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Abstract

Following Scott's (2018) sociology of nothing, we focus on the process of non-identification, wherein young adults seek to manage the risk of being marked by their non-participation in an important cultural practice. Drawing on qualitative interviews with undergraduate students we develop two overall identity refusal positions (resistance and othering), through which informants seek to disengage with the collective identity of the non-drinker. These positions are underlined by four categories of identity talk: denial and temporal talk (distancing through resistance), and disconnect and concealment talk (distancing through othering), which are used to repudiate non-drinking as culturally and personally meaningful respectively. We contribute understandings of how identities can be performed through active omission, developing Scott's conceptualization and demonstrating how this can be a potentially planful process, depending on the extent to which individuals credit a particular object or activity with being a 'something'.

Key words:

Abstention, Alcohol, Consumption, Identity, Non-drinkers, Nothing, Omission

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Introduction

Building on Scott's (2018) 'sociology of nothing' we focus on the process of non-identification, wherein people seek to manage the risk of being marked as a result of not conforming to a normative cultural practice. We explore the narratives of UK university students who do not drink alcohol and seek to refute the identity and negative connotations of being a non-drinker in a dominant normalized alcohol culture (NUS Alcohol Impact, 2016).

Tackling alcohol consumption remains high on the policy agenda, yet recent statistics suggest a complex picture. While alcohol related hospital admissions have continued to rise since 2003, increasing numbers of people abstain, partly reflecting changes in the UK population's cultural makeup as well as alternative leisure pursuits (Jayne, Valentine and Holloway, 2016). British 16-24-year olds are less likely to drink than other age groups, yet consumption on their heaviest drinking day tends to be higher (NHS, 2017). This polarisation in habits (Measham, 2008) is not unique to the UK; alcohol consumption in the Americas is also characterised as 'high-intensity' (Esser and Jernigan, 2018), but with an overall downward trend in US adolescents' consumption (Vaughn, Nelson, Oh, Salas-Wright, DeLisi, and Holzer, 2018).

Prior academic work has tended to position young adults who do not drink with a collective non-drinking identity, stemming from their non-conformance to the mainstream drinking culture (Griffin et al, 2009; Piacentini, Chatzidakis, and Banister 2012). Findings illustrate the need for non-drinkers to develop counter drinking identities and narratives (Nairn, Higgins, Thompson, Anderson and Nedra, 2006; Supski and Linday, 2017), and research invariably focuses on 'managing' non-drinking (Conroy and deVisser, 2014), particularly in contexts where drinking is a dominant cultural practice (e.g. universities). However, the collective non-drinking identity is based on a 'non-doing' (Scott, 2018), sitting in sharp contrast to communal and collective identities based around 'doings' developed elsewhere in consumption studies (e.g. Goulding, Shankar and Canniford, 2013; Arsel and Thompson, 2011). This reverse marking of non-drinking - the way this 'nothing' is noted and observed - is at the heart of the negative connotations associated with not drinking and therefore an important element of young adults' social contexts.

Following Scott, McDonnell and Dawson (2016), we position not drinking as a potential non-becoming, and ask: Is it possible for those who do not drink alcohol to refuse the identity of the non-drinker, even in a culture where drinking alcohol is the norm? What identity positioning does this entail, and what identity talk accompanies it? We seek to demonstrate the complexity of non-drinking identities and how these translate into positions and narratives towards resisting a negative impact on identity work.

Literature Review

Identities are established as social and relational matters (Williams, 2000), defined through dialogue with significant others (Mead, 1934). Scott (2018) recently extended attention to the construction of identities around not being or doing something, focusing on the forms that 'nothing' takes in social life, and how it is practiced through verbal communications.

The act of not drinking alcohol, within a context where excess is normalised and participation expected (Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Griffin, Hackley and Mistral,

2011), is potentially problematic for young adults and involves negotiating a complex social order. Scott (2018) briefly uses the non-drinker as an exemplar of commission, positioning non-drinkers as demonstrably and symbolically opposed to drinkers. From this position, non-drinking involves conscious disengagement and 'accounting for oneself as a non-drinker' (p. 5). This interpretation fits well with the way that not drinking has been framed in prior work: Supski and Lindsay (2017) focus on abstinence as an active choice, whereby non-drinkers accept the accompanying scrutiny by others, and the non- and moderate drinkers in Graber, deVisser, Abraham, Memon, Hart and Hunt (2016) position their choices as positive and proactive.

Herman-Kinney and Kinney (2013) consider the identity position of a non-drinker as a spoilt identity (Goffman, 2009). The accompanying stigma management strategies include concealment and passing, different forms of disclosure (admitting non-drinking status) and capitulation involving succumbing to the stigma. In Conroy and deVisser (2013), this potentially stigmatized identity is explored from a different vantage point; how drinkers perceive non-drinkers. Non-drinkers are discussed as a collective group with (stereotyped) shared practices, motivations and experiences and the emergent discourses can be understood as statements of 'identity not' (Freitas, Kaiser, Chandler, Hall, Kim and Hammidi, 1997). The non-drinkers in Conroy and deVisser's (2014) study discuss these prejudicial judgments by others, believing drinkers misunderstand them, consider they need 'fixing' and that they are naïve for not understanding the potential pleasures that alcohol consumption offers. Notwithstanding Graber et al.'s (2016) discussion of positive adaptations, most research points to the challenges faced by those experiencing the collective label of the non-drinker in the social sphere; themes of not belonging, social exclusion and social stigma are key (Jacobs, Conroy and Parke, 2018).

Therefore the sense that the identity of the non-drinker can be experienced negatively is well established. Nairn et al. (2006) consider a range of alternative non-drinking subject positions, including attempts to develop a positive spin on the non-drinking identity and minimising negative associations. The accompanying verbalizations of 'nothing' take the form of non-drinkers' counter-narratives used to 'fit in', and challenge 'the repeated association of youth with alcohol consumption' (Nairn et al., 2006: 288), while incorporating a desire for social belonging and a positive identity. These verbal manifestations (or identity talk), share commonalities with the counter-neutralizations used by informants in Piacentini et al. (2012).

A point of difference to the notion of the non-drinking identity as requiring work and 'managing' is having a 'valid' reason for not drinking, such as religion or illness. In such circumstances *being* a non-drinker is usually understood as central to the individual's identity work (Conroy and DeVisser, 2014), an act of commission (Scott, 2018). Such identity-related rationales for not drinking enable the positioning of alcohol as 'abject' with the potential to 'taint' the self, and also inform others' interpretations of decisions around alcohol (Griffin et al., 2009). Conroy and de Visser (2014) use the term 'culturally sanctioned' to describe legitimate alternative subject positions, suggesting that cultural and religious identities serve as powerful social norms and 'defences' for not drinking. Gendered assumptions around alcohol can also be powerful. Conroy and de Visser (2013) provide insights into how prescribed masculine identities can provide additional challenges for men's negotiation of non-drinking identities, and Piacentini and Banister (2009) suggest gendered practices around coping with abstinence.

It is clear there is the potential for non-drinkers to experience stigmatization, and it follows that some non-drinkers may wish to distance themselves from dominant

collective representations. Yet prior studies do not emphasise circumstances where those who do not drink specifically question or reject their assigned identity as a non-drinker. While prior research has positioned non-drinking as a key symbolically marked (non) practice (Scott, 2018), what happens when we consider not drinking as a non-becoming (Scott et al., 2016)? Is it possible, in situations where drinking is a normative cultural practice, for those who do not drink alcohol to refuse the identity of the non-drinker (i.e. to re-position it as a nothing)? This may be emphasised when a non-behaviour unmarked in one context (considered a 'nothing') becomes marked (a 'something') by others, when the non-actor moves into a different (micro) cultural context.

Identity refusal around alcohol has received little attention, although Conroy and deVisser (2015) indicate reluctance from one participant to be defined in such terms. Common to all these studies (Nairn et al., 2006; Piacentini and Banister, 2009; Conroy and deVisser, 2014) is nuance in the ways being a non-drinker is constituted in people's lives. There is also considerable variation in the accompanying identity talk, which includes silence and quietness (linked to disclosure) through to engaging more active management strategies.

In seeking to conceptualise identity refusal, we look to other consumption studies that forge understanding of how marginalized groups combat stigmatisation, discrimination and disempowerment. While societally defining differences lie at the heart of such work, these concerns are often exhibited in the production of legitimate and positive collective identities (Kellner, 2003). Weinberger's (2015) study of non-celebrands reveals their careful management of the symbolic boundaries distinguishing them from those who celebrate Christmas. These non-celebrands are ideologically motivated, but these roots are carefully managed and not always revealed. Such theoretical insights contribute to understandings of people's identity distancing projects and boundary marking activities (Jenkins, 1996), yet one key difference from the experiences of non-drinkers is the common or collective ground for individuals' identity endeavours. Non-celebrands experience tension within their social relationships *because* their non-celebrand status is (ideologically) important to them and they share goals and interests with other non-celebrands within the same collective (e.g. whether Jewish or atheist).

For some alcohol abstainers, not consuming alcohol is clearly an integral part of an important collective identity. For example, within the 'straightedge' community identities are based around significant 'not doings' including abstinence from alcohol, as well as drugs and promiscuous sex (Haenfler, 2004). These behaviours form the basis of what Mullaney (2001) terms 'never identities', important acts of commission that form the basis for becoming a (straightedge) community member. Conscious processes of dis-identification can be important for other non-drinkers, and we have outlined prior research where identity is managed in situations where being a non-drinker is perceived negatively (Conroy and deVisser, 2013; 2014). However, what happens if non-drinkers refuse a (collective) non-drinking identity? Can non-drinking also be understood as an act of omission (Scott, 2018), incidental to the self-identity of individuals who 'happen' to not drink, an irrelevant identity marker? If not drinking alcohol is denied a basis, if it is interpreted as an act of nothing (Scott, 2018), what identity work is directed towards minimizing the impact of this non-drinking status in the eyes of others and resisting the label that is imposed on them? The focus of this paper is on those non-drinkers who share 'nothing' acts with others (i.e. not drinking alcohol), yet reject presumed commonalities, shared meanings, experiences and endeavours.

The Study

Given the predominant drinking culture within the UK student body (NUS Alcohol Impact, 2016), our study focused on undergraduates studying in North West England, within a city containing a large student population and a thriving night-time economy. We conducted 19 interviews (see table 1), adopting a qualitative exploratory design to explore participants' non-drinking positions (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014).

[TABLE 1 HERE]

Participants were recruited via an advertisement on a university student careers and volunteering webpage. The opt-in purposive sampling strategy sought individuals from the broader population of interest (students), based on a particular element of their consumption (not drinking alcohol). To meet ethical guidelines, participation was voluntary, written consent was collected, and informants were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Interviews were audio-recorded, conducted on university premises by two of the authors and checks ensured that no participants were current, past or likely future students of either interviewer. Interviews were loosely structured, incorporating some common agreed themes, but as much as possible aimed at mimicking conversations (Burgess, 1984). Interviews varied in length, within a range of 45 to 120 minutes.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymised and pseudonyms given. After establishing familiarity with the entire data set, each author participated in an iterative process of open and axial coding, identifying themes, which were then explored across the data set. The paper focus emerged inductively and we sought to develop emic understandings of what eventually came to be termed 'identity refusal'. Once this overall theme emerged, the data were revisited to explore further examples and identify alternative positions under which identity refusal had taken place. This process of cross-comparison enabled consideration of the differences and overlaps between these positions (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) alongside the accompanying talk. We then developed a more etic understanding that involved engaging with prior literature in the contextual (non-drinking) and theoretical areas, systematically iterating between the empirical data and the literature (Charmaz, 2006; Dubois and Gadde, 2002). This final step enabled the further development of categories, consideration of where the study sits in relation to previous studies, and its theoretical and social contributions. The data of relevance to this paper were those extracts coded as providing examples of identity refusal; that is an identity positioning strategy that refuses the collective identity of the non-drinker.

Findings

Initial analysis focused on our entire data set of non-drinkers, wherein we found examples of both acts of commission and omission (see table 1). Under commission, some participants engaged in conscious dis-identification (Scott, 2018), but this contrasts with a number of our participants who tended to non-identify rather than dis-identify with the category of drinker. For many of our participants this was consistent throughout their narrative, as they position their drinking identity based on omission, indexing 'something that is not there but might have been' (Scott, 2018: 7), in

contrast to the possibility of the 'never identity' (Mullaney, 2001). For other individuals there was a certain amount of fluidity within their narratives as they incorporated elements of omission and commission into their identities (see Bahir and Tao) depending, for example, on context and audience.

Our theoretical framing of identity refusal (figure 1) allows us to question assumptions surrounding non-drinking as consistently being an act of commission (Supski and Lindsay, 2017; Graber et al 2016). We discuss the ways in which non-drinkers understand or interpret their *position* as a non-drinker and uncover the verbal means by which this non-identity is asserted. In addition, our framework enables an exploration of potential the social exclusion and stigma associated with not drinking (Jacobs et al 2018), and the means through which individuals ensure that non-drinking does not assume an unwelcome place in their identity. We develop two identity refusal positions: distancing through resistance (of non-drinking as a 'thing') and distancing through othering (of non-drinkers). These are underpinned by four categories of identity talk: *denial* and *temporal* provide examples of distancing through resistance, whereas *disconnect* and *concealment* illustrate distance through othering. These four forms of talk provide examples of individuals' verbalisations of their *non*-identification with the identity of the drinker, functioning as acts of omission (albeit a less passive process than originally envisaged by Scott, 2018), rather than conscious acts of dis-identification. We now provide a discussion of these identity positions, with empirical illustrations from our data set.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

Distancing through resistance

Individuals adopting a distancing through resistance position forge an outright rejection of the relevance of non-drinking to their identity work. Their acts of omission are supported verbally through *denial* and *temporal* talk. Under *denial*, individuals resist understandings that emphasise the significance of their (or others') non-drinking status; they refute the relevance or validity of non-drinking and associated practices as cultural markers. Under *temporal,* while participants may partially accept the potential relevance of non-drinking to identity work, going some way to accept non-drinking as a cultural marker, they suggest it can only provide a partial understanding. They emphasise their potentially shorter-term commitment to not drinking, providing a stark contrast with Mullaney's (2001) 'never identity'.

Denial talk: 'So what?'

Those participants who frame their resistance through the use of 'denial' take an emphatic stance that involves contesting the relevance or validity of non-drinking as an identity marker, illustrated by the sense of 'I'm a non-drinker, so what?' They best fit Scott's (2018) notion of non-being. Their denial is general in nature, and their accompanying talk positions 'not drinking' as irrelevant to individuals' identity work, as illustrated by Jacinta:

> *I think [not drinking] is a consequence of my background, and if it's not an interest, how is not having an interest defining you? ... So if I don't like chocolate how is [being] a non-chocolate eater defining me? ... I mean there*

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are so many activities in which you don't engage, so if you don't engage, does that define you, or do the things you engage in define you?

For Jacinta, non-drinking is an empty signifier and she challenges the validity and logic of non-drinking as a cultural marker. Her comparison of alcohol with chocolate (elsewhere she says *"it's the same as chocolate… everyone likes chocolate"*) demonstrates a failure to more fully appreciate the importance that alcohol plays in many young peoples' social lives (Szmigin et al., 2011) and the potential stigma associated with not drinking alcohol (Herman-Kinney and Kinney, 2013).

Other participants also present their decision not to drink alcohol as incidental. Alex, for example, depicts alcohol as simply a drink containing alcohol, which should communicate nothing more than the choice of a soft drinks brand:

People like Sprite, some people like Coca Cola, some people like Fanta and I've got a friend that he will go for Sprite a 100 times rather than Coke or Fanta… so I just look at alcohol like a drink that has alcohol in it. So it's not really a big issue to be honest.

Rob, a mature student, suggests that while peer pressure to drink may exist, any negativity reflects badly on the individual holding the views rather than the non-drinker.

I'm at the age now where I don't succumb to peer pressure all that easily. If people have an issue with me not drinking then it's their issue not mine

Through denial talk, participants refuse to attach additional significance to their own, or others', non-drinking status beyond other everyday consumption choices (e.g. brands of soft drink, preferences for chocolate or not). In so doing, they purposefully downplay the relevance of alcohol, rejecting the cultural significance of their non-drinking, and the potential assumption that there exists a community of non-drinkers with common ideals or understandings; this works to deny the relevance of alcohol non-consumption in identity terms.

Participants whose identity talk incorporates aspects of denial appear to exercise self-agency – for example 'doing what you want to do with your life' (Conroy and DeVisser, 2015). In this sense not drinking incorporates elements commensurate with acts of commission. However, in denying the relevance of not drinking, their positioning is more in line with an act of omission, since it downplays the consciousness with which they reject alcohol whilst denying the accompanying symbolism of alcohol as a product and a practice (Scott, 2018; Szmigin et al, 2011). Essentially, these participants position alcohol as 'not meaning enough to be seen and consciously rejected' (Scott, 2018: 5).

Temporal talk: 'just not right now'

Temporal talk directly contrasts with the 'never' identities in Mullaney (2001) and signals an 'in the present' commitment to non-drinking. Engaging in temporal talk allows individuals to dismiss the existence of a community of non-drinkers, alongside any implied commitment, obligation or responsibility. Rather than being

based on denial, it allows these non-drinkers to constantly revisit their decision not to drink alcohol.

Here, Louise and then Anastasias' understandings contrast with the 'never identities' outlined by Mullaney (2001):

> *I still go out to bars with my friends, and things like that. [I] just say that I don't drink... I don't really like to put a label on myself, I don't like to tell people "I'm teetotal" because that implies that I'd never drink alcohol, and I feel very strongly about it, which I don't. The only reason I don't drink is because I don't enjoy it. I don't feel like other people shouldn't drink, and I don't feel like I will never drink ever again. It's just that I choose not to do it.*

> *If I change my mind well I'd change it [....] if I'm not drinking now that's OK for me, I'm happy so that's how it will be and then when, if, I decide to start drinking again [...] I don't even know what would start me drinking again.*

Louise implies some appreciation of alcohol's potential as a cultural marker (e.g. if she positioned herself as teetotal), yet she presents her non-drinking as an everyday choice, an act of omission. Anastasia presents her choice not to drink as almost inconsequential and both participants are careful not to present their decision as final. Their identity talk emphasises the lack of a moral dimension; non-drinking is very much in the now and 'just' something they choose not to do. Despite Louise's acknowledgement of elements of cultural significance, she claims that in her case not drinking means little, and she resists labels and categorisation. Both participants assert their agency in choosing not to drink, as a decision that can be revised at any time which could suggest overlaps with acts of commission, when 'we choose to avoid doing/being something' (Scott, 2018: 5). Yet Louise does not exhibit the conscious disengagement or dis-identification that this entails, rather positioning herself as not drinking 'by default rather than conscious intention' (Scott, 2018: 5); her overall position and accompanying talk is in line with 'not choosing' to drink, an act of omission.

Another participant, Helen, provides a more specific illustration of how temporal identity talk can play out in the form of (non) drinking practices. In response to her peers' encouragement to consume alcohol on a specific occasion, Helen eventually relents, providing support for her claim that whether or not she drinks is of little significance to her, it is just something she happens not to do, an act of omission. However, on seeing her sip champagne, her friends' encouragement turns to surprise:

> *We went for an art trip to Paris, and on the way back, on the Eurostar, it was one of my art teachers, her 50th birthday, or something, so they got champagne and they offered me some, and I was like, no, I don't like alcohol. And they were like, no, it's a really good one, try it, so they poured me a glass and I tried it, and it was disgusting ... and they were like, why did you drink it? And I was like, you just gave it to me!*

Amy adds another perspective on this temporal aspect.

> *... there could be more relapses, because sometimes I just feel like having a drink, but it's not very often, and I still would say that I'm a non-drinker... I'm not an occasional drinker, but I just mean that I wouldn't say that*

alcohol will never pass through my lips again sort of thing, but I don't think I will be a drinker.

Amy demonstrates that even individuals who have seemingly clear non-drinking identities can oscillate. While much of her narrative around not drinking is core to her identity (as a Christian), she minimises the relevance of this position when she contemplates the prospect of possibly having a drink one day, which in her mind would not make her a drinker.

These participants describe their non-drinking practices as having an in-the-present orientation. They diminish the personal relevance of their decision not to drink through various means (e.g. Louise still engages in student social space and culture, and Helen lacks associated moral convictions). Participants engaging in temporal talk downplay the relevance of (not) drinking alcohol to their identity work due to its potentially transient nature. With this lack of a clear conviction, it is a decision taken on a daily basis without long-term commitment and is presented as saying little about their values and motivations. However, unlike those engaging in denial, temporal talk allows participants to (partially) accept alcohol's cultural significance; they accept that non-drinking can be a marked characteristic (Scott, 2018) yet resist this marker on account of their reluctance to commit to a permanent longer-term non-drinking status.

Participants adopting *denial* and *temporal* identity talk downplay the impact that non-drinking has on their social lives and deny its cultural significance, albeit to different degrees. Their general identity talk is mobilised as a response to others' attempts to attach significance to something (or rather a nothing) they see as irrelevant in identity terms. They present themselves as regular students participating in normalised student social lives, refusing to let their practices around alcohol impact on their time at university.

Distancing through othering

Distancing through othering places non-drinking identities firmly in the social sphere, specifically recognising the cultural relevance of drinking and non-drinking identities. Individuals practicing distancing through othering engage with *disconnect* and *concealment* talk, resisting their personal associations with what they see as the identity of the 'non-drinker'. Their identity talk may emphasise *disconnect,* accepting that there exists a typical non-drinker, yet demonstrating its irrelevance to their personal identity work. Or under *concealment,* individuals' belief in the typical 'non-drinker' is exhibited by their determination not to be 'found out'; their identity talk takes the form of silence, coupled with various concealing practices. These identity constructions are developed and discussed in terms of difference, distancing occurs through discourses that contrast with the presumed negative characteristics associated with the broader collective non-drinking identity. This raises the spectre of stigmatized non-drinking identities, with the fear of 'abject other' (Kristeva, 1982), leading to active approaches to stigma management and alleviation.

Disconnect talk: 'I'm not like them'

Distancing through othering acknowledges the negative symbolism that surrounds non-drinkers (Conroy and deVisser, 2013), providing clear recognition of the cultural

significance of alcohol within the university setting. Drinkers are accepted as the normative majority and non-drinking functions as a marker, yet non-drinkers engaging in disconnect talk verbally distance themselves from dominant stereotypes. Informants accept that there is such a thing as a non-drinker, yet do not acknowledge this as their own position of 'not being' (Scott, 2018). They project negative associations onto other abstainers, simultaneously legitimatising their own position through differentiation: 'not *that* type of non-drinker'. Their identity distancing process shares similarities with Arsel and Thompson's (2011) symbolic demarcation; they project the negative symbolism of abstaining onto other non-drinkers, confirming the (negative) stereotype whilst legitimising their own position as a different type of non-drinker.

Helen, for example, distances herself from other non-drinkers by participating fully in the social scene, fitting in and therefore not performing out of line with stereotypical views of the non-drinker:

> *I think quite a lot, because I'm used to not drinking, I'm used to being sober in a drunk group, so I don't stand out, and I'll act the same way as everyone else, and they say that I'm not a problem, whereas some people, kind of, really quiet, and they'll hang round on the edges, whilst everybody's socialising, because they're not used to being sober, in that situation, people find it annoying*

Similarly, Anastasia presents a direct comparison between her own approach and that of another non-drinking acquaintance:

> *She like announced it to everyone and she made it into a big deal and, like, she just made it into, like, almost a problem for everyone, like, then she said she didn't want to go if you are going 'out-out'. I feel, like, she cut herself off kind of thing, but I'm kind of these people…. they knew I was willing to go out, like, I love going out, like, different places… I wouldn't ever go into, like, a room or, like, a group of friends and be, like, 'everyone I don't drink'.*

Anastasia critiques her friend on a number of grounds. First, by announcing her non-drinking her friend made it a 'big deal', which Anastasia feels it need not be. In this respect Anastasia's approach shares similarities with denial. Second, Anastasia is critical of the impact that her friend's non-drinking has on her socializing, whereby she avoids social occasions where alcohol takes centre stage. The friend's announcement is an 'act of commission' (Scott, 2018) by virtue of her need to account for herself, that she is 'demonstrably 'doing nothing'' (p. 4). Anastasia distances herself from this position and the accompanying identity talk as it represents the rejection of a normatively expected action (drinking) based on negative associations, with which she does not wish to align. Anastasia is practising a strategy of active stigma management (Goffman, 2009), attributing blame to those elements of the stigmatised population (non-drinkers) who make a big deal of their non-drinking, expecting accommodation from others (Conroy and deVisser, 2013).

Those who accept the existence of a communal non-drinking identity recognise the cultural significance of alcohol, engage with this notion of the typical non-drinker yet work purposefully (via othering) to prevent association with what they perceive to be a potentially stigmatising identity. For participants engaging in

disconnect talk, the extent to which non-drinking becomes self-defining is a very significant aspect of their approach. As a Muslim, Bahir has a culturally sanctioned reason for not drinking alcohol, yet despite the associations of non-drinking with his religious identity, he refuses to make it a central aspect of his own personal identity work:

> *I've never made it [non-drinking] a defining part of me, I've never made it so I would kind of what's the word… alienate myself or others because of it… I wouldn't want to do that. I don't think it's necessary to do that. I know there are certain people that take the position, they won't mix with people that do drink. So non-drinkers won't mix with drinkers, at all, they'll say, 'no, I won't be friends with these people.' But I think that's a bit unnecessary to be honest, it's a bit silly.*

Much of the identity talk we categorised as disconnecting is associated with performance in the social arena, and in particular engagement with the night-time economy. *Disconnect* talk might be accompanied by practices that share similarities with symbolic demarcation (Arsel and Thompson, 2011), and the presumed negative symbolism of abstaining is projected onto other non-drinkers. Other non-drinkers become othered and disconnecting participants rely on their natural skills to demonstrate sociability and acceptance in the social sphere (Abel and Plumridge, 2004). They present themselves as able to participate in the essential rituals associated with students' social lives, whereby their social interactions are managed in ways that minimise potentially negative identity consequences. This position lies in contrast with 'other' non-drinkers, who might see the 'nothing' as replaceable with an alternative (non-drinking) 'something' (Scott, 2018) and are therefore less motivated to engage with the social world. For disconnecting non-drinkers, there is a need to ensure their non-drinking is not culturally marked or noted; by not replacing their non-drinking with something else they are achieving this goal. Hence, when engaging in disconnect talk, non-drinkers downplay the cultural marking of their own non-drinking and hence their identity talk functions to diminish the relevance of non-drinking to their identity work.

Concealment talk: 'you'll never know'

Elements of concealment and passing have been presented in prior alcohol research (Nairn et al., 2006; Herman-Kinney and Kinney, 2013). It is a protective strategy whereby individuals prevent others from discovering their true alcohol non-consumption behaviours (practice) yet also contains important elements of identity talk, including verbal denials and declinations (Scott, 2018). Through silence and quietness, concealment can be an effective (short term) stigma avoidance strategy, although several of our participants presented it as a more enduring position. Concealment can take the form of acts of commission (e.g. saying no) and omission, declining to speak at all, which can still be an agentic choice (Scott, 2018).

In keeping with disconnect, individuals' concealment talk allows non-drinkers to acknowledge non-drinking as an identity marker and they operate with regards to its potentially stigmatising impact (Herman-Kinney and Kinney, 2013). Individuals refuse the identity of the non-drinker, not because they do not believe it applies to them (as with the disconnect position) but in direct protection of the self. In so doing, they create the conditions for 'easier' social interactions and experiences.

Anushka conceals her status through socialising with a range of friendship groups in the hope that they will not notice her continued avoidance of alcohol.

> *It's easier for me because, for example, this week I'm hanging out with this friend, and the other week I'm hanging out with another group of friends... After two weeks, they already forgot whether I drink at that party or not... The friends from here in two years, they didn't quite figure it out that I'm a non-drinker.*

Anushka's talk shares similarities with the *temporal* position. She expresses her reticence to identify herself as a non-drinker, and suggests that others might be more accepting of a more transient, less committed attitude towards alcohol (i.e. a temporal strategy), which would enable her to communicate less directly about her identity.

> *I don't want to put a label on me and say I'm a non-drinker. It's just easier to say that I'm a perfectly fine person who just doesn't want to drink alcohol today.*

However, Anushka's commitment to not drinking alcohol is much more established. She has a medical reason to avoid alcohol stemming from a serious illness she experienced in her teens. Medically informed explanations for abstention represent a form of culturally sanctioned justification, and are thus more easily accepted by others (Conroy and DeVisser, 2014). However, Anushka's medical history is particularly sensitive, causes her upset and, rather than reveal this explanation, she keeps her non-drinking status secret. Only a handful of people (including her direct family) know that she does not drink, and she uses concealment talk to ensure this goes no further, allowing her control over how she is viewed in her social space.

Rob also speaks of his decision to conceal his non-drinking as a privacy maintaining exercise. He pre-empts questions regarding his decision not to drink by providing excuses or alternative explanations. Like Anushka, he reports spending time with different social groups, which serves to preserve his secret (non-drinking) self.

> *They're all there with their pints of lager and you're there with your Coke so they might be wondering why you're not partaking in a drink. So you sort of know that they're thinking that, so you tend to pre-empt it with just a little joke or a little side comment as to why you're not drinking on that particular occasion... I've never really sat down with anyone, because it's none of their business anyway, but I've never really sort of sat down with somebody and explained 'these are the reasons I don't drink' because they're my reasons not theirs.*

Both Anushka and Rob conceal their non-drinking while engaging with the rituals and places associated with alcohol; they enact a similar script, presenting as someone who normally drinks yet not on this occasion. Both seem determined to downplay their decision not to drink alcohol, believing it cannot and should not be a

social marker given their reasons are so deeply personal and beyond their control. For them, silence is used to conceal their position.

Two of our other participants, Jacinta and Tao, take this engagement with the practices around alcohol further, in order to conceal their position and also reduce the social pressure around drinking. Tao reveals how he will buy and hold an alcoholic drink to escape awkward feelings and avoid 'disappointing' the drinkers with whom he is socialising:

> *Sometimes, if I'm with my friend in a pub or in a bar, like everybody is holding a glass and talking, and just chatting. And then I feel that if I don't do the same, it'll like it will be awkward for me… on one of my nights out, I wasn't holding any drink, I was just sitting there, and my friend asked me, 'Why don't you get a drink?' And I felt like it wouldn't be very nice to say, 'Oh I just don't want a drink, and I'm just sitting here trying to chat with you guys.' So, I'm not prepared to say that, so I just got myself a drink.*

And while Jacinta does not pretend to consume alcohol, she is more than happy for others to presume she is intoxicated. There are some inconsistencies in her narrative; on the one hand she suggests it reflects a natural (tired) state, yet at several points in her interview she refers to it as an 'act' or 'fake'.

> *It does sound a bit crazy, but when I'm tired and I'm really tired, I act like I'm drunk. I get a little bit tipsy, and I can't really think clearly. That's my best state for going out, that's my fake drunkness.*

Earlier we discussed Jacinta's use of denial, when she challenges the validity of the non-drinking label and denies the significance of alcohol consumption. Yet demonstrating the potential fluidity within individual approaches, concealment comes into play within social situations where intoxication seems appropriate.

Like those operating in the disconnect condition, those concealing their non-drinking implicitly acknowledge the existence of a community of non-drinkers. However, owing to the negative connotations (Conroy and deVisser, 2013), they conceal their association and practice identity refusal in protection of their self. The success of this position seems to be associated with informants' level of intimacy within their friendship groups and indeed could impact the formation of strong friendship bonds.

Conclusion and discussion

This paper examines the identity work of non-drinking university students who contest the assumed collective 'non-drinker' identity by adopting two identity refusal positions around alcohol (non) consumption. We use the sociology of nothing (Scott, 2018) to understand how non-drinkers complicate the normative dichotomy of something-nothing, by reworking the cultural terms of reference on an individual level via identity talk.

Our study is distinct from prior work focused on non-drinkers of alcohol. While we recognise the cultural significance of alcohol, we specifically explore instances where non-drinkers seek to minimise the role and impact of alcohol (non)

consumption in the construction of identity. We frame our paper using Scott's (2018) sociology of nothing, whereby not drinking alcohol becomes understood as an intangible manifestation of nothingness, and informants' identity talk provides examples of 'micro-level gestures of power and resistance … expressed in everyday talk about nothingness' (Scott, 2018: 3). Prior work on non-drinkers has primarily positioned not drinking as a positive act of commission, taking on board the significance of 'what we are not' in individuals' identity work (e.g. Supski and Lindsay, 2017). Under commission, non-drinkers are seen to make proactive choices not to drink alcohol and engage in an active process of dis-identification. In fact, Scott (2018) uses the example of not drinking alcohol to illustrate the act of 'demonstrably doing nothing', recognising that within societies where non-drinking is culturally marked, those who choose not to drink have consciously considered the alternatives and dis-identified with the culturally supported identity of the drinker. Scott (2018) acknowledges the skilful management of social relations that this performance entails given the norms and prevalent social expectations, yet regardless of whether they publicly reveal their status (e.g. Nairn et al., 2006), the non-drinker is widely assumed to accept their place as belonging to the communal identity of non-drinkers.

Our point of difference is to contribute an understanding of how some non-drinkers understand and perform their non-identities through acts of omission. They seek distance from the culturally marked 'non-drinker' using identity talk and associated practices. This process is more active and planful than is acknowledged in Scott (2018) and is informed by the extent to which individuals credit alcohol (non) consumption as a 'something'. Pursuing distancing through resistance involves the positioning of alcohol as a 'nothing', with its cultural relevance either dismissed (using denial talk) or partially recognised (using temporal talk). When distance is achieved through resistance, individuals reject the relevance of 'never identities' (Mullaney, 2011). Their non-consumption of alcohol is presented as without ideological or foundational basis and they refute an identity, which is presented as either irrelevant or potentially non-enduring. Individuals pursuing distance through othering recognise alcohol consumption as an important cultural marker and the existence of a stereotypical non-drinker. Identity talk is directed towards providing evidence of disconnections, and both talk and silences conceal (non) consumption. The key link between these two identity positions, and underlying talk, is a concerted refusal by individuals to identify with the notion of 'the non-drinker'. The heterogeneity of non-consumers is emphasised and non-drinking is denied status as a 'thing', rather it is understood as a 'nothing'. Yet those individuals using disconnect and conceal talk reference a particular kind of representative non-drinker - the abject other. In these cases, not consuming is considered an act of omission where there is no pride associated with the rejection of alcohol. This contrasts with those non-drinkers for whom it is an act of commission, as might be the case with a reformed alcoholic or an individual with a strong religious identity.

Through this study, we shed empirical light on an aspect of non-identity, the refusal to take on an identity that is perceived as inaccurate or unwarranted. We leave readers with a quandary: How should we refer to individuals when describing something they do not do? And why should those who do not do something (whether by omission or commission) be defined by it? Alcohol non-consumption represents a substantive context where 'not doing' can defy normative expectations, and is therefore associated with normative negative sanctions. However, other inactions can be framed as more positive cultural markers (e.g. not smoking) or neutral (e.g. not eating pizza), and not warranting such negative sanctions or stigmatization. Clearly

the cultural marker of the inaction is important, bringing a strong normative dimension to how this inaction is perceived. It is also important to understand the heterogeneity of identity positions - the term non-drinker masks a host of intentions, behaviours, understandings and identity work. Scott's (2018) sociology of nothing framework provides the impetus to explore a wealth of nothings, further developing this complexity and advancing a theoretical basis on which to better understand the identity-related implications of resisting culturally expected behaviours in other contexts.

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Table 1 Participant overview

Name	Nationality	Age	Gender	Not drinking motivation	Non-identity as commission/omission
Alex	Italian	19	M	Personal preference	O
Sarah	British	21	F	Personal preference	C-NEUTRAL
Amy	British	26	F	Religion	C-NEUTRAL
Paramita	Indian	19	F	Religion	C
Anastasia	Serbian	20	F	Preference/medical	O
Jacinta	Portuguese	19	F	Preference/athlete	O
Rob	British	39	M	Family history	O
Anushka	Romanian	21	F	Illness	O
Boris	Romanian	22	M	Bad experience	C-NEUTRAL
Naina	Indian	21	F	Religion/family	C-NEUTRAL
Louise	British	21	F	Personal preference	O
Tao	Chinese	18	M	Personal preference	O-C
Helen	British	19	F	Personal preference	O
Irene	Romanian	20	F	Religion	C-NEUTRAL
Ameena	British	20	F	Religion	C
Ottilia	Finlandish	23	F	Bad experience	C
Khatun	Bangladeshi	22	M	Religion	C
Bahir	Indian	22	M	Religion	O-C
Candra	German	20	F	Personal preference	C

Figure 1: Identity refusal: distancing positions and talk

Identity refusal
positions (RQ1)

Underlying
identity talk
(RQ2)

Distancing through
resistance

(e.g. there's no such 'thing'
as a non-drinker)

Distancing through
othering

(e.g. the non-drinker is a
'thing' but I'm not one)

Denial:
'So what?'
*Denial of cultural
significance*

Temporal:
'Just not right now'
*Partial recognition of
cultural significance*

Disconnect:
'I'm not like them'
*Recognition of cultural
significance*

Concealment:
'You'll never know'
*Recognition of cultural
significance*