Gendered drinking: Meanings and norms among young Estonian adults

MAARJA KOBIN

ABSTRACT
AIM – Current research in Estonia shows that drinking has increased both among men and women and that the gender gap in alcohol consumption is decreasing, especially among young people. This article will explore from a micro-level perspective how gender, meanings and norms are interconnected, and how these meanings and norms regulate and legitimise gendered drinking behaviour. DESIGN – The study is based on in-depth individual and focus groups interviews with young adults from rural and urban areas in Estonia, supported by participant observation. RESULTS – Women’s drinking still carries a clear, albeit contested, double standard. Young men, on the other hand, contest the traditional masculine drinking norms and distance themselves from the heavy drinking practices of drinking to intoxication and drinking vodka, which are connected with images of Soviet-era (inflexible rural) masculinity. CONCLUSION – In creating alternative modes of masculinity and femininity, young adults stress independence, individualism and being active agents in the reconstruction of their gendered identities. These aspects can be explained through broader processes in Estonian society during the last two decades.

KEYWORDS – drinking behaviour, gender, double standards, Estonia

Introduction
After the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991, alcohol consumption kept increasing steadily until 2008, when the consumption took a downturn due to the economic recession and European Union regulations that Estonia had to adopt after joining the EU in 2004 (Lai & Habicht, 2011). Estonia used to consume predominantly spirits, but since the beginning of this century, it has been primarily a beer-consuming country (Pärna & Rahu, 2010). Men drink more than women, and drinking has significantly increased among younger and more educated women (Tekkel, Veideman & Rahu, 2009), as well as among 15–16-year old female students (Kobin et al., 2012).

The simple interpretation of these results as “convergence” or masculinisation of female drinking behaviour would be too narrow (Babcock, 1996; Demant & Törrönen, 2011), especially from a mi-

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crosociological point of view. In light of the quantitative data which suggests that important changes must have taken place in the Estonian drinking culture, it would be important to investigate from a micro level the gendered drinking behaviour and practices among young adults in Estonia. This article therefore looks at how gender, meanings and norms are interconnected, and how such meanings and norms regulate and legitimise drinking habits from a micro-level perspective. Based on open-ended and focus group interviews and participant observation, I explore how the norms differ when drinking to intoxication, the meaning of drunkenness among young Estonian adults, and to what extent related norms are differentiated by gender. Key questions include: how are the norms of drunkenness negotiated and reworked depending on the drinking context? How are gender identities constructed in relation to drinking space and place?

**Studying gender and drinking**

*Theoretical approach*

I have approached studying gender identities related to alcohol consumption from a social constructionist point of view, which sees gender as socially constructed (de Visser & McDonnell, 2011; Courtenay, 2000; Peralta, 2008; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender should not be seen in terms of two static categories but rather as “a fluid one whose meanings emerge in specific social contexts as it is created and recreated through human actions” (Gerson & Peiss, 1985, p. 317). “Gender is a normative and moralising system that exerts social control on all people in society”, and it “brings to society a set of inter-related norms centred on the activities of individuals” (Ettorre, 2004, p. 329). The social constructionist perspective emphasises that the constructions of masculinity and femininity are adopted from culture, and these constructions then guide people’s behaviour and practices (Courtenay, 2000). Cultural ideas and norms of masculinity and masculine drinking behaviour inform the ideas and norms that a given culture holds about femininity and feminine drinking behaviour, and the other way around (see also Pajumets, 2012). Masculinities and femininities are dialogically related and constructed in relation to one another (Willott & Lyons, 2012). West & Zimmerman (1987, p. 140) have written that “gender is not simply an aspect of what one is”, but “something that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others”.

The social constructionist point of view “suggests that the social use of alcohol may symbolically express gender” and “while this conceptualisation includes recognition of that femininity is subordinated to masculinity, the meaning of gendered behaviour is also contextually bound in terms of where and when particular demonstrations of gender are appropriate” (Peralta, 2008, p. 375). Femininities and masculinities are highly dynamic and change based on time, location and social context (Paechter, 2003), and it is important to recognise that there are several different ways of being masculine or feminine. This also implies rejecting the idea of speaking in terms of single, uniform masculinity or femininity (de Visser & McDonnell, 2011; Courtenay, 2000; Peralta, 2008; Connell, 1995; Willott & Lyons, 2012). Men and women are not passive victims of a socially prescribed role, nor are they simply conditioned or socialised by...
their cultures, but rather are active agents in constructing and reconstructing dominant norms of masculinity and femininity (Courtenay, 2000). Different definitions of masculinity and femininity may be related to different patterns of alcohol use (de Visser & McDonnell, 2011); drinking is not only affected by gender or filtered through some of its influences, but is in itself a way of “doing gender” (Measham, 2002).

As gender is socially constructed, and the use of alcohol has social and cultural meaning, gender displays and practices become more varied in alcohol use contexts (Peralta, 2008). Studying gender resistance or challenging gender in the context of alcohol use allows seeing the fluidity of gender and the contextual basis upon which gender is dependent. Non-traditional, inappropriate or alternative drinking practices demonstrate how social constructions of gender operate and illuminate the structural forces that facilitate drinking practices and gendered drinking identities (Peralta, 2008). Engaging in non-traditional or alternative drinking practices that are not consistent with the traditional gendered conceptions of alcohol and norms for women or men could be seen as a way of creating alternative notions of gendered identities that change or influence the existing gender norms (Eriksen, 1991).

**Literature review on gendered drinking**

In many (Western) cultures, drinking itself is interpreted as a heroically manly act. Most cultures allow men to drink to intoxication every now and then, and though most allow it for women also, only a few sanction it positively (Heath, 2000; also Willott & Lyons, 2012; Gefou-Madianou, 1992). In general, women have to deal with greater social pressure in their drinking behaviour. It comes as no surprise that men typically drink more and more often than women, and generally females are more at risk and have more to lose from drinking – which entails questions of honour, shame and parenting (Heath, 2000).

Public drunkenness among women has been mostly considered inappropriate, as public drinking has been a symbol of manliness while femininity has been symbolised by sobriety in the private sphere (Eriksen, 1991). Women have traditionally been widely excluded from drinking strong alcohol (Driessen, 1992), whereas masculinity has typically been connected with vodka and also beer drinking (e.g. Lyons & Willott, 2008; de Visser & Smith, 2007).

Drinking excessively and holding one’s drink are linked to such traditional masculine traits as risk taking, physical resilience, and aggression and violence, which are therefore also elements of traditional masculinity. Drinking in large amounts is generally equated with masculinity, and drinking is important for masculinity (de Visser & Smith, 2007). Women who drink heavily are typically seen as unfeminine and prone to sexual disinhibition. Such consumption is perceived to impair nurturing and maternal behaviour in general (de Visser & McDonnell, 2011, p. 2). Transgressing the norms of everyday life with intoxication has been mostly associated with men, though recent studies indicate that women have also started to drink heavily, and many reasons can be found for such changes in the women’s consumption and patterns of drinking. These reasons include the emergence of new types of alcoholic beverages and drinking venues; predominantly urban vs. rural living;
changes in the family order; young women being economically active; and hedonistic lifestyles and consumption practices (see e.g. Brain, 2000; Griffin et al., 2009; Bec- caria, 2010; Mullen et al., 2007).

In Nordic alcohol studies (where Esto- nia has traditionally been positioned; e.g. Room, 2007), masculine drinking has been characterised as intoxication-oriented and by an open attitude towards drunkenness. It is seen as marking a break with the everyday world (Alasuutari, 1985), a way of breaking rules of self-regulation. Most often such drinking occurs in the company of other men, and the women’s main role has been to control men’s drinking (Pyörälä, 1995). More recent studies on young adults’ gendered drinking behaviour in Europe argue that one of the major changes is that women have entered the drinking scenes as more independent actors in different kinds of drinking situations. This applies to, for example, Fin- land, Italy (Beccaria et al., 2010) and the United Kingdom (Measham, 2002).

Epidemiological studies often suggest that the convergence of men’s and women’s drinking is a sign of young women drinking in an increasingly masculine way, and that women have one-sidedly just taken up masculine drinking (Demant & Törrönen, 2011, p. 1252; see also cri- tique on ‘convergence’ by Babcock, 1996). Young women in Scandinavia now engage more in public drinking than they did in the past. Instead of talking about the masculinisation of female drinking behaviour, Demant & Törrönen (2011) maintain that while public drinking is no longer associated with unfeminine or sexually immoral images, it would be more appropriate to argue for the existence of more diverse and hybrid drinking practices, and that women have negotiated (the traditional masculine) intoxication-oriented drinking. In another recent study, Simonen (2011) showed how the discourse on intoxication has changed over the last 20 years among Finnish wom- en. The women interviewed in 1985 em- phasised the importance of a decent, con- trolled way of drinking and the impropri- ety of getting drunk, while the interviews carried out in the 2000s show how among young Finnish women partying and intox- ication-oriented drinking were perceived as expressions of independence and self- confidence. Young women were more open to expressing themselves (Szmiggin et al., 2008; Rolfe et al., 2009). To express themselves freely, young wom- en choose and carefully navigate between drinking venues in the countryside or club scene in the city (Leyshon, 2008). While the norms related to drunkenness have perhaps become less strict for women or are being enfeebled (Bergmark, 2004), it is clear that ‘stronger’ norms for women still exist. Young women need to control their drinking behaviour, and their drinking is still more often disapproved of than men’s drinking (Tigerstedt et al., 2010; de Visser & McDonnell, 2011; Rolfe et al., 2009). The heavier the drinking situation becomes, the more gendered the experience appears to be (Törrönen & Maunu, 2007). Gender double standards – the application of dif- ferent sets of principles and expectations to men and women – are still valid (de Vis- ser & McDonnell, 2011; also Mullen et al., 2007).

Recent findings from qualitative re- search on men, masculinity and alcohol also suggest a move away from the conven- tional hegemonic masculine role to a more
pluralistic interpretation, such as among Scottish men (Mullen et al., 2007), the fragmentation and diversity of young men’s drinking styles in the United Kingdom (Harnett et al., 2000; de Visser & Smith, 2007) or in Denmark and Finland (Demant & Törrönen, 2011). In their study, de Visser & Smith (2007) found that while some men used alcohol traditionally to express their masculinity (drinking beer, drinking in large quantities), others used alternative forms of competence to compensate for a lack of competence: they “traded masculine competence”, engaging in other domains such as sport or emphasised other characteristics of hegemonic masculinity such as rationality, health, free thought, individuality, independence, resisting social pressure or the role of agency.

And while alternative modes of masculinity only exist in reference to the hegemonic form, a study on masculine identities in New Zealand (Willott & Lyons, 2012) showed no competence trading with markers like rationality or sport. The male participants demonstrated a greater discursive flexibility in enacting their gender identities through alcohol consumption. A minority of men who constructed themselves as atypical (did not like rugby, beer or drinking huge quantities of alcohol) were all in professional occupations, and it could be speculated that their social class and financial status enabled them to negotiate alternative masculinity. It also comes as no surprise that the aspects stressed in one’s masculine identity change over time, as age and status and other aspects (e.g. professional career) become more important in masculine identity building (Harnett et al., 2000; de Visser & Smith, 2007; Mullen et al., 2007).

Existing research on gendered identities shows, on the one hand, a diversification and plurality of masculinities and femininities related to drinking, and on the other hand, the existence and impact of traditional norms in the contemporary world. Despite the recent research outlined above from different parts of the world, no such research has been conducted in post-socialist Estonia which would have explored the masculinities and femininities in relation to drinking. We do not know exactly what the gendered drinking differences were like in Estonia during the Soviet time, but it can be assumed that men’s drinking practices were heavy and intoxication was more accepted for men than it was for women. Gapova (2002) has written that during the Soviet era men had poorer health, they had a shorter life expectancy and were engaged in such self-destructive practices as smoking and drinking. Recent studies (Kobin, 2012) have shown that young adults in Estonia inhabit a drinking culture that represents global trends and similarities with youth drinking cultures elsewhere in Europe. This is characterised also as the new ‘democratic’ drinking culture common among European youth (Eisenbach-Stangl & Thom, 2009), which celebrates fun and partying, relaxing, forgetting worries and troubles at the weekends with groups of friends (e.g. Szmigin et al., 2008; Griffin et al., 2009; Törrönen & Maunu, 2007).

Methods and data
In accordance with the principles of the constructivist-grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), I carried out open-ended interviews (19 in total, 10 of which in rural areas and 9 in urban areas) and focus group inter-
views (7 in total, 4 of which in rural areas and 3 in urban areas). Most of the groups had three people, while the biggest one consisted of nine people; two groups were single sex and the other five were mixed sex. In addition, I conducted some participant observation in bars, nightclubs and at other events involving drinking, such as birthdays and in the company of some of the informants. This has provided a broader perspective for data interpretation (deWalt & deWalt, 2002). Conversations at these events were not recorded.

Altogether 20 men and 28 women were interviewed. Of the informants, 24 (11 men and 13 women) were from rural areas – small towns, villages and/or hamlets – which typically had only one bar/pub or none at all, and no theatre or cinema. An equal number of informants, 24 (9 men and 15 women) were from bigger towns or cities in Estonia (e.g. Tallinn (capital city), Pärnu, Tartu and Kohtla-Järve). The informants were 18–36-year-olds, most of them in their twenties and/or early thirties.

The contacts for individual and focus group interviews were first made through different personal acquaintances, which led to meeting new people (snowballing). A couple of informants were recruited in nightclubs. The snowballing technique is considered the best for studying hidden populations and is suitable for research that is explorative, qualitative and descriptive in areas which involve sensitive, illegal or deviant issues (Hendricks & Blanken, 1992, cited in Faugier & Sargeant, 1997, p. 792). The snowballing technique proved to be useful, especially when looking for informants from rural areas. The interviews took on average between 1.5 and 2 hours, with the longest lasting for four hours. The open-ended individual interviews made it possible to get quite close to research participants, to ask about their personal experiences and to pose informational questions of clarification and move back and forth during the interview if necessary (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011). The focus groups, on the other hand, shed light on the “collective truths” that operate in a drinking culture when people question one another and comment on each other’s experiences (Barbour, 2007). These groups showed social interaction, as participants presented and defended their opinions and beliefs (Warr, 2005).

I used an open-ended interview schedule covering topics I wished to discuss – including the first time alcohol was consumed, changes in drinking practices, meaning of drunkenness, etc. – which also allowed for new topics to emerge (such as the importance of drinking space and place). Topics analysed for this article included questions such as: what do you think, do men and women drink differently; do men and women get drunk differently; do they drink different types of alcohol; what kind of expectations are there of men’s and women’s drunkenness. The informants were also asked to speak about their recent drinking situations and experiences, etc. The focus groups explored such topics as gender and drinking (e.g. acceptable norms) and the meaning of drunkenness. The focus groups consisted of natural groups, since all the informants knew each other. While this can be seen as a good basis for open conversation (Barbour, 2007; Warr, 2005), there is a disadvantage with focus groups, because some participants have more to say than others and as people knew each other, those who
did not wish to confront the group majority with an alternative view on alcohol use may have been left hidden (Demant & Järvinen, 2011).

The focus group data reflected a general understanding of the phenomenon, and individual interviews provided a more detailed description of an issue. Both added to the interpretation of the structure (circumstances around a phenomenon), drawing out the key characteristics of a category and the relations between them. Thus, the data sets were mutually informative, and the individual and collective meaning-making complemented each other. Both were useful for understanding the different representations of the phenomenon (also Lambert & Loiselle, 2008).

The interviews were coded with the help of the qualitative software program NVivo 8. The aim of the analysis was to identify core categories using open coding, in accordance with the themes that emerged from the material. Codes were compared and relevant categories were formed. Later the categories were combined and linked with relevant literature and theory to provide an explanation for the phenomenon being researched. With focus groups, I first identified and coded the subjects as they emerged and then paid special attention to the interactions in the focus group data to explore whether and how group members agree or disagree and challenge each other in the processes of collective truth making (see also Warr, 2005; Barbour, 2007). The material used for this article was coded under “gendered drinking” with the most relevant (sub)categories being “drunkenness”, “double standard” and “drinking context”.

In addition, I have used participant observation data to interpret the results. In participant observation, I have paid attention to aspects such as how drinking depends on the context (navigating between and within drinking time, space and networks) which overall impacts on how one drinks – that is, the drinking pattern and related (gendered) norms. Also covered was the interview topic of public drunkenness among women and how people inter-relate with and react to this taboo.

**Drunkenness: meanings and norms**

Drinking was found to have many different purposes. Among young Estonian adults, drinking occurs mostly in contexts of fun, relaxation and forgetting about worries and troubles. Drinking helps to mark different transitions, and alcohol also carries a mood-setting role (Kobin, 2012). As stated before, Törrönen & Maunu (2007) suggest that the heavier the drinking situation becomes, the more gendered the experience appears to be. In order to explore this, I will first look at the meaning of drunkenness. This is an expression of culture as it is socially learned and patterned (Wilson, 2005), because the gendered expectations reveal themselves most in heavy drinking and drinking in large amounts. Based on the data, it can be said that “drunkenness” has two very broad levels of meaning – one can be unpleasantly or pleasantly drunk. Both refer to situations where people have consumed alcohol, but it has been done in different ways and it carries different connotations of impaired ability, physiological and cognitive indicators or the feeling of losing control (Levit et al., 2009). There are also powerful gendered differences of opinion about the appropriateness of these
two levels for women and men. Exploring the meaning of drunkenness is one possible way of starting to investigate gender differences.

(Un)pleasantly drunk
Everyday communication has a range of expressions to describe someone who is unpleasantly drunk. Among different friendship groups, different words are used at various times. When the informants spoke about being “drunk” or the meaning of drunkenness, they often did it by referring to other people’s drinking and then situated their own drinking (image) into this context. A person who is drunk in an unpleasant way can be said to be “dead drunk”, “smashed”, “hammered” or “on all fours”\(^1\), etc. Most commonly the terms refer to a situation where a person has problems standing up or speaking to other people, is aggressive and/or has problems remembering his/her actions. Most often this involves drinking to intoxication. To be unpleasantly drunk means the loss of control in most possible ways.

\[\text{Oskar (M29):} \text{ drunk is like when people get ugly. I think when a person cannot handle oneself anymore, when one can’t stand on one’s feet, then for me this is concretely drunk. That is drunk in a way that is ugly. }\ldots \text{ It’s like you’ve lost this good feeling. Eventually you are so busted that you can’t remember how you went home and the next day you have a horrible hangover and it feels bad and you think what was that again?!}\]

A person who is pleasantly drunk can be described as having a “buzz” in the head, being a bit “grimy”, “tipsy”, “groggy” or “sleepy”\(^2\). There are many expressions that describe a person’s condition after drinking alcohol as being more fun, lively and cheerful, more open, confident and sociable. These are also the moods that are the most legitimate in alcohol consumption.

\[\text{I: what does “drunk” mean to you?} \]
\[\text{Mari (F24): there are different types of drunken people. There are those who start being more fun, there are those who get mean. There are those who start telling secrets. I’m not that kind. This I understand all the time that I know what I’m talking about. Me, when I’m drunk, I can say that I become more joyful. I never become aggressive or arrogant. Drunken people are those who feel free.}\]

Words that describe different ways of being (pleasantly) drunk also provide an opportunity to legitimise drinking practices. In general, it can be said that young adults do not see drunkenness necessarily as a negative status to be avoided (‘drinking stories’ are important to share with friends, they are a tool of collecting social capital in the friendship circle, Demant & Järvinen, 2011). These young adults also differentiate ways of being drunk, which may not be the case for older people (see also Thickett et al., forthcoming). Words used to describe intoxication could be seen as a structuring theme for self-representation (Tigerstedt et al., 2010, p. 213), and they play an important role in drinking behaviour for and among men and women.
Drinking gender: norms regarding drunkenness

Double standard

In the Estonian context, both men and women perceive that a woman as unpleasantly drunk, and in public in particular, is not socially accepted in a way that a man would be. The quotation below from a focus group reveals how self-evident it is to see a man intoxicated.

**I:** is it worse if a woman is drunk than a man?

**Sirje (F22):** yes, of course

**Peeter (M30):** a drunk woman is worse

**Tiina (F21):** yes

**Sirje:** it’s like when you’re sober and you look at women being drunk somewhere, then this is a very harsh sight. Well, of course, if I’m drunk, then this is totally cool [everybody laughs]

**Tiina:** well, it’s also because nobody’s used to seeing drunken women. There are so few women who get so drunk... but all the men drink, get completely drunk...

**Peeter:** for a man it’s natural to be drunk

**Sirje:** well, you think, when a woman is drunk and lies about somewhere in a chair or something... she’s still a woman!

**Tiina:** it’s not common, you see mostly men all the time like this...

**Peeter:** men and women are equal in general... but when somebody pukes and crawls around, then in the case of a woman it’s not normal. (Focus group)

Both men and women agree with the traditional understanding that drinking heavily and unpleasantly drunk (vomiting and crawling around) is considered unnatural and unfeminine, which reflects a clear double standard. In the focus group interview, Peeter refers to equality between men and women, but this spectrum does not cover drunkenness.

A woman should be more decent or well-behaved. Being slightly dizzy – more sociable and eager to talk to strangers – is most often favoured among women and also seen by men as appropriate drinking behaviour for women. Most women distance themselves from intoxication-oriented drinking in order to maintain their desired gender identity in compliance with the rules of traditional expectations on women. For example, in speaking about her consuming of alcohol, Marju describes it as keeping the most favourable features of female drinking, such as maintaining control and not transgressing the norms and borders of everyday life:

**Marju (F26):** You’re a bit braver in the company. Otherwise I sit quietly, on my own. But when you have a little buzz then you talk and you’re livelier and you get into the situation. /.../

Then I can at least talk along with other people. I’m not so quiet and shy. /.../ But I’d limit myself to this buzz for the whole evening. I don’t want more; I don’t want to get drunk.

Though traditional norms in women’s drinking behaviour are expected, this is not always the case, and some women try to change and shift these norms.

Contesting the norms among women

Some younger women consider drinking
like men (heavily) as rather heroic, proving that they are not weaker than men and altering the existing norms. By challenging traditional notions of femininity, young women construct their identity. For young women, partying and intoxication-oriented drinking could be perceived as expressions of independence and freedom. For women who do not distance themselves from heavy drinking, this suggests a call for equality and breaking the codes of traditional femininity, as is exemplified in the focus group interview below.

Peeter (M30): women fall down more quickly
Tiina (F21): no, it’s not like that
Sirje (F22): I have an experience of my own; I just went drinking yesterday, right. And I drank all the men under the table and you’re saying that women can’t stand… It’s about practice!
Tiina: yes. (Focus group)

Triin describes a situation where two women, as Sirje mentioned earlier, were proud of their capability to hold their drinks. Triin reveals her surprise (“and this was amazing”) at such drinking practices among young women, reflecting the generally accepted norm that this is not feminine behaviour.

Triin (F30): There were two women. One of them was, I figure, about 22 or 23 and the other one was just about to turn 28. A highly educated woman who’s graduated also from a foreign university, got a master’s degree, a marine biologist. And it was amazing how much alcohol they could tolerate. They had no problem in drinking this run just on their own. Well, they were drunk, but they drank more and more and more and more and then I looked at them, and my husband also looked and said that, well, they can carry a lot. And they were so proud about it. /…/ They said, “We can drink any man under the table anytime”.

In the context of double standards, women who can hold their drinks and drink vodka have to negotiate carefully in order not to threaten their feminine identity by losing control or being very drunk publicly. Riina speaks about herself as being able to drink like men (carry a lot and drink vodka), while also stressing control over drinking lest she start behaving in an inappropriate way (traditional features of feminine drinking), which she perceives as a threat to her (feminine) identity and reputation.

Riina (F27): Some old friends [men] told me, “Gosh you’re drinking, you’re one of the guys” or they said something like “look, you’re drinking vodka with us and not like girls usually drink [vodka], like taking only a couple of shots and that’s it”. At the same time, I don’t tell many people that I drink a lot. /…/ Or, for example, when there’s a party at work, a Christmas party, like when some people drink and start behaving unpleasantly, then I perhaps can drink as much as they do, but at the same time I still behave properly and know what I’m doing and what I’m saying; I control myself.

In their study, Rolfe et al. (2009, p. 332) maintain that female heavy drinkers distinguish their drinking as a habit, not as an
addiction, when describing their drinking behaviour. The women thus show that they can control their drinking if they choose to. Drinking to them has no connotations of compulsion or obsession. Women need to protect their moral identities through demonstrating self-control and self-surveillance, and the need for control has shifted to the women themselves (ibid.), as demonstrated by Riina above.

Contesting the norms among men
Heavy drinking is considered more appropriate and accepted for men. A man who does not know how to hold his drink is not seen as masculine and if he is prone to passing out after a ‘couple of shots’, it is seen as a weakness.

*Riina (F27)*: A proper man has to know how to drink, how to handle vodka. /*...*/ But it’s funny when a man takes a couple of shots and then passes out or, I don’t know, starts talking about random things. This is funny. This is not a normal guy, I think. A real man, well, he doesn’t have to drink a lot but at least he knows how to control himself.

However, heavy drinking practices are also contested by men. For example, those who have left the countryside to live in bigger towns distance themselves from the friends who are left behind and have not moved on with their lives or with their drinking styles (Kobin, 2012). These kinds of changes and distinctions are connected with changes in age, status, friendship circles and also have links to educational background. Riivo contests the idea that in company where drinking is present, everybody should drink so as not to offend others.

*Riivo (M25)*: I hardly go to X [name of a small place where he used to live] because I haven’t got anything to talk about with [old friends]. As I said, they’re still at the same level of development, I haven’t got anything to talk about with them. /*...*/ They haven’t got anything to do there, they go to the shop at 10 in the morning, they sit on the stairs of the shop... They get drunk there... I don’t understand them. Maybe in some friendship circles it’s like that, “hey, if you don’t drink vodka with us, then you’re a ninny”. But no, we don’t have that. It’s everyone’s own business whether they drink or not. /*...*/ We have a very well-established group of friends. Who wants to drink will drink, who does not will not, no one will pay special attention to it. This is also some kind of small town attitude that, well, you’re not drinking – are you a blithering idiot or what? Everyone’s a grown-up so everyone knows their limits and emotions and opportunities.

Riivo stresses individuality and independence (“It’s everyone’s own business whether they drink or not”), which could also be interpreted as elements of his alternative masculinity. He does not have to follow the mainstream norm where masculinity is connected with heavy vodka drinking. In concurrence with what de Visser & Smith (2007) found in their study on alcohol consumption and masculine identity, Riivo also emphasises the role of agency and being active in choosing whether to drink or not and in resisting social pressure (“if you don’t drink vodka with us then you’re a ninny”).
In addition to emphasizing individuality and independence, it appears that masculinity (as well as femininity) also changes in time with age and status, such as settling down, having children or a professional career. Therefore, other aspects such as work become important for masculine identity construction (also Harnett et al., 2000; de Visser & Smith, 2007). In the following quotation, Tiit clearly emphasizes the importance of work over heavy drinking.

**Tiit (M28):** This is how life was; it was just a phase of life [drinking during the university years]. After that we haven’t been drinking that much, there’s no time for that. I’m the owner of a business, a manager, and we’re collaborating internationally. I can’t allow myself these things…. I’m not saying that we don’t meet or drink, of course, we meet on the weekends to go to the sauna or something, and all the anniversaries and things, but we don’t have this kind of full-on drinking during the week, ‘cause there’s too much to lose.

Paid work seems to be a primary basis for Estonian men’s self-worth, social approval and masculinity. Men are especially work-oriented, even though Estonian women are also rather materialistic (Pajumets, 2012, p. 37). This also reflects what Eriksen (1991, pp. 72–73) calls ‘the new male type’, career-conscious, forward-looking and controlled and with no need to reinforce his masculinity through (heavy) drinking.

There has always been a strong Russian influence on the Estonian drinking culture. These are neighbouring countries, and Estonia was part of the Soviet Union for decades. In the Soviet culture, masculinity was perceived as a problem in connection with alcoholism and other self-destructive practices. Alcohol was ubiquitous in the Soviet era (Raudne, 2012), and “real” men in Russia have always been closely identified with hard alcohol (Hignite & Webber, 2012, p. 301). Tiit stresses the importance of making “cocktails in the way [he] wants” and claims that “usually we drink only cocktails”. This also refers to the Soviet era, when a wide choice of alcoholic drinks was not available. Hignite & Webber (2012, p. 306) argue that ‘drinking and holding large amounts of alcohol have been and still remain defining features of Russian masculinity, and men often experience considerable social pressure (masculinity challenges) to drink’; “the abstainer continues to experience feminizing or infantilizing stigma, where he is considered shy, insecure and unable to interact with women”. The cure for these conditions is vodka. In the perception of young Estonians, Soviet masculinity is connected to drinking heavily. New drinking styles in a youth culture are most often defined in contrast to the drinking styles of preceding generations (Room, 2007, p. 24). Such distinction also refers to what Demant & Törrönen (2011, p.1252) call playful drinking, one that does not focus on a traditional, inflexible masculine identity and is not such an unyielding and exclusive form of drinking. Young adults are expected to play and shift between different self-presentations.

**Urban and rural spaces and places as platforms for doing gender**

Social and physical spaces are gendered (Measham, 2002). Space is not a neutral
entity but is culturally constructed, creating symbolic meanings with regard to gender relations, roles and values (Fenster, 2009, p. 468). Drinking places and drinking spaces are the key constituents of alcohol, drinking and drunkenness; they have the differential and discursive role in the construction of alcohol, drinking and drunkenness (Jayne et al., 2008; Jayne et al., 2011) as well as of gendered identities. Drinking spaces (rural/urban areas) and places (venues such as bars and clubs) carry different norms and values, which also creates a platform for doing gender while drinking and offers an opportunity to navigate and negotiate between expected and perceived gendered drinking behaviour and norms.

Women drinking in urban and rural contexts: When young women talked about going to rural drinking venues, they felt they were being immediately noticed. Some young women considered this a threat to their identity and felt offended by staring men at the local pub (Kobin, 2012). Similarly to Leyshon’s study (2008) on young women’s embodiment and drinking in the countryside, young women in my study reflect the idea that rural drinking venues make them feel intimidated and sexually threatened. The club scene in the city is therefore often seen as more sophisticated, leaving more room for young women to work on their gendered identity (ibid.). However, while for one person the city offers more freedom and anonymity for manipulating gender norms on drunkenness, it can also be the other way around. From Maria’s point of view, drinking in a rural area allows her to negotiate expected gender norms regarding drinking and lets her “do” gender in an alternative way (Kobin, 2012).

Maria (F21): In the countryside it’s freer, there are strangers all around... But here in Tallinn I know so many people, and if I do something and somebody sees it, then it’s like you have to stay on the straight and narrow and look around and you shouldn’t fall down or fumble around.

Though for some young adults (such as Maria) the rural drinking venues may offer alternative platforms for doing gender, others (both men and women) may feel even stronger social pressure and control from the others in rural areas when drinking. If a woman drinks like a man, if she is noisy and loud in public, it does not only threaten her respectability but also acts as an insult/threat to the man – boyfriend/husband – as “rumours” (act of transgressing the norms) spread quickly and can have a strong effect on one’s (gendered) identity and reputation in the local community.

Ian (M29): It’s not nice to see a woman drunk... the make-up becomes a mess and then they can start talking some random arrogant things and then, I don’t know, jump around in front of others, and then your own girlfriend or friend, falls over in front of the other people, then it causes this nasty feeling inside you, you feel embarrassed. Well, women should stay more reserved. /.../ And because a woman’s like an ego of a man. /.../ And when somebody happens to say [comment by a friend], then it feels even worse...
and you can see from people’s eyes, you can see what’s being said. You can imagine what’s being said and what reaches the other end of the town... /.../ The woman is slutty and so on.

Men drinking in urban and rural contexts: Rural drinking venues are often described as “stuck in time”, where people (especially men) are aggressive and do not know how to act in a civilised manner. In the following quotation, Riivo talks about the town where he grew up and where locals are not open towards strangers or people who act or look differently from the mainstream. This is also revealed in men’s behaviour when they start acting aggressively towards outsiders, constructing the borders between “us” and “them”. In one’s (masculine) identity construction, personal choices and individuality – to look and behave differently from others – are once again stressed.

Riivo (M25): I think this story also appeared in newspapers. Tanel Padar and Eda-Ines Etti [two famous Estonian singers] came to Väike-Maarja [his hometown]. /.../ And then Tanel had the guts to go to the pub also and he protested loudly when somebody hit him with a beer can. In the end, the local police came and said, ‘Come on boys, stop it’. The local police have also kind of lost control or the power is out of their hands, they’re all afraid of those hoodlums. And then Tanel was simply taken to hospital with a head wound. Again... the person was different, had a different haircut, clothes, and people directly told him that he’s a fag. When you don’t have trainers, joggers or a leather jacket, a baseball cap with the beak rolled up tight, then you can be sure that you’ll get beaten up. That’s the thing with small places.

In small places, some of the drinking venues are also “governed” by local men (“near the bar they have their own chairs”), who in the local context have power and can therefore act as leaders in the local bar.

Laura (F24): In every village you have those important people. /.../ Like village businessmen or shop owners who drive around the village with the most powerful car. Always when they get to the bar.... Near the bar they have their own chairs, these were freed up immediately, they sat on them feeling very comfortable. /.../ Once I sat on one of these... they came and said, ‘hey, go away’. ‘Okay’, because you don’t have the courage to say no either. Sometimes they shout in there, break glasses. But they don’t care, the next day they come and pay for them. This is all so lame.

In order to avoid possible “power games” (us vs. them) between men and the “small place mentality” in rural drinking spaces, drinking venues are chosen carefully.

Mihkel (M29): If I have a chance to choose whether I’m going to X [name of a small place] or to Tallinn [capital city], then there [in Tallinn] is a smaller chance... let’s say to get into trouble. Here these things tend to happen by themselves. It’s this small place mentality, I think. Here it’s been like this. For someone who came from the outside and was a stranger, it was very
complicated for this person to sit here, when both the downstairs and upstairs bars were full of shouting locals.

Distancing from the rural drinking spaces, places and men could be explained with local hegemonic masculinity connected to urbanity. Urbanity reflects the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991, the collapse of the economy and business opportunities since, and the depopulation of the rural areas in the last two decades (Sepp, 2010, cited in Pajumets, 2012, p. 36). The power games among rural men in the local drinking venues (as reflected in the interviews) may be explained as an alternative way of gaining status in a situation where they perceive that they have been “left out” from the “real life of the men in the city”. Showing power at the local drinking venues is not only a chance to construct us and them (locals/non-locals) but to apply for aspects of masculinity which they perceive to be normative and important for their own (masculine) identity construction. “The next day they come and pay for these” also reveals the post-socialist hegemonic masculinity in Estonia, which is influenced by the American-style neoliberal ideology that idealises strength, youth, competitiveness, financial success, hedonism and individualism in men (Pajumets, 2012, p. 35). The “city men” who distance themselves from the “narrow-minded rural men” are, on the other hand, themselves applying for and emphasising aspects of the local hegemonic masculinity.

Conclusion
My article has sought to explore gendered drinking behaviour and identities among young Estonian adults. Relying on a social constructionist point of view (Courtenay, 2000; de Visser & McDonnell, 2011; Peralta, 2008; West & Zimmerman, 1987), my study has helped to show how alcohol is used in the reproduction and reconstruction of gender, in the fluidity of gender and the significance of gender in drinking cultures (Peralta, 2008). In general it can be argued that young Estonian men and women challenge the traditional notions of femininity and masculinity in terms of drinking, while at the same time they are subject to traditional values.

A clear double standard exists for women in Estonian drinking culture among young adults, though it has some fluidity and some young women try to contest it. As other studies have also shown (Simonen, 2011; Szmigin et al., 2008; Rolfe et al., 2009), drinking heavily could be seen as a call for gender equality and as an expression of independence for women. However, young women still need to be careful in order not to jeopardise their feminine identity and damage their reputation. They can do so by strategically using various alternative ways and different social contexts, and by choosing and navigating between the drinking venues in rural or urban areas (see also Leyshon, 2008). Similarly to Demant & Törrönen (2011), I would argue that diverse and hybrid drinking practices exist in tandem, and it would be inappropriate to talk about the masculinisation of female drinking behaviour in a context where traditional notions still have high value and impact for regulating femininities related to drinking. Women’s heavy drinking cannot be simply or one-sidedly compared to men’s heavy drinking as such. The women in this study most
of all stress values like equality in being able to practise drinking “like men”, while they also emphasise the importance of freedom and self-expression and without being sexualised in their drinking (“coping” by navigating between urban and rural drinking space).

In addition, the alternative modes of femininity (drinking like men) in the Estonian context could be explained through changes in the society since the restoration of independence in 1991. These include the reorientation towards a Western hedonistic lifestyle, consumer society, travel and media, the import (of images) of other European youth drinking practices, the increased availability of alcohol and the available variety of different beverages, or even the increased access to higher education. For example, the number of women acquiring higher education has almost tripled between 1995 and 2011, and there are considerably more women than men now in universities (Statistics Estonia, 2012)\(^3\), while the mean age of mothers has also increased\(^4\).

While it can be suggested that the gender norms are shifting, the double standard that exist in drinking behaviour for women reflect the patriarchal Estonian society, where women are not highly valued, where their position in the labour market is not equal to men, where the highest and most prestigious positions tend to be occupied by men, and where we have the highest gender pay gap in Europe (Statistics Estonia, 2012).

In the Estonian context, masculinity has been connected to drinking heavily and drinking vodka. This was the perception that was discussed and pointed out both by men and women. On the other hand, young men contest traditional masculine drinking, which involves making a distinction and distancing oneself from the heavy drinking practices of drinking to intoxication and drinking vodka that are connected with images of Soviet (inflexible and rural) masculinity. By distancing from the Soviet era images of masculinity, an alternative mode of masculinity is created. This alternative mode is compensated by emphasising other values, such as the importance of individuality, independence or professional career (also Harnett et al., 2000; de Visser & Smith, 2007; Mullen et al., 2007). This refers to what de Visser and Smith (2007) call “trading masculine competence”, presenting the “new male type” (Eriksen, 1991) and breaking the hegemonic drinking male norms. Stressing such values as freedom, self-expression, independence and being active agents in one’s gendered drinking behaviour and identity (re)construction among young adults in Estonia could be broadly put and explained in the context of the country’s reorientation towards the West and the adoption of Western hedonistic values.

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Maarja Kobin, PhD Candidate
Institute of International and Social Studies
Centre for Lifestyle Studies
Tallinn University
E-mail: maarja.kobin@gmail.com
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NOTES

1. Words describing “unpleasant” drunkenness in Estonian include täitsa purjus, täiesti täis, maani täis and käpukil.

2. Words describing “pleasant” drunkenness in Estonian include sumin peas, tahmane, vindine, švipsis and seeditav.

3. In 1995, there were 13,040 men and 14,086 women in higher education in Estonia. By 2011, the numbers had risen to 27,610 men and 39,997 women (Statistics Estonia, 2012).

4. At the beginning of the 1990s, most of the women who gave birth were under 25 (about 55% of childbirths), while in 2011 women below the age of 25 gave birth to fewer than 23% of all children born (Statistical Yearbook of Estonia, 2012: 49).
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