The Rising Social Media and Declining Alcohol Use: The Case of Finnish Teenagers

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Abstract
The article aims to make understandable a significant change that has taken place in the adolescent drinking habits: throughout the world, the teens are drinking much less than previous generations. Previous research has approached this phenomenon through survey research methodology, trying to identify the variables that correlate with individuals’ alcohol consumption level, thereby explaining the phenomenon. The impact of social media use on drinking habits has been identified as one possible explanation, but the results have been contradictory. The article hypothesizes that the rise of social media created an institutional change in young people’s conditions for and patterns of socializing. Using qualitative interviews with Finnish teenagers as empirical data, the article concludes that since socializing with peers and initiating romantic relationships takes place primarily in virtual contexts, there are less occasions in which alcohol would serve as a social lubricant. Consequently, compared with previous generations, alcoholic beverages play a smaller role in young people’s lives. The current living conditions molded by the social media concern everyone, which is why individual-level correlations between social media use and alcohol consumption level do not capture the aggregate effect that the changed living conditions have brought about.

Keywords
alcohol, social media, adolescents, culture

Introduction
A significant change in the adolescent drinking habits has been observed throughout the world: today the teens are drinking much less than previous generations. The change has been observed simultaneously in many European countries (e.g., Finland, Republic of Ireland, Germany, Portugal, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Iceland and Czech Republic) as well as in the United States, Canada, Australia, Russia and Ukraine (Bhattacharya, 2016; De Looze et al., 2019; Kraus et al., 2020; Månsson et al., 2020; Raitasalo, Tigerstedt, & Simonen, 2018; Raitasalo et al., 2021; Room et al., 2020; Vashishtha

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et al., 2020). According to Room et al. (2020, p. 467), the change has been seen in “most high income countries and in some middle income countries.”

This article takes Finnish youth as an example of this global shift. In contrast with the adult population, a significant change in their drinking habits is clearly visible in the results of the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) (Raitasalo et al., 2015). Researchers have hypothesized about several contributing factors behind this change. These include the technological and social changes that have taken place during the last decade or two. For example, it has been speculated that better legal enforcement, enhanced parental control (mobile devices, social media) and changes in communication technology could account for the change (Bhattacharya, 2016; Kraus et al., 2020; Raitasalo, Tigerstedt, & Simonen, 2018; Raitasalo et al., 2021; Room et al., 2020; Törrönen, Roumeliotis, et al., 2020; Törrönen, Samuelsson, & Roumeliotis, 2020).

Obviously, there can be many factors at play. Yet so far, the research has been unable to explain this phenomenon. It is equally clear that any attempts to account for the global trend must be applicable to all countries where the trend has been noticed, rendering many country-specific explanations unsatisfactory. In this respect, the technological shift to internet-based means and devices of seamless mobile communication is a promising explanation, because it has also affected the youth the world over. We agree with several other researchers that the radical worldwide change in communication technology around the turn of the 21st century is an important factor behind the simultaneous decline in youth alcohol consumption. The problem is, what is the causal link between these parallel changes and how to study it?

In this article, we argue that the global change in communication technology has brought about such an institutional transformation in young people’s social environment that its effect on alcohol consumption cannot be captured by social survey methodology. It reduces the link between these two aggregate-level changes to correlations between variables that measure individuals’ behavioral patterns—classic case of ecological fallacy (Goodman, 1959). To avoid this fallacy, we conducted qualitative interviews with teenagers in Finland. The idea was to capture a holistic view of the lifestyle and daily practices of the interviewees in order to explain how mobile internet use could make the lowered alcohol consumption among the youth understandable. Based on the analysis of the interview data, we conclude that since socializing with peers and initiating romantic relationships takes place primarily in virtual contexts, there is less demand for alcohol as a social lubricant. Consequently, compared with previous generations, alcoholic beverages play a smaller role in young people’s lives.

The article is organized as follows. In the next section, we review existing research on the phenomenon and point out the problems in attempts to account for it. After presenting the data and methodology, we introduce our findings and interpretations. In the conclusion, the results, the ecological fallacy concerning the interpretations on the youth culture and the need for future research are discussed.

**Declining Alcohol Use as a Global Phenomenon**

In Finland, adolescent alcohol consumption has changed notably during the last decades. Whereas drinking in the adult population has lessened only slightly, in the 21st century the youth have begun to use much less alcohol than previous generations (Lintonen et al., 2015; Raitasalo et al., 2015). From the end of the 1990s until the year 2015 the change has been notable. For instance, the share of the youth who have drunk alcohol during the past month has dropped almost to a half (Raitasalo et al., 2015). The same trend has been observed not only in other European countries, but also in North America and Australia (De Looze et al., 2019; Pennay et al., 2015). In several countries, the trends have been confirmed by age-period-cohort studies, finding downturns in drinking particularly in the youngest cohort (e.g., Kraus et al., 2014; Meng et al., 2014). Furthermore, there is evidence that the trend extends upward as the teenage cohort ages, in comparison to the level of drinking of previous cohorts at that age (Livingston et al., 2018). On the other hand, there is some variation: in some
countries the trend began earlier, and Cyprus, France, Hungary and Montenegro have thus far moved against the trend (Hibell et al., 2012, pp. 124–126), so the phenomenon is not completely without exceptions.

Researchers have hypothesized about factors that could drive the change. Explanations such as more extensive parental and social control, increasing use of digital technology, evolving social norms, better parenting, demographic changes, and an overall increase of happiness in childhood, as well as social and economic pressures have been suggested as contributing factors (Bhattacharya, 2016; Caluzzi et al., 2021; Kraus et al., 2020; Raitasalo, Simonen, et al., 2018; Room et al., 2020). It has also been noted that various physical activities have gained popularity and that the youth are more health-oriented than previous generations and that present-day gendered practices of alcohol consumption and health result in the diminishing “coolness” and cultural significance of alcohol among teens (Törrönen, Roumeliotis, et al., 2020; Törrönen, Samuelsson, & Roumeliotis, 2020). Similarly, Kraus and colleagues (2020) conclude that there has been a general “devaluation” in the social position of alcohol among the youth, which may be due to formal or informal reactions to the negative effects of alcohol, but also to changes in technology, social norms, family relationships, or gender identities.

According to existing research, adolescents engage in continuous, on-the-run interactions using a multitude of digital platforms: the daily messages easily run into tens or even a hundred (Gardner & Davis, 2014). While messaging is used to micro-coordinate their lives—for instance, when meeting with others—it also functions as a pastime activity that keeps a channel open between friends and facilitates peer support regarding daily activities and emotions (Gardner & Davis, 2014). On the whole, online interactions and practices have become an integral part of the teenage physical and social worlds (Törrönen, Roumeliotis, et al., 2020). Digitally mediated communication may also feel easier and safer, because physical distance renders sharing personal feelings less uncomfortable and risky (Gardner & Davis, 2014). Room and colleagues (2020) hypothesize that, among other factors, mobile devices bear the risk of drunken behaviors spreading online via photos and videos, which makes adolescents avoid such occasions. They also suggest that mobile devices enhance parental control. Several authors also propose that digital media may restructure adolescents’ face-to-face practices in ways that promote substance-free interactions (Kraus et al., 2020; Room et al., 2020; Törrönen, Roumeliotis, et al., 2020; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009).

However, identifying the main causal forces behind the decline in adolescent alcohol consumption has proven difficult. Since this global change has occurred simultaneously with the equally digital revolution of communication technology, including the onset of social networking sites from the 2000s onward, the link between drinking and internet use has been one of the key hypotheses. However, in this area the results have also been inconclusive. Studies conducted in Sweden have found a weak positive correlation between abstinence and frequent computer gaming, but on the whole Internet activities were not associated with non-drinking among adolescents (Larm et al., 2019; Svensson, 2013). Yet other studies have arrived at the opposite finding. Some studies have found a positive correlation between heavy social media use and episodic heavy drinking (Brunborg et al., 2017; Savolainen et al., 2019). De Looze and colleagues (2019) came to the same conclusion. Based on a multilevel regression analysis of data from the international Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study comprising more than 25 mainly European countries, they concluded that national declines in substance use were associated with declines in face-to-face peer contact, but not with increases in electronic media communication (EMC). In fact, at the individual level both face-to-face contact with peers and EMC related positively to substance use. The researchers conclude that the decrease in face-to-face peer contacts, but not the increase in EMC, plays a role in the recent decrease in adolescent substance use. On that basis, they reason that increased EMC enhances its function as a social connector which, in turn, increases substance use. Related to that, it has also been suggested that extensive social media use and chatting as well as watching movies exposes the youth to positive images of drinking and alcohol advertising without parental supervision (Anderson et al., 2009; Brown...
& Gregg, 2012; Larm et al., 2019; Nicholls, 2012). Additionally, some longitudinal studies have found a positive correlation between alcohol use and media use among the young (Vashishtha et al., 2020). Furthermore, Hanewinkel and Sargent (2009) concluded that both movie exposure and having a TV in the bedroom predicted the onset of problematic alcohol use among German teenagers.

These findings are puzzling. How could it be possible that a general decrease in face-to-face peer contacts among the youth could account for the decline in alcohol use, but the most logical explanation for it—the increased use of internet-based media, communication and chatting—would increase individuals’ alcohol and other substance use? Measuring the use of social media, streaming services and games is typically done via analyzing survey questions about the frequency and timing of the use of various services, games and media in addition to the use of alcohol and other drugs. Questions pertaining to the psychological disposition of the respondents as well as the sense of belonging to various offline groups and relationships and the frequency of face-to-face interactions can also be used (e.g., De Looze et al., 2019; Larm et al., 2019; Savolainen et al., 2019). Conflating these with the social constructs relevant to the teenage alcohol use is a difficult task. To begin with, measuring all facets of (social) media use is a daunting task and may produce mixed results (Pape et al., 2018). Of course, we do not claim that the social media could not contribute to increased alcohol use in some contexts. As is discussed above, there are several plausible mechanisms that could contribute to either increase or decrease of alcohol consumption. This too may well contribute to the mixed results.

We agree that the creation of social media is an important explanation for the declining adolescent alcohol use, but we argue that it cannot be captured by social survey methodology, which reduces the link between these two aggregate-level changes to correlations between variables that predict individuals’ behavior. Such an ecological fallacy (Goodman, 1959; Hale, 2008) hides from view the fact that since social media has become institutionalized in adolescents’ lives, interaction among them has changed altogether, also affecting the role of face-to-face interaction and the social position of alcohol. As Pape et al. (2018, p. S110) note, the nexus between individual and aggregate level changes should be interpreted cautiously: even if there appears to be evidence about heavy social media use correlating with heavier drinking, the relationships in individual and aggregate levels are not necessarily synchronous. Our argument is that since the altered environment has affected everyone, regardless of how much they spend time in social media, the snapshots of individual level correlations between social media and alcohol use cannot be used to reveal the causal mechanisms behind the decline in adolescent drinking.

An Institutional View of Social Media Use and the Position of Alcohol

As a background for the institutional perspective proposed in this article, we must realize that worldwide trends in people’s behavior are possible only on the condition that people’s living conditions, practices and meanings attached to objects have become sufficiently similar among the populations in question. Such homogenization leads into the formation of global fields, wherein innovations and fads spread across the board (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Martin, 2003). The global spread of internet-based communication technology and the meanings of alcoholic beverages are of particular interest here.

The internet and social media use have spread the world over, making people’s living structurally similar in many respects. According to current statistics, the penetration rates of internet usage range from 43% in Africa to 89.9% in North America (Internet World Stats, 2021). According to data from the beginning of 2021, 90% of internet users also use social media, which had 4.33 billion social media users around the world, equating to more than 55% of the total global population. Comparisons of social media users to total population may, in fact, under-represent the full extent of social media use,
because most social media companies restrict use of their platforms to people aged 13 and above (Global Social Media Stats, 2021).

As to the role of alcohol in people’s lives, from the latter part of the 20th century onward, we have seen a homogenization of drinking patterns, with wine, beer and spirits cultures mixing with each other. In countries with traditionally high consumption of beer (e.g., UK, Belgium, Germany), the use of wines and hard liquors became more common, and in wine-drinking countries (e.g., France, Southern Europe or Mediterranean countries), beer and hard liquors gained in popular favor. Consequently, differences in total consumption levels evened out: decreased in wine countries and increased in spirits countries (e.g., Canada, the Scandinavian countries and Ireland), which used to have the lowest consumption levels (Gual & Colom, 1997; Sulkunen, 1976a, 1976b, 1983, 1989; Tusini, 2007). Because of this global mixture of drinking patterns and attitudes toward alcohol, already in the late 20th century the adolescent drinking habits of wine and spirits countries were quite similar (see, e.g., Pyörälä, 1988, 1995).

From around the turn of the 21st century onward, transnational youth culture seems to have witnessed a trend toward a decline of adolescent alcohol consumption simultaneously with the fast spread of social networking sites. As reviewed earlier in the introduction, previous scholarship has proposed several explanations for how these parallel developments could be linked. We propose that the social media and chatting have changed adolescents’ lives particularly by affecting the ways in which individuals initiate romantic relationships. Prior to the onset of social media, teenage drinking typically took place in face-to-face drinking rituals on Friday and Saturday nights. According to Törnönen, Roumeliotis, et al. (2020), social media has changed the boundaries of such rituals and also the character of drinking stories told. Since interactions have dramatically changed by the spread of new technologies, we suggest that the significance of alcohol has also changed. As noted by Room and colleagues (2020), alcohol has been used to facilitate romantic interactions. Therefore, it can be assumed that the new forms of interaction made possible by internet-based communication contribute to lessening the significance of alcohol. Indeed, existing research suggests that adolescents use social networking sites to meet new people and to flirt (Reich et al., 2012). However, more research is needed on adolescents’ romantic relationships and their implications for alcohol use.

Data, Ethics, and Methodology

To learn more about present-day adolescents’ life-worlds, we conducted qualitative research interviews with 15- to 19-year-old teenagers in Finland. Whereas in survey research one searches for causal laws that account for differences in individuals’ behavior, in these interviews the idea was to identify similarities in interviewees’ talk—similarities that are due to shared features in their social environment and cultural patterns that those features have generated. Accordingly, the interviews were open-ended. Rather than asking everyone the same list of detailed questions, we asked them to tell about their lives. The starting point in the interviews was to ask the teenager to describe the last school day and last weekend. Then it was the interviewer’s task to do follow-up questions about the details they mention. In this kind of discursive or narrative interview (Alasuutari, 1998; Czarniawska, 2001, pp. 145–151), one avoids “feeding” the interviewees the concepts and frames within which to talk about a topic, and remain at a fairly abstract level as to the choice of words. The objective is to allow the interviewees to select the concepts, discourses and story lines by which they tell about their lives. The interviews then enable the researcher to capture the interviewees’ perspective on their lives and the meanings they attach to various things, for instance alcohol use. Rather than differences between the individuals, the analyst’s task is to search for persistent patterns underneath individual diversity.

This rationale of qualitative research does not mean that individual variation is disregarded altogether. In selecting interviewees, the objective was, instead, to maximize variation (Larsson, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). If one finds persistent patterns in interviewees’ talk regardless of differing
individual backgrounds, it strengthens the argument that they reflect institutionalized behavioral patterns and shared culture. Naturally, we do not claim that by studying a relatively small number of adolescents in Finland, we can give a definitive answer to the reason why the youth now drink less than the previous generations. However, similarities found between dissimilar individuals not belonging to a single community increases the transferability of the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1999).

The 47 interviews were carried out in 2019 with teens living in Finland. Forty-one interviewees were 15–17 and 6 interviews were 18–19 years old. There are 38 high school students and 2 students from junior high school. Seven attended a dual qualification school (gaining vocational training in addition to high school). Thirty-two of the interviewees were girls and 15 were boys. Nearly all of the interviewees live in urban areas save for a few exceptions. On average they are children of well-educated parents and most of them live with both parents. Eighteen interviewees had not consumed alcohol during the past 12 months. Nine had done so once and 13 interviewees a few times. Six teenagers described monthly alcohol use and one told about moderate weekly use. A majority of the interviewees are from three separate schools, but there were interviewees from other schools as well. They were mostly of Finnish cultural backgrounds. The majority of interviews were conducted in Western Finland but nearly one-sixth of the interviews was carried out in Lapland.

As the interviewees are mainly high school pupils and from urban areas we obviously cannot claim to have ideal variation in the data. However, the interviewees are from various schools and neighborhoods and, hence, do not belong to a single circle of friends. Yet, they give similar accounts about their relationships and the use of social media. Based on these interviews we believe we reached good saturation (e.g., Aldiabat & Le Navenec, 2018, pp. 247–248) in terms of learning about the high school pupils’ alcohol uses and relationship practices utilizing social media.

As the interviewees are young it is particularly important to be clear and transparent about the practices concerning the interview, anonymity, and future data archival. We had The Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region review our research project and the preparation of the data gathering was, with great help from the Tampere University legal team, done adhering to the new GRDP laws in the EU. This set strict guidelines for the recruitment and conduct of interviews, which made things difficult in the pandemic situation. Furthermore, we deem face-to-face interviews necessary to facilitate breaking the ice, building trust and good research ethics concerning the research interview with underage interviewees. The research project was advertised as being about the alcohol related attitudes and preferences as well as about their everyday life, e.g. their media consumption habits. For the most part, we introduced the research project via school visits as well as providing documentation for the teenagers and their parents to see. Some teenagers were reached via social networks. After telling the school or a class or individual students about the project we asked those interested to contact the researcher and a time was set. We do not know whether a different procedure would have been more efficient in recruiting male or other sex interviewees, but the procedure chosen was deemed ethically the soundest. Perhaps this resulted in the female interviewees outnumbering the males. The interviews were then carried out in a suitable space that provided privacy. A movie ticket was given to the participants as a thank you for participating. The interviewers were a male and a female researcher in their forties.

Above all, the interviews were conducted in a fashion that imposed as little stress as possible to the interviewees. The average length of the interviews was little over thirty minutes. We consider this as sufficient length that has good balance on information gathering and placing as little stress on the young people as possible: many of them tend not to be as verbose as older people as some will find the interview situation somewhat exciting. On the other hand, interviewees were met as competent informants on their lives, but care was taken to make the interview as positive an experience as possible, also giving them a glimpse of the academic world. Before conducting the actual research interviews, we carried out a three-person focus group interview to gain a better understanding of what the teens themselves see as relevant issues pertaining to the phenomenon of declining alcohol use. This was
done to promote an element of co-research with the young. We have consciously tried to avoid patriarchal, dismissive attitudes towards their agency while also being mindful that they are, indeed, underage teens and often will not produce the same amounts of talk as adults in an interview situation (Heath et al., 2009; Liamputtong, 2007).

The analysis consisted of reading the data and paying particular attention to the descriptions of social media, romantic relationships, and discussions of alcohol use. The a priori focus of the research was to understand the attitudes towards alcohol use but also to gain a holistic understanding of their everyday lives. The significance and the change in the practices concerning romantic relationships was something we realized around the time we began the data collection. Characteristic of qualitative analysis, the idea was to grasp the cultural logic that the interviewees’ accounts of their life reflect or from which they stem. Rather than reporting on “typical” attitudes to, say, alcohol use, or common ways in which the interviewees described their behavior, the objective was to capture the institutional logics that make all those accounts understandable. To put it in other words, the idea is to formulate rules that hold true throughout the data—including what at first might look like exceptions (Alasuutari, 1995, pp. 20–21).

In our data, the teens talk mostly about Snapchat, WhatsApp and Instagram among some other services. While we have covered previous literature on e.g. movie watching and game play, our analysis focuses on social media that facilitates interaction during the first steps of budding romantic interest. This is simply because these themes are most prevalent in the data. We have no doubt that in the earlier times e.g. text messages may have played a part in this shift but as the means of digital communications are ever evolving, it means we are studying a moving target.

The Use of Social Media in Establishing Social Relationships

The interviews of these 47 adolescents make it clear how central role the social media plays in the lives of the teenagers. Although the interviewees reside in different urban areas, they tell a consistent story of how and why they have certain internet-based social media applications installed in their phones. For those inexperienced in the present-day communication technology, it might not be immediately clear as to why the teens are abandoning some social media platforms and instead like Snapchat and Instagram and WhatsApp so much. However, for the interviewees, the different functions of these applications are self-evident. For them, WhatsApp is a way to spread important information to a group of recipients, whereas Snapchat is for relaxed, informal interaction that is often quite high volume in terms of the number of messages. This means there are no pressures to answer a particular message that comes out of the blue. Hence, one is not that vulnerable to feeling rejected, whereas one would feel puzzled or disappointed in case a WhatsApp message went unanswered. As one interviewee put it: “It is difficult to explain but all youngsters understand what the thing is.” It follows that within Snapchat the young know to expect netiquette that differs from the one expected of WhatsApp. This seemingly minor difference makes Snapchat more popular among adolescents for casual messaging. What is more, on Snapchat it is no big deal to send a message to someone whom one does not know so well; it is enough to get that person’s username. For that purpose, one often uses another app: Instagram:

Female, 15–17 years, high school, alcohol use once in the past year.

**Interviewer:** Okay, let us say there is an interesting person whom you would like to get acquainted with, so how would it happen? What would be a somehow smooth way to, say, contact that person or something?
Interviewee: Well Snapchat is perhaps the smoothest way to establish a contact, I feel. If it is
WhatsApp, then you need to have the number and so on, but in Snap you don’t need
any number or anything.

Interviewer: No number needed?

Interviewee: No, you don’t need to know. You only have to add that person on the basis of the
username. It is like Instagram. So you don’t need to exchange numbers, if you just
know the person by name or you have found his Instagram and usually people have
Instagram that tells the Snapchat. You can then get his Snapchat directly and
contact him. Well you can do it also in Instagram, but it is a little bit lockneck
[laughter] way to approach. So Snapchat is like smoother, and you can just write Hi.

Such a role of social media in the relationship building was described in numerous interviews.
Individuals know of each other, belong to the same face-to-face or social media network, or they have
mutual friends. When an interest for a closer relationship arises, the social media plays a central role.
Since the volume of messages is typically rather high in Snapchat and the netiquette very informal,
sending a short message like “Hi” does not make the sender vulnerable to embarrassment. Little is
explicitly implied other than that the channel is open for casual, fleeting messages. Such a message can
be sent from one’s home or a friend’s place and there is no pressure to immediately establish small talk.
Both participants can take their time and even if the initial message leads nowhere, no face is lost. This
is very important in the sense that this way there is no need for a certain place to meet or for social
lubrication in the form of alcohol. Consider the following description after the interviewee has talked
about how his current relationship started in Instagram:

Male, 15–17 years, high school, alcohol use a few times a year.

Interviewer: Would you say that that’s a sort of the common way in which people get to know
each other these days?

Interviewee: Yes, it is. For real. Pretty few, I would almost say that the majority of relationships
start online in one way or another. Like at least in the manner that if they know each
other from the school or some hobby, then likely they will first start chatting in
some Snapchat, Instagram, where the threshold is much lower than just going in
some hallway, in the school, during the recess, to just go and say hey, hi.

Interviewer: So that there would be immense pressure?

Interviewee: Yeah. Since there is not nearly as much pressure, not even half.

The initial contact after getting to know of someone’s existence via the school or hobbies is crucial.
Before the age of private, individually owned handsets and digital communication there was little
options but to meet face to face and feel the pressure of initiating conversation. Such a moment
requires immediacy and the ability to start the confabulation in real time, obviously making matters
more stressful. Hence, often these situations took place where there was also the possibility to use
alcohol to relieve some of the pressures and the fear of rejection and possibly even ridicule.

On the other hand, the social media apps are also used for practically all kinds of communication
among friends and acquaintances. The apps both build and maintain friendships and communities:

Male, 15–17 years, high school, alcohol use monthly.

Interviewee: She was in another class in junior high school but we didn’t know each other at all.
But now she came to the same class as I in high school. So we started snapping,
exchanging messages on Snapchat. Then I asked her out. I don’t know, maybe three weeks ago. Last Sunday we went out for coffee.

Interviewer: All right. So the Snap was somehow a convenient way?
Interviewee: Yeah it is usually, for example as the new high school class was formed, everybody was adding each other in Snap and then follow on Instagram. It is a little like getting to know each other also.

Interviewer: Oh so it is an easygoing way of messaging then?
Interviewee: Yes. And then if you snap, it will be easier to talk face-to-face too. That’s how it is these days as far as I know.

The pervasive nature of communications over digital platforms is significant in the way that it expands the scope for convenient approaches towards potentially interesting peers. Everybody is “adding” each other, thus creating a parallel digital social network on top of the traditional one. Clearly, this makes making the initial contact easier but as the above quote illustrates, it also facilitates the face-to-face interactions later. After chatting with each other has proved rewarding or interesting there is, again, less pressure in agreeing to see each other and spend some time together on a date. In the example above the two agreed to meet over a cup of coffee, so in this instance there was no need to get alcohol to lessen the anxiety of the first actual date. It can be seen how the digital revolution has rendered the creation of romantic relationships into a less steep, much more relaxed and less risky endeavor.

Additionally, this phase of getting to know each other also facilitates the chance to really get to know each other unlike some traditional arenas of interaction. This quote follows the description on how she initiated the contact with her boyfriend via Instagram and Snapchat:

Female, 18–19 years, vocational training & high school, alcohol use once in the past year.

Interviewer: How do you think, overall, what’s your take on how these start, so is it somehow via social media or?
Interviewee: Via social media pretty much.
Interviewer: Parties or bars or?
Interviewee: Well I’d say that via social media or maybe in the school, but so far I have not heard that one would find a real relationship from some parties or anything like that. Maybe social media is the biggest at this moment and all these Tinders and what have you. (Laughs). Those are maybe the biggest.

Bars and parties are juxtaposed against social media and the latter is described as facilitating the chance to find something real. Instead, the interviewee considers bars and parties as an arena where only superficial connections may be made. Tinder is also mentioned in our data as an example of the online possibilities, but at a more general level. It does not have the significance that Snapchat and Instagram have.

Since the social media apps have become an integral part of socializing among adolescents, it has constituted the way in which they move around in social space. There are no time series studies on this issue, but it appears that the youth have less need for real-life public spaces where they would have a chance to meet new people and potentially establish close relationships with them. That is because the apps such as Snapchat serve the same purpose; they function as virtual public places. In the data, there are some descriptions of how the interviewees go out to the city and “hang out” in, for instance, shopping malls, but in these cases, too, meeting others seems to be preorganized by using the apps.
Female, 15–17 years, high school, alcohol use once in the past year.

**Interviewer:** Is it nicer to meet in the city than for example in someone’s home?

**Interviewee:** It varies. In the daytime it may be nice to move around in the city when you can go for a cup of coffee and things like that. But I think on average we are at someone’s home. My friend lives close to the center, so usually we are there ‘cos there you can be kind of more casual. ‘Cos there isn’t necessarily any place there in the city where you can go and sit down if you don’t want to go for coffee or so.

In the excerpt above by a girl exemplifies the point that the interviewees’ stories do not have descriptions of regular street corners where to go without being informed via the apps about something going on, for example a private party. Although public places where you can see and be seen by new people have certainly not disappeared altogether, they seem to be less important in adolescents’ lives. Furthermore, even if they meet an interesting person while hanging out somewhere, the next steps in establishing a closer contact entail online messaging. Therefore, the tension-arousing moment of initiating and developing a romantic relationship does not necessarily take place in face-to-face situations. Consequently, there is no need for using alcohol as a tension-relieving substance—a function the interviewees recognize well.

Male, 15–17 years, high school, alcohol use a few times in the past year.

**Interviewee:** And then those social media messaging platforms and such maybe facilitate a kind of easier approach without face-to-face. Because, if I may say so, will I approach a new girl after drinking a little, or not drinking any, I will rather do it if I have had a little. But then again in case there is social media then that’s probably a little easier if something suddenly comes to mind.

Underlining the social pressures of making the initial contact the teenager tells how he would rather approach someone after he has had some alcohol. The description can be interpreted as a general example instead of a particular, concrete past situation but, nevertheless, he adds that social media would provide a still more comfortable way of approaching someone. The expression about something suddenly coming to mind illustrates the relaxed nature of the online communications: there does not have to be a particular issue or a decidedly serious approach, but rather something can be sent in a whim, which renders the contact much less anxiety provoking. However, the teenagers do still meet at parties and relationships are born that way:

Female, 15–17 years, high school, alcohol use a few times in the past year.

**Interviewee:** Yes it’s maybe that if you are a little tipsy, your guard goes down or the excitement, so you are maybe more courageous to start talking. And then maybe you’ll get to know each other.

In the two excerpts above, the social function of alcohol is taken as a given: the lowering of inhibitions is described as beneficial for social encounters with new acquaintances. But even if alcohol is being used in this manner by some teenagers and even though interviewees emphasize the importance of face-to-face interactions, there is no escaping the fact that these behaviors no longer exist in isolation from online interaction. Instead, they are encompassed in the present day youth culture that undoubtedly has many factors contributing to the decrease in alcohol consumption (Törönen et al., 2019).
we have shown, social media is likely one important contributing factor behind the trend, which is
difficult to capture via a quantitative approach. Pape et al. (2018, p. S112) point out that relevant issues
in the youth culture may be hard to operationalize in quantitative studies, which, we believe, further
contributes to the conflicting results in earlier research.

Conclusions

In this article, we set out to ask why alcohol consumption has declined among adolescents from the
turn of the 21st century onward throughout the world’s developed economies. Previous research has
proposed various factors as explanations for this fascinating phenomenon, including the concurrent
emergence and spread of digital platforms and mobile devices, but the causal links between these two
global changes have proven hard to pin down. This article contributes to the discussion by proposing
that a significant part of the explanation lies in the change that the social media has made to adoles-
cents’ courting practices. In addition, we provide an explanation for the contradictory and inconclusive
results of existing scholarship.

To summarize the main point elaborated in the sections above, the new possibilities that the creation
of digital platforms and mobile social media has opened for socializing and initiation of romantic
relationships has most likely reduced the utility of drinking as a social catalyst in situations where
individuals establish new relationships. When starting a romantic relationship is done by exchanging
messages between mobile devices in the midst of other everyday activities, drinking is not a natural
element of the situation. On the whole, the formation of social media as an integral part of young
people’s lives has made a big impact on their interaction in all settings.

The hypothesis that the formation of online social media platforms has affected the decrease of
alcohol consumption among the youth is not a new one (see, e.g., Room et al., 2020), but it and
competing hypotheses have turned out to be difficult to test. We argue that the difficulties in pointing
out the link between the rise of social media and the decline in alcohol use stem from the institutional
nature of the change that the new communication technology brought about in adolescents’ lives.
Therefore, it cannot be captured by social surveys, which reduce the link between aggregate-level
changes to correlations between variables that predict individuals’ behavior. We argue that while the
social media has changed the institutional foundation of young people’s lives, it has also affected the
social position of alcohol. Since the altered environment has affected everyone, individual level
correlations between social media and alcohol use do not capture the causal mechanisms behind the
decline in adolescent drinking.

In this case, say, how many minutes screen time an individual teenager has per day does not change
the fact that using social media platforms in daily socializing has become part of youngsters’ institu-
tional ecology, the external conditions within which they act. Because of this historic change, there are
less “old-fashioned” socializing opportunities and therefore also occasions for social drinking. This
does not mean that everyone abstains from drinking, but when it is less normal and self-evident, its
social meaning and attitudes toward it also change.

Naturally, the analysis presented here, based on only 47 interviews with Finnish teenagers,
does not prove that we have the definite answer to the mystery of the decline of adolescent
alcohol use. More research is needed, for instance to see whether our results are transferable to
other teenagers living in other countries. Moreover, as Vashishtha et al. (2021) have pointed out,
the global trend has not taken place in perfect synchronicity in various countries. Therefore, it
would be important to flesh out the differences in the youth cultures and the uptake of digital
communication technologies in countries at different phases of the change. Based on such qua-
litative analyses, it might also be possible to create data that captures the changes in youngsters’
interaction patterns and alcohol consumption in ways that evade the ecological fallacy discussed
above. In terms of quantitative inquiries, it would be beneficial to study whether the methodology
could be developed to overcome the problem of conflating measurements both on individual and aggregate level (Pape et al., 2018, p. S110).

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