you are thinking more clearly and everything... I think it's amazing and everyone should stop drinking (laughs). It would be better but you know like...*

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<sup>1</sup> Benas emphasized the "I" while he was talking, strengthening the contrast between his untrue drinking self vs. his true sober self.

In addition to the other statements by Benas which I analyzed in the previous subchapter, we can say that Benas is constructing a 'better' version of himself through his life without alcohol and the subsequent discourse describing it which we get to witness through these interview transcripts.

I discovered this 'better self' narrative in other informants that exited the drinking culture after being part of it for a relatively long time. The following is an excerpt from my conversation with Gustav:

*I am another person now. I stopped drinking one day just after one night out and then I just started to (engage in a certain sport) instead. Like... Go do the sport and then it just kicked off like a hobby after that. So I just changed... I switched out alcohol for having a much healthier every day. And then... So the effect has just been massive. I feel... I have so much energy and I don't have ups and downs like physically....*

In the previous subchapter, we learned that Benas, just like Gustav, is engaged in a sport activity, which they both seem to regard as a 'better' activity than drinking.

In Inger's narrative, we can also notice a contrasting discourse between her former drinking-self and her present sober-self. The following is her answer to the question on how her sobriety affected her identity and her sense of self:

*I feel it has affected my self-respect, that I stopped doing something that led to me not feeling good. Now I can, in a way... Everything I do I can stand behind it, it's not like I cannot do stupid things, or wrong things, but now I can do them consciously. Not sit there and think "oh no did I say that, and why did I do that", but that I can in a way have that respect to myself "I<sup>2</sup> have chosen this", and I can stand behind that, right. I can feel some kind of pride over it as well, because I think it's important to show that it's possible, to my own*

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<sup>2</sup> Similar to Benas, Inger also puts weight on the "I", as if her former drinking self was not truly 'herself'.

*children, and to some extent almost in solidarity to everyone who suffers because of someone's alcohol problem. Most people aren't abusers, but a lot of stuff is happening, I think, which would not be happening if people didn't drink alcohol. It was so exciting to see this post (about the study), because I thought this is important, and it's important to make people aware of... Because I think it's a little bit that people... And we can see that from different things in the society and culture, but that it is in a way that people just adopt those habits and customs that are there, without in a way doing something, sitting down and evaluating "is this something I..."... It becomes like that in a way.*

If we compare Inger and Benas, we can conclude that there are some similarities between their sober narratives. Benas talks about how it is easier for him to face his anxieties sober, and Inger tells she can stand behind her actions, even if they are 'dumb', if she is sober. Through sobriety, and the better selves that they seem to be constructing against the backdrop of it, the *present* or *potential* flaws to their identity can be justified. They both appear to appreciate the *solidness* of their sober identities in contrast to their drinking selves. Their sober identities also seem to be "truer" than their former drinking identities, strengthened by the emphasis on the "I" perspective in both informants' narratives.

Another interesting concept to be discovered in Inger's narrative is the concept of *solidarity* which can be noticed in her use of the affirmation techniques of acknowledgment of responsibility and acknowledgment of the victim. She wants to show her own children that it is possible to live a good life without drinking, thus acknowledging responsibility towards them. We can spot the acknowledgment of victim discourse in her stating that she almost feels her sobriety is important for the sake of *solidarity* to those who suffer (the victims) because of someone's alcohol abuse. There appears to be a strong moral force behind these utterances.

Another informant who put emphasis on the concept of solidarity as a driving moral force behind his sobriety is Håkon, as we can see from the following excerpt from my conversation with him. I asked him if he avoids certain social settings because of his sobriety:

*Both yes and no. But of course there is this discomfort when you go to parties. "Now I have to explain it again". And maybe I have a bit of paranoia, what do they think about me now?*

*It just became like that, and I was never dependent on alcohol to loosen up in social settings and such, but I see that now that I have quit drinking, I don't behave more uptight, but I have probably stopped doing the dumbest things one can find oneself doing while drunk. I never felt like I cannot socialize sober. But the discomfort related to it is that you are required to have an explanation. It is extraordinary, being abstinent. To begin with - it is quite recent I decided to quit drinking- it was easy to explain: it is because of health reasons. I have a health situation. And also I had a discussion not long ago with my wife, "I cannot continue with this, saying that (health) is the reason I quit drinking". And then I started saying that what made me reevaluate my relationship with alcohol was health, but what makes me stay sober is more the solidarity towards those who suffer and because alcohol is a big problem in society. And that makes for some raised eyebrows. But I think I am kind of a common person, so I am not choosing, or I am not letting myself be led towards breaking my decision, I would rather hear people say "oh, you don't drink! So good! I wish more people did like you!". No, I never hear this. And often in temperance movements it's like "that time I was 9 I vowed to my mother that I will abstain, and I have kept that". It's not like that with us who are former alcohol users, we do not make that choice once. Not like those who live inside the, I could say, movement, and stay there all their lives, we must make that choice every single time. It is not particularly difficult for me, but you must make that choice every day.*

Although there is not much direct comparison between his former drinking-self and his present sober-self, we can see that the concept of *solidarity* is a motivating factor in sobriety for Håkon as well as for Inger. Håkon also appears to be acknowledging responsibility which is, as we have learned before, an affirmation technique. The conflict of discourse in this excerpt lays between Håkon's statements and, for example, *those* unnamed individuals who raise eyebrows when they hear he is not drinking in solidarity to those who suffer (because of alcohol abuse). By putting emphasis on solidarity to those who suffer, Håkon is also acknowledging the victim.

As we learned in the theory chapter, the concepts of group formation and *representation* are central concepts within discourse theory. What can be drawn from the above quoted excerpt from my interview with Håkon is that he, in a way, made himself representative of a group including Benas, Inger and Gustav. He is putting emphasis on the perspective of 'we', thus implying that

there are more members in this particular club of former drinkers. What makes these four informants fit to be placed within the same group within this study is that they had been active participants in the drinking culture before they had stopped drinking, as we can see by putting the following statements uttered by them under each other:

*Int: Can you tell me a little bit more about that? Like how did you drink before (quitting)?*

*Benas: I wasn't like an alcoholic or whatever, I was just partying like everyone.*

From another part of the interview with Benas:

*Int: How much did you drink when you drank, like on average?*

*Benas: I don't know, it's a bit hard to say, but... Are you talking liters or? (laughs)*

*Int: I mean like how often. Like in a week for example.*

*Benas: Actually it was like almost every day some alcohol. It doesn't mean that it was like a lot of it but for example... Like today I just had one beer but still it's one beer, so you know, something. And on the weekend like you are free and maybe you meet some friends and it all the time means that you are going to drink (...).*

Gustav:

*Int: What is your relationship with alcohol use?*

*Gustav: Well. For the last 7 years I haven't been drinking alcohol at all, nothing. But before that I was drinking socially, as often and as much as possible.*

*Int: So how much did you drink? Did you drink a lot?*

*Gustav: Yeah, when I was out when there was a party, then I would be drinking a lot. How much it is... Well, if it was a night out with the guys then we are talking about at least 15 beers and drinks after that until the early morning.*

Here we can see Inger's narrative about her participation in the drinking culture:

*I am now 43, going towards 44 and the 31. December it had been two years since I made a decision to stop drinking alcohol entirely. And I haven't been drinking since then. Before that I had what, in the Norwegian sense, can be called a normal relationship with alcohol,*

*when you turn 18, you start drinking at parties, you go out on town, so it has been like that in a way.*

And here is Håkon, who sums up the sentiment behind this particular group of non-drinkers in the last sentence of the following excerpt:

*Int: How old are you and can you describe your relationship to alcohol?*

*Håkon: I am 57 years old. And my relationship to alcohol fits well into the typical Norwegian drinking pattern. So two years ago I was a typical alcohol consumer, and as you hear I am a Trønder<sup>3</sup>, and in Trøndelag drinking is central, it is known as a drunken culture, and I was part of that. So I have been on both sides of the fence, you could say.*

There is a distinct link between these following “participation degree” discourses:

*“I was just partying like everyone”*

*“As often and as much possible”*

*“I had what, in the Norwegian sense, can be called a normal relationship to alcohol”*

And

*“My relationship to alcohol fits well into the typical Norwegian drinking pattern.”*

I find it interesting to also look at the abovementioned “participation degree” discourses through the Bordieuan lens of *habitus*. As I mentioned in the theory chapter, *habitus* could be explained as the habits and resources that are established through life, and it is those habits that later determine how an individual expresses themselves culturally. *Habitus*, in relation to the drinking culture, is both structured and structuring as we can interpret from the citations above: by participating in the drinking culture individuals are entering the structure, but they are at the same time structuring and reinforcing it by the action of drinking “like everyone” and “fitting well into the typical Norwegian drinking pattern.”.

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<sup>3</sup> Håkon is from the Trøndelag area in Norway, that has a distinct accent.



What Benas, Gustav, Inger and Håkon are accomplishing with these discourses of their past, is positioning themselves in a collective dominant drinking culture they have since decided to stop partaking in. There appears to be a connection between the degree of participation in the drinking culture and the subsequent 'better self' narrative upon exiting it, a claim that will become clearer as I move forward with the analysis. To mention the concepts of group formation and representation again, I find that Håkon, in this following excerpt from my interview with him, successfully (and somewhat bluntly) explains the difference between individuals who had a strong connection with the drinking culture, and those who did not. I mentioned Arnold Birenbaum's and Edward Sagarin's categorization of non-drinkers, and I find that Benas, Gustav, Håkon and Inger (as well as Jon in the first subchapter) belong to the categories of 1. former drinkers and 2. former excessive drinkers who have become total abstainers.

To conclude this chapter on drinking and identity, let us look at how Håkon describes the types of non-drinkers we talked about in this sub-chapter:

*No, it's not so hard that I cannot manage it (staying sober), but at the same time it's not easy either. We talked about the social, and we have been into the power of habit, I did think it (consuming alcohol) was good. And we talked about when it goes from the optimal buzz to drunkenness and intoxication, and the discomfort that follows it, and it always does follow in one way or another, but the part that was good, I do miss that to some extent. I have to say that yes it has been a decision that that led to me not being able to enjoy one beer, and there is a lot of nice alcohol free beers that are good, but at the same time there is this type of trigger effect that strengthens that what I would call something missing, I can't take red wine, or champagne, or a whisky, one should not underestimate the taste and enjoyment side of it, it becomes something you miss. I like chocolate too, and I didn't quit that, or coffee, which would also become something I would miss. There are elements that make it so that you have to be aware all the time, and I think, and I apologize if this is somewhat on the edge – but I have previously worked with dogs, and had male dogs, and one can see that male dogs that got to mate, they are way worse than those who never got to do that. And maybe that's a bit of a comparison, but a person who never experienced that enjoyment, cannot experience the lack of it in the same way.*

In the opening part of this statement by Håkon, I consider it important to explain that when Håkon says “we” (have talked about for example) he is referring to our conversation prior to this statement. Before presenting the above statement, I have mentioned the concepts of group formation and representation. I find that Håkon, with this statement, in addition to the previous ones, serves as a representative of the informants that have been mentioned in this subchapter. The difference between the contrasting motivations and the degree of participation in the drinking culture appear to be affecting their present stance on their former drinking selves as well as the better-self narratives that we have seen in some of the informant’s discourses.

## **4.2 Sobriety as Deviancy**

Next in my analysis, I will investigate the discourses that reveal the issues of being sober as deviant behavior in the Norwegian drinking culture, as well as the concepts of drinking pressure and the stigmatization that may follow the state of being sober.

### **4.2.1 Legitimate vs. non-legitimate sobriety?**

When I asked Håkon, an informant we talked about in the previous part of the analysis, if he felt he had to have a good reason to refuse alcohol in social situations, he answered the following:

*Yes, it’s almost like going to a party with pink sequins and an umbrella on your head, so you have to explain why you made that particular choice, so I experience it as terribly weird. And it’s a paradox that with alcohol, as opposed to other drugs, you have to legitimize why you won’t have any. Of course, if you are pregnant, and I cannot use that excuse, then not drinking is legitimate. If you are driving... If my wife and I drive to a party, then it’s “which one of you is driving”, and it is implied that the other one will have alcohol in their glass. That’s how it’s been. And I do believe that for people like me, that others know had been drinking in a previous life, it becomes even more wondersome to choose, completely voluntarily, to not drink. And I do notice people looking at me with a bit of a skewed gaze.*

As I described in the theory chapter, referencing Arnold Birenbaum's and Edward Sagarin's study about being sober as being deviant, not drinking falls into the category of failing to meet normative requirements within a dominant social structure. The "skewed gaze" Håkon describes is the gaze of the drinkers, the people he left behind when he exited the drinking culture and stopped with the activity of drinking. He returns to this very culture, though, and meets it face to face, as a different version of himself. As we learned in the theory chapter, it is claimed that discursive practices contribute to the creation and reproduction of unequal power relations between social groups. Håkon, as he himself states, was drinking in *a previous life*, and his decision not to, *completely voluntarily*, makes people wonder *why* and it is on him to try and produce a *legitimate* reason for refusing to drink.

We could argue that the unnamed drinkers perpetuate a discourse of drinking-as-norm and seem to claim the power and *right* to meet Håkon (and the likes of him) with a "a skewed gaze" and "wonder". The conflict of power in the drinking vs. nondrinking discourses seem to be leaning towards the drinking culture and its norms, which Håkon fails to meet. As with the non-drinker described by Birenbaum and Sagarin, Håkon's nonconformity is troubling to others. Håkon, as described in the presentation of the participants, is a 57-year-old man. In my understanding and interpretation of his narrative, feeling like you have pink sequins and an umbrella on your head when entering a social gathering serves as a metaphorical sign of stigma, marking Håkon as a stigmatized deviant by his own understanding of the situation.

Another informant who faced stigma and was marked deviant when meeting the discourse of the drinking culture is Sofie. This was her answer to me asking if she goes out to parties and social gatherings:

*Yes, I have done that for many years. I can go to a party... I take a soda with me usually and enjoy myself... But the problem is that when my friends get drunk, they begin to be rude. And they get into this mood where they say "oh my god you are so lame for not drinking" and they try to pressure me to drink even though they know I don't drink. They get to this point where they get so drunk that they start being mean to me.*

*Int: So you experience drinking pressure from your friends still? (after such a long time)*

*Sofie: Yes. Although I have been sober for so long they are still pressuring me. It's the same when you go out to pubs as well.*

Sofie has been labeled *lame* for her non-drinking by her drinking friends. As she describes above, they have even been mean to her, as she describes in the above cited excerpt from my conversation with her. With Håkon as with Sofie, the conflicting side which is made up of drinkers seem to request a legitimization from their non-drinking counterparts, and both Håkon and Sofie recognize the *legitimate* and justifiable reasons for non-drinking which open up to the possibility of being left alone in their sobriety. One dominant legitimate justification *tool*, if I may call it that, for non-drinking is **driving**. We already saw Håkon mention driving, so let us look at yet another part of my interview with Sofie, where she too talks about driving as a legitimate reason for staying sober:

*I always feel like I have to defend myself. I do. And I think that's sad. My family, they understand. They think it's a really good thing that I don't drink. And my husband he is also very supportive. The only thing he drinks is maybe one beer a month. He supports me fully. We had an alcohol free wedding because I wanted that, and he was supportive. But both my friends, and yes a lot of strangers, all of them, no. I always have to defend myself. So when I first became abstinent, the first reason I presented, was that I am driving. "Oh yeah, you are driving" and then it's okay, then they understand why you are sober on that particular evening, right. And that became a regular thing, that I became the driver. I even got paid sometimes. Or I generally drove some of my girlfriends because they lived on the way home for me, so I just dropped them off on the way. But if you were on a party without drinking and without driving, then it was a lot of questions, and then I had to like sit there and almost argue with people at the party. It was people I barely knew, some strangers too. They asked: "why aren't you drinking?" and I was like "I abstain from using alcohol", "What? DO YOU? Since when?", and I answer "No I have done that for a good while". It had been some years at that point (of being sober), and still I had to sit here and explain. I had become so boring, boring because I don't drink (they said). Then sometimes I could for example say that the next day, I can wake up at 06.00 in the morning and you will lay in bed and throw up. Or I could say, well, at least I am not damaging my liver, and stuff like that. I*

*tried to make them understand that when they drink as much as they do they will be pretty sick. I used those kinds of arguments a bit. And I also tried saying that it is a choice I made. "It's none of your business", I used to say. But then they became even more curious.*

As Sofie is finding acceptance and support in her family and her husband in relation to her non-drinking, we can say that her family are what Erving Goffmann would describe as *The Wise*. She turns to them for support and acceptance, because she knows she will find it there. As with Håkon and the reaction of "wonder" he experienced when people learned he does not drink – voluntarily even – Sofie describes sparking curiosity in people when she shares the *real* reason for not drinking. If we think back to the theory chapter, and Anthony Giddens' concepts of structure and agency, we can say that Sofie, finding herself within the constraining yet also enabling duality of the drinking structure, exerts agency by resisting those who question her sobriety. In that sense, the drinking culture as structure is *constraining* her by stigmatizing her with words such as "bored" or "lame", yet it is also *enabling* her to show resistance by being honest about the reasons behind not drinking instead of using what Erving Goffmann calls *techniques of information control*.

The excuse of **driving** can be described as a typical discursive device of cover when faced with possible stigma due to non-drinking. It is apparent from the above excerpt that Sofie, in addition to "coming clean" about her sobriety, did also actively engage in covering up her stigmatizing feature of non-drinking by using the *driving* cover. Another informant who uses this cover is Iben, as we see from the following excerpt from my conversation with her. The following is how she addressed the question of whether she experienced pressure and people asking about why she does not drink:

*Yes. It's actually uncomfortable for me to be asked, I don't like it. Because I have to defend myself. And you would never ask people why you drink, right, but in this case here I've had the question a lot of times. Like why you don't drink? And I am uncomfortable when I get the question. And I have now learned of course to defend myself with those excuses like "yeah but I am having this competition tomorrow" or whatever. Also I have volunteered so many times to drive, you know. Because I said "oh no problem, I can drive, and I cant take you home". So then that has also turned into being my little thing you know, to say no problem, I can drive.*

Both Sofie and Iben use the excuse of **driving** when a situation arises where they could potentially be marked as deviants who then could potentially be stigmatized by individuals who are engaging in drinking activities. Another interesting concept that pops out from the two narratives is the concept of having to *defend* themselves, which implies they feel *attacked* when faced with the norm requirements constructed and upheld by the drinking culture that they participate in, to some degree, and where they are seen as deviant. The excuse of *driving* seems to be a popular tool when faced with the pressures of the drinking culture, as we can see in the following excerpts with several informants:

Oscar:

*Int: Do you ever feel outside because of your own drinking habits? Do you go out?*

*Oscar: Yes I go out. I actually go, usually, quite a bit, not as much now (because of Covid) but I've never felt outside because of my alcohol habits. But that might also be because usually when I'm out with friends I'm driving, so it comes like more natural that I am not drinking.*

And from another part of my conversation with Oscar:

*Int: So you have like a friend group that you kind of known for a long time, and then they just accepted your...*

*Oscar: Yeah, I mean I never actually gotten, as far as I can remember, any questions on why I don't drink.*

*Int: And when you meet new people, does that happen sometimes, or?*

*Oscar: Yeah I mean very very rarely. People just hear "oh you are driving"... I think that also gives me... It's probably part of the reason why. Rarely do people ask why you are driving instead of drinking. There has been like one or two people over the years but very rarely does that happen.*

As we see from these excerpts from my conversation with Oscar, he also recognizes the cover of **driving** as a working tool to legitimizing his sobriety.

Benas:

*Int: Do you ever experience drinking pressure? Like people pressuring you to drink?*

*Benas: They are like "oh you don't drink, you are boring" and stuff like that. It was more in the beginning (of him being sober) but now I'm more like... Because everyone knows, so it's a bit different. And I don't feel any pressure anymore, I am like yeah whatever.*

*Int: Do you feel like you need a good excuse to say "I don't want to drink" or?*

*Benas: Not like good excuse, but like yeah just back off I don't drink. Some people really pressure you and stuff like that. Some they just accept it, and they are like "oh it's a good job you do", you know.*

*Int: But do you get asked why you don't drink?*

*Benas: Sometimes. Usually I say "I just don't drink" or I'm driving or whatever. It depends but usually I say I am training a lot and it's just not good for my heart, for anything, for my body, I feel that.*

Benas, like other informants mentioned in this subchapter, faces some degree of stigmatization when revealing himself as being sober, and he also seems to be using some techniques of information control when he finds himself within a conflict of discourse between drinkers and non-drinkers. He also uses driving as an excuse, as well as the fact he is actively engaged in sports activities. However, as with Sofie, there is a certain degree of agency in his resistance when being asked why he does not drink, as we can see in the following statement by him:

*Int: So what do you say to them (when they pressure you)?*

*Benas: Like "back off, I just don't drink".*

I have recognized the **driving** cover in Ramona's narrative as well upon asking her how it is to be mostly sober in the Norwegian drinking culture:

*I think it's actually really okay. It is rarely people ask "why don't you drink", or yes, they do ask, but then I explain that I don't like it, I am driving or...*

In Ramona's narrative, the driving cover comes off as an afterthought, an addition to her explaining she just does not *like it*. However, it seems to be working, even though perhaps Ramona did not reflect upon it too much in this statement.

As we have seen from the analysis so far, driving is a popular *cover* for non-drinkers to use when engaging in social situations that involve drinking. However, I would argue that from the participants' point of view, driving is a tool that serves as a cover for the real reasons behind their non-drinking (which are more abstract, choice-based and therefore harder to grasp), yet if we switch the point of view to the drinkers, it could be said that it is a *legitimate* or *justifiable* easier-to-grasp explanation to the deviancy of not consuming alcohol. Judging from the above narratives, it also works, as the informants seem to be left alone after pulling the "I am driving" card. Norway has very strict laws regarding intoxication and driving, so both the drinkers and non-drinkers seem to agree on the seriousness of this activity. Drinking alcohol, as we learned in the theory chapter, is an activity that belongs to the pastime. Driving, on the other hand, can be described as a working-activity, and the one who is driving is therefore excused from drinking.

There are other legitimizing discursive tools that the participants of this study have successfully used when confronted with their deviant act of not consuming alcohol. We have already seen how Iben and Benas mention their **sport's activities** as tools of cover, and in the following excerpt Iben elaborates on this very topic, after being asked if her non-drinking affects her identity and her social activities:

*Iben: I think it to some extent limits what I'm invited to. And it also limits what I want to go to. So it is a limitation because... And there is those events where I'm not even invited because I don't drink. That clearly tells a lot, but those events that I decided not to go to are because people go there just to get drunk. And I'm like holy sh\*t that's not how I want to spend a Thursday or Friday or Saturday night. No.*

*Int: So you would say you avoid certain type of social activities because (you don't drink?)*

*Iben: Yes, I do. And I have to say I find excuses also here. Again if I use the example of being on an exhibition, spending four days away from home, that could be a good reason for going out every night, but for me it's not. For me it's like finding excuses or just not even*



*telling where I am going, because I'm in the rehearsal room at night or maybe I'm going out jogging or whatever, so yeah.*

*Int: So do you like feel outside because of that, sometimes?*

*Iben: Definitely. Definitely. I think I'm looked at as a stranger. And also like being remembered for not participating in some of these gatherings here. Yes. And that's interesting people can remember that you were not there.*

From another part of the interview:

*Int: I have talked with some people now, and this driving-excuse is really popular.*

*Iben: But you know, to some degree I have been able to just say that, and then there was no more talk on why or why not, so you are right, and it's also interesting for me to hear that this is a common way to solve the problem. But as I said before, I also use my sport as an excuse. And I even have had the question a couple of times when I was a bit younger "oh are you pregnant?". And that's just like holy smokes, that was really turning me so angry. Because again, how come that you feel so free to ask people that question just because you don't drink alcohol? It's really like mad.*

In the above excerpts it is possible to identify several discursive tools of cover such as **driving**, which we already talked about, but also **sport activity and pregnancy**. However, it is possible to identify another technique of information control in the above excerpts, namely *concealment*. We can identify the activity of concealment in Iben saying "... just not even telling where I am going". She is removing herself from the possible conflict of discourse by not informing would-be provocateurs of her activities and whereabouts, therefore also engaging in the activity of not-doing and not- being something, which is an "act of omission" according to Susie Scott. In addition to concealment as a technique for stigma-avoidance, we can see that Iben alienates herself from the community whose identity norms she fails to meet, which is one of the solutions individuals use for approaching the issue of deviance, as identified by Erving Goffmann.

Another seemingly legitimate reason for avoiding alcohol consumption when facing pressure or stigma is for health reasons, as we can see in the following excerpt from my interview with Mads:

*Int: Do you get questioned on why you don't drink, do you get some reactions to your sober lifestyle, how do you feel about that?*

*Mads: I mean, some people would call me crazy for not drinking, but... Yeah like some people feel they need to drink to get by, not daily, but they need to go out in the weekends or whatever. I don't know... Some people don't understand but I just explain I don't want to.*

*Int: Yeah. Is that your answer, like, "I don't want to?"*

*Mads: I have no problem explaining that I stopped because of Ritalin. But I also just... I don't drink anymore, I don't need to.*

*Int: But do you feel like people expect some kind of let's say plausible explanation to it, or did anybody ever question you...*

*Mads: When I say to people I didn't have a drink in 7 or 8 years, then most of them expect me to tell I'm an alcoholic. Or that I had problems with alcohol. That's what people expect me to say.*

*Int: And do they get like surprised, I mean what's their reaction when you explain to them?*

*Mads: Yeah I think people get surprised. But most people understand when I explain that I don't want to mix medicine and alcohol.*

In this excerpt, we can see that Mads also has been stigmatized and marked deviant by being described as "crazy" for not drinking. However, we can also see that he shows agency against the dominant structure by explaining why he does not drink. He also presents a "legitimate" reason for not drinking, which is not wanting to mix medicine and alcohol, which most people understand, according to Mads. This marks "health reasons" as one of the potentially legitimate excuses for not consuming alcohol, and by presenting these arguments one can subsequently be "left alone" and free from the pressure to drink.

In this sub-subchapter I have investigated the concepts of justifiable vs. non justifiable reasons behind not consuming alcohol some of my informants encountered while being in contact with participants in the drinking culture. I identified several discursive coping tools, or excuses, the informants used and that were, in various degrees, 'approved' by participating members of the drinking culture. Driving is arguably a strongly successful excuse for not-drinking, followed by health reasons and sports activities. However, the informants also expressed a certain degree of agency in revealing the *true* reasons behind their non-drinking, opting out of defending

themselves by using 'legitimate' excuses for non- drinking. In the next sub sub-subchapter, we will look more into how these non-drinkers are marked as deviant through discourse, but with more focus on seemingly positive reactions to the act of non-drinking, which I argue are stigma discourses in disguise.

#### 4.2.2 Accepting the non-drinker: Stigma in Disguise?

In this sub-subchapter I will present some discourses that might be interpreted as an acceptance of the non-drinker by the drinking culture.

I will start with an excerpt from my interview with Inger:

*Int: But is there some situations, or like social things, you avoid because you don't drink? Is there something that has changed? How does your sobriety affect your social activities and things like that?*

*Inger: It does affect it in some ways. I don't go out to drink beer with my girlfriends anymore, like I used to, just go to town and get a beer or meet someone on a Saturday night just to have a party, I don't do that. But for example, if I am invited to a party, I don't just say no to it because I am not going to drink. But it's not my initiative any longer...*

*Int: Do you ever feel outside because of your sobriety?*

*Inger: Yeah, a bit with things like, I have started at a new job, so it's like "oh we need to go out and take a paycheck beer one night", then I feel... I can say "Yes, but I don't drink, but I can join". And then I think, for others it easily becomes... And on Wednesday I had an exam and I got a really good grade, so I was very happy, and I went to work and they were like "Oh, so bubbles will flow this evening" and I said "Yes, in my Pepsi Max at least", and then it's like "Oh you are so boring", but I am in a way not affected by this, but that is the attitude, but I think I haven't felt it that much. But that people kind of respect the decision. They think it's tough in a way, taking that choice, because I made it because I was thinking that it's better for me to not do it.*

We can see in this above narrative, that Inger also faces stigma to some degree by being called “boring” because of her non-drinking. She also does not engage in social activities that used to involve drinking as much, and she certainly does not initiate these kinds of social interactions, according to her. I recognize both of Erving Goffman’s solutions to coping when faced with possible stigma in this narrative. Inger is alienating herself from the community that upholds the norm, but at the same time she is supporting the norm by acknowledging it but not being recognized by herself or others as someone to put the norm into practice. The latter solution heeds what could be described as relatively tolerant reactions from the people that uphold the norm, in the form of *respect* for her decision. I would argue, however, that this also might be interpreted as a sort of “marking of the deviant” and a sort of stigmatization. Like with the non-drinker in Edward Sagarin’s and Arnold Birenbaum’s paper, she is merely tolerated, but not approved. Inger, in the above narrative, inhabits conflicting discourses, she is both *boring* and respected as a non-drinker in the drinking culture. Another informant’s discourse that reveals a relative acceptance of the non-drinker, that I would also argue is stigmatizing in less obvious ways, is the following excerpt from my conversation with Gustav:

*Int: How would you say your sobriety affects, or influences, your identity, your lifestyle and your social activities?*

*Gustav: Eh... I think that... I think people see me now as a strong person. Because of that. I am a social person, I am an active person, I am very visible in the social community, I go to parties and stuff but I don’t drink. People would think that I would drink, I am from Denmark and I am social and I am usually fun so it comes as a surprise for a lot of people... And then they are like wow, cool, you don’t drink, and I think I get a lot of good reactions, I do that.*

*Int: But do you ever feel like you need a good reason to... Do people ask you why you don’t drink?*

*Gustav: People ask me, yeah. Especially people that don’t know me. They are like “why don’t you drink?”. Then I just say honestly it’s been a part of my life, in a bad way, for so many years and I want to be better than that, you know, so that’s short. And people seem to respect it. But it’s kind of... They need an answer. Because it’s not normal for people, for grown up people, not to drink anything. It’s like they see me as an ex-alcoholic. And I wasn’t. I didn’t drink during the weekdays or anything...*

*Int: But is it important for you when you give these answers that they know that you weren't like what they would call an alcoholic, in the clinical sense?*

*Gustav: No, no. I don't think... I don't mind... If they think that I was an alcoholic and I'm not now, then yeah, I think that's okay. That doesn't make it any worse. Maybe it makes me even stronger, you know, keeping from alcohol. And as I said I am very visible in the social community, I have a sports<sup>4</sup> club, and everybody is familiar with it. And then when they hear that... The first they think is I am fanatic, something like that, because now I stopped drinking. I don't think so much about it, what they think. Just I like to give them... I like to speak honestly.*

Gustav's narrative opens on a positive note, with an apparent acceptance of his sobriety by the surrounding participants in the drinking culture. However, once the stereotypes about people from Denmark kick in, people are surprised by the fact he does not drink, and although Gustav states he gets good reactions to this fact, as the discourse unfolds, it seems he still has a lot of explaining to do. Not accepting a "no, I don't drink" without further probing, could be interpreted as a sign of mistrust by those who ask. Another interesting piece of the discourse above is how Gustav describes how it is *not normal* for grown up people to not drink. With this, he positions himself within the discourse of stigmatization. The agency Gustav shows by opening up about the reasons he does not drink, is both a defense tool when cornered, or limited by the structure, yet it also enables him to talk about his motivations for not drinking, which seems to be important to him. This testifies in favor of the duality of structure, which in the case of this paper, is the drinking culture.

In this sub-subchapter I have looked at how these two informants, Inger and Gustav, testify to seemingly positive reactions to their non-drinking that reveal themselves to be stigmatizing in less obvious ways. In the next sub-subchapter, I will analyze how some of the informants interpret the motivations behind exerting drinking pressure on individuals that do not consume alcohol.

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<sup>4</sup> The type of sport's club Oscar runs is not revealed here, to protect his privacy.

#### 4.2.3 Stigma Reversed: The Non-drinker as a Reminder to think over one's own Relationship to Alcohol?

Answering the question of why drinkers pressure non-drinkers to consume alcohol, and why they stigmatize them and potentially mark them as deviant, is a complex one to answer. We might, however, find some potential interpretations to the issue at hand in some of the discourses from the interviews for this study. Let us start with Gustav:

*Int: I will read a sentence for you now, and you can say what you think about it.*

*Drinking pressure is a method where those who exert it have as their goal to legitimize their own alcohol use then and there.*

*Gustav: Aha. I think that that... Could be true in many occasions. Mhm. Definitely. I used to be at this temperance organization that is in Norway. A youth organization, and it's really about just making people think before they do stuff. Then I had this role play I do with pupils where I set up a party situation and you know... A lot of people are having a party and then I take one of the pupils up and then I seemingly pressure this one student to drink, making them drink to be a part of the party and that gets them to reflect so much and exactly what you said now... That it can seem like a lot of times that it is to legitimize their own drinking culture, that you put pressure on others. If everybody drinks, then it's not a problem. But if one person steps out of the crowd and says "hello, what are we doing here? Do we need to drink this much? Like now we had beers, and do we need to level up?". Then they would feel the right to defend themselves "oh common, we are having a good time and you are ruining it". I see that for me. So yeah, in a lot of occasions I would think that that's right.*

As we can see from the above excerpt, Gustav does think that one person's sobriety potentially makes others think about their own relationship to alcohol. Arnold Birenbaum and Edward Sagarin state that the non-drinker is easily overlooked if they do not insist on imposing that behavior on others. However, if they challenge the drinking activities, they might be marked deviant and party ruining in the context of a social gathering where drinking is involved. Let us see what Håkon has

to say about this issue. He addressed my question on whether one's sobriety can be a challenge to another one's drinking as follows:

*I completely concur on this. As an abstaining person it is clear for me that you are probing around in the other's bad consciousness about drinking. "Frankly, it would have maybe been better if I did like Håkon, that would be better for me". And I know from my own drinking history, my wife does drink, but she probably belongs to the group of people that drink the least, but of course when the kids moved out a while ago, I thought it was great to make good food on Fridays, and have a beer, you should not drink alone, that's not good. That's what the abusers do, so there was some sort of cultural rules of thumb there, everything is much better if you drink with someone. And I am honest about this to her as well, we discuss things, it was very easy for me to pour wine to her at the same time I did for myself, and push her, and I got scolded for it. So the drinking pressure, I am completely sure that it's also being used to justify one's own drinking. Drinking pressure is a tool or method used to legitimize one's own alcohol use. It's also a bit socially stigmatized to be the only one who is drinking alcohol. The more people don't drink, the worse it gets. But I also feel like, in the degree it is relevant to your paper, at parties, I have experienced that people drink less, if there is a non-drinker at the party. They kind of tone it down. And I think it also has to do with age, where the younger people who really don't want to drink, get pressured to do so to a bigger extent. But in my experience as an adult, it's a decision I made. I don't let pressure get to me. And it seems like people have accepted that...*

As we see from Håkon's observations, he also thinks that being sober can act as a challenging factor to other people's drinking habits. Another interesting concept to discover in the above narrative is that of *reversed stigma*. As a previous active participant in the drinking culture, Håkon is, in a way, looking at current drinkers and his own former drinking self through his present *sober glasses*. He acknowledges that he has, himself, engaged in the activity of pressuring others to drink, so as to keep everything in line with the accepted drinking culture. With this, he is also engaging in the affirmation techniques of acknowledgment of injury and acknowledgment of responsibility. Drinking alone is not good, according to Håkon, and therefore it is important to get others to drink with you, in order to legitimize your own consumption of alcohol.

Another narrative where the concept of *reversed stigma* is to be discovered, is in this following excerpt from my interview with Denis. He answered the following when being asked to elaborate on what he thinks about the Norwegian drinking culture:

*I would have to say it would be nice to have more friends that are sober. And I think it would... There is of course a reason to why we drink. And maybe someone has like one or two glasses of wine weekly, and that's fine, maybe that's not even drinking. It depends how the relationship is with alcohol, but I feel that a lot of my friends are like drinking a lot, and it would be really nice to see some of those processes that I am going through, to see another person... For example, I know that you quit, and it's so good hear. I would like to see more of that with my friends. I feel like it's another level of communication as well (talking to sober friends). Like when you are using alcohol and someone isn't. Like before, I know people who didn't drink, triggered me, a lot. Like "this person is totally ruining my fun". That's how I saw it. And I mean probably because I didn't want this person to be aware of all the stupidity, all I am saying and I don't know... All the stupid things that I am doing, so they can all remember it and then... It would not be on the same level. And I think it goes the same for the sober person. Like it would be nice to get to that level and understand each other and have fun (...) I thought that this person (the sober person) it's not possible that this person is having fun. And we cannot have the same fun. They have to be on the same level. Like I sad I didn't like that they would then observe everything, the more drunk I for example get, the more this person is going to be like... They will know who I am. And it would not be safe to be drinking kind of (...) I was afraid that they would like judge me. Just having a person who is sober there was already triggering that they are going to... They are judging me. I am an alcoholic. And that's the worst thing that can happen. And I think it's a lot of stigma about alcoholism. And it brings a lot of shame and it should not be like that...*

When I asked him if he thinks there is stigma around being sober as well, he answered the following:

*Yeah definitely. Among those who consume alcohol. There is a lot of questions like "why are you not drinking"? Are you pregnant, are you sick, are you... All these kind of questions... I*



*really want it to be that something normal as well that when I meet my friend and they are drinking that we are not having this discussion “oh why are you not drinking” or that I say “oh why are you drinking”... Everybody is having their own drink, and everybody is responsible for their drinks. I don’t want it to be judgmental either way, but there is stigma both ways.*

As we see from the above narrative, Denis, similarly to Håkon, is showing some signs of *reverse stigma* acknowledgment when it comes to reminiscing about his past drinking self. He states that he has been stigmatizing toward non-drinkers when he himself was drinking, because they represented a threat to his reputation. Having been on both sides of the fence, he has been a representative of both the drinking culture, and the non-drinking culture. Håkon stated that he believes his sobriety is probing into other people’s bad consciousness around their own drinking habits, and Denis states that he has been triggered by sober people potentially present at parties where drinking was expected. These two statements complement each other rather well. However, the concept of *reverse stigma* does not only apply to individuals looking at current drinkers and their former drinking selves through the glasses of their own sobriety, but it also applies to how they themselves use discourse to stigmatize the participants of the drinking culture. Denis mentioned “all the stupid things he was doing” and in that way, he is putting stigma onto his former drinking self as a representative of the group of drinkers. He, however, acknowledges that stigma runs in both directions, and we can easily state that also the drinking individuals prefer the company of Goffman’s “The Own” when faced with potential stigmatization for their alcohol consumption activities. Relevant to this is the following excerpt from my interview with Mads, who also mentions the concept of “doing stupid things” when drunk:

*Int: What do you think about, let’s say if I’m out in a pub and I am drinking, is somebody going to ask me why?*

*Mads: No, I don’t think so (...) if you are out in a pub and you are not drinking then you are the weird one. They are going to think “what’s wrong with you”. I think some people would look negatively upon you if you were there sober. It’s actually a lot of people feel insecure about it, it’s a social contract, that everyone here is drunk so everyone does stupid things, and then you forget about them in the morning. But then if one person is sober, then he is breaking that social contract.*

As we can interpret from the above narrative, Mads thinks that the *sober* person in a drinking context is *breaking a sort of social contract*, which is an interesting concept in itself, one that I will take with me further in the analysis. There are several stigmatizing discourses in this above excerpt, pointed towards non-drinkers, namely the words “wrong” and “weird”. However, besides the concept of breaking a social contract, what can be interpreted from the above narrative is that if people feel insecure about *it* (non-drinking), they might be feeling challenged in their own alcohol drinking habits. As for the concept of reversed stigma, let us look at yet another excerpt from my interview with Mads, where the stigmatizing discourse towards drinkers is clearer:

*Int: And how is it to be sober in this kind of culture? Do you still like to party?*

*Mads: No, no I haven't gone out since I stopped drinking.*

*Int: You haven't gone out at all?*

*Mads: No, not a single time.*

*Int: Okay. And why is that?*

*Mads: I don't enjoy it. I think my friends are stupid when I am sober (laughs). I like to be stupid with my friends, but I don't like to watch my friends being stupid while I'm not stupid.*

*Int: Yeah, you need to be on their level?*

*Mads: Yeah, exactly. And to be dumbed down like they are. Partying sober doesn't really work for me. I mean I'm not a huge party guy anyway. I like small gatherings rather than the big night clubs and stuff.*

*Int: But do you do that still? Like a Christmas party or?*

*Mads: I haven't done that in a few years. But that's more lockdown and covid. I don't mind hanging out with friends. If I'm with a friend who has had a few beers then that's not a problem but going to a party where everyone is drunk and I'm not, that doesn't work for me.*

Mads talks about his friends being stupid, and him not being able to be stupid with them due to his non-drinking. He also mentions the concept of being “dumbed down” when drunk. Both stupid and dumbed-down can be interpreted as stigmatizing adjectives pointed towards drinking people.

If we can argue that Mads is using stigmatizing language towards drinkers, we might also argue that he is projecting features of his own former drinking self upon the people still actively engaging in the drinking culture, and therefore stigmatizing himself as a former representative of this group. Another interesting conclusion to be drawn from Mads' above narrative is that he is alienating himself or even refraining from developing an attachment to the community that upholds a norm he cannot follow, which is, as we learned from the theory chapter, one of the solutions Erving Goffman identified deviants use as a defense against stigma.

In this sub-subchapter I have explored the concepts of non-drinking as a challenging factor in other's drinking habits, as well as the concept of *reverse stigma*. In the next sub-subchapter, I will explore how discourses of confidence might serve as a repellent to the challenges of a pressuring drinking culture.

#### **4.2.4\_Confidence in one's decision: A repellent to drinking pressure and stigma due to non-drinking?**

I have recognized that in some of the informant's discourses there is to be found an undertone of confidence which seems to affect their stance and/or response towards being marked as deviant or stigmatized. As we have seen in the previous discussion about issues surrounding drinking pressure, deviancy and stigmatization, some individuals avoid meeting the community that might potentially judge them or pressure them. Others, however, seem to have found agency and a defiance to the dominant structure in their confidence in their non-drinking. Stigma is often associated with physical differences, that is, things that can be seen with the naked eye, physical attributes that stray from the norms. In our contemporary times, these kinds of differences are being proudly presented to the dominant community and acceptance and tolerance are on the rise. We seem to be living in an era of the mantra that "differences are beautiful", but does that apply to the non-drinkers in this paper? I would argue that for some, pride and confidence and nonetheless striving for *visibility* of their non-participation in the drinking helps them negotiate their place within the drinking culture. Let us look at some of the discourses I find radiate pride and confidence in one's decision not to drink. At the end of another one of Håkon's statements

that I have already analyzed, he states that *“I don’t let pressure get to me. And it seems like people have accepted that...”*. The following is the continuation of that same part of our conversation:

*I think I am being perceived as “there is nothing to discuss here”, I think so yes, but I am not very argumentative about it, I don’t want to be this moralizing darkness man, I am not that. But I fully believe that it is for the good of bringing down the total amount of alcohol consumption, which is just as big a problem, if not bigger, as the abuse on an individual level is. And then you make a choice, either you quit or you drink less, and my choice to achieve the goal of bringing down the total consumption, is to quit. And in solidarity to those who suffer because of alcohol abuse on an individual level. So this is a decision of standpoint. And that is easy to stand with. I didn’t wake up one morning and was a non-drinker.*

As we see in the first sentence of Håkon’s narrative, he positions himself, through using discourse, into a place of confidence. He is a non-drinker, that is what he brings to the table, and there is no discussion about it. His motivations for non-drinking serve, almost, a higher purpose, and there is a sense of a social responsibility he feels he contributes to by not drinking. The concept of solidarity mentioned in the Identity chapter of this paper makes an appearance again, reinforcing the positivity of the decision to not drink.

Another informant whose discourse reveals confidence in their decision is Denis. Following is his narrative about how he handles drinking pressure:

*The thing is the last 5 months I didn’t socialize at all, not that I remember, and I socialized I don’t know, I didn’t feel any pressure from people who... Yesterday I was with my colleague. And after we were done I was hungry, and I called my partner as well, let’s grab some food. And my colleague had beer and I had alcohol free beer. And there is no talk about it, it was totally normal that... That situation was totally normal. But I did feel pressure when I started reducing the alcohol... For example, when I would go to Bosnia, and from my good friends. They would be like “oh common, have a drink, what’s wrong with you”. I laughed it out, but it affected me, I also want to drink, like, it doesn’t make sense that I don’t drink. But I am much more sensitive to that now, if somebody would do that I would be very, I*

*would not feel sorry to say okay that's not okay, don't do that. Like I can have the same fun as you, without drinking alcohol. And I can if I have enough energy, and in my free time. And also what it is now is that it's not possible that somebody can talk me into it, I would not allow them, as I said I would tell them how I feel about that, and if I would be afraid... I would avoid those situations. But I am not afraid, I know what it will do to me, it would feel like a defeat, it would bring a lot of feelings of guilt and shame, plus these physical things.*

As we can see from the above excerpt, Denis did face pressure to drink from his peers, albeit in Bosnia (where he is from). However, he states, with confidence and agency, that he would not succumb to drinking pressure at this given time, which could be interpreted as him having built up a confidence and security around his non-drinking self. He also states it would not be possible to talk him into drinking nowadays, which reinforces the confidence he feels about his sobriety. Although we can read confidence from his above narrative, it is also important to state that he himself is aware that he would avoid “those situations” (meaning situations where he could be pressured to drink) if he was afraid of succumbing to the drinking pressure, which he states that he is not. For the sake of comparison, following is the rest of that part of the conversation with Denis, where he elaborates more on the difference between *this* time, and the other times he attempted to quit drinking:

*Int: But before when you tried to quit, then you felt this kind of pressure? But did you then try to avoid certain situations, so you don't get tempted?*

*Denis: Yeah for example when I was like “yeah now I'm going to last for at least two months”. Then I would just not really... The thing that is also different, is that before I would get tempted, and I would not be able to go and sit with people who are drinking, it would be so boring for me. Because alcohol was always something that brought joy to my life. And all of a sudden this joy is taken away from me, and how could I possible have joy? I couldn't believe that... I was the one who didn't believe that you can have fun, joy, be happy, without drinking, for a very long time, until very recently, and of course because that was kind of almost my daily life, that was something that... And I think many people lived that life, maybe more normally, maybe drinking on weekends, like “I can't wait for the weekend to come” but I don't want to have that “I can't wait”. I want to enjoy every day, I want to enjoy my work, I want to enjoy things every day, not be like every time “I can't wait to”...*

*That's the thing like I was tempted, and I knew, I failed so many times, and I would tell myself "okay, it's not a failure, it's part of the process, it's not a failure, it's part of the process". So now kind of I am at the place where I am like... I can go, I can have fun still, and not in connection with alcohol. The only thing that would be different I think, that at some point you know people get drunk, and they start acting silly, those things would not be fun for me anymore, so I think that I would have to retreat maybe.*

In this excerpt, Denis himself is interpreting his former *failing version* of himself as a non-drinker against his now *confident and sure* version of himself as a non-drinker. There is a *confidence talk* to be discovered in the conflict between those two discourses (former non-drinker vs. present non-drinker). This kind of confidence discourse we can discover in Håkon's and Denise's seems to be a successful way for these two non-drinkers to negotiate their position within the drinking culture. I have discussed the avoidance *of* versus the presence *within* the drinking culture among non-drinkers with Sofie, and following is her addressing this issue:

*I think it's very sad. I don't know many sober people except my best friend, I have pressured him out sometimes, so I exerted a kind of social pressure on him you could say, I tried to make him have fun even though he does not drink, and he got some good friends out of that. And he thanked me afterwards. Because I made him understand that it was okay to be a non-drinker. There is nothing wrong with being a non-drinker. You should be proud of being that. I think that's important. I have been proud of that for many years.*

Another concept that reinforces the confidence in one's own non-drinking, as we can see in this above narrative, is a sense of *pride*. If one is proud of one's commitment and achievement of *not-doing* something, which is drinking, in this context, it could be said that that individual is confident and secure about their decision. Sofie also brings forward a message of *visibility*, where she thinks it is sad that some non-drinkers do not socialize, and generally avoid being part of social gatherings where they might be stigmatized by not drinking. There are, of course, other potential reasons why some individuals would avoid such social gatherings, but in this particular discourse, Sofie mentions her friend whom she *pressured* to come out with her, so that she could make him aware that being sober does not mean one is not permitted to have fun, albeit while in contact with individuals who might be consuming alcohol.

It can be stated, from the above interview excerpts, that being confident in one's own sobriety might make it less challenging to face drinking pressure and possible stigma when engaging with the drinking culture. Instead of engaging in the avoidance of and isolation from the drinking culture, visibility and engagement, and subsequently *resolution* of the issue by exerting confidence, might be a solution the non-drinker might use when in contact with individuals who drink.

In the following and final part of this analysis, I will look at how the discourses of the informants reveal their views on the drinking culture, and how the *subculture* of non-drinking fits into it.

### **4.3 The Norwegian Drinking Culture as Perceived By the Participants of This Study**

In this final chapter of the analysis, I will interpret the Norwegian drinking culture through the discourse of the informants and inspired by the Bordieuan concepts of *habitus* and *cultural* capital.

#### **4.3.1 Different Circumstances – Different Relationship to Alcohol?**

I found that a significant part of the empirical material that connects to the concepts of habitus and cultural capital come from the answers to the first question I asked my informants, namely, what their relationship to alcohol is. Let us start with Håkon:

*Int: But you said: "typical drinking pattern". What do you mean by that?*

*Håkon: What I mean with that... I was born... I grew up... Now I am not a representative for anything, not my own or others use of drugs and alcohol, but I was born into, to use that term, into that it was the most natural thing when one became a youth and getting closer to adulthood, the most natural thing was that drinking is a part of that. And when you first drank, then you drank a lot, you got drunk. It was only when one grew older that one*

*became preoccupied with things like enjoyment and having a cozy time (while drinking), and one became interested in things like taste. But one was born into the idea that this (drinking) was a part of being a grown up. I went into it without reflecting, into a huge world of drinking habits, of course you drank, and you began with it in your middle teenage years, towards high school. And then it was party and intoxication and everything that went along with it. That's how I got into it.*

As we can interpret from the above discourse, Håkon was “born into” the drinking culture as it is according to him. This means that his own drinking habits are part of his *habitus*. As we learned in the theory chapter, *habitus* is an embodiment of cultural capital which in the above narrative means that the ability, knowledge and agency to become a participating member of the drinking reveals a certain amount of cultural capital he was *handed* over by being born and raised among participants of the same culture. In the following excerpt, he elaborates more on this:

*Int: How much did you drink then? When you drank? And what led to you drinking less or you don't drink at all?*

*Håkon: Now I don't drink at all.*

*Int: But what led to that decision and how much did you drink before you quit? Can you talk a little bit about that?*

*Håkon: You can say that as a youth, then it was a couple of times a month, and then it was typical party drinking, that you got drunk. Not so much to begin with, but then it became more. In my adulthood I became, in a way, conscious about the fact that alcohol isn't just a regular consumption item, it's not juice. And one was aware along the way that, one has to be careful, you don't know who is prone to becoming an alcohol addict, and to that extent I was careful to how much I drink, about 7 units a week, I think. It was more that it was concentrated, connected to weekends and pastime, vacations and Christmas and Easter, and then the consumption would go up, but on a normal weekend it could be less. I don't think I was in a risk zone. And then the question was what made me quit? I was in the military all my life. And I came home after a long deployment in a high-pressure war zone, and then I noticed it was easy to go for that peace that a bottle could offer. And then I saw that this wasn't sustainable at all. And it didn't do me any good, neither for my physical nor mental health. And then I noticed some improvements (after quitting). And me quitting*



*was, to begin with, motivated by the health argument, and maybe mostly mental health. And then I noticed improvement with that. But then it was the force of habit, and of course when you did something for 40 years, and not reflecting over it either, and it's part of the cultural expression... And I am a person who can overdo things, and things I am enthusiastic over, I am very enthusiastic over them. And it's true, consuming alcohol is fun in many ways. Until you reach a certain point and then it becomes bad. And to change an old habit, and it being one you enjoy, that's not just easy. And then it was a lot of discussions with what I call "the man in the mirror", because after a while, I started pondering a lot about this, read a lot about it. And when you search for something on the internet the algorithms start to work, and then a lot more information pops up, so I got a pretty extensive knowledge about it. I felt like what was abstinence from alcohol because of health, I manage to extend that to a sort of solidarity abstinence, because alcohol as a cultural phenomenon and a drug is very dangerous for both the individual and the health of a society. So I have become more of a solidarity non-drinker, rather than a very principled non-drinker. I don't think I can say that I cannot drink exclusively because of my health, that's not true. My health isn't worse than the next man's.*

Besides serving as a sort of elaboration on the first mentioned discourse by Håkon in this sub-subchapter, it also reveals that his sobriety, as well, is influenced by cultural capital he has access to. He has access to various sources, and even more so, information that aligns with his current belief system is being pushed upon him by the algorithms of the internet which recognize his interests. In the theory chapter, I have mentioned the Bordieuan concept of *production fields*. Within (cultural) production fields, besides material artefacts, belief systems and values are being produced as well. By analyzing Håkon's shift from drinker to non-drinker, we can see a conflict between two cultural production discourses, namely the values of participants in the drinking culture vs. the values of non-participants or former participants of said culture. Another interesting discourse in Håkon's above statement is how he describes how alcohol consumption was reserved for weekends and more excessive alcohol consumption for holidays and vacations, which corresponds with Joseph Gusfield's theory about how drinking became an activity for pastime.

Following is another (shorter) excerpt which reveals the presence of a certain type of cultural capital Håkon has access too, that might help solidify his *new* values as a non-drinker:

*Int: Do you think a lot about your non-use of alcohol?*

*Håkon: Yes, I guess I do. And I work for a temperance organization. So I am employed in the field, you can say. So my knowledge about the whole phenomena becomes bigger every day. And there are reflections around it – one's own behavior, and how is it to just be led into it (the drinking culture), without contemplating it at all. One started drinking because it was natural. That's just how it is. 85% of Norway's adult population consumes alcohol.*

We can argue that the entire above conversation reveals that Håkon puts focus on how, almost *innocently*, an individual just ends up being part of a culture by inheriting its cultural capital which then becomes an individual's habitus. This habitus led him into participating in the drinking culture, yet *conflicting* discourses of cultural capital also led him to become sober and, in a way, influence his own habitus. Håkon accomplishes a sort of *shift* in habitus by being reflected over the risks of alcohol consumption, whereas he was not reflected over them while he was drinking. The *new* and conflicting (conflicting with the drinking cultural capital) cultural capital he attained can be read from his employment at a temperance organization. This cultural capital reinforces his sobriety, because it belongs to a non-drinking culture, or perhaps, the subculture of not-consuming alcohol. It also seems that, by working in the temperance organization, Håkon has access to different social capital, which helps him attain symbolic values related to his non-drinking.

Another informant who reveals how drinking might be a part of a person's habitus is Gustav:

*Int: And why did you quit? What made you quit?*

*Gustav: Uhm. Because... It's a long answer. I grew up in an environment highly influenced by alcohol. The local environment, the neighborhood, the sportsclub, everything was just infected by alcohol and growing up as a teenager playing handball... I had my debut in a senior team, and at the first match with the senior team when you are like 15 years old, then you have to buy a case of beer. And if you are player of the day then you have to buy another one. The more you drink the more compliments and the more socially accepted you*

*are. That's how it all kind of started and nobody says stop, you know. It's a negative spiral, you get into it and you get approved and then it just builds up from there. Yeah so that was a small town environment, small sports club, everybody knows everybody, and it was socially accepted to drink a lot. My mom drank a lot and she was an alcoholic and drank through my childhood... She died a few years ago and when I found out I was going to be a dad, 7 years ago, I thought to myself that I knew the influence alcohol had on me. I knew I couldn't control it. When I was in it when I was at parties, I know I drank too much. And I didn't feel like I was myself the next many couple of days. I didn't have the energy level, I didn't have the positivity, that I usually have. The drive and everything. The dad I wanted to be should be the one that wakes up every morning and is positive and has energy, wants to play, wants to have fun and not get irritated and have so many ups and downs that follow with drinking a lot. And if I could just tune it down to just drinking once a while then it would have been alright, but I knew that was not me. I had difficulties with that. It was a big part of me and my personality and the way people knew me. I was a lot of fun at parties. It was like all or nothing and so I thought to myself that I will take a break and then it turned into months and years and I will never drink again. I am positively sure.*

I would argue that there are significant similarities between Håkon's and Gustav's narratives that reflect on their habitus in relation to the drinking culture. However, Gustav is also referencing prior relationships and a negative personal experience to alcohol use as motivation not to engage in the drinking culture (such as his mother being an alcohol addict). Similar to Håkon, the cultural capital that Gustav was equipped with during his upbringing influenced his subsequent drinking habits. He also has started reflecting upon his own alcohol habits and by referencing prior relationships (his mother) he came to the realization that he must quit drinking because he is becoming a father. In addition to referencing prior relationships, he is also acknowledging responsibility, both of which are techniques of affirmation used by members of subcultures to reinforce their lifestyle. Another interesting concept that reveals itself from the above narrative, is that within the drinking culture, social capital is acquired by drinking, in order to be accepted. Håkon and Gustav can be described as having been active participants in the drinking culture prior to quitting, however, I find it useful, for the sake of contrast, to present narratives by some informants that can be described as having had a different situation regarding the habitus that influenced their relationship with alcohol:

*Oscar: So I am 30 years old, turning 31 in like a month, and my relationship with alcohol began when I was 18 years old, that's when I tried alcohol for the first time, and even back then I didn't particularly drink much, and I drunk like a cider or two maybe, and that was pretty much it. I never been a big drinker. And I also drunk very very rarely. And even moreso after I got my driver`s licence.*

*Int: Did you grow up in an environment where people were drinking a lot? Are you like familiar with the concept of what we call the Norwegian drinking culture?*

*Oscar: I am familiar with that. I mean my parents did drink some, but not much. My mom is a psychologist specializing in addiction and that had an influence on me.*

*Int: How come, did she talk to you about it?*

*Oscar: I mean she said don't touch alcohol until you are old enough. But she would drink herself, not much but like a beer and a wine in the weekend would be normal. So it's like I grew up in a non-alcoholic environment. My parents, I would say they drink normally, like a regular Norwegian household would do.*

*Int: And what does that mean, can you answer that?*

*Oscar: In my view it means it's not unusual to take a beer in the evening if you are doing something, or in the weekend, but primarily drinking in the weekends. Like having a glass of wine or a glass of beer to the food in the weekend, was not unusual. But never exceeding like 2-3 units. Never getting drunk.*

We can argue that, in the above discourse, there is a different kind of habitus to be revealed.

Oscar's mother, an addiction specialist, might have presented Oscar with a cultural capital that differs from the one Håkon and Gustav had. It could be assumed, then, that his sobriety is shaped differently than that of the informants who had a more active relationship with the drinking culture.

Another informant whose habitus might have shaped their sober-selves in a different way than it would with former active drinkers is Sofie:

*Int: Did you see your close ones drink, or how was it for you to grow up in relation to alcohol consumption?*

*Sofie: My parents were always very good with that. When we were small, they drank when we went to bed, one glass of beer or wine when we fell asleep. After we became older then it was also only in the weekends, and then it wasn't more than one or two glasses of wine. They always drank very little, and with Christmas dinner they drank Christmas soda with us. And maybe they would have a beer or wine in the evening, maybe a tiny shot of Akevitt. But that was very rarely. They never drank much at all. They didn't increase the amount either over the years, they still drink very little. My mother uses one hour on one glass of wine. They were always very proper with that and they told us one has to learn to drink with a purpose, like my mother always said. One should not abuse alcohol and get addicted, one should be able to enjoy it. They were always very preoccupied with that. My in-laws are also very good with this. He (husband) also grew up like this so it wasn't a problem for them (the in-laws) when I said I want an alcohol free Christmas.*

Sofie's habitus, we could argue, also differs from that of informants who have had a more intensive connection to the drinking culture. Both her family and her in-laws seem to share that habitus that makes sobriety or minimal drinking a *normal* state to be in.

Comparing the first two narratives in this sub-subchapter with the latter two, one could argue that habitus and cultural capital reveal the differences between former drinkers with their sober and/or minimal drinking peers. In the next sub-subchapter, we will look at how the informants view the Norwegian drinking culture in a more general way, in order to understand and shed light on the processes within and outside the drinking culture.

#### **4.3.2 The Norwegian Drinking Culture – Through the Eyes of Non-drinkers**

Finally, there is an interesting and important alleyway we have not analyzed yet. How do these informants view the Norwegian drinking culture, anyway? And what could be the takeaway from this paper regarding the drinking culture? Let us see how Mads addresses this:

*Int: What do you think about the Norwegian drinking culture?*

*Mads: I think we have a culture of... I don't know what to call it. Speed drinking? Especially because alcohol is so expensive in Norway. You have the vorspiels, where everyone needs to be drunk before they go out. Because nobody can afford to get drunk in a normal setting, like most people can't afford to sit down and have drinks in a pub or a bar because it's so expensive, so you down a lot of drinks. I witnessed it myself many times working behind the bar, that when the alcohol serving stops at 2 o'clock, most people panic and think "Oh God I gotta down a few drinks before they stop selling". So you down maybe a couple of beers or a couple of drinks and then the doors close 30 minutes later and everybody fights over the few taxis available and everybody is extra drunk because they all down drinks before closing time. I think these things lead to a problematic culture.*

As we see in the above discourse, Mads believes there is a culture of "speed drinking" in Norway, caused by all the restrictions that are posed upon jolly bar enthusiasts. He gives himself credibility to state this through saying that he worked in the service industry. Let us look at another informant's opinion about the Norwegian drinking culture, Benas also works in the service industry, thus marking himself credible to discuss this via discourse:

*Int: But what do you think about the Norwegian drinking culture, how they drink?*

*Benas: They are like pigs (laughs). We have in town like a festival, there you see a lot of drunk people. For example, now that I am not drinking, I am sober and I have to work in a bar so to see people they are like so aggressive sometimes, or just like some are crying. Just completely like lost you know. And you see this alcohol is like so bad you know. It triggers all you have inside your head and I don't know. But then you see how people are acting, they are really like not polite to each other and stuff. They are thinking they are going to be drinking to relax, but it's just completely different. They are just more intense. The opposite of relaxed.*

Benas sees the participants in the drinking culture as aggressive and not polite, the opposite of relaxed. Perhaps we can find the answer to *why* in this informant's narrative:

*Int: You never ask somebody why they drink, when they are out on town, but you do ask them why they drink, do you have any thoughts on that?*

*Oscar: I think it's just because how ingrained alcohol is in our culture, and especially Norwegian culture. Because we are perceived as sort of like an introverted kind of people. And alcohol kind of loosens that up. It makes you feel a little looser, being able to be like more approachable perhaps. I think it's just because of that, the norm is more "we are drinking" than the fact people are not drinking.*

In this narrative, we see that Oscar thinks that the power of norm is on the side of the drinkers. After he answered my previous question, I asked him if he thinks the non-use of alcohol is talked about in the Norwegian society, and he answered the following:

*To some extent I think. It comes up every time someone wants to do something about the times you can sell alcohol, for example, or the availability of alcohol. Like when people want to have stronger percentage of alcohol outside Vinmonopolet, then the discussion comes up on how much Norwegians are drinking and so forth. But other than that I don't feel like there is a discourse in society about it.*

In the next discourse, we can see a comparison between different drinking cultures, by Iben:

*Int: So what do you think about the Norwegian drinking culture and how is it different from the one in Denmark?*

*Iben: This gets very interesting. I can also tell you I lived 6 years of my time in Germany, so I can compare Germany, Denmark and Norway. To compare Denmark and Norway is quite interesting. In Denmark you can go to every little kiosk and shop to get a beer or to get a bottle of red wine, or even to buy a whiskey right. The fact that you are exposed to alcohol in the shop wherever you go is sort of like a liberty of course to make your choices, to drink with other people, to drink at home, where nobody sees you, or even to go to some public place and drink. That is a huge difference, here you must go to the Vinmonpolet. And that fact sits in people's heads as well "hey, there is a limitation". So in Denmark I think people would go out on a Tuesday night just to have one or two beers. Whereas in Norway you go Friday night and you go totally bananas. And you do maybe the same on Saturday night. That's how I see this, and how I've seen it for many years. There is no such thing as "okay*

*let's have just one glass of wine" and it's over. It's like people when they first open that bottle of wine then they also empty it here.*

*Int: But why do you think that is? Do you have some thoughts about that?*

*Iben: Yes. I think it is because of the fact that it is so limited, because you only get this on the Vinmonopolet. Then there is a hunger for that.*

*Int: Can you talk a little bit more about how you see this Norwegian drinking culture, and how are the participants of it?*

*Iben: I think that in order to stay within some sort of barriers with yourself has a difference in Denmark, Germany and also here in Norway. Because here in Norway there is a tendency to really drink a lot, people get so drunk and so sort of unreliable and mad, you know, they go crazy, this is a very big difference when they go out in Germany, because in Germany you would have one beer and then you would go home again, that's fine. So it's like losing self-control, in a way, and that's what I talked about before with the sms. This person totally losing self-control in being so drunk that you don't even know who you are sending the message to and at what time of day, or even night. That is a very big difference, you know, because of not really being able to say ok enough is enough. It's like the Norwegians go to the extreme really. I lived here for so many years, and of course you can I am part of this. And maybe I also go to the extreme by saying no alcohol, thank you very much.*

What is important to note here is that the Norwegian drinking culture seems to be perceived as quite problematic by the non-drinkers included in this study. This sentiment largely extends to the discourses of the remaining informants as well, which is why I will include some more examples that represent this perception of the Norwegian drinking culture among non-drinkers:

Håkon:

*It is deeply problematic. Because those who don't drink often, also drink more when they first start drinking. And we know this. We have more problems per liter than other countries where the alcohol consumption rate is higher. And I noticed it with myself – you stand in it with both legs, not thinking. Why do we do this when it leads to so many problems? "We don't know". But that's how we always did it. My father does it, my grandfather does it, that's just how it is.*



Sofie, upon being asked if she thinks drinking pressure is part of the Norwegian drinking culture:

*Absolutely. The pressure is there. I think the drinking pressure is what makes people still go out and drink too much and do stuff like that. Because the pressure is there, always. From your friends, or strangers, or bartenders and waiters when you go out (...) but if we want to change the drinking culture, we cannot just change what the pub owners do, we also need to change the psychological in people that makes them drink.*

Kim, upon being asked on why it seems so normal to be drinking alcohol:

*The Drinking culture should be more open to accepting the fact that some people do not drink. And that people stop perceiving it as something surprising, not drinking, and that drinking is something that is an "of course".*

I asked Jon, who I have concluded avoids contact with the drinking culture, about how it is being sober in that culture:

*I think I get more respect (for not drinking) in the subcultures than in the normal culture. Everybody knows that I don't drink and nobody asks questions, nobody cares. But if I go to a normal pub, then everybody is asking why don't you drink.*

## 5.0 Conclusion

The research topic for this paper is **how non-drinking individuals experience sobriety in the Norwegian drinking culture**. In order to explore this topic, I have identified three research questions that I answered in this paper:

1. How does the non-use of alcohol affect non-drinker's identities?
2. Are non-drinkers considered deviant in a 'wet' society?
3. How is the Norwegian drinking culture perceived by sober individuals?

The non-consumption of alcohol affects the participant's perception of self-identity in several ways. What has been revealed in this study is that the importance of identity to some of the informants might be related to their involvement in temperance organization. On the other hand, other informants engage in various forms of 'identity refusal' discourse where they deny the significance of sobriety to their identities. Another interesting conclusion that can be drawn from the study is that some informants use *better-self* discourses where they construct a *new* and *improved* version of themselves after they have decided to quit drinking, which directly contrasts the identity refusal narratives.

Concerning the question of non-drinkers as *deviants*, it has been revealed that non-drinkers are considered deviants to some extent by members of the drinking culture. There seem to be *legitimate and illegitimate* reasons for not drinking, which are subsequently either accepted or rejected by drinkers. The 'legitimate' reasons include driving, pregnancy and health issues. In addition to that, non-drinkers complain about drinking pressure and potential stigmatization exerted on them by the drinking culture, which they meet with either alienating themselves from the drinking culture or meeting it with *agency* by engaging in discussion and revealing the reasons for their non-consumption. Some informants use a combination of the aforementioned coping strategies.

The participation in and view of the Norwegian drinking culture in the discourses of the informants in this study has revealed itself to be conditioned by their cultural capital and its embodiment in

the individual's habitus. Individuals that were 'born into' a dominant drinking culture environment are the ones who have been active participants of that culture before becoming sober. More passive former drinkers had a different cultural capital, and therefore participated in the drinking culture to a lesser extent. The Norwegian drinking culture, according to the participants of this study, is largely considered problematic. There seems to be an issue of 'speed drinking', and it seems to be related to the restrictions surrounding alcohol use in the Norwegian society.

To add some final words at the end of the study, I would like to emphasize the reasons why I decided to write my master thesis paper about this topic. Within the cultural studies, alcohol non-consumption is under-researched. This leads to a lack of resources for those who do not consume alcohol, which takes from them the opportunity to search for understanding of their own sober state-of-being from a theoretical standpoint. There is a lack of *sober* voices in the discourse of society at large, outside of the traditional alcohol (non) consumption studies, and with this study, I have tried to turn up the volume on some of those voices. In order to add to a much-needed discussion between two discourses – those of the drinking vs. those of the non-drinking individuals.

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Are you interested in taking part in the research project

“Everybody knows that Jeppe barely drinks, but who is asking why? The experiences of being sober or mostly sober in the

Norwegian Drinking Culture”

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to explore the experience of people who live sober or mostly sober in the Norwegian drinking culture. In this letter we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

Purpose of the project

The purpose of this project is to gain knowledge on the experience of people who live sober or mostly sober in the Norwegian drinking culture. How they navigate social settings, how it is affecting their identity and how they see alcohol consumption from a perspective of someone who is on the “outside” of the drinking culture.

This research is the basis for my master thesis at the University in Southeast Norway where I study Cultural Studies.

Who is responsible for the research project?  
The University of Southeast Norway. (USN)

Why are you being asked to participate?

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have quit or heavily reduced your alcohol intake and because you are an adult/young adult who has had prior experience with alcohol consumption.

What does participation involve for you?

Participating in this project involves talking about your own relationship with alcohol consumption. The data will be collected via a semi-structured interview, approximately one hour long, which will be done live or online via zoom/skype or similar platforms. The sound will be recorded electronically and transcribed by me.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data

We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act).

- • Me and my supervisor will be able to access data that you provide.
- • I will replace your name and contact details with a code. The list of names, contact details and

respective codes will be stored separately from the rest of the collected data

I will ensure that information that could make you recognizable will be anonymized, changed and/or coded.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?

The project is scheduled to end in May 2022. The personal data will be deleted after that.

### Your rights

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- - access the personal data that is being processed about you
- - request that your personal data is deleted
- - request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- - receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- - send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process your personal data?

We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with The University in Southeast Norway, NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- • The University in Southeast Norway via Marija Bliznac (the student) at [marija.bliznac@hotmail](mailto:marija.bliznac@hotmail), telephone: 004740572682 or the supervisor Ellen Schruppf at [ellen.schrumpf@usn.no](mailto:ellen.schrumpf@usn.no), telephone 004735952628.
- • Our Data Protection Officer: Paal Are Solberg at [paal.a.solberg@usn.no](mailto:paal.a.solberg@usn.no), telephone 004735575053
- • NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS, by email: ([personverntjenester@nsd.no](mailto:personverntjenester@nsd.no))

or by telephone: +47 53 21 15 00. Yours sincerely,



Project Leader Student (if applicable) (Researcher/supervisor)

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I have received and understood information about the project “Everybody knows that Jeppe barely drinks, but who asks why? The experiences of being sober or mostly sober in the Norwegian Drinking Culture”. I give consent:

- ◆ to participate in an interview ◆ for the interview to be recorded

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approx. May 2022.

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- (Signed by participant, date)

Interviewguide:

Målet med undersøkelsen:

Å forstå og analysere erfaringer edrue, eller oftest edrue personer har i den norske drikkekulturen.

Temaer/spørsmål:

- Hvordan vil du beskrive din relasjon med alkohol (Edru, drikker sjeldent, osv.)
- Hvordan er det å være edru (eller drikke sjeldent) i den norske drikkekulturen?
- Føler du deg utenfor pga. alkoholvanene dine?
- Tenker du mye på din egen alkohol (ikke) forbruk?
- Bruker du noen ressurser (nettressurser, grupper, litteratur osv.) for å hjelpe deg være edru?
- Hvorfor drikker du ikke (eller drikker sjeldent)?
- Hva synes du om den norske drikkekulturen?
- Hvordan påvirker din edruhet din identitet, din livstil og dine sosiale aktiviteter?
- Anti-konsumeristisk?
- Synes du du må ha en god grunn for å nekte alkohol?

## Hvordan er det å være edru eller drikke sjeldent i den norske drikkekulturen? Invitasjon til å bli med i undersøkelsen (fikk lov å poste av modsene)

Jeg skriver masteroppgave om hvordan man opplever å være edru (eller oftest edru!) og vil gjerne snakke med deg som kjenner deg igjen i dette. Du skal være anonym om du ønsker det. Å være med i undersøkelsen innebærer at du er med på en intervju om hvordan du selv opplever å være "utafor" det som man kaller en drikkekultur. Gleder meg til å snakke med deg! Sendt meg en PM her på reddit hvis du er interessert og mellom 20- 40 år og så tar vi det derfra.









Annex 1: <Annex Title>