A Study on Sober People’s Motivations and Surroundings in Hungary

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the background and relationships of people who don’t consume alcohol on a regular basis. In the thesis, it is assumed that alcohol consumption is common behaviour and those who do not take part in it are considered to be in the minority. The thesis investigates what influenced them to live this way and how their friendship groups are constructed with a further emphasis on relationships. After a short introduction, previous literature is reviewed which is followed by the methodological part which consists of reflexivity, qualitative interviews and supplemental data. The thesis then concludes with the statement that there is evidence that there is a further polarization of society in the works and that alcohol consumption could influence the quality and the construction of relationships although further research is needed in this area.
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1. Introduction

I have always been fascinated by social norms (or social facts for a better term), the mere thought that the decisions that I make are subconsciously being influenced by the unwritten rules of society is an interesting but also disturbing thought. The questions then arise such as “Can we make decisions which are not influenced by outside norms?” or “Is there a way to completely rid ourselves of these facts and do we even need to?”. These are questions which are in my mind right now but they are too grand to tackle right now.

What fascinates me even more than social norm are the people who are going directly against it, let it be consciously or subconsciously. While it might be intimidating at first when I see another person on the streets who are doing something which I do not consider at first “normal”, the question still arises in my head “Why are they doing this, what are their motivations?”. It also helps that I sometimes find these scenarios funny as long as I am not involved of course. Because of this is why I decided to base my thesis on a social norm which is also very common in Budapest, Hungary (my country of origin): alcohol consumption. It might be uncalled for that I categorize alcohol consumption as a social fact but I am basing my assumption of this on two factors. Firstly, Hungary is constantly above the EU average of alcohol consumption (the 2016 stats of the World Health Organization states that Hungary is above the 6,4 litre per person average of its 194 membership countries by almost double, with 12,8 litres per person). The second factor is simply through anecdotal investigation, simply observing the media, other people on the streets, in the University and schools made me realize that avoiding or ignoring this topic was and still is very difficult. While it is still up for debate whether alcohol consumption is or isn’t the “norm” nowadays, in developing or developed countries, I approached my thesis on the basis that someone who doesn’t drink is in the minority.

Studies about alcohol consumption are plenty and I don’t think I would give my thesis work enough justice if I covered a topic in social studies which is already very saturated. This is why I decided to approach this topic from the exact opposite side, I want to study people who reject alcohol consumption, reject something which is a very common activity in today’s society. People who essentially reject a social norm, go against the majority. I want to find out why did they choose this lifestyle, what were their motivations, did any past event influence their decision (past trauma). I also want to ask
them how do they cope with living in a society where alcohol consumption is common, how do they deal with peer pressure, how are their friend groups constructed and are their attitudes towards people who do drink. I feel like asking outsiders (people who reject a specific norm) could help me understand this phenomenon’s origins a bit more. I might have gone a bit out of topic here but I want to stress that the main purpose of my study is to find out more about people who reject a specific norm (in this case alcohol consumption) and find out more about their motivations, thoughts about society and the construction of their friendship groups and relationships.

From now on I will be referring to people who reject alcohol consumption simply as “sober” people and I will be also using the term sobriety as well. I could have also used to term “abstinence” but there are different types of abstinence not just abstinence from alcohol. My description of someone being sober will be that they have consciously stayed away from alcohol consumption for about half a year. I think this time frame could be just enough as I feel like only staying away from alcohol for 2-3 months might not be enough time for someone to honestly say that they are “sober”. I do think that giving some leeway is necessary, for example if someone drinks a small amount of alcohol during special occasions such as a birthday, because these situations might be impossible for someone to avoid. I also thought about that I should be more extreme with my categorization of “norm-rejecting” people and investigate people who are not just sober but also refrain from using drugs and smoking but I feel like that the latter of those two are still being looked at in a more “negative light” as in smoking and taking drugs are considered way more unhealthy than drinking alcohol so they do not fit the criteria of “norm-rejecting” as these activities might not be as common as drinking and also the fact that there are more strict Hungarian laws against smoking and taking drugs but this could be arguable.

I am interested if I can notice any sort of pattern amongst the respondents. Examples which I could see happening are factors such as one gender is more prominent or a personality type is more common (I predict that more respondents will classify themselves as introvert). I will also try to formulate a prediction about the future regarding how will alcohol consumption will look like in the near future. I will formulate this prediction based on the answers and findings I get from the research combined with some research around whether there are any recent publications about a change of attitude published in the media.
I theorize that in order for someone who chose to live a sober lifestyle will have to realize that if they are constantly surrounded with people who do the opposite, it will be much more difficult for them to pursue their agenda. This ties very well to Émile Durkheim’s theory of social facts which implies that people who are socialized in a specific community then they will do things very similarly to each other. I will try to ask the respondents to go in detail about their friendship groups, whether they are surrounded by other sober people or not.

Herbert Spencer’s theory on the evolution of society is also important to me as it assumes that as we progress forward, society will get more and more differentiated and alcohol consumption could be a topic where this phenomenon can be perceived.

Something which closely relates to this is the theory of peer pressure. Attitudes and self-values can easily be influenced by what others from the same “type” of group (age, gender) do. I would like to find out how sober people deal with this phenomenon.

I would like to tie in the concept of “agents of socialization” into my research as well. Peer groups are one type of an agent of socialization and I would like to explore if I can find any differences between sober people’s peer groups. Maybe I will be able to find some alternatives that they have in the place of drinking, maybe they have a different strategy to “relax and forget about the difficulties of life” which is often attributed to one of the main motivations behind getting together in a bar with friends and sharing a drink. Maybe these people have less opportunities for this and this could lead to them being more emotional or introspective. Religion is also an agent so of socialization and I do expect that it will come up among the responses but I won’t focus on that topic in this thesis.

My main source of information collecting will be through qualitative interviews with individuals who fit the aforementioned sobriety criteria. I will use non-probability sampling during my qualitative research as I will be looking specifically for sober people. The types of non-probability sampling that I will likely use are snowball sampling, convenience sampling. I will try to have a close to equal distribution between genders and age groups so quota sampling should be mentioned too. Quantitative survey and focus group research both seem unlikely to me at first glance. Online communities are also an option for finding more respondents and communities and I intend to make use of them,
an example would be /r/stopdrinking. I also intend to look at recent stats about alcohol consumption, a source could be the World Health Organization’s website and Eurostat.

I will continue the thesis with a critical look at existing literature which is relevant to this topic, after that, my methodology will be discussed. It will be followed by a discussion of the results of the data collecting and the concluding remarks.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Outline

In the following section of my thesis, I highlight articles and books which, in my opinion, relate to my research topic because they either explore a new theory which I didn’t consider or delve deeper in a specific area of research. Theories which focus on peer influence, norm-rejecting behaviour and potential motivations behind drinking. I chose texts which are broader and more open than others first, then come the ones which are more specific. At the end of this section, I summarize common findings, potential conflicts and gaps in the articles.

2.2 Broader theories

2.2.1 Sociocultural influences

In search of potential reasons to explain why someone starts or stops alcohol consumption I highlighted Stephen P. Hogan, Keith J. Perks, and Rebekah Russell-Bennett’s summary of social cultural influences (2014) which can affect drinking behaviour.

The first one is *hedonism* which roughly means that the pursuit of happiness is one’s goal in life. Alcohol can be used as a tool to achieve momentary happiness, used most commonly after an exhausting week of work, as a tool for someone to relax. (Hogan et al, 2014)

The second is parental influence which can be viewed from multiple angles. It could simply be that the presence of parents, even at later parts of one’s life, can influence their drinking choices. It is also a possibility that children who are often exposed to their parents’ binge drinking are more likely to follow in their steps but it is also a possibility that parents who expose their children to milder drinking at a relatively young age will reject alcohol later in their lives as they will have more time to understand and consider
their values. “Therefore have both a positive and negative impact on children’s future drinking behaviour.” (Hogan et al, 2014)

Peer influence as a third factor can be argued to be the most powerful of the influences mentioned. The concept is very simple, drinking in social environments are very common and individuals will be pressure by their peer to follow them and engage in drinking behaviour to better fit in with the norms of the group. (Hogan et al, 2014)

The final factor is cultural norms which is different across the world therefore it is difficult to generalize. The text mentions that anthropological studies have differentiated between wet and dry societies where alcohol consumption is high or low, respectively. (Hogan et al, 2014) This factor is very self-explanatory therefore the text doesn’t elaborate on it much.

2.2.2 Further hypotheses

Looking for online sources, I came across an article on Neo.Life by Zoe Cormier (2017) that not only focuses on millennials’ sobriety but also proposes some hypotheses why do they stop drinking. In the following, I will highlight the most interesting proposals.

*Selfie obsession* takes a contemporary approach to this topic and highlights that millennials value their online image a lot which might motivate them to drink less so a potential unwanted picture will not surface online. (Cormier, 2017)

*Cocooning* is the phenomenon that millennials tend to stay at home more therefore they have less opportunities to engage in social meetings which then lead to drinking. *Depression and anxiety* are mentioned as well but these are less concrete than others. (Cormier, 2017)

*Academic pressure* proposes that nowadays; higher education does not guarantee a stable career which emits constant pressure to adolescents as they continuously struggle to find a stable job. This lead to more pressure which needs to be eased and alcohol is a great tool for this job. (Cormier, 2017)

2.2.3 A different approach to norm-rejecting behaviour

To avoid my thesis being too one-sided I would like to provide some theories which question the whole basis which I built my thesis on. So far I described sober people as
being anti-normative as I proposed that in my views, drinking has pretty much became a social norm in my county. But what if an “anti-normative” lifestyle doesn’t even exist?

To look for a counterargument, I used Eliot R. Smith and Diane M. Mackie’s book, *Social Psychology* (2007) as my source. The idea which grabbed my attention was that people are actually using norms to fight against norms. People are constructing alternative consensuses to challenge prebuilt ones and they declare that it is the “right” thing to do. (Smith and Mackie, 2007, 383-384)

The other proposed idea is that it is much easier to challenge norms as a collective than being alone which is, once again, bears resemblance to actual, socially accepted norms. An example which the authors give is anti-government resistance which almost all the time is a group act. (Smith and Mackie, 2007, 383-384)

In relation to my thesis, this theory suggests that sobriety is just simply a different norm which some people decided to pursue. It suggests that no drinking is just the “right” thing to do according to them and there are no prominent anti-norm undertones behind their thinking. The theory also suggests that these people should have some other peer and acquaintances who share similar values to them as it help to solidify their views. (Smith and Mackie, 2007)

2.2.4 Short and long-term relationships

Relationships are a key part of our lives and I am interested whether an individual’s alcohol consumption habits somehow influence the structure of their relationships somehow. To look for an answer, I used Eveline Vincke’s 2016 article about how alcohol consumption and the length of relationships are intertwined.

Eveline suggests that a person who mainly indulges in short-term mating strategies is very likely to be a heavier drinker while those who are interested in more long-term relationships are typically not engaged in binge drinking. An explanation that the article suggests is that people who drink are more open to new relationships and they use alcohol to show others that they are not taken and available. On the contrast, people who are sober are likely limiting themselves because they are already in a relationship or they just don’t want to engage in short-term sexual activities. (Vincke, 2016)

Another explanation which Eveline suggests is people’s perspectives on risk-taking behaviour. People who engage in a heavy-drinking lifestyle can be perceived as more of
a “risk-taker” kind of person and the article suggests that risk-taking behaviour is more attractive to those who are looking for a short-term relationship. Risk-avoiding tendencies on the other hand are associated with people who are more likely to engage in a long-term relationship. The article also states that this phenomenon is not one-sided as both sides reinforce each other. In other words, individuals who drink a lot are more likely to be looking for short-term mates and people who have short-term mates are more tolerant to drinking larger amounts of alcohol. (Vincke, 2016)

In my research I will be looking for individuals who do not engage in binge drinking therefore if the theory above is correct, the respondents will likely be looking for or are already in long-term relationships. The article doesn’t specify whether there is a significant difference between genders in this area therefore I will be looking for patterns among the respondents.

2.3 Specific theories

2.3.1 Further theories on relationships

While on the topic of relationships, what if instead of looking at the length of a potential relationship, the quality of it is measured instead? Catharine E. Fairbairn and Maria Testa write (2017) that the strength of existing relationships can foreshadow drinking habits.

The theory is very simple; alcohol tends to bring out more positive and happier moods in humans therefore if relationship partners commonly experience arguments and difficulties with each other they could both develop drinking habits to ease their lives and try to live with their struggles. It is mentioned that research shows that sober partners interactions with each other are more unstable and result more heated arguments. (Fairbairn and Testa, 2017)

While the article only focuses on relationships, I think the approach that alcohol is used to ease and diminish humans’ everyday struggles is an approach to this topic which I will consider moving forwards as I am interested in how do people who don’t use alcohol this way, deal with their struggles in life and how they relax themselves.

2.3.2 Context and the concept of behavioural willingness

An article by Kristen G. Anderson, Tracey A. Garcia and Genevieve F. Dash (2017) takes a contextual look at the topic of alcohol consumption. The demographic which the article focuses on is labelled as “emerging adults”. While the text doesn’t give a proper definition
to what “emerging adults” mean, it does seem like that they are referring to adolescent who are in the last years of high school education and those who are just beginning their university studies. The theory which they propose is that the university environment is a likely precursor to one’s desire to start actively engaging in drinking activities. On the other side of the spectrum, adolescents who are not attending university should be less likely to engage in such activities. (Anderson et al, 2017)

The other concept which is brought up in the article is called behavioural willingness which is defined as “a contextually dependent aspect of nondeliberative decision-making for youth” (Gerrard et al., 2008). While it may seem very similar to the concept of peer pressure, behavioral willingness puts more emphasis on the risk-taking and explorative aspects of decision-making in social environments. I think it is vital that this thesis does not only look at someone who engages in alcohol consumption as someone who is a victim of peer pressure. Curiosity and risk-taking behavior can be other explanations as to why someone started drinking and also why they didn’t start. It could be that some sober people are simply not that explorative and they prefer to stay in their comfort zones which ultimately led them to avoid trying alcohol and become addicts. (Anderson et al, 2017)

In the rest of the article, the authors suppose that the situation where behavioral willingness comes into play can be recreated using audio simulation (Anderson et al, 2017) I personally don’t agree that social situations can be recreated in a controlled environment therefore I only focused on the theoretical part of the articles which can help to look at this whole topic in a more open way and not to label alcohol consumption as simply a result of peer pressure.

2.3.3 An approach to changing attitudes

Mari-Liisa Parder and Trii Vihalemm’s study (2015) looked at the relations between the two sides of the spectrum (abstainers and drinkers) and suggests solutions how to decrease alcohol consumption amongst the youth without just simply separating the two sides and thus limiting their ability to socialize with each other. The authors mention that the need of alcohol consumption is an unwritten rule in youth meetups and changing it seems difficult. Once again, the concept of risk comes up in this article in relation to why adolescents start drinking, which seems to be a common phenomenon amongst the literature which I read. (Parder and Vihalemm, 2015)
The authors mention that applied research which tries to prevent alcohol consumption tries to recreate these social contexts whereas social pressure occurs but these practices are not viable enough because they will ultimately fail to properly imitate these kinds of environments and I wholeheartedly agree with this approach. The authors decided to instead, analyze online forums which allowed them to gather information from a relatively natural environment. (Parder and Vihalemm, 2015) This strategy could be used for my research as well.

The article proposes that completely separating the two sides (abstainers and drinkers) will not lead to any changes in attitudes and would further limit the possibilities of socialization and acceptance between groups. “Complete abstinence might be a healthy ideal but is unrealistic in terms of the logic of the socialization process” (Parder and Vihalemm, 2015), this quote emphasizes the drawbacks of choosing a sober lifestyle as it limits one’s ability to properly engage with others in environments where drinking is pretty much an unwritten rule. The solution which the authors propose is to make “the current alcohol-related partying practices more tolerant of non-drinkers”. (Parder and Vihalemm, 2015)

2.3.4 Parental influence and psychological factors

At the turn of the century Anne Holtung and Ingeborg Rossow (2000) investigated how does one’s physical and psychological health and their drinking patterns relate and whether one’s parents’ have any influence on this. The first concept which is highlighted is the so called U-shaped association. This theory conveys that the two sides of the drinking spectrum (complete abstainers and very heavy drinkers) are more prone to diseases and a higher mortality rate than those who are in the middle, who still drink but it doesn’t develop into an actual addiction. (Holtung and Rossow, 2000)

The second new concept in the literature is the differentiation between wet and dry family environments. In a wet environment, parents do drink, while in a dry environment the parents are sober. The research aims to investigate whether the parental environment influences an abstainer’s risk of having poorer health. (Holtung and Rossow, 2000)

By sampling from the Norwegian National Health Survey, the research results showed that abstainers do report higher numbers of psychological problems, most notably loneliness and suicidal thoughts which is in tandem with the assumption that abstainers have smaller social networks. While the research report does mention that the results
support the U-shape association, it doesn’t highlight the results from the heavy-drinkers party. Concerning parental influence, the results show that individuals who live in a dry environment are less likely to experience health issues than does who were brought up in wet environments. It is theorized that it is more difficult to adjust for those who have been brought up in a drinking environment as they must reject the very values of their parents and this could lead them to develop such thing as social anxiety. As a final note, the report does highlight that these cases of illnesses were more prominent in male respondents than in female ones. (Holtung and Rossow, 2000) Both parental influence and psychological factors will be taken into account during my research and interview questions.

2.3.5 Advertising

One territory which I haven’t explored yet was the marketing area. As alcohol is a product which is to be sold to people, marketing exists in tandem with it. Could it be that simply one’s exposure to the marketing of alcohol is a deciding factor in their decision to drink or not-to drink?

A book, concerning this issue is Victor C. Strasburger and Barbara J. Wilson’s Children, Adolescents & the Media (2002) which proved to be useful as my thesis tries to focus on the younger parts of society. The authors point out the generally, in advertisements, alcohol consumption is portrayed as a “harmless activity with no major health risks associated with it” (Strasburger and Wilson, 2002, 216). This fact is pretty obvious as it is not the intention of advertisers to depict their products in a bad light. The findings which interested me are that alcohol ads are often featured during prime-time unlike ads of cigarettes and that alcohol advertising is most often associated with sport programs. (Strasburger and Wilson, 2002) Associating sport programs and alcohol consumption is something which I never considered before although it does seem a bit more obvious now (just thinking about sport-loving communities does enforce this association in my head).

Something else which is worth noting is that while there are a lot of “pro-drinking” materials which can be found in the media, there are no that many ads which suggest that people should be careful with their drinking habits (this does not only concern alcohol related products). Alcohol advertising is not the sole reason behind the larger phenomenon but it does further encourage it without balance between the two sides. (Strasburger and Wilson, 2002)
There are more observations in the book such as the overabundance of alcohol usage in movies and music videos (which is useful to note) but I do not agree that the simple presence of drinking (and other similar activities such as smoking) in the media is inherently a bad thing and a problem which should be solved as that would imply that I am biased to one side of this argument. The fact that the media fails to keep a balance between both sides is a valid argument in my opinion though. Another weakness that should be noted is that while the book is not that old, the importance of the media (specifically the television) did decline over the years in my opinion. Nevertheless, the big revelation which this book helped to form is that does one’s amount of exposure to media sources affect their choice on alcohol consumption. Maybe sober people in general will say that they avoided or just didn’t have many ways to “get to” the media.

### 2.3.6 Risk perceptions

The concept of risk has come up a lot of times already in the texts which I have highlighted in my thesis as it seems to be a common explanation in this topic. To push this idea further, I looked for articles which delve deeper in risk-related themes. Patrik Karlsson’s article, *Personal experiences of drinking and alcohol related risk perceptions: The importance of the subjective dimension* (2012) differentiates between different types of risk-perceptions which could influence one’s views on alcohol.

Karlsson writes that subjective experiences related to alcohol consumption should be investigated further because people who have actual experiences with drinking tend to form a different view on the situation as a whole. The article refers to these subjective experiences as *behavioural experience*. Actually trying out drinking and then reporting to have more “positive” experiences will obviously result in individuals believing that alcohol-consumption is less risky than they otherwise thought before trying it. These “positive” experiences can be things like leisure time relaxation and better social engagement. (Karlsson, 2012)

The article also points out that generally, after subjectively experiencing drinking, people are more likely to report than they had positive experiences. It is a given assumption but I do want to highlight that the opposite is true as well, if people report negative feeling after experience than they will be less likely to engage in further alcohol consumption and will attribute more risk-factor to drinking. (Karlsson, 2012)
These theories and assumptions are formed after conducting a questionnaire of randomly sampled citizens from Sweden between the age 18 and 70. That is a very big age gap and I question whether it was a good strategy to not target a specific age group instead. I also want to add that these statements are a bit obvious to me, assuming that someone will have a lower risk-perception after actually engaging in said activity seems like a no-brainer to me at least. Nevertheless, this article did help me come up with a new aspect to my research: How much alcohol did a person consume (if any) before going sober? Their experiences will surely differ and will facilitate how much influence does one’s personal experiences have in forging their values.

2.3.7 Expressing ourselves

In search of further theories about people’s motivations behind drinking, I came across an article which sounded ridiculous upon first inspection but the more I thought about it, the more I realized it might have some truth behind it. The said article is Eveline Vincke and Patrick Vyncke’s Does Alcohol Catch the Eye? Investigating Young Adults’ Attention to Alcohol Consumption (2017).

The proposed theory here is that alcohol is a tool in one’s self-expression towards others. The article mentions that posting photos on social media which depict people in an intoxicated state is a common activity nowadays. It can be used to show others that we like to take risks but it is useful for strengthening friendships as well. Relationship-seeking and short-term mating strategies are also credited here as a potential motivation which goes in-line with an article I reviewed earlier. (Vyncke, 2017)

I can’t really argue with this theory as my personal experiences support the proposals (such as the common posting of intoxicated pictures on social media). Once again, I will try to use this theory in my research by taking the exact opposite of it: “Do sober people just not want to express themselves towards others, are they just shy or feel anxious?”

2.3.8 A biological approach

Before I end the literature review part of my thesis, I do want to highlight one more article which might not necessarily explore the same thought-process which I follow related to this topic but instead, proposes a completely different approach.

Generally, drinking habits start to emerge around adolescence, although they might start even earlier and simply it is just more difficult to observe them as they might be
happening under closed-quarters. Trying to examine young children about whether they have started drinking or not could pose some ethical problems which limit this side of the research. Linda Spear’s article (2013) proposes that there might be biological reasons to why we start drinking during our adolescent phase of life.

She writes the research on other mammals (the article uses rats as an example) shows that younger mammals could be more resistive to alcohol intake which means that because of this, higher amounts of intakes can be observed and this could very well be present in humans as well. It was also observed that mammals tend to participate in more social activities and risk taking when they reach their adolescent phases and these observations fall in-line with my research. (Spear, 2013)

I don’t intend to approach my research question from a biological perspective and I do find it questionable that rats apparently consume alcohol on their own but it is crucial in the research process to be open to new ideas therefore I thought this article was worth mentioning at least.

2.4 Summary

2.4.1 Common findings

The concept of risk-taking came up in multiple texts as well as the need of engaging in social contexts. Self-expression and parental influence were also brought up multiple times. All of these are valid and shaped the research process of the thesis.

2.4.2 Gaps

I did not find any articles about alternatives to leisure among adolescents, as in alternatives to drinking when people try to deal with their emotional struggles such as anxiety. I was also hoping to find a text which delves deeper in the peer pressure topic but I couldn’t find one. I also want to mention that generally it is quite difficult to find articles related to sobriety which supports my earlier statement that this topic is not researched enough as of now.

2.4.3 Controversies

The theories which I highlighted do not necessarily contradict each other, they are just different approaches to a topic which is difficult to be answered. The one major
controversy I found is that some researchers believe that social contexts can be recreated under a controlled environment while others disagree with it.

3. Methodology
3.1 Methodological Perspective

The perspective which I have adopted for my research is the interpretive/social scientific approach. My reasoning behind this decision is that my research is heavily focused on social norms and the established rules of our human society. This fits in line with the thought process of the interpretive approach which maintains that the world is constructed and is shaped by the people and their interactions within this environment. I also made heavy use of qualitative data in my research through face-to-face interviews as I tried to understand people’s subjective views on social norms and their motivations behind rejecting them. This research topic is not suitable for a quantitative approach yet because I feel like the social group which I am targeting (sober people) is not big enough to conduct a survey or if there are enough people then they are not concentrated enough. Because of my stance on this topic, I decided to include reflexivity as well in which I describe my attitude towards this topic while still keeping myself as neutral as possible. Reflexivity can be defined as an introspective look at how one’s personal biases and feeling affect the way one thinks about a given topic.

I tried to be as relativistic as possible in my research therefore I did not choose a side between the two ends of the spectrum related to my topic (alcoholic and sober). My research is discovery-oriented as in I will tried to shed some light on a topic which I feel is relatively unexplored as of now and my respondents’ subjective perspectives were used to theorize possible explanations regarding my research question and to pose further research questions at the end.

3.2. Ethics

During my research, I made sure that the ethical rules of sociological research are not harmed in any kind of way. My main source of information regarding the ethical rules are taken from the International Sociology Association of Ethics. It is not in my intentions to spread any kind of agenda to my respondents. I am simply interested in this topic and I would like to conduct a research based on it because it fascinates me and to hopefully expand my understanding of society’s rules in the end.
I made sure that this information is be given to my respondents before the interviews as well as the fact that I am a university student and their responses will be only used to formulate my thesis. Moreover, I also preserved that they will be kept anonymous and I will not include their real names in my thesis unless they give their consent for it to happen. All of the above information was be given to each of my respondents in the form of an informed consent which also specify the conditions of the interview and I only started conducting it after they have fully agreed with it. (See appendix for the letter of consent)

3.3 Research Methods

The method which will be in the forefront of my thesis will be a literature review. The purpose of the review will be to present theories and ideas which are connected to my topic, such as the influence of peer pressure in our lives and the postmodern values of the younger generation.

The principal method which will be utilised during my field research will be qualitative interviews. I will try to reach the 10 respondent mark and it is also in my intentions that I spread out my respondents in an equal way (interview as many males as females. This approach enables me to take the subjective views that I received from my interviews and compare it with the presumptions that I had before conducting the research and with the literature which I had examined beforehand. The interviews will be semi-structured. I intend to have around 10 concrete questions which are quite open and besides them, I will be asking on the spot questions if I feel like there is a subject that is worth digging into deeper. I suspect that my structured questions will change over-time as I get more experience with my topic and with the interviews.

If I end up with more respondents than I expect (maybe I find an online group of sober people) I do intend to conduct a survey but even then, I intend to focus my evaluation on the qualitative interviews. I also have the participatory method in my mind, maybe I will be able to go to an environment where drinking is common (therefore social pressure is high) and find out how a sober person deal with the outside push. I could also do this myself, go to a party environment and see how I cope with the situation but then I must make extra effort during my analysis to take into account all of my personal biases and motivations. As I mentioned earlier, this part of the research is still under construction whereas the literature review and qualitative research are more less fixed.
3.4. SWOT analysis

In the following section I look at my methodology which I just discussed as a whole and look at its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

The strength that comes to my mind first is that this subject is relatively unexplored in Hungary. While my research’s scope isn’t big enough to say that my results will be representative enough to make some conclusions, it could allow some people to finally voice their opinion on a topic which is important to them.

The weaknesses regarding my thesis are pretty much the opposites to what I mentioned early. Because I won’t be able to ask that many people this limits my perspective and the conclusion that I will write at the end of my thesis will most likely not represent the whole of the sober community and their motivations. The fact that this topic didn’t get that much attention so far will limit the availability of relevant articles and other sources of information.

My research could give me the opportunity to get in contact with new and interesting people as I suspect that those who agree to do an interview with me also have a passion for this topic. The research may also shed some light to some social spheres and happenings which are an unfamiliar territory for me. Conducting these interviews will likely improve my conversation skills and it could also help my participants too and may motivate them in the future to be more open to interview requests.

The biggest threat to my research in my opinion will be the quality and relevancy of my literature review. I have a personal bias against books and articles and it will be quite difficult for me to overcome them and write a review which truly represents the points of the original material. It may also be difficult for me to tie in the articles to my research topic as I intend to tackle a relatively unexplored topic (at least in Hungary, it may be easier for me to looks for materials in other countries). I will likely have to face the threat of personal bias but I think I was able to formulate my research topic in a way that largely eliminates this threat but I do have to take into consideration that I don’t intend to pic a side in this conversation. Whether someone obeys or disobeys social norms is their own decision and I don’t intend to push any agendas upon them. A final threat that could occur during my research is that I will be more anxious during my first few interviews and the
quality of them will not be as good and representative as in the later ones. I intend to remedy this fact by practicing interviewing some of my acquaintances.

4. Results and Discussion

I decided to divide the data analysis part of my thesis into three distinct parts: analysis of the interviews, reflexivity and further information gathered through other means such as website sources and statistics. After going through them one-by-one I will then attempt to formulate a conclusion to the whole thesis.

4.1 Reflexivity

Because I am approaching this research from an interpretative way I thought that having a section if the thesis where I go into my personal connection to this topic would be helpful. The answers which I got from my respondents were very familiar to me, as in I recognized a lot of qualities and personality traits in their answers which were very similar to mine (I would have given similar answers to my questions). While it felt good to hear that other people have similar feeling to this topic and that they have their own friends to fall back to who accept them as who they are (a minority group if one assumes that drinking is the “norm” in a postmodern society) I can’t help but feel that I am part of a further polarization of society. There are already so many ways people can differ from one another such as in worldview, religion and class, here we have another topic where there are two distinct sides which do not belong together very well. As society gets more heterogeneous, the opportunities for community development and more chances for public affairs. Don’t get me wrong, I am not criticizing this whole phenomenon, it was just something that was in mind as I was doing this research. I mean, if everyone was the exact same human being, the world would be a much more uninteresting place and I wouldn’t be writing this thesis, exploring the construction of our society.

If I were to ask myself “Why is being sober more attractive to you than drinking?” I would have a hard time pin-pointing a precise answer. I think the parental environment which I was raised in was really influential but to be honest, that can be said about every attribute which I have, it is very general. It is not because I see drinking as a sin or a “bad thing”, it is more likely to be related to who I am. This is the reason why I included that question which tried to make a connection between the respondents’ personality and sobriety.
4.2 Qualitative interviews

I do want to mention a few things about the data collection before I get into what was actually said in the interviews. Firstly, gathering people wasn’t as difficult as I originally thought. Before I started this thesis I thought that it would be incredibly difficult to find sober people not only because I assumed that they are few in number but I thought it would also be difficult to find out whether they are sober or not (one cannot just simply approach random people on the streets and ask them in hopes for good results). It turned out that after finding one or two sober individuals through personal connections, it basically turned into a snowball effect and they could recommend me more people who were similar to them. This phenomenon by itself is valuable to the research as it reinforces the idea that if someone is sober then their friendship group will also be similar to them with regards to alcohol consumption. An extra detail that I want to add is the method I used to find the first few interviewees. I visited a University party where (no surprise) alcohol was present. I looked around whether I could find people who looked “out of place” or uncomfortable and I approached them whether they are sober or not. Luckily, my method worked and I was able to find not one but two students who fit this category therefore my method of “data collection” worked out.

4.2.1 The question of self-awareness

My opening question was simply “How seriously do you treat this lifestyle?” The answers were a bit mixed but for the sake of simplicity I can divide them into groups: the ones who make actual efforts to avoid alcohol in their lives and the other group being those who just simply live in such a way that they passively avoid alcohol. Let me explain the characteristics of the second group just to make it more clear. “This is me; I didn’t make any extra effort” or “I don’t pay attention to this” were the types of answers I got from them. What they explained to me is that for them it is natural to live like this and it is through their way of socialization which led them down this path. By “way of socialization” I mean that their friends and partners were also non-drinkers therefore it was natural for the to adopt this lifestyle. There wasn’t a specific day where they said to themselves “I am going to stop drinking alcohol”. They did have friends who were drinker back in the day (while they were still drinking) but over time the connections with those friends weakened.
The other group, where individuals were more aware of their actions had similar answers such as that they originally had friends who did drink but they don’t talk as often now (I will touch upon friendship groups in the next part). The main difference with them was that they were a bit wordier about the threats of alcohol and why is it not good for someone to drink. While they didn’t specifically say so that their lives are better than those who don’t abstain, quotes like “I don’t tour with them” did hint at this.

After looking at all of the data, I fail to find any clear distinctions between these two camps. I thought that maybe some sort of shocking event during their youth could lead to someone being more antagonistic to drinking and therefore more aware of their actions but both sides gave me answers like this, for example “I saw my friend on the floor, wasted, and I was like: Thanks but I don’t need any of this”. The one clear distinction which I observed was that the majority of the “less aware” respondents were male while the more “aware” camp was mostly composed by females. Gender stereotypes can come into play here but because my sample is small and the division between genders is not 100%, I am hesitant to make any conclusions related to gender differences.

4.2.2 Friends

Peer pressure can be a difficult thing to dealt with and this is why I asked the interviewees the composition of their friend groups. Are they similar to them not just with regards to drinking but also personality wise? The answers I got were fruitful as they corresponded with my theory, yes, they are extremely similar to them. They are also non-drinkers and (while it is difficult to measure) but they said to me that they are similar to them personality wise. When I asked them about whether they made any extra effort to shape their friend circle in this way, in other words, did they actively look for friends who did not drink, just like them, every single respondent told me that no, “It is just how things turned out to be”. The only group who told me that their friendship group is a bit more mixed were the younger (in their 20s) ones but that could be explained by assuming that they are in an earlier phase of their socialization and later down the road, their friends will be filtered out too.

What these answers tell me is that this creates a further layer of differentiation in society. I would like to bring up Spencer’s theory of the development of society which proposes that as society progresses forwards, further and further differentiations will happen among us, this being one of them. This phenomenon also reminds me of Parder and Vihalemm’s
2015 article which mentioned that the differentiation of the two sides (drinkers and abstainers) will not lead to good results in terms of human socialization.

It is just interesting to me that without making any effort, it just happens to be that all of my sober respondents’ friend groups are comprised of people who are very similar to them. I know that similarities and being friends with one another go hand-to-hand with each other but maybe there is something else going on here. Maybe there is a connection between personality types and alcohol consumption? I tried to find an answer to this which I will explore more in the next section.

4.2.3 Personality traits

“Does your personality and you being an abstainer somehow related to each other”? This was the type of question I asked the respondents to dig deeper in this subject. I do want to add that I worded this question pretty badly as I couldn’t really pin-point what exactly what I was referring to but it did lead to more open answers so at least it wasn’t a total disaster.

The answers I got were mixed but once again, I can divide them into two groups: those who had an idea what I was referring to and those who did not see any connections. The second group were much fewer in number (two males and one female) and they didn’t elaborate much on this question, “It is probably just a coincidence, I don’t think about this that much”.

For those who did agree with this, their views on this question was that their personality type does have something in common with their attitude to drinking. They characterized themselves as “introvert”, “easy-going”, “more rational” thinkers and they told me that these characteristics are also present among their friends as well. I also want to add that all of my respondents were very liberal in terms of their views on others. Yes, I did mention that some respondents had a more negative view on drinking but they all fit in the “It is an individual’s decision what they do with their lives and I don’t care” type of response category.

It is already well-known that there is a clear distinction between introvert and extrovert people, it could be interesting to discover what other characteristics are present among these two sides. If it turns out that being less outgoing and being sober is closely related might give us an insight into how and where society is heading, especially if we assume
that the rate of alcohol consumption is increasing (just an assumption) then maybe the introvert personality types are getting less common? Are people advocating for a more free and outgoing society? What about the rise of home computers, aren’t they making society less outgoing? These are just questions which came up during me research and I will reiterate them during the conclusion part of the thesis.

4.2.4 The importance of the parents

“They were very liberal” was the type of answer I got most of the time from respondents. Basically all of the respondents described their parents as very similar to them as in they drink very rarely, however only a few of them actually credited parental influence as a factor to their decision-making. There was an absence of any “bad memories” such as seeing one’s own parents very drunk in the past, which I assumed would appear a few times among the responses and would be the cause of them being sober but I did not get that response a single time.

While parental influence certainly is important, being a parent could also influence one’s views on alcohol. I interviewed four parents (two of each gender) and all of them mentioned that being a parent is a valid reason why they don’t consume alcohol regularly. “It is my responsibility to show a good example to my children” one expressed. When I asked them how they would react if their children started drinking the answers I got were in-line with how they described their own parents as in they wouldn’t try to actively stop them from doing it, although one response I got was “There is a low chance for that to happen because of how I raised them”.

All-in-all I would say that even if almost all responses discredited parental influence as a factor in their decision to not drink, I would theorize that “passive” parental influence or in other words parental environment does exist in some form. I am saying this because the correlation between “dry” parental environment and their children being sober is very much present in my sample. A biological approach is also applicable here, what if it is through genes, the parents transfer something to their child which makes their bodies more resistant to alcohol?

4.2.5 Benefits or not?

The question in which I got mixed results was where I asked interviewees whether they feel like they benefitted from being sober or not. Surprisingly, many of my respondents
struggled to give examples to both sides while one of them told me that “I don’t think about this at all”. One interviewee told me that “I can drive the car whenever I want to” which turned out to be the most common example of a benefit among the respondents. Being healthier also came up a lot but that is difficult to measure and a bit too vague for me to make any conclusions related to whether alcohol consumption worsens health or not.

One interviewee expressed the opinion that she thinks that overall she did not benefit from this decision. She said that “I feel like I miss a lot of connections, opportunities for connections… from a social capital point of view” but she also expressed the view that she did not regret her decision to be sober.

These answers suggest to me that being sober is less goal-oriented and instead it has more relations to personal values.

4.2.6 Self-expression

When asked about whether being sober is one’s part of their self-expression, the answers were mostly negative, in other words being sober wasn’t something that the respondents felt like defines their own self. One interviewee explained to me that “I tend to push this in the background, if things turn out well then it is something that other will never find out about me”, referring to her social environment. Another interviewee stated that “if I have to tell others this then something is not going right” which further emphasizes that it is more of a secondary attribute to them.

This relates to a proposal I made in the literature review where I suggested that sober people might not feel the desire to express themselves, contrary to those who are drinkers. While the majority of the respondents said to me that sobriety is not a part of their self-expression, I feel like that is actually a way of a “passive” way of expressing ourselves to the public. Not being a part of something means that you are a part of something else instead.

4.2.7 Relationships

I devoted a large section of my literature review looking at articles which mentioned connections between relationships and alcohol consumption because I got very interested in that topic. Because of this, I included some question at the end of the interviews about this (I put these questions at the end because these are more personal details).
It wasn’t surprising at all that every single interviewee said that alcohol consumption is a deciding factor when they are/were looking for a partner. “It is acceptable as long as they know where the limit is” one said but this type of response was also present in pretty much all answers. It does matter for them but it is not the main deciding factor and they can be more lenient.

The responses to my other relationship related question was much more surprising. I asked them whether they think that their relationships are more stable and more emotional because they don’t drink (or compared to those couples where the partners do drink). I formulated this question based on the findings which I mentioned in the literature review concerning alcohol consumption and relationship “strength”. The majority of answers I got corresponded to this theory with answers such as “We have more time for each other” In order to probe more deeply, I asked them whether this is true with their acquaintances and yes, they said that this is mostly true with their friends as well. Two of my respondents told me that, just like them, their friends also had a stable marriage for a long time. It is more difficult to measure this if I ask people who are still in their 20s but nonetheless the responses I got sort of confirmed this as they described themselves as “I am not a fan of spontaneous relationships”, I could describe them as “individuals who look for more emotional investment”. Two respondents disagreed with this theory, one of them had the argument that “People can change over time” while the other told me that “Negligence is not exclusive nowadays”.

These answers fall in-line with the theories I described earlier, such as that drinking is a sort of signal to others that “I am a free and an unchained individual” while not drinking is the opposite of that. This phenomenon plus the fact that many of my interviewees said that they think alcohol consumption is increasing nowadays really got me thinking about the future consequences of this and I will elaborate more on this in the conclusion part of the thesis. Nevertheless, these were some of the most rewarding question during my research.

4.2.8 Time limits

One point which one of my respondents brought up was that the general lack of time during weekdays or maybe even during the weekends too is another potential cause of non-drinking. It is quite simple, nowadays there are a lot more things one has to do in order to stay on top of their lives. Teenagers working overtime, up to 12 hours a day is a
phenomenon not unusual which translates to one having much less free time to do other things, such as drinking alcohol. My respondent expressed the view that he likes to “live while being aware of his surroundings” and that he likes to “think more about his actions” and a lifestyle like that does not support that “you take off your mind from reality”.

4.2.9 Media influences

While I did not ask my respondents about the influences of the media on their lives (I thought that it would interrupt the flow of the interview), one of them was very passionate about this subject and he brought it up a lot during the interview. He said that “consumer society reinforces drinking habits...among the youth especially” because the media depicts alcohol consumption as being cool and “fancy” especially among typical movie protagonists. He also exclaimed that “companies don’t care about the consequences” referring to that alcohol is just a way for them to make more profit and that they do not care if it produces more addicts. What was said here corresponds with the literature review related to advertising strategies.

4.2.10 Straight edge

Out of the ten interviewees, one of them was not just simply sober but he was living a straight edge lifestyle. Just for clarification, straight edge means when someone doesn’t drink any alcohol, doesn’t take any drugs at all. There are more serious versions of straight edge which also involve not engaging in occasional sexual activity (such as “one-night stands”). This lifestyle originated in the 80s and it is still present in today’s society, it is most notable among musicians. The original idea of this thesis was to only look for straight edge individuals but that would have limited the scope of the research a lot.

I thought it wouldn’t make sense to bundle this one interviewee with the others as he takes this lifestyle much more seriously than the others, the answers which he gave were in-line with the answers the other interviewees provided. If I were to look for attributes in which he differed from the others, I would say that he was much more enthusiastic about the whole topic (makes sense as if someone takes something seriously it is bound that they like to talk about it in-depth) and that he was much more “aware” of his actions. As I mentioned, a lot of interviewees gave the answer that it is simply natural to them that they don’t drink, it is not that they make extra effort to reject it.
4.3 Supplemental data

In order to get a more concrete answer on where alcohol consumption patterns are heading, I looked for the World Health Organization’s (WHO) statistics on pure alcohol consumption among persons above the age of 15 in litres per capita per year. The comparison was between results from 2010 and 2016, a big, 6-year long gap which would surely tell us where alcohol consumption patterns are heading, at least one would assume. Unfortunately, the results don’t paint a clear picture as the patterns are mixed among countries with 17 countries where it decreased and 13 countries where it increased. It was mentioned that generally consumption rates are increasing in the countries which are in the middle part of the EU. These findings are similar in what I got from my respondents when I asked them about whether they think consumption patterns are going up or down, the answers were mixed. The WHO results mentioned that men consumed 18.3 litres of alcohol on average while women only consumed 4.7 litres on average. Because of my smaller sample I can’t make a concrete statement whether my findings support this or not but I didn’t feel like it was necessarily more difficult to find males who were sober, in fact, I were to continue this research I might have been able to find a lot more male interviewees but that can simply be the result of my social environment.

One of my original plans was to have a survey which enhances my sample size a bit but over-time I realised how difficult it is to have a survey which is targeted at a larger audience in a topic which is interested in a lifestyle which is considered a minority behaviour. Nevertheless, while I did not complete a survey I was able to find a community online which I scoured a bit to find some interesting details. The community is the StopTheDrinking subreddit (Reddit is an online forum which can have many subtopics which are called subreddits) which was surprisingly active when I found it. This website works as a sort of motivating engine for those who want to abstain from alcohol. If someone has an issue they are struggling with, they can make a post about it and others can react on it and give each other advice. They even had their own vocabulary such as “slip” (Sobriety Losing Its Priority). There were even examples of topics which I was interested in such as the struggle of coping with friends who want to “force” drinking upon you. I could go on and on about this but the existence of this fairly active website tells me that social support is important but also is much easier to come by thanks to the advancements in technology. While it is very important to have friends around you who support you in your decisions, evidence can be seen in the answer I got which were related
to respondents’ friendship groups, it is interesting that emotional support can be acquired elsewhere in the modern world, although its strength over real-life friends could be questioned.

5. Conclusions

My goal with this thesis was to set out, explore and interpret the causes and motivations behind someone choosing a sober lifestyle. Throughout my research I came across a number of theories which opened my eyes towards multiple different explanations such as how important the parental environment is, whether an anti-normative lifestyle exists or not, how much our personality tells us about other parts of our lives and ways of expressing ourselves. I collected information with the goal of finding patterns, which I did, and then I used these patterns to formulate hypotheses in an attempt to find some potential answers.

At the end of the thesis journey, do I feel like I have a clearer view on this topic? Yes, but it did make me realize how complicated it can be if I try to dig deeper in a certain area. It did lead me to ask more questions about not just alcoholism itself but the future construction of society which I think is the real reward I got from this research.

I believe that the relationship between alcohol consumption and relationship quality is worth exploring in more detail as it is a topic which directly influences the future of our society. What if the theory of alcohol consumption lessening the desire to form long-term relationships is true, combined with the tendency of alcohol consumption patterns not changing, will lead our society down a path where human relationships will be more fragile and more occasional and not long-term oriented. There are already concerns about how technology has overtaken our lives, how will this affect us in the near future?

While I did not elaborate on the topic of advertising and media influences, I do think that it is also worth exploring more, especially the attitude by which the media handles alcohol consumption. The “normalization” of drinking (and other “destructive” behaviour) in movies and music could be a key topic in further research.

If I was asked to suggest some social policy concerning this topic, I would be a bit hesitant as I did say that I want to be neutral and do not wish to depict alcohol consumption as a big threat but if I must, then some kind of prohibition could be applied. Similar to the increased tax on cigar, alcohol could be taxed as well in order to reduce consumption but
I would honestly question whether it would make any big difference in the long-term. Nevertheless, I am completely against an outright ban on the whole substance, that wouldn’t end very well.

**Bibliography:**


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Appendix

Consent Letter

Dear (Insert Participant’s Name):

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study I am conducting as part of my BA degree in the Institute of Sociology at the Corvinus University. I would like to
provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement would entail if you decide to take part.

This study will focus on people’s motivations behind sobriety and anti-norm lifestyle. Participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately 30 minutes. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences by advising the researcher. With your permission, the interview will be tape-recorded but if you are unhappy with this I can make written notes. Only I and my examiners will have access to the recording. All information you provide is considered completely confidential. Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study, however, with your permission anonymous quotations may be used.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at 06204167662 or by e-mail at afuszeder@gmail.com. You can also contact my supervisor, Ryder Andrew Richard at e-mail (Insert Email Address).

I very much look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project.

Yours sincerely,

(Signature)

**Interview Questions:**

1. How seriously do you take this lifestyle?
2. Do you think drinking is a norm nowadays?
3. Were you always sober or not?
4. Why did you choose this lifestyle?
5. Did you make this decision yourself?
6. Can you think of any past event which could have influenced you?
7. How much did parental influence affect you?
8. Do you think you benefited from this?
9. Do you surround yourself with other sober people?
10. Did you ever try to change someone to follow this lifestyle?
11. How much of a risk-taker are you?
12. Is sobriety a mean of your self-expression?
13. Do you think sobriety is getting more common nowadays?
14. Are there any examples in your life where you go against the norms?
15. How much does this matter when you are looking for a partner?
16. Do you think sobriety influences the quality of relationships?
17. Do you think your personality and you being sober are somehow related?