



Deposited via The University of York.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/174117/>

Version: Published Version

Article:

Nicholls, Emily (2021) Sober rebels or good consumer-citizens? Anti-consumption and the 'enterprising self' in early sobriety. *Sociology*. pp. 768-784. ISSN: 1469-8684

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038520981837>

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial (CC BY-NC) licence. This licence allows you to remix, tweak, and build upon this work non-commercially, and any new works must also acknowledge the authors and be non-commercial. You don't have to license any derivative works on the same terms. More information and the full terms of the licence here:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

Sober Rebels or Good Consumer-Citizens? Anti-Consumption and the ‘Enterprising Self’ in Early Sobriety

Sociology
2021, Vol. 55(4) 768–784
© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/0038038520981837
journals.sagepub.com/home/soc



Emily Nicholls 
University of Portsmouth, UK

Abstract

Former drinkers in the UK are required to negotiate sobriety in a society that positions consumption (of alcohol but also more widely) as an important part of identity formation. A refusal to consume risks positioning the self outside of the established neoliberal order, particularly as traditional models of sobriety and ‘recovery’ position the non-drinker as diseased or flawed. As drinking rates decline across western contexts and new movements celebrating sobriety as a positive ‘lifestyle choice’ proliferate, this article will highlight ways in which sober women rework elements of traditional recovery models in order to construct an ‘enterprising self’ who remains a good consumer-citizen despite – or indeed because of – their refusal to drink. In doing so, this article enhances our understandings of the ways in which neoliberal notions of a successful, enterprising self can be incorporated into (re)constructions of the self and identity by ‘anti-consumers’ more widely.

Keywords

alcohol, anti-consumption, consumption, neoliberalism, sobriety

Introduction

The stimulation of a constant desire to consume is imperative in post-industrial, capitalist society; an individual is expected to literally ‘consume oneself into being’ (Walkerdine, 2003: 247). Alcohol consumption is no exception, with an enduring ‘imperative to intoxication’ (Griffin et al., 2009: 463) normalising heavy drinking and regular attendance at

Corresponding author:

Emily Nicholls, School of Education and Sociology, University of Portsmouth, St George’s Building,
141 High Street, Portsmouth, Hampshire, PO1 2HY, UK.
Email: emily.nicholls@port.ac.uk

bars, pubs and clubs. Yet in the UK and more widely, drinking rates continue to decline, particularly among young people (Pape et al., 2018). Recent years have also seen a proliferation of online communities celebrating sobriety as a positive 'lifestyle choice' tied into wider discourses around wellness and self-improvement. Yet a refusal to consume may undermine attempts to position oneself as a good 'consumer-citizen' (Harris, 2004). Arguably, this is compounded by the fact that traditional approaches to sobriety or 'recovery' position the non-drinker as someone with an affliction or disease (Denzin, 1993), further jeopardising the ability of those who do not drink to position themselves as successful, productive members of society.

Against this backdrop, further research is required to understand the ways in which non-drinkers who participate in emerging online communities make sense of their involvement in these movements and work to position themselves as successful consumer-citizens despite – or even *because of* – their refusal to consume alcohol. Such research must also consider the gendered implications of both drinking and sobriety. This article attends to gaps in current research by highlighting the ways in which the notion of the 'enterprising self' is drawn upon in the accounts of women in early sobriety, explicitly considering how this self is bound up with ideas of (anti-)consumption and reworks more traditional recovery narratives. In doing so, it sheds light on some of the important identity work that may be undertaken by 'anti-consumers' more widely in neoliberal consumer societies and extends previous research that tends to focus on the reasons for anti-consumption rather than the consequences (Lee et al., 2020).

First, this article will outline in more depth the concept of the 'consumer-citizen', highlighting the ways in which consumption is bound up with the construction of an enterprising self in contemporary contexts. I will then consider how a refusal to consume in these contexts may be problematised, before highlighting the ways in which traditional models of sobriety and recovery may pose further challenges to attempts to craft an enterprising self and outlining the value of bringing a gendered lens to consider this issue. I will then chart the emergence of new online communities celebrating sobriety, and turn to empirical research on women's 'sobriety stories' to ask: how do women who participate in these communities negotiate identity and create an enterprising self in early sobriety? The Sobriety Stories project methodology will be outlined, before considering how, in their active constructions of the enterprising self, participants rework different aspects of neoliberalised consumer identities. Drawing on empirical data, the article will highlight how participants describe a particular journey that facilitates the construction of the enterprising self through contrasting a powerless, ineffectual and inauthentic drinking self with a successful sober self who retains control over their life, represents their 'true' self and participates in wider consumer markets in alternative ways. Throughout the discussion, the ways in which traditional recovery narratives are resisted and reworked will also be highlighted.

Neoliberalism and the 'Consumer-Citizen'

This article considers women's experiences of sobriety against a backdrop of neoliberalism in a capitalist 'consumer society'. Neoliberalism is an ideology characterised not only by a rolling-back of the state and the emergence of new markets but also by

particular understandings of what constitutes individual success and ‘good’ citizenship (Scambler, 2018). In these contexts, ‘self-identity becomes a reflexively organised endeavour’ (Giddens, 1991: 5). Individuals must ‘construct and display themselves as distinctive, authentic selves [and] discerning consumers’ (Griffin et al., 2009: 460). They are compelled to engage reflexively in practices of crafting an autonomous, agentic and entrepreneurial self who successfully navigates a plurality of life choices (Rose, 1998), disciplines their body and manages their own destiny (Beck, 1992). This ‘enterprising self’ – to use a term adopted by Rose (1998) – is produced through making the ‘right’ choices, including the right choices in relation to consumption. In this sense, consumption becomes intimately bound up with a contemporary form of ‘consumer-citizenship’ that is ‘enacted through individual choices in the market’ (Harris, 2004: 167).

Consumption includes regular alcohol consumption and participation in the bars, clubs and pubs of the night-time economy (NTE). Attempts have been made over the last 30 years to regenerate UK post-industrial city centres by extending consumption patterns to include night-time leisure opportunities (Shaw, 2010) and encouraging alcohol consumption among cash-rich populations (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003). Brain (2000) charts the development of a ‘post-modern alcohol order’ that sees the alcohol industry constantly striving to engage new markets and positioning drinking as an almost compulsory component of engagement with bar, pub and club spaces. While public drinking was historically a masculine past-time, recent years have seen young, professional and single women targeted as a specific consumer market (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003) by the alcohol and nightlife industries (although claims that the NTE has been ‘feminised’ should be treated with caution as nightlife continues to be associated for women with fears of sexual harassment and violence (Sheard, 2011)).

Previous research explores the ways in which consumers in the NTE uphold the neoliberal social order and balance the demands for excessive consumption with a recognition that practices deemed *too* irresponsible may be seen as moral failings (Griffin et al., 2009). Consumers are compelled to show some restraint and engage in ‘responsible’ consumption as a form of rationalised and controlled pleasure within a neoliberal context (Caluzzi et al., 2020). However, the implications for those who *stop* drinking entirely demand further exploration. These individuals make a choice to become what Cherrier and Gurrieri (2013) call ‘anti-consumers’ in contexts where alcohol consumption is expected, thus resisting dominant paradigms of consumerism (Kilbourne et al., 1997). While previous research explores ‘anti-consumption’ in relation to sustainable lifestyles (Black and Cherrier, 2010) and brand avoidance (Iyer and Muncy, 2009), less research exists on drinking as an explicit anti-consumption choice. While Piacentini and Banister (2009: 280) make a welcome contribution to this literature and draw on the related concept of ‘voluntary simplifiers’ to describe those who ‘make informed decisions to restrict their consumption’ in dominant drinking cultures, further work is required to understand anti-consumption in relation to sobriety, particularly in light of the emergence of new sobriety communities outlined below and the growth of a wider cultural trend which rejects material consumption that is perceived to be unethical, unsustainable or excessive. Timely examples include the move towards ‘minimalism’/decluttering, the growth of veganism and the rejection of mass-produced goods such as ‘fast fashion’ (see, for example, Ouellette, 2019).

Recovery or Wellness? Framing Sobriety

The challenges of a refusal to consume alcohol are compounded by traditional ways of thinking about sobriety and ‘recovery’. Such approaches – most notably the dominant recovery model Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) – are founded on a disease model centred around the condition of alcoholism (Heather and Robertson, 1997). AA is a ‘self-help’ mutual support group approach to sobriety based on acceptance of an ‘alcoholic’ identity, attendance at regular group meetings and a 12-step programme of recovery of which spiritual surrender to a ‘Higher Power’ is a key component (Humphreys, 2000). Alcoholism is defined as an incurable ‘disease’ which, if not arrested through complete abstinence, results in progressive deterioration and death (Heather and Robertson, 1997).

However, alternative models of ‘positive sobriety’ have decoupled from a disease model; ‘a new sober peer culture’ (Herman-Kinney and Kinney, 2013: 93) is reconfiguring sobriety as a lifestyle choice to be publicly celebrated. Examples include the development of the UK-based mindful drinking movement ‘Club Soda’, the rise of online blogs, communities and social media accounts celebrating sobriety (often managed by women) and the growth in short-term abstinence initiatives such as ‘dry months’ (Yeomans, 2019). With 21% of the UK’s female population reported as not having drunk during the last year in 2017 (Osborne and Cooper, 2018) and declining drinking rates among young people (Pape et al., 2018), we may be seeing something of a cultural shift in relation to drinking and sobriety.

These ways of publicly depicting and celebrating ‘alcohol-free living’ sit at odds with more traditional narratives of ‘alcoholism’ that circulate within traditional recovery communities, but they remain under-researched. A greater understanding of how these ways of framing sobriety are lived and experienced, and how this ties into wider themes around identities and lifestyles in contemporary consumer societies, is required. Sociological research is beginning to highlight the experiences of those who *stop* consuming alcohol in cultures where heavy drinking is normalised (see Graber et al., 2016; Herman-Kinney and Kinney, 2013), including non-drinkers’ *positive* reasons for abstaining (Carah et al., 2015; Herring et al., 2014; Yeomans, 2019). Yet researchers such as Romo et al. (2016) have called explicitly for further work to explore how abstinence is managed in ‘real world’ settings, while Coulson (2014) argues that specific research into – for example – the value of emerging online communities and discussion groups around sobriety remains limited.

It is important that further research also attends specifically to the experiences of women who stop drinking. Atkinson et al. (2012: 366) suggest that one’s choices around alcohol ‘may have implications for the achievement of a gender-specific identity’. Research increasingly acknowledges the important role that alcohol may play in the lives of women in supporting leisure and relaxation (Guise and Gill, 2007), maintaining friendships and even in the ‘doing’ of gender and femininity (for example, through particular drinking practices and beverage choices) (Nicholls, 2020; Waitt and Clement, 2016). The implications for women who do not ‘do’ femininity in this way demand further consideration. Previous work also suggests women may manage sobriety in different ways to their male counterparts – for example, traditional support communities around sobriety may be male-dominated (Sanders, 2019) and women may be more likely to use

online communities and resources than men (Carah et al., 2015). Women may also face particular gendered forms of judgement around sobriety and the 'stigma' around alcohol misuse may be greater for women than men (Romo et al., 2016).

This article draws on original empirical data to demonstrate the ways in which recently sober women deploy the notion of the enterprising self to construct sobriety as a meaningful life choice. In doing so, the article will reveal wider themes pertaining to how the enterprising self is constructed by those who refuse to consume in expected ways or at all. This article will also highlight how women who have stopped drinking draw on the enterprising self in ways that simultaneously create distance from and echo approaches adopted within more traditional recovery communities. In doing so, the article will bring previous literature around recovery models explicitly into dialogue with more contemporary ways of framing sobriety that have not yet been explored in the literature.

'Sobriety Stories': Methodology

This article draws on data collected as part of a small qualitative study – 'Sobriety Stories' – with the following research aims:

1. To explore how women who no longer drink frame their past drinking selves and drinking experiences.
2. To explore how former drinkers reconcile their past drinking selves with present practices, relationships and identities in the early stages of sobriety.
3. To explore how women who have recently stopped drinking imagine their futures as longer-term non-drinkers.

The methodology comprised 17 semi-structured interviews with self-defined 'moderate to heavy' female former drinkers involved in 'positive sobriety' communities in the UK. Following ethical approval, I sought participants in the initial 6–12 months of sobriety, as it was anticipated that participants would have been sober for long enough to reflect on some real changes in their practices and identities, but also still have relatively recent memories of their 'drinking selves' (Romo et al., 2016). The actual sobriety periods of participants ranged from five months to just under two years, with an average of 10 months.

I asked that participants could identify 'at least one positive change' of stopping drinking (in practice, participants shared numerous benefits of sobriety and most said they never wanted to drink again). Participants were sought who had *not* accessed formal treatment or rehabilitation services, and were recruited primarily through the 'Women who don't drink' (WWDD) Facebook community, managed by the research partner organisation *ichange21* (a coaching and support organisation working with individuals looking to change their relationships with alcohol). This free support group provides space for women to post inspirational material, share achievements or challenges in sobriety, ask questions and seek or give support. Other participants were recruited through coaching days designed for women who wanted to change their relationship with alcohol, conducted jointly by myself and the *ichange21* Director. Women

participating in *ichange21*'s Facebook group and coaching days have generally decided to stop drinking outside of alternative support mechanisms such as AA, and are involved in the 'positive sobriety' movement that celebrates alcohol-free living as a lifestyle choice.

All interviews were conducted one-on-one by me and lasted between 40 minutes and 2.5 hours (with an average length of 80 minutes). They took place in participant homes, on university campus or at local cafes or libraries (depending on where participants felt comfortable). As Rose (1998) suggests, narratives about one's past, present and future serve as a way to account for the events in our lives and craft identities. For this reason, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were deemed the most suitable method to elicit detailed narratives about participants' experiences and the ways in which they understood these (Warren, 2002). I encouraged participants to tell a story about their 'journey' to sobriety, focusing on the 'drinking past' (reasons for drinking, experiences while drinking and build-up to stopping), the 'sober present' (life in sobriety, strategies for achieving and maintaining sobriety) and 'imagined futures' (goals and ambitions). Participants ranged in age from 24 to 58 and were largely based in London or South-East England. Most were White British, and participants came from a range of backgrounds and occupations. I did not explicitly ask about sexuality, but 11 of the participants were in heterosexual marriages or relationships.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis to explore patterns and relevant themes and sub-themes, initially within and then across interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A coding template of themes to be explored was devised in advance and also updated during analysis as emerging themes that arose more inductively from the data were added. This approach allowed me to retain some structure and focus in the analysis while also requiring me to be open to seeing what emerged directly from the data, including the unexpected (Joffe, 2012). This openness was important as my own positioning as someone for whom being sober was still a relatively new part of my life means it is likely I approached the analysis with pre-conceived ideas based on my own experiences.

I had been sober around a year when conducting the interviews, allowing me to empathise with participants, build rapport and assure them the interview was a non-judgemental space. Furthermore, my position as a member of the *WWDD* Facebook group likely helped participants to feel comfortable contacting me. However, even seeing some of my fairly innocuous posts in the group about my own sobriety 'milestones' may have made participants feel a degree of pressure to show me a certain version of their own successful self in sobriety. Furthermore, some participants to an extent sought reassurance and validation of their experiences or were keen to establish commonalities between their experiences and mine.

There were some notable differences in the journeys with alcohol participants shared, their patterns of consumption prior to stopping and the extent to which alcohol was impacting upon their lives. However, there were also commonalities in the ways in which participants constructed the enterprising self and reworked particular ways of framing abstinence noted in traditional recovery programmes, as the remainder of the article will show. Illustrative examples and quotes from the data are included with pseudonyms.

Drinking Selves: Losing Control and Sense of Self

Several participants depicted alcohol as something over which they lacked control. For all participants, stopping drinking completely – rather than attempting to drink moderately – was framed as the only way to stay in control, aligning with traditional recovery models which demand complete abstinence (Laudet, 2007). Another common theme was around how a sense of self and a sense of control over one's life more widely were 'lost' when drinking. Several participants described the self being hidden by alcohol, suggested alcohol could 'take over' one's behaviour and sense of self or talked about becoming so bound up with alcohol it was impossible to separate the self from it. Participants claimed alcohol can 'smother' you (Karen) or 'take away your identity' (Penny), echoing approaches used in traditional recovery communities where members depict the self as becoming 'buried' through alcohol consumption (Denzin, 1993: xxvii).

Several participants also described an alternative persona that emerged when drinking, with Jodie talking about a switch flipping and Florence describing a 'beast' taking over:

I was like, 'Oh, my God, it's that beast', you know? It's still there, like, 'What the fuck. . .?' It was dormant for a while. I think the beast acts in the blackout, it's the 'free beast zone', you know? It can do anything. It can jump. It's just that feeling of you have absolutely no control. (Florence, 36)

The idea of Florence's 'beast' conjures up an image of something powerful that can 'do anything'. If we think of agency as the capacity to act on the world around us – something that is both relational and embodied (Malmström, 2012) – the drinking self can be depicted as lacking agency. Here, agency is attributed to the beast. It is the beast that 'acts' on the external world, while Florence becomes disembodied in a process that echoes the disembodied experiences of the alcoholic (Denzin, 1993: 122). While a loss of control may be a positive association of alcohol use – for example, in the performance of excessive, embodied forms of masculinity (Thurnell-Read, 2011) – there is an expectation for women to retain control over the self and body (Bordo, 1993) which may make it more difficult to occupy such positions.

Research with AA members by Hill and Leeming (2014: 767) suggests that those involved in the movement depict alcohol as a 'separate and powerful being' – much like Florence's 'beast' – that used to have control over their actions. Participants who tended to experience blackouts (whereby after drinking sessions they could not always recall everything that had happened) associated these times of blackout in particular with diminished agency. The strategy of denying agency allowed participants to distance themselves from what they perceived to be undesirable and 'unfeminine' behaviour associated with their drinking; such as – in their words – being a 'slut' or 'bad mother':

I don't feel the level of shame that I felt before, because the stuff I did when I was drunk wasn't me . . . I know that's not me, and I know that I'm a good mum. (Julia, 40)

Here, Julia positions herself as a 'good mum' and distances herself from any shame associated with her drinking by claiming it 'wasn't me' who did the 'stuff' she finds

shameful. This builds on research with drinkers suggesting women may use extreme drunkenness to 'justify' temporary transgressions of respectable femininity (Measham, 2002; Peralta, 2008) and research within recovery communities highlighting how associating drinking with a lack of agency allows 'alcohol rather than the self to be constructed as the problem' (Hill and Leeming, 2014: 768).

Florence went on to suggest her identity became 'polluted' when she was drinking, and she felt she could not reconcile the drinking self (obnoxious, loud and selfish) with a kind, loving and caring sober self. Gender is significant here, for many participants the drinking self was marked by traits we might view as unfeminine, while the sober self was depicted as a kind, caring and loving mother, daughter or friend (which is interesting considering the ways in which drinking itself can be depicted as a way to enhance intimacy, trust and friendship). The drinking self was depicted as 'inauthentic and fragmented' (Graber et al., 2016: 87) and clearly felt to undermine or sabotage the sober self's attempt to be a healthy, productive and 'good' person, and was positioned – as in other research – as fundamentally 'incongruent with participants' desired self' (Piacentini and Banister, 2009: 285).

Several participants also associated drinking with a lack of control in their lives more widely:

I was miserable as sin and I felt very powerless, very ineffectual. I felt like everybody hated me and that I couldn't do anything. (Penny, 49)

Penny goes on to suggest that when she was drinking, she often got caught up in 'being the victim', positioning herself as someone passive. This kind of recognition of powerlessness over one's drinking and wider life is depicted as a key step in one's admission of a problem, acceptance of an alcoholic identity and subsequent surrender to a higher power in the AA movement (Denzin, 1993: 114). Other participants described similar feelings of powerlessness over their lives, careers, health or living spaces. Particularly interesting examples were those where participants talked about losing control over domestic space (letting their homes fall into disrepair) or their own bodies (through weight gain or a perceived general failure to care for themselves). Once again, such perceived failings were bound up with notions of femininity – either through failing to be a good 'homemaker' or through failing to tame and discipline an unruly female body (Bordo, 1993).

It is clear that the sense of a lack of control over one's life and body and the sense that the 'true' self was somehow hidden or smothered by alcohol limited the ability of participants to position themselves as enterprising (i.e. productive, successful and 'good') selves while they were still drinking. In contrast, the decision to *stop* drinking created space for participants to draw on notions of an enterprising self through their anti-consumption choices, as this article will now illustrate.

Good Citizens? Agency, Authenticity and 'Redemption'

To facilitate a shift towards a more successful and enterprising self in sobriety, several participants drew on what we might call a 'redemption' narrative where a 'rock bottom' was described as a 'turning point' in their relationships with alcohol:

People may have a rock bottom . . . For me it was the simple act of ‘sneaking the last glass of wine while my husband wasn’t looking’ . . . I don’t do shit like that – hence ‘Who have I become?’ I guess I didn’t align with that picture of myself so I had to do everything I could to get back to who I thought I was . . . I lost myself in that bottle. (Rose, 58)

Rose reflects on how her rock bottom moment is one where she questioned who she had become and realised she needed to ‘get back’ to the person she thought she was. Such narratives are echoed in recovery literature and previous research with communities such as AA, where addicts attempt to ‘plot’ the events of their drinking transformation and select a certain ‘turning point or key moment to be the beginning of the end of addiction’ (Taïeb et al., 2008: 996). This format of a turning point and subsequent identity change is common (McIntosh and McKeganey, 2000) and AA members are guided towards producing what Humphreys (2000) calls their own personal ‘drunk-a-log’ (a narrative around a descent into addiction and a rock bottom followed by recovery and change). The accounts of the majority of participants clearly mirrored this kind of narrative approach and way of telling a story of sobriety.

As part of the ‘redemption’ narrative, following the turning point or rock bottom, participants’ sobriety was associated with reclaiming a sense of agency and control. Verity describes a transition from feeling like things happen *to* her – which evokes a sense of passivity – to feeling much more able to make things happen, while Anna repositions herself as a ‘catalyst’ in her own life:

I’ve never really had a very strong sense of self before, but I am starting to get to know who I am and what I’m capable of. That’s only just starting, and that’s a really interesting effect of this . . . It’s like waking up and me being at the centre of things rather than being just a kind of contributor or a bystander. It feels like I’m more of a catalyst for things now. (Anna, 46)

While more traditional recovery models require an acknowledgement that one is powerless over alcohol and must surrender to a ‘higher power’ (religious or otherwise) (Humphreys, 2000), participants instead aligned more explicitly with the notion of the enterprising – and secular – self. For example, Liz’s use of the term ‘taking the power back’ in her own account explicitly rejects the language of surrender to a ‘higher power’ and rather aligns with neoliberal ideals around the construction of the self as someone reclaiming agency and self-efficacy. Such findings mirror those of other research with non-drinkers, where sobriety may be associated with ‘longer-term feelings of personal agency’ (Conroy and De Visser, 2018: 593).

Participants also drew on notions of ‘resilience’ to claim they were better able to deal with challenges in their lives and had – in the words of one participant – ‘got their shit together’. This allowed women to position themselves as ‘good’, productive and well-adjusted subjects while actively working to avoid any potential stigma associated with sobriety. Again, gender remains at the forefront of these experiences; sobriety was associated with regaining control over the unruly feminine body (for example, through new exercise regimes or weight loss), or with a return to domestic femininity (for example, becoming more house-proud or learning to cook). In this sense, sobriety was aligned

with other goals such as working on ‘mind and body’ (Carah et al., 2015: 215) and was positioned not as an end in itself but part of a wider programme of self-growth. Such strategies clearly align with a focus on the self as enterprising, autonomous and striving to live a fulfilling life.

Extending the ‘redemption’ narrative, the transition to sobriety was also associated with a return to the ‘true’ self. As shown earlier, alcohol was felt to obscure the self, while getting sober was framed as a journey of self-discovery where participants could return to the version of themselves that they believed preceded their drinking:

I don’t have that mask. I don’t have that [routine where] after a couple of drinks, I’ll become the ‘party girl’. It’s like I go in, myself, and I’m just me the whole time. I am the person I feel like I have always been below all the alcohol and everything that came with it . . . If I act like a dick, it’s because I’m actually a dick. (Laughter). I’m authentic. I’m real. (Rebecca, 31)

Here, the idea of a ‘coherent and authentic self’ (Graber et al., 2016: 93) is prominent. These points were echoed by several participants who felt able to take ownership of their actions and behaviour (linking back to earlier points about control and agency) and to go back to who they ‘really’ were before they started to drink heavily. Kate describes sober life as more ‘honest’ and ‘authentic’, allowing her to ‘be me’, while Isobel talks about sobriety as allowing her to be a really ‘cool person’, highlighting some of the ways in which participants also worked towards the ‘pursuit of desired identities’ (Fry, 2011: 354) in the way they framed sobriety.

This kind of reconstruction of the ‘true’ self is a key element of addiction narratives, where storytelling is used to mark a clear break between the drinking self and an ‘authentic’ new self (Denzin, 1993; Hill and Leeming, 2014). However, the need to construct an authentic self is also bound up with notions of the enterprising self, as we experience pressure to display who we ‘really’ are (Mendick et al., 2018) and construct something that is recognised by the self and others as a ‘meaningful personal identity’ and coherent life story (Riley and Cahill, 2005: 261). In many ways, the participants’ narratives here represent a continuation of those that have been circulated in support movements such as AA but also a conscious attempt to construct an enterprising and authentic self under a neoliberal regime where we are compelled to ‘make ourselves’ and ‘free the self we truly are’ (Rose, 1998: 95) through a process of ‘inner-directed self-discovery’ (Duffy, 2013: 132).

Sober Rebels? (Anti-)Consumption Strategies and the Enterprising Self

While these kinds of redemption narratives could be used as ways to position the self as successful, productive and more authentic, all participants remained acutely aware of the judgement that can come with sobriety, the centrality of alcohol to British culture and their own positioning *outside* of dominant cultural practices through their refusal to consume. Some were keen to embrace this and explicitly framed their sobriety as a ‘statement’, a form of ‘rebellion’ or something that located them outside of an ‘alcohol-centric’

culture. For example, Anna described stopping drinking as ‘radical’, ‘rebellious’ and ‘the punkiest thing I’ve ever done’, while Lena (44) stated:

I can identify with being a ‘rebel’ because I’ve been a rebel all my life anyway . . . As opposed to ‘I can drink 15 ciders as a rebel’, now it’s the other way, ‘I drink 15 pints of water’.

Anna and Lena’s explicit identification with terms like ‘punk’ and ‘rebellious’ allowed them to locate themselves as active anti-consumers and frame their sobriety through what Fry (2011: 349) calls a ‘resistance lens’. Lena frames her original consumption practices of drinking very heavily as a form of rebellion, but then argues her choice to *refuse* to drink alcohol can actually continue to position her as a rebel (but against dominant drinking cultures this time). Claims such as these also align neatly with Graber et al.’s (2016: 89) findings that non-drinkers may actively position anti-consumption of alcohol as an expression of ‘freethinking individuality’, allowing participants to work towards constructing an enterprising self who embraces freedom to choose, independence and non-conformity. The alcohol industry itself often draws on ideals of creativity, freedom and rebellion; Brewdog markets itself as an investment opportunity and business ‘for punks’ (Smith et al., 2010) and offers an alcohol-free beer whose name – ‘Punk AF’ – is a play on words alluding simultaneously to ‘Punk Alcohol Free’ and ‘Punk as Fuck’.

It should be noted that this kind of positionality was not embraced by all. The participants who vocally adopted a ‘rebel’ identity were white, heterosexual mothers who were successful in their careers and could be identified as middle class. Although the intersection of class and gender was not a central focus of this research, the findings suggest that certain identities and positions in sobriety – such as the ‘rebel’ identity – may be more readily embraced by participants with existing markers of privilege. Romo et al. (2015) suggest that in situations where non-drinkers have ‘higher status’, they are better able to be open about their non-drinking. It is possible that identifying as a ‘sober rebel’ may be more difficult for those who are marked as lacking status or who experience marginalisation (as a result of, for example, their class, sexuality or race). Indeed, one of my participants – in a more precarious living and working situation – explicitly rejected the idea that she might be seen as a ‘rebel’.

The ambivalence towards the ‘rebel’ label was echoed in the ways participants grappled with the term ‘alcoholic’. Almost all worked to actively distance themselves from this identity, preferring to describe themselves as ‘alcohol-free’. This rejection of the ‘alcoholic’ identity – and related terms such as ‘addiction’ and ‘recovery’ – contrasts with approaches which demand continued affirmation and articulation of one’s alcoholic identity (for example, through the way in which speakers in AA meetings preface their contributions with the phrase ‘my name is . . . and I am an alcoholic’) (Denzin, 1993). Hill and Leeming (2014) describe the ways in which AA members position themselves as ‘self-aware’ alcoholics and embrace AA philosophies and support, yet it is clear this kind of language and terminology may not be helpful for all, as exemplified by Crystal’s (57) description of the WWDD Facebook group:

That's another thing I like about the group, we don't say 'alcoholic'. It's just, 'you're unlearning a habit that you've got into'. And that has worked for me rather than, 'you're an alcoholic. Go to an AA meeting' . . . You're not born with it. You can unlearn it.

Involvement in online support groups and communities such as the group facilitated by *ichange21* provides a space for women to share their experiences and seek advice and validation. Social media and online communities may also provide contexts and spaces for women to articulate alternative narratives of sobriety that challenge traditional recovery narratives. Like other participants, Crystal rejects the idea of 'alcoholism' as in any way an innate condition or disease that one is required to live with (as per AA), but rather positions her drinking as something that had become a 'habit' or series of problematic consumption practices. This move aids in the construction of an enterprising, productive self through consciously creating distance from notions of a self who is sick. None of the participants were attendees at AA and some worked hard to distance themselves from its approach, methods and members and to avoid framing their practices as in any way related to 'recovery' or 'addiction'. Gender may again be salient here, as groups such as AA are often male-dominated spaces (Sanders, 2019), while Klaw et al. (2000) suggest online support spaces may be particularly useful for women.

Finally, in a further move to construct an enterprising self in sobriety, participants actively reworked their resistance in ways that *still* positioned them within dominant consumer markets. Time and money 'wasted' on drinking – described by Verity as 'an activity that has no tangible or positive end result' – could be repurposed for the achievement of other goals (although many participants did not disengage from the NTE completely and continued to attend bars, pubs and clubs). Florence described how she has replaced the 'reward' of drinking with 'putting the money towards something productive' such as yoga classes. While such measures could be associated with more immediate gratification and with the entanglement of consumption, pleasure and 'reward', other participants were more concerned with longer-term investment (financial and otherwise) in the future self. When asked what sobriety means to them, nearly all suggested it means 'opportunity' or a brighter future, with many talking about returning to study or working on other longer-term goals such as health or starting a family (which of course all come with cost implications).

As Bartram et al. (2017) suggest, non-drinkers are likely to replace drinking with different goals and ambitions such as travel, exercise or education. This future-focus is an important element of construction of the enterprising self as individuals work to create a coherent narrative where the past and the imagined future are outcomes of personal choices (Rose, 1998). It also allows participants to position themselves as consumers who invest financially in personal growth. In this way, anti-consumption can still remain embedded within a market system (Cherrier and Gurrieri, 2013). Focusing on personal goals such as fitness or self-improvement is also broadly socially acceptable as a reason for stopping drinking; it allows non-drinkers to position refusal to consume as a personal choice without critiquing the dominant drinking culture (Carah et al., 2015). In this way, conscious adoption of a 'rebel' position might be avoided and individuals may be able to fulfil wider moral obligations to position themselves as responsible for their own health

and well-being in contexts where discourses around 'wellness' and 'self-growth' predominate (Cederström and Spicer, 2015).

Conclusion

This article enhances our understanding of the ways in which women involved in 'positive sobriety' communities rework both contemporary understandings of the enterprising self in neoliberal contexts and traditional narratives of recovery in accounts of their journeys to sobriety. Importantly, while non-drinkers become 'anti-consumers' in terms of their abstinence from alcohol, they may compensate for this through ongoing processes of 'self-development' designed to create what Carah et al. (2015: 216) call 'more desirable lifestyles and identities' that are not linked to alcohol use. Such findings can be considered against a backdrop in western contexts that has seen a wider move to anti-consumption or reduced consumption as a set of desirable or ethical lifestyle choices (for example, in the form of veganism or minimalism). Notions of health, well-being and self-development were also central to participants' accounts of sobriety and align with Yeomans' (2019: 460) suggestion that stopping drinking can be understood as 'an embodied experience of ethical self-formation'; one that necessarily involves the redeployment of time, money and resources to activities which allow non-drinkers to continue to position themselves as 'good' consumers. As Fry (2011) suggests, non-drinking need not represent a complete disengagement from the marketplace – and indeed, several participants did still participate in the NTE – but rather can facilitate different kinds of consumption that are more directly linked to the desired identity non-drinkers seek to project. Anti-consumption practices thus enable identification with a new identity that nevertheless remains intrinsically bound up with the market.

These findings also enhance our understanding of the experiences of former drinkers in ways that may provide lessons to inform public health and policy. Through paying particular attention to the under-researched and emerging online movements and communities around sobriety in the UK, this research highlights ways non-drinkers might challenge dominant drinking cultures and tell different stories about alcohol consumption and its refusal. As this article shows, there appear to be both continuities and ruptures between the experiences of those using more traditional support and recovery groups such as AA and those who may actively seek to distance themselves from such programmes.

It is important to acknowledge that this is a small-scale study and findings cannot be generalised to reflect the experiences of all women who stop drinking. Recruiting through *ichange21* was useful and facilitated a high response rate, but this also provided access to women who were already part of an online sober community or had the means to attend coaching days. It is also likely the women were engaging in processes of impression management in the interviews themselves. This is not to say the benefits of sobriety the women described were not 'real', but rather to acknowledge that women may construct a particular narrative of 'successful' sobriety both within and beyond the interview, particularly if they know they are speaking to a 'sober confidant'.

Limitations aside, this article clearly facilitates a richer understanding of how particular constructions of the enterprising self can work against neoliberalism but also within it. Such findings extend previous research by considering the consequences of anti-consumption choices for identity formation in neoliberal contexts. They may be applicable to other anti-consumption trends and lifestyle choices that continue to grow in popularity in western contexts and have wider implications for how we think about new ways of ‘doing’ – or perhaps ‘not doing’ – consumption. The interesting ways in which class and other markers of privilege might shape one’s identity as an anti-consumer – for example, the extent to which one can identify as a ‘rebel’ – are revealed rather tentatively here and warrant further exploration in future research on consumption and identity formation in neoliberal consumer societies.

Acknowledgements

This project was supported by internal funding from the University of Portsmouth. Thank you to the external partner, Stephanie Chivers from ichange21, for all of her support throughout the project, and to all the participants who gave up their time to share their ‘sobriety stories’.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: this project was funded by an internal grant (project number HM00068) from the University of Portsmouth.

ORCID iD

Emily Nicholls  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6013-9560>

References

- Atkinson AM, Kirton AW and Sumnall HR (2012) The gendering of alcohol in consumer magazines: An analysis of male and female targeted publications. *Journal of Gender Studies* 21(4): 365–386.
- Bartram A, Elliott J and Crabb S (2017) ‘Why can’t I just not drink?’: A qualitative study of adults’ social experiences of stopping or reducing alcohol consumption. *Drug and Alcohol Review* 36(4): 449–455.
- Beck U (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: SAGE.
- Black IR and Cherrier H (2010) Anti-consumption as part of living a sustainable lifestyle: Daily practices, contextual motivations and subjective values. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 9(6): 437–453.
- Bordo S (1993) *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. London: University of California Press.
- Brain K (2000) Youth, alcohol and the emergence of the post-modern alcohol order [online]. Institute of Alcohol Studies, Occasional Paper January 2000. Available at: <http://www.ias.org.uk/uploads/pdf/IAS%20reports/brainpaper.pdf>.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3: 77–101.

- Caluzzi G, MacLean S and Pennay A (2020) Re-configured pleasures: How young people feel good through abstaining or moderating their drinking. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 77: 102709.
- Carah N, Meurk C and Hall WD (2015) Profiling Hello Sunday Morning: Who are the participants? *International Journal of Drug Policy* 26(2): 214–216.
- Cederström C and Spicer A (2015) *The Wellness Syndrome*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Chatterton P and Hollands R (2003) *Urban Nightscapes: Youth Cultures, Pleasure Spaces and Corporate Power*. London: Routledge.
- Cherrier H and Gurrieri L (2013) Anti-consumption choices performed in a drinking culture: Normative struggles and repairs. *Journal of Macromarketing* 33(3): 232–244.
- Conroy D and De Visser R (2018) Benefits and drawbacks of social non-drinking identified by British university students. *Drug and Alcohol Review* 37: 589–597.
- Coulson NS (2014) Sharing, supporting and sobriety: A qualitative analysis of messages posted to alcohol-related online discussion forums in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Substance Use* 19(1–2): 176–180.
- Denzin NK (1993) *The Alcoholic Society: Addiction and Recovery of the Self*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Duffy BE (2013) Manufacturing authenticity: The rhetoric of ‘real’ in women’s magazines. *The Communication Review* 16(3): 132–154.
- Fry ML (2011) Discourses of consumer’s alcohol resistant identities. *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing* 23(4): 348–366.
- Giddens A (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Graber R, De Visser R, Abraham C, et al. (2016) Staying in the ‘sweet spot’: A resilience-based analysis of the lived experience of low-risk drinking and abstinence among British youth. *Psychology and Health* 31(1): 79–99.
- Griffin C, Bengry-Howell A, Hackley C, et al. (2009) ‘Every time I do it I absolutely annihilate myself’: Loss of (self-)consciousness and loss of memory in young people’s drinking narratives. *Sociology* 43(3): 457–476.
- Guise JMF and Gill JS (2007) ‘Binge drinking? It’s good, it’s harmless fun’: A discourse analysis of accounts of female undergraduate drinking in Scotland. *Health Education Research* 22(6): 895–906.
- Harris A (2004) Jamming girl culture: Young women and consumer citizenship. In: Harris A (ed.) *All about the Girl: Culture, Power and Identity*. London: Routledge, 163–172.
- Heather N and Robertson I (1997) *Problem Drinking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Herman-Kinney NJ and Kinney DA (2013) Sober as deviant: The stigma of sobriety and how some college students ‘stay dry’ on a ‘wet’ campus. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 42(1): 64–103.
- Herring R, Bayley M and Hurcombe R (2014) ‘But no one told me it’s okay to not drink’: A qualitative study of young people who drink little or no alcohol. *Journal of Substance Use* 19(1–2): 95–102.
- Hill JV and Leeming D (2014) Reconstructing ‘the alcoholic’: Recovering from alcohol addiction and the stigma this entails. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 12(6): 759–771.
- Humphreys K (2000) Community narratives and personal stories in Alcoholics Anonymous. *Journal of Community Psychology* 28(5): 495–506.
- Iyer R and Muncy JA (2009) Purpose and object of anti-consumption. *Journal of Business Research* 62(2): 160–168.

- Joffe H (2012) Thematic analysis. In: Harper D and Thompson A (eds) *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and Psychotherapy: A Guide for Students and Practitioners*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 210–223.
- Kilbourne W, McDonagh P and Prothero A (1997) Sustainable consumption and the quality of life: A macromarketing challenge to the dominant social paradigm. *Journal of Macromarketing* 17(1): 4–23.
- Klaw E, Dearmin Huebsch P and Humphreys K (2000) Communication patterns in an on-line mutual help group for problem drinkers. *Journal of Community Psychology* 28(5): 535–546.
- Laudet AB (2007) What does recovery mean to you? Lessons from the recovery experience for research and practice. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment* 33(3): 243–256.
- Lee MS, Ortega Egea JM and García de Frutos N (2020) Anti-consumption beyond boundaries: From niche topic to global phenomena. *Psychology & Marketing* 37(2): 171–176.
- McIntosh J and McKeganey N (2000) Addicts' narratives of recovery from drug use: Constructing a non-addict identity. *Social Science & Medicine* 50(10): 1501–1510.
- Malmström MF (2012) Gender, agency, and embodiment theories in relation to space. *Egypte/monde arabe* 9: 21–35.
- Measham F (2002) 'Doing gender' – 'doing drugs': Conceptualizing the gendering of drugs cultures. *Contemporary Drug Problems* 29(1): 335–373.
- Mendick H, Allen K, Harvey L, et al. (2018) *Celebrity, Aspiration and Contemporary Youth: Education and Inequality in an Era of Austerity*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Nicholls E (2020) 'I feel like I have to become part of that identity': Negotiating femininities and friendships through alcohol consumption in Newcastle, UK. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 81: 10254.
- Osborne B and Cooper V (2018) *Health Survey for England 2017: Adult health related behaviours* (version 2). NHS Digital.
- Ouellette L (2019) Spark joy? Compulsory happiness and the feminist politics of decluttering. *Culture Unbound* 11(3–4): 534–550.
- Pape H, Rossow I and Brunborg GS (2018) Adolescents drink less: How, who and why? A review of the recent research literature. *Drug and Alcohol Review* 37: S98–S114.
- Peralta RL (2008) 'Alcohol allows you to not be yourself': Toward a structured understanding of alcohol use and gender difference among gay, lesbian, and heterosexual youth. *Journal of Drug Issues* 38(2): 373–399.
- Piacentini MG and Banister EN (2009) Managing anti-consumption in an excessive drinking culture. *Journal of Business Research* 62(2): 279–288.
- Riley SCE and Cahill S (2005) Managing meaning and belonging: Young women's negotiation of authenticity in body art. *Journal of Youth Studies* 8(3): 261–279.
- Romo LK, Dinsmore DR, Connolly TL, et al. (2015) An examination of how professionals who abstain from alcohol communicatively negotiate their non-drinking identity. *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 43(1): 91–111.
- Romo LK, Dinsmore DR and Watterson TC (2016) 'Coming out' as an alcoholic: How former problem drinkers negotiate disclosure of their nondrinking identity. *Health Communication* 31(3): 336–345.
- Rose N (1998) *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sanders J (2019) Resistance and fitting in: A qualitative analysis of young women in Alcoholics Anonymous. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly* 37(4): 442–461.
- Scambler G (2018) Heaping blame on shame: 'Weaponising stigma' for neoliberal times. *The Sociological Review* 66(4): 766–782.

- Shaw R (2010) Neoliberal subjectivities and the development of the night-time economy in British cities. *Geography Compass* 4(7): 893–903.
- Sheard L (2011) ‘Anything could have happened’: Women, the night-time economy, alcohol and drink spiking. *Sociology* 45(4): 619–633.
- Smith R, Moulton S, Burge P, et al. (2010) BrewDog: Business growth for punks! *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation* 11(2): 161–168.
- Taïeb O, Révah-Lévy A, Moro MR, et al. (2008) Is Ricoeur’s notion of narrative identity useful in understanding recovery in drug addicts? *Qualitative Health Research* 18(7): 990–1000.
- Thurnell-Read T (2011) Off the leash and out of control: Masculinities and embodiment in Eastern European stag tourism. *Sociology* 45(6): 977–991.
- Waitt G and Clement S (2016) Women drinking alcohol: Assembling a perspective from a Victorian country town, Australia. *Gender, Place & Culture* 23(8): 1121–1134.
- Walkerdine V (2003) Reclassifying upward mobility: Femininity and the neo-liberal subject. *Gender and Education* 15(3): 237–248.
- Warren CAB (2002) Qualitative interviewing. In: Gubrium JF and Holstein JA (eds) *Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method*. London: SAGE, 83–101.
- Yeomans H (2019) New year, new you: A qualitative study of Dry January, self-formation and positive regulation. *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy* 26(6): 460–468.

Emily Nicholls is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Portsmouth, UK. Her areas of expertise include gender and femininities and alcohol consumption, and she has recently published a monograph based on her research around how gender is negotiated on a ‘girls’ night out’. Her more recent work explores women’s experiences of sobriety and experiences of drinking during ‘lockdown’ in the UK.

Date submitted December 2019

Date accepted November 2020