



## Research Paper

# Why are young people drinking less than earlier? Identifying and specifying social mechanisms with a pragmatist approach

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## ABSTRACT

Recent surveys have found a strong decrease in alcohol consumption among young people and this trend has been identified in European countries, Australia and North America. Previous research suggests that the decline in alcohol consumption may be explained by changes in parenting style, increased use of social media, changes in gender identities or a health and fitness trend. We use qualitative interviews with drinking and non-drinking young people from Sweden (N = 49) to explore in what way and in what kinds of contexts these explanations may hold true and how they alone or together may explain declining alcohol consumption among young people. By using the pragmatist approach, we pay attention to what kinds of concerns, habits, practices, situations and meanings our interviewees relate to adolescents' low alcohol consumption or decline in drinking. By analyzing these matters, we aim to specify the social mechanisms that have reduced adolescents' drinking. Our paper discovers social mechanisms similar to previous studies but also a few that have previously been overlooked. We propose that the cultural position of drinking may have changed among young people so that drinking has lost its unquestioned symbolic power as a rite of passage into adulthood. There is less peer pressure to drink and more room for competing activities. This opening of a homogeneous drinking culture to the acceptance of differences may function as a social mechanism that increases the success of other social mechanisms to reduce adolescents' drinking. Furthermore, the results of the paper suggest a hypothesis of the early maturation of young people as more individualized, responsible, reflective, and adult-like actors than in earlier generations. Overall, the paper provides hypotheses for future quantitative studies to examine the prevalence and distribution of the identified social mechanisms, as well as recommends directions for developing effective interventions to support young people's healthy lifestyle choices.

## Introduction

Recent analyses of surveys of youth drinking in Sweden have found a strong decrease both in rates of abstinence and in levels of drinking among drinkers (Raninen, Livingston, & Leifman, 2014). For instance, alcohol consumption among 15- to 16-year-olds has fallen more than 50% between 2000 and 2012 (Norström & Svensson, 2014). At the same time, the abstention rates among boys and girls have increased from about 30% to more than 50% (Leifman et al., 2011). Moreover, heavy episodic drinking has decreased from 34% to 18% among boys (ibid.). The findings are backed up by an age-period-cohort analysis of trends in alcohol consumption, which found a substantial cohort effect

for non-drinking and a smaller effect for volume of drinking for the youngest cohort, born 1991–1995 (Kraus et al., 2015). Similar declining trends of alcohol consumption among young people have been identified in other European countries, North America and Australia (De Looze, Raaijmakers, Bogt, & Pickett, 2015; Hibell et al., 2012; Livingston et al., 2016).

Discussion has begun of possible meanings and implications of these findings (Kraus, Seitz, Piontek, & Hibell, 2018; Livingston & Room, 2014). It seems clear that something is changing in the drinking culture of young Swedes. However, it is hard to point either to policy changes or to trends among older adults that would match these trends. There are several possible directions in which to look in trying to understand

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the patterns that have been found. Existing research suggests that the decline in alcohol consumption may be explained by changes in parenting style, delaying of adolescence, increased use of social media, changes in gender identities or a health and fitness trend (e.g. Pape, Rossow, & Brunborg, 2018; Raitasalo, Simonen, Tigerstedt, Mäkelä, & Tapanainen, 2018). There may also be other potential explanations which research has not yet identified.

In the paper, we use qualitative interviews with drinking and non-drinking young people from Sweden to clarify in what way and in what kinds of contexts the different explanations for the decline in adolescents' drinking may hold true, and how they alone or together may explain the unexpected trend. To this end, we pay attention to what kinds of concerns, habits, practices, situations and meanings our interviewees relate to adolescents' low alcohol consumption or decline in drinking. By analysing these matters, we aim to identify the social mechanisms that have reduced adolescents' drinking. With our interview data, we cannot analyse how the identified social mechanisms have changed over time. However, by contextualizing the identified social mechanisms within recent cultural, social and technological developments, we can discuss their significance for the decline in adolescents' drinking: how they currently support moderate or delayed consumption among young people, as it has been observed in population level studies. Our article provides hypotheses for future quantitative studies to examine the prevalence and distribution of the identified social mechanisms. Furthermore, the study suggests directions for developing effective interventions to support young people's healthy lifestyle choices.

### Theoretical framework

In the article, we approach potential factors in adolescents' low alcohol consumption with the concept of social mechanism, along with a pragmatist orientation (Gross, 2009). Conceptualizations of social mechanism usually emphasize that “a social mechanism is a more or less general sequence or set of social events or processes analyzed at a lower order of complexity or aggregation by which – in certain circumstances – some cause X tends to bring about some effect Y in the realm of human social relations” (Gross, 2009: 364). The pragmatist theory agrees with this but differs from other theories by emphasizing the relevance of habits, practices and discourses in the examination of what kinds of sequences, events or processes mediate between cause and effect. While the dominant theories assume that social mechanisms are based on rational and conscious weighting of means and ends or on the desires, beliefs and opportunities of the individuals involved (e.g. Hedström & Swedberg, 1998), an approach in terms of pragmatism postulates that social mechanisms get their identity and meaning at the level of situations in relation to habits, practices and discourses (Gross, 2009).

Habits are “acquired predisposition[s] to ways or modes of response” (Dewey, 1922: 42). We learn habits through our own experience and by being exposed to the habits and practices of others in particular situations. We may discern cognitive-affective habits, behavioral habits, collective habits and habit sets (Gross, 2009: 366). For example, a habit of seeing the world with sociological lenses is a cognitive-affective habit, taking every day a nightcap before going to sleep is a behavioral habit and consuming alcohol frequently to intoxication together with other people on a Friday night is a collective habit. Doing competitive sports often means that one develops practices of eating healthily as well, in the case of which two sets of habits are combined. Habits orientate and regulate our action in a situation, and change as we fail to solve a concern at hand with pre-existing habits. When a situation appears to us as problematic, it then forces us to creatively develop new ways of acting, which, as responses, usually become later integrated into our stocks of habits and practices for use in similar kinds of occasions (Gross, 2009).

Thus, as we analyze social mechanisms from a pragmatist

perspective, we will take into consideration the following. In the identification of social mechanisms that bring about low alcohol consumption among young people, we pay attention to the current concerns our interviewees have in their everyday life situations, and how they are related to drinking or oppose it. We understand “concerns” in a broad sense, referring to all kinds of problems, complications and interests individuals face in everyday life situations, from a need to find meaning in existence to a need of discovering ways of being social and having fun (Gross, 2009). We also take note of what kind of habits and practices the interviewees develop to resolve a certain concern or to strengthen a particular interest. Furthermore, as the pragmatist framing of social mechanism emphasizes that individuals' meaning-making regarding their concerns, habits and practices is an important component in social mechanisms (Gross, 2009), we also include this discursive aspect in our definition of social mechanism. Overall, the pragmatist perspective helps us to detect what kinds of situational concerns, habits, practices and meanings the social mechanisms influencing young people's low alcohol consumption are rooted in. When we have identified and specified specific social mechanisms from our data, we compare them and group social mechanisms that have certain similarities and relations with each other under wider themes.

### Earlier studies

As already noted, several possible themes or explanations have been discovered in earlier studies related to the decline in adolescent drinking.

#### *Changes in parenting style and control*

Parents' role in shaping young people's drinking habits is important. Parents can serve as an example for moderate alcohol consumption, monitor and set rules to children's alcohol-related activities, limit alcohol supply to them and develop good communication about alcohol with them. Some studies indicate that parents today are more concerned about their children's drinking and have developed more restrictive parenting styles (Larm, Livingston, Svensson, Leifman, & Raninen, 2018; Ryan, Jorm, & Lubman, 2010). The changes in parental control – through establishing new stricter habits and practices around alcohol – may have contributed to the decline in adolescent drinking.

#### *Changes in relationship to parents and delay in emancipation*

Another important theme for the decline in adolescent drinking may be related to structural changes in overall parent-child relationships. Whereas some previous generations tended to respond to their parents' life style by opposing it (Room, 1984), the current generations seem to consider their parents as friends with whom they want to spend their leisure time, thereby responding to their parents' lifestyle in a conformist way (Øia & Vestel, 2014). These tendencies keep young people more at home, reduce their time and opportunities to drink with their peers and interweave their concerns, habitual responses and creativity to conforming with their parents' wishes. For example, in the USA, the decline in adolescent drinking overlaps with a decrease in activities such as driving a motor vehicle, going out to have fun with peers, dating and having sex (Twenge & Park, 2017). This phenomenon has been called ‘delayed adolescence’ (Pape et al., 2018).

#### *Gendered identity changes*

Changes in ‘doing’ masculinity and femininity may also serve as one potential explanation for the decline in adolescent drinking. The long-term increase in women's drinking along with a general change in gendered identities has created space for the enactment of new kinds of masculinities and femininities among young people. Studies suggest that young men's masculinity is more flexible regarding drinking and

less attached to heavy drinking than earlier (Demant & Törrönen, 2011; Lyons & Gough, 2017). Therefore, heavy drinking is not probably as important a building block for their masculinity as it was to earlier generations. Young women's drinking, in turn, faces different kinds of normative concerns and is still a subject of strong regulatory scrutiny. Whilst having fun, young women's drinking is expected to stay within a socially decent and responsible femininity (Hutton, Wright, Lyons, Niland, & McCreanor, 2016). As the invasion of social media into private drinking situations have transformed the situations to be more public, this has had effects especially on young women's drinking. Studies show that young women actively supervise digital spaces to unlink themselves from disreputable images (ibid.).

### *The advent of social media*

Increased use of social media may have also affected adolescents' drinking, in various ways besides that suggested above. Studies show that social media may operate as part of two separate social mechanisms. One of them is related to the way young people share information about their drinking events via social network sites (SNS) and integrate SNS in their drinking practices. The studies from New Zealand (e.g. Griffiths & Casswell, 2010) suggest that SNS has extended the influence of intoxication-driven drinking culture by creating new public forums for young people to promote it. Young people post pictures and share stories via SNS so that 'intoxicogenic social identities' are celebrated. In this way, social network sites encourage drinking and normalize intoxicogenic drinking cultures among young people (Moewaka Barnes et al., 2016). However, a study from the Netherlands (Hendriks, Gebhardt, & Putte, 2017) finds that young people regulate their alcohol-related content on SNS towards moderate alcohol consumption by sharing modest rather than extreme representations of drinking. Thus, as a social mechanism that transforms private issues into public matters social media may encourage or reduce drinking, depending on the practices it is embedded in. The other social mechanism through which social media may operate is linked to competing activities. For example, a study from Sweden (Norström & Svensson, 2014) proposes that the declining trend in adolescents' drinking in Sweden could be explained by their widespread use of social media through which their social practices have changed to be less based on alcohol consumption. Drinking is largely a socially interactive activity, with alcohol consumption occurring in face-to-face interaction in accordance with shared norms (Room, 1975). But much teenage socializing is now carried on at a physical remove, through web communication, which may well be less likely to involve drinking.

### *Increasing health consciousness*

The last proposed explanation is related to health concerns. Recent studies suggest that there may be a growing health consciousness among young people born after the year 2000. Health-oriented adolescents drink much less (Pennay et al., 2018), are interested in 'beneficial' food products (The Neilsen Company, 2015) and value more ideals of fitness than previous generations (Tiggerman & Zaccardo, 2016). However, we do not know enough what this health trend means among young people and in what way it has affected young people's everyday life practices. For example, a recent study by Van Amsterdam and Knoppers (2017: 130) shows that young people approach health by being "more concerned about 'looking good' and 'not being fat' than about 'being healthy'".

### **Data**

Our data consist of 39 individual interviews and 5 interviews with two interviewees (friends) among young people (n = 49) from different backgrounds in terms of parenting, social class, ethnicity and residence. The interviews include current drinkers and non-drinkers. Since

**Table 1**  
Overview of the participants. N = 49.

	Drinkers	Non-drinkers	Total
Gender			
Girls	15	17	32
Boys	8	9	17
Age groups			
15–16	8	16	24
18–19	15	10	25
Area <sup>a</sup>			
Large city	4	2	6
Middle town	7	10	17
Small town	12	14	26

<sup>a</sup> Based on number of inhabitants in the municipality. Large city > 500,000, Middle town 50,000–499,999, Small town < 50,000.

previous studies suggest that the reduction of drinking may be a phenomenon particularly concerning 15–16-year-olds (Lintonen, Härkönen, & Raitasalo, 2016), we interviewed both 15–16-year-olds (n = 24) and 18–19-year-olds (n = 25). The interviews among 15–16-year-olds included 8 drinkers (2 males, 6 females) and 16 non-drinkers (8 males, 8 females), and among 18–19-year-olds 15 drinkers (6 males, 9 females) and 10 non-drinkers (2 males, 8 females). A larger number of girls than boys were interviewed (32 vs. 17). The proportion of drinkers in the gender groups was equal (47%). In the older age group drinking was more common than in the younger age group (60% versus 33%) (Table 1).

Interviewees were recruited during 2017 by purposive sampling from various secondary (9th grade) and upper secondary schools (12th grade) in the Stockholm region and from other towns in the middle of Sweden. In addition, contacts through non-governmental organizations and social media were used to recruit interviewees. The interviews were based on semi-structured open questions covering themes that are related to the expected explanations for the decline in adolescents' drinking. We asked the interviewees to tell us how they spend their leisure time, use social media, understand health, carry out healthy practices, have fun through drinking or abstinence and deal with parents' rules about drinking. Furthermore, we asked our interviewees to describe similarities and differences in boys' and girls' drinking and reasons why young people may choose to drink less or abstain from alcohol. The interviews lasted between 35 and 90 min. They were fully transcribed and then thematically coded using NVivo software. Through the coding process, we identified manifold social mechanisms that may explain the decline in adolescents' drinking. We grouped these social mechanisms under six broader themes: family and parental control, gendered practices, social media and gaming, competing activities, healthiness trend, and decline of peer pressure to drink. Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Regional Ethical Review Board in Stockholm, Sweden (ref. 2016/2404-31/5). In the results section, the real names of the interviewees have been changed.

### **Analysis**

In what follows, we analyse, by following the pragmatist definition of social mechanisms, how in our interviews the manifold potential social mechanisms of the decline in adolescents' drinking are rooted in young people's own concerns, habits, practices and discourses. In this, we pay attention to what kinds of concerns or interests our interviewees relate to low alcohol consumption or abstinence. We follow what kinds of habits and practises they develop around these concerns or interests, and how they rationalize them as meaningful undertakings (Gross, 2009). This way, in our analysis the focus is on situational concerns, habits and practices, since through them social mechanisms get their meaning and operate.

The themes under which we have grouped the results of our analysis usually involve more than one social mechanism. For example, under

the theme ‘family and parental control’ we have identified three different social mechanisms. They all exemplify habitual responses to drinking that foster concerns, practices and meanings that contribute to low alcohol consumption. They not only differ by situational concerns, habits, practices and discourses but also by how they locate parents and children to different relational positions. In the first social mechanism, low alcohol consumption ensues from the habits and practices in which parents and children consider themselves as friends and spend their time together. In the second, it is accomplished through habits and practices of parental control and monitoring. And in the third, it is realized by young people’s habits and practices of taking distance from parents’ alcohol problems.

## Results

### Family and parental control

In the Swedish intoxication-oriented drinking culture, drinking and having fun is expected to happen during weekends or holidays (e.g. Kühnhorn & Björ, 1998). Some of our adolescent interviewees, instead of hanging out with their friends, choose to spend their weekends and holidays with their family or relatives.

Interviewer: What did you do last weekend? (...)

MATEO: I went to my relatives’ home (...) We played FIFA and spent time with the family (15–16 year old boy, IP 9)

Interviewer: What do you usually do when you want to have fun?

SAMIR: I am doing something together with my family, either at home or outside home... (15–16 year old boy, IP 6)

Since underage drinking is done with peers in situations where adults are not present (Ander, Abrahamsson, & Bergnehr, 2017), spending weekends and holidays with the family and relatives greatly reduces adolescents’ opportunities to drink and, as a social practice, orientates adolescents’ habitual and creative responses to everyday life concerns away from drinking.

Most of our interviewees, however, prefer to spend their leisure time with their friends outside the immediate control of their caretakers. Then other aspects of parent-child relations become important factors to the decline in adolescents’ drinking. One is parents’ ability to set clear rules for drinking which the adolescents respect and follow:

SANA: I don’t drink alcohol first and foremost because my parents have forbidden it (15–16 year old girl, IP 20).

LUCY: My mother has said that I cannot drink before I am 18 years old. I feel that I have nothing against this rule (15–16 year old girl, IP 35).

THOMAS: My parents have been very strict about drinking, which was good for me since this changed my behavior. I became honest and my parents started to trust me 100 percent (18–19 year old boy, IP 7).

Some interviewees also think that nowadays parents try to protect their children against the harms of drinking more than earlier generations did (Harry 15–16 year old boy, IP 3). As parents are more worried about their children’s drinking, they have developed new social practices to regulate and restrict it: “I believe that many parents have started to discuss more openly about drinking with their children” (Emilia 15–16 year old girl, IP 34) and are more successful “in applying stricter rules” (Ellen 15–16 year old girl, IP 33).

There are also parents that have established practices to monitor their children’s time with friends by using social media, such as Facebook, Instagram or text messages.

CAROLINE: My mother uses Facebook and Instagram to follow me; (...) we are friends, I follow her and she follows me, or rather, she

follows me, because my updates are current (15–16 year old girl, IP 27).

SOPHIE: For my mother it is very important that I keep contact with her when, for example, I am in a party. Then I send her some text messages. Once I am back home, I go to her bedroom to show up. Otherwise, she cannot sleep (18–19 year old girl, IP 14).

ALI: Every time I go out, my mother wants to know where I go, with whom and what we are going to do. And then she always follows me, she sends text messages to ask “is everything okay?” and to say that I should not drink too much (18–19 year old boy, IP 32).

The above excerpts from our data exemplify social mechanisms that reduce adolescents’ drinking as concerns, habits and practices set up by parents, and perceived as legitimate and followed by children. However, parents’ heavy drinking at home may also produce circumstances for a mechanism that reduces young people’s drinking. In the cases of alcohol abuse in the family, young people may develop habitual responses to their parents’ drinking by opposing it, as the following statements show:

NABILA: In my case, there is alcohol abuse in the family; (...) [young people] may feel that they do not want to grow up and become as their parents are (15–16 year old girl, IP 45).

EDWARD: If you have grown up with parents who are alcoholics, you may choose not to drink at all (18–19 year old boy, IP 26).

### Gendered practices

Our interview material confirms that changes in ‘doing’ masculinity and femininity may also explain the decline in adolescent drinking. Historically drinking to intoxication has been a male tradition. Young men’s drinking has been considered as more acceptable, and even as a normal and a compulsory masculine ritual in the transition to adulthood. Therefore, it has usually remained invisible to public scrutiny (e.g. Törrönen & Roumeliotis, 2014).

However, heavy drinking may have lost its status as a compulsory masculine ritual in the transition to adulthood. In line with the recent studies suggesting that drinking is not as important a building block for the masculinity of present-day young men as it was to earlier generations (Lyons & Gough, 2017), our interviewees’ accounts witness that you can powerfully perform your masculinity also in other fields and activities, such as in sports or in computer games. In this sense, masculinity emerges as more flexible and less attached to heavy drinking (Demant & Törrönen, 2011).

EDWARD: How do we generally look at people who do not drink? (...) I have absolutely no problems with it. I respect it, because probably they usually have a reason. I do not think you need a reason, but usually they have a reason (...). They may be very good at a sport and want to be able to invest in it and then there’s nothing I value more than that (18–19 year old boy, IP 26).

We come back to this issue of competing activities later. Competing activities may serve also an important social mechanism in the decline of young women’s drinking, but then it is conditioned by different concerns. As stated above, while drinking has typically been seen as expected behavior for young men, young women’s drinking has frequently aroused public concerns (MacLean, 2016). It has been limited by strong regulatory norms (Hutton et al., 2016). Often the concerns have been related to a worry that intoxication makes young women vulnerable to unprotected sex and violence (Jackson & Tinkler, 2007). Our young female interviewees identify this concern.

STELLA: I don’t want to get drunk because then I am exposed to something bad (15–16 year old girl, IP 37).

ESTHER: [in the parties] there are usually more girls who do not

drink than guys. And I think it is because of the entire rape culture, you feel safer when you are sober (...) So I think many young girls choose not to drink because they do not feel safe (18–19 year old girl, 39).

SOPHIE: I think that as a girl, you are more afraid to drink larger amounts because it is so easy to be exploited, and rape at a party is a much greater fear for girls than it is for boys. So, I think that as a guy you can feel comfortable losing control more than a girl can (18–19 year old girl, IP 14).

The above examples show how young women and young men face different kinds of cultural expectations and social concerns related to drinking. Thus, their habitual and creative responses to intoxication follow different paths and become embedded in different practices and discourses, which means that the social mechanisms that reduce boys' and girls' drinking are not identical. Some interviewees also emphasize that there may be a gender difference in the fact that young women are more concerned about health matters than young men are:

HENRY: I think girls think more about health than boys do. For boys, it is typical to think that nothing happens if you drink a lot. Boys usually believe that "yes, we will still have fun until we are 60", for example (15–16 year old boy, IP 19).

There are also interviewees who think that by drinking young women lose their attractiveness, which provides one reason among others to drink less:

AMELIA: There are these ideals, these norms, which say, well a nice girl does not smoke, a nice girl does not drink, and that is what I mean with attractiveness (18–19 year old girl, IP 2).

AILA: It may sound strange, but (...) I do not think it is so attractive when girls drink (15–16 year old girl, IP 16).

### *Social media and gaming*

Our interviewees are high users of social networking sites (SNS), such as Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook. When they speak about the use of social media, it is evident that online networking and practices have become a continuous, seamless and routine part of their physical and social worlds (Lyons, Goodwin, Griffin, & McCreanor, 2015). In line with earlier studies, our interviewees have appropriated social media as important arenas for their self-display and networking (Bailey & Griffin, 2017).

The existing studies show that the use of social media may function as a social mechanism that increases and normalizes intoxication-oriented drinking among young people (e.g. Moewaka Barnes et al., 2016) or, alternatively, that changes their ways of being together to be less favorable to drinking (Norström & Svensson, 2014). Our interview material links social media to the latter social mechanism.

According to our interviews, social media may reduce drinking in two ways, as a competing activity or as a public eye on comportment and behavior. As a competing activity, it endorses concerns, habits and practices that reduce young people's opportunities to drink. In these cases, the competing activity is often related to online gaming:

SAMUEL: [When I was 15 and 16] I played [online] games on my computer pretty much. I would not say that I was addicted. After coming home from school, I could sit for two hours and play (...); and on the weekends, then, I could sit from three or four in the afternoon until five o'clock at night (18–19 year old boy, IP 36).

MIA: I have quite a few friends more or less everywhere. I have mostly got friends because I play X-box, so I have friends from all over the world, so to speak.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of games do you play?

MIA: I play, for example, Grand Theft Auto, Dead Island, different versions of Call of Duty, a farming simulator (laughs), so quite a wide variety of games ... (15–16 year old girl, IP 12).

Playing online computer games is more common among boys, but there are also girls who are into this, as the above quotation from Mia shows. Another way social media may reduce young people's drinking in our data is related to the sharing of pictures on social network sites (SNS):

STELLA: Rumours spread very fast on parties, on social media. What you can put up, it can be completely wrong. (...) There was an image on Instagram of me standing on a table and dancing with a vodka bottle, and I really hugged it. I was terrified, I did not know what to do. (...) I contacted the person who uploaded the picture and begged, "Please delete this picture, I do not want to be attached to that picture, I'm ashamed", and she removed it. I also have a friend to whom exactly the same thing happened. She was drunk (...) and someone shared a picture of her, calling her "worst fucking girl". Because of this, she became so much hated that after the drama she has chosen to go to parties sober (15–16 year old girl, IP 37).

Earlier generations did not have the technology available that would have facilitated this kind of activity:

JASMINE: Previously, there were no chances that parents or someone else would have been able to see images of you intoxicated. And now you can take a picture of anyone and send it (15–16 year old girl, IP 42).

Especially young women respond to the possibility of being represented in the online environment as intoxicated by reducing their drinking, but our data shows that most of our interviewees have developed practices that limit how they share pictures and information related to intoxication. They differentiate between private and public online contexts concerning sharing pictures and information. They post pictures of drinking and send messages about having fun only to their best friends, using Snapchat or the private groups in Instagram and Facebook. Thus, they do not consider intoxicated behavior to be a completely socially accepted activity and avoid sharing intoxication-related pictures and messages publicly. What happened to Stella and to her friend in the above excerpt represents one reason not to do this. In Snapchat, which our interviewees use for private conversations, they usually have only about 20 followers, and there the pictures and messages disappear in 24 h. It is by far the most used social medium among the young people we interviewed.

SANA: I do not consider Facebook to be private and I do not write so much there. I only update, since it is something most people see. But Snapchat, there I have my private conversations that I really don't want to anyone else to see (15–16 year old girl, IP 20).

### *Competing activities*

We have seen above how social media and playing computer games can function as competing activities that generate habits and practices that keep young people away from drinking or reduce their drinking. Our interviewees describe many competing activities for drinking. They are often related to a lifestyle of non-drinking. Non-drinking becomes a durable choice when it is rooted in meaningful habits and practices. Besides social media and playing computer games, our interviewees name many competing activities to drinking, such as course work, scouting, doing different types of sports competitively (soccer, biking, riding, gymnastics, etc.), going to the movies, or hobbies and hanging out with friends in general.

ELLA: I have been very engaged in different groups such as the scouts, I started there and since I wanted to do something also in my spare time. (...) I joined UNF, which is the temperance movement.

I'm in both of them now, and it's like you have more friends there (...). Maybe I was thirteen when I started, and I'm still there (15–16 year old girl, IP 11).

The excerpt from Ellas's interview shows how a specific activity can become a leading preoccupation in life into which all other concerns, habits and practices tend to be integrated. This can be true particularly for a competing activity in which one wants to excel or be the best.

EMILY: I usually choose not to drink [at a party] because I have to study the next day. I could take a glass but I do not want to take any risks. I have to study on weekends and weekdays (...). For me school has always been priority number one, and my parents are very keen that I am studying and getting good grades (18–19 year old girl, IP 10).

Emily's excerpt also illustrates the importance of parents in competing activities. Parents often put pressure on or strongly support their children's aspirations to be successful. However, many of the competing activities our interviewees tell about do not dominate their other activities as comprehensively as they do in the examples above. Such competing activities may limit and reduce young people's drinking by offering meaningful alternative sets of concerns, habits and practices, but do not necessarily make their attitude towards alcohol consumption negative or restrict their possibilities for aimless hanging out with friends that entails drinking.

#### Healthiness trend

Doing sports is closely connected to health concerns in our data. It is difficult to say whether being worried about one's health or looks makes young people do sports and avoid drinking, or whether an aim to be good in sports makes young people concerned about their health. In the following examples, the driving force seems to be sports:

LUCY: My friend does some cycling and she exercises an extreme amount, she cannot stay out late in the evenings, she has to be home before nine every day. It's very strict what she can do. She must not have her mobile on in the evenings, because she has to sleep properly; she must not eat sweets and drink soda. She exercises every day (...). Probably her parents are putting pressure to her quite a bit, too. I think that, more now than earlier, parents try to achieve something through their children (15–16 year old girl, IP 35).

EDWARD: If you are really good at any sport and maybe have a lot of competitions or matches early in a morning or during a day [then you do not drink] (18–19 year old boy, IP 26).

CAROLINE: My boyfriend does not drink (...) because he is investing in football (15–16 year old girl, IP 27).

The excerpts above exemplify well how a desire to be good or best in sports, fitness or other competing activities implies changes in multiple sets of habits. In order to be successful, you need to reorganize all your everyday life habits and practices to be beneficial to your goal. The aim to be bodily and mentally strong and healthy foregrounds concerns about what you can eat, how much you need to sleep and what other activities you can do. In this way a dedication to sports, hobbies or studies engenders a network of habits and practices, so that multiple social mechanisms may work towards the same outcome of limiting drinking.

Young people also describe the relation between exercise and health so that it is the worry about your 'body' as 'looking good' that encourages alcohol avoidance and habits and practices that promote a healthy life style instead:

ESTHER: There are those who are very health-oriented (...). For example, my friend is building muscles and wants to have a perfect body (18 - 19 year old girl, IP 39).

EMILY: [Because alcohol makes you look less attractive] its consumption has gone down among young people, I think. Alcohol contains a high amount of calories (...). The next day your head is hurting and you appear a bit muddy. Then it may take another day before you are back on track; and then you have not been able to exercise and you probably eat junk food because you are not able to cook anything else and you want it; and usually alcohol is blended with soda or mixed with something else very useless. Therefore, I do not consume a lot of alcohol (18–19 year old girl, IP 10).

In our data, health can also stand alone as a concern why young people do not drink as much as the earlier generations did:

ALICE: I think that earlier they did not have much knowledge about it [the harmful effects of alcohol] (...). Today you know a lot more about how it actually affects the body (18–19 year old girl, IP 31).

ELLEN: I think young people are more aware of what actually happens. You learn more about it at school. Then some people begin to think that "yes, but I don't need to drink", and this choice affects their friends, too (15–16 year old girl, IP 33).

MAYA: I want to take care of my body and I think alcohol is bad for the body in many different ways, and I have also read a number of research reports that say so (18–19 year old girl, IP 44).

#### Decline in peer pressure to drink and more room for individual choice

All the previous social mechanisms we have identified and analyzed above are related to mechanisms already put forward in past research. From our data, we can identify also a social mechanism which the earlier research has overlooked. According to our interviews, one important explanation of the decline in adolescents' drinking is the decline of peer pressure in drinking. As there is less peer pressure to drink, young people can be more "independent" (Caroline 15 - 16 year old girl, IP 27) and "self-confident" (Arin 18–19 year old girl, IP 29) in their habitual and creative responses to drinking.

STELLA: I think that now you have a little more courage to say to your friends [that you do not drink] than earlier. Then you had a lot, like this, "yes, but come on, like." You do not have as much peer pressure anymore (15–16 year old girl, IP 37).

This independent, self-confident choice to say no to alcohol consumption and to develop alternative concerns, habits and practices to drinking is backed up by the fact that today over 50 percent of 15- and 16-years old adolescents choose not to drink (Raninen et al., 2014). Thus, non-drinking is not anymore an activity of a minority. Rather, to abstain from drinking or from other harmful substances appears as a fashionable habitual response:

ARIN: Many drink less now (...). You know that smoking is not cool, drinking is not cool, it's the other way around. If you do not smoke and drink, you are accepted more. Because you know, it is harmful to me and it is harmful to the environment (18–19 year old girl, IP 29).

NABILA: People of my age, it's a bit cool not to drink. It's become a bit like this, aha, you're sober, aha, how cool! Or it's a little more encouraged among many groups. Earlier, the reason to not drink perhaps came from alcohol abuse in the family (...) you really needed to have a deep reason not to drink. While today I think (...) you should be a little unique, or you just do not feel like drinking (15–16 year old girl, IP 45).

Our interview material also suggests that the lifestyles of the drinkers and the non-drinkers are not developing towards a sharp polarization. Instead, they seem to interact with each other and thereby influence each other. In our data, besides hanging out or having parties as

separate groups, the drinkers and non-drinkers also spend their leisure time together as blended groups in face-to-face or in online situations. As there are more non-drinkers in drinking situations, this may also reduce drinkers' alcohol consumption and change their perception of intoxication in terms of what is fun and what is not.

MAYA: Young people understand that 'party' is not synonymous with 'alcohol', that one does not need to drink to have fun. And many of my friends who drink less usually say that "I don't understand why there are people who think it's so cool to get so heavily intoxicated, I think it's nice to be a bit intoxicated" (...). Then you are in control, you know where you are and what the fun is about (...). Very strange things happen to people who become too intoxicated (18–19 year old girl, IP 44).

## Discussion

In our analysis above, we have mapped and identified current social mechanisms in young people's low alcohol consumption. The pragmatist approach has helped us to specify in what way these social mechanisms are rooted in young people's own concerns, habits and practices, as well as how they operate.

Most of the social mechanisms our analysis identifies and specifies are not new. Social mechanisms related to stricter parenting style, gendered practices, competing activities and health have been prevalent among earlier cohorts, as well. Thus, it is likely that what is new is young people's habitual responses to these social mechanisms. Adolescents seem to interpret and react to the mechanisms so that they become more effectively embedded in concerns, habits and practices that limit young people's alcohol consumption.

In concert with previous studies, our analysis shows that parental control, gendered practices, social media, leisure time hobbies, health consciousness and normative climate provide important explanations of adolescents' low alcohol consumption. Some of the social mechanisms we identify from our interview material are also parallel to the results produced by population-level analysis. This is especially the case with the social mechanisms concerning social media and stricter parental control. Surveys show that in Sweden the proportion reporting frequent social media use with friends grew larger from 2002 to 2010 (Bjereid, Daneback, & Löfstedt, 2017). In the same period, the proportion of adolescents reporting weekly drinking dropped significantly (Pape et al., 2018: 12). The way our interviewees describe their habits of using social media supports the observed macro-level relationship and clarifies what kind of concerns and practices reduce drinking among young people in this context. When it comes to changes in parental control, other studies have identified a trend towards more restrictive parenting concerning alcohol since the turn of the millennium (Raitasalo et al., 2018). Our analysis adds evidence to this macro-level observation and shows what kind of habitual responses to parental concerns, as embedded in specific practices and meanings, function as social mechanisms that reduce young peoples' drinking.

Some of the social mechanisms in the decline in adolescents' drinking identified from our interviews are also parallel to the results produced by qualitative analyses from other cultures. For example, qualitative studies from Australia, Britain, other Nordic countries and New Zealand have suggested that while masculinity today is more flexible and less driven by heavy drinking than earlier (e.g. Demant & Törrönen, 2011; Törrönen & Roumeliotis, 2014; Lyons & Gough, 2017), femininity is still governed by restrictive norms of maintaining respectable behavior in drinking (e.g. Lindsay & Supski, 2017). As boys and girls face different kinds of concerns and norms in drinking situations, their habitual responses also follow different paths. Our analysis suggests that when boys choose to develop a habit of non-drinking or moderate drinking they usually turn to the kinds of competing activities where they can seek a social recognition of the performance of their masculinity. Girls' gendered habits and practices of non-drinking or

moderate drinking, again, emerge from the need to protect themselves from the unwanted sexual predation, male violence and moralism of surrounding society.

Our analysis also suggests that the social mechanisms we have identified from the data usually interact with each other. When they act as varying combinations together pointing in the same direction, they strengthen the habits and practices of drinking less or staying sober. For example, our analysis shows that the sport-related competing activities usually entail a concern about what is healthy for one's physical body and psychological well-being, in which case young people cultivate sets of habits and practices that more extensively limit whether and how much they drink.

Furthermore, our analysis identifies a previously overlooked social mechanism. We propose that the cultural position of drinking may have changed among young people so that drinking has lost its unquestioned symbolic power as a cool activity and rite of passage signaling entry to adulthood (Sande, 2002). Thus, as drinking seems to be in the process of losing its status as a marker of entering adulthood, it may not any more function as a normative 'social clock' that pressures young people to get experiences with intoxication 'on-time' (Paglia & Room, 1998). According to our interviewees, there is less peer pressure to drink and more room for individual choice in this matter, transforming young people's social relationships and networks to be more heterogeneous and open to various forms of social pressure. This opening of a homogeneous drinking culture to acceptance of difference may function as a social mechanism that increases the success of other social mechanisms to reduce adolescents' drinking. Parental control over young people's drinking has been around and has increased steadily from the 1960s (Dotti & Treas, 2016); health has been a popular concern for many decades (Benson, 1997); gym culture became part of mainstream landscape already in the 1970s and the 1980s (ibid.); and social media became established before the decline of adolescent drinking started (Pape et al., 2018). Thus, the changes in the cultural position of drinking may have shifted young people's relation to drinking so that they are now more sensitive and exposed to the surrounding social mechanisms, which had been around already earlier. They are more willing to follow their parents' concerns and rules in drinking, more interested in putting the public health risk messages into practice and more active in creating competing habits.

On the other hand, our analysis also suggests that as young people's frequent social media use with friends has increased over the 2000s and 2010s, social media may have attained such a power in the re-organization of young people's everyday life practices that it now provides new social mechanisms to lower their alcohol consumption.

It is difficult to predict whether the observed changes in young people's drinking will last or disappear when young people become a bit older. Some studies propose that it will not last (e.g. Lintonen et al., 2016), while others maintain that it probably will (e.g. Livingston et al., 2016). Especially researchers who interpret the downward trend in adolescents' drinking in terms of the hypothesis of delayed adolescence or 'childhood lasts longer' tend to think that drinking and other bad habits are just postponed. From the pragmatist perspective, the hypothesis of delayed adolescence is problematic, since it assumes that a passage to adulthood is a uniform, linear and predestined process through which we all move, either quickly or slowly. The pragmatist approach considers human nature more malleable and the passage to adulthood more open to unknown futures. It approaches adolescence as something young people are actively doing, remaking and re-orientating through their habitual and creative responses to the practical concerns they face in their everyday life situations. In this way, adolescence may become linked to multiple social practices and bend to various trajectories. Therefore, we cannot predict whether the decline in adolescents' drinking will last or disappear. We simply need to follow its development.

Furthermore, instead of proposing a hypothesis of delayed adolescence, our results suggest a hypothesis of the early maturation of young

people as more individualized, responsible, reflective, and adult-like actors than in earlier generations. Our interviewees are well aware of the health risks of drinking, they are sensitive to their parents' expectations, they devote themselves to hobbies that require careful planning and they have developed special skills for communicating in social media.

Overall, our analysis shows how the social mechanisms that reduce drinking among young people function through specific situational concerns and more or less habitual responses to them. Because our data was collected in an interview situation where young people tell an adult interviewer about their concerns and habits, this may have affected the results so that young people, for example, overemphasize health concerns that is much valued by adults and downplay habits related to heavy computer gaming that the surrounding society deals with as an addiction. Therefore, we cannot say how widespread, important and efficient each social mechanism is in the reduction of their drinking. Further studies are needed to establish at the population level how prevalent the social mechanisms are among young people: in what way the prevalence is related to and varies by age, gender, social class, ethnicity and neighborhood. Further studies are also needed to examine how the identified social mechanisms function across different youth drinking cultures and geographical contexts: do they operate through similar or different concerns, habits and practices?

Studies show that health policies that take into consideration the target group's own concerns work best (e.g. Ott, Rosenberger, McBride, & Woodcox, 2011). In line with this, as our study clarifies how particular social mechanisms are rooted in and operate through young people's own concerns, habits, practices and meanings, it provides important knowledge for health practitioners to develop interventions that resonate with young people's interests in pursuing a healthy life style.

## Conflict of interest

None.

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