“I Feel Like They’Re Going to Think I’M Boring”: Stereotype Threats and the Experiences of Non-Drinking Students

Anthony Grimes, Manchester Business School, UK
Emma Banister, Manchester Business School, UK
Maria Piacentini, Lancaster University Management School, UK

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“I Feel Like They’re Going to Think I’m Boring”: Stereotype Threats and the Experiences of Non-Drinking Students

Emma Banister, Manchester Business School, UK*
Anthony Grimes, Manchester Business School, UK*
Maria Piacentini, Lancaster University Management School, UK*

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

High levels of alcohol consumption are a major concern to governments across Europe and the US. Alcohol plays an important facilitative role in young people’s attempts to create social identities (Griffin et al, 2009) and is viewed by many as an essential aspect of young people’s ability to ‘perform sociability’ (Abel and Plumridge 2004: 492) playing a particularly central role in the social lives of many students (Gill, 2002; Goftron, 1990; Webb et al., 1996). Recent data suggests growing numbers of young people do not drink, or drink very little (Smith and Foxcroft, 2009; Measham and Östergaard, 2009; Measham, 2008) and increasing numbers of studies seek to understand the experiences of non-drinkers (Cherrier and Gurrieri, 2012; Conroy and DeVisser, 2012; Kinney and Kinney 2013; Nairn et al 2006; Piacentini and Banister 2009, 2012).

Notably for this study, prior work describes the negative labeling or stereotyping felt by non-drinkers (Piacentini et al, 2012). The awareness and fear of potential negative stereotyping is known as a stereotype threat, the “situational predicament caused by the awareness that one might be treated differently because of a negative stereotype about one’s group” (Lee et al, 2011: 343). For stereotype threats to be experienced, the person needs only be aware of the potential to be negatively labelled (Steele and Aronson, 1995). People fear others’ judgement of them on the basis of stereotypical views (of non-drinkers) and efforts are made to reduce this stereotype threat being activated or applied, including avoiding social situations that could emphasise the negative stereotypes (Adkins and Ozanne, 2005; Piacentini and Banister, 2009). The consumer domain lacks understanding of the mechanisms and conditions under which (potentially) stereotyped consumers operate and act in relation to non-stereotyped consumers (Lee et al, 2011). In this study we address this gap by exploring: the experiences and evidence of stereotyping among non-drinking students; their interpretations of stereotyping; and some of the causes and consequences of perceived threat of stereotyping.

METHODS

Nineteen undergraduate students participated in interviews which varied in length from 45 minutes to two hours. An agreed approximate interview schedule was compiled, but our aim was to have an informed conversation with participants, accepting that their varied experiences would lead to diverse discussions.

FINDINGS

In contrast to Kinney and Kinney (2013) who focus on the experience and management of stigma by non-drinkers, we set out to understand the causes and consequences of the threat of stereotyping amongst non-drinking undergraduate students. While we do not find notable evidence of extreme attitudes and behaviours towards non-drinkers that constitute stigmatisation (as reported in Kinney and Kinney 2013), the fear of stereotyping – and particularly of being negatively judged - is common across respondents, regardless of the nature of their experiences. Specifically, respondents cite the fear of being considered boring, a burden, immature, strange or simply not liked because of their decision to abstain from drinking.

“I do find it harder to meet people because I don’t drink. I find that, probably, I have less confidence because I always feel like people are going to judge me for it... And I feel like they’re going to think I’m boring” (Louise)

This perceived threat of stereotyping is evident across the sample, and remains a prominent factor even in the face of experiential evidence to the contrary. For example, non-drinkers often indicated that, despite their initial concerns, drinkers they know do not judge or stereotype them. Yet respondents maintain that they feel threatened by other drinkers, which is as expected from Lee et al (2012).

“I just thought what if everyone’s drunk and they’re like … what if they start being kind of rude; or, you know…. Not my friends but other people.” (Ameena)

In sustaining this position, friends are deemed as special with different attitudes towards non-drinkers than the majority of the student population, although there is often little experiential evidence to support this.

“My closer friend groups actually adjusted stuff for me. So for example, they’ll have drinks and they, like last time that we played the [drinking] games, they made me have like raw black coffee without sugar which I really hate, they know that I hate that… so they actually… modified the situation…. I find it really unusual. I don’t think a lot of people would do that.” (Khatun)

Given the perceived threat of stereotyping does not appear to be entirely (or even primarily) linked to actual experience, the question of what causes or heightens this sense of threat is of great importance. In this respect, we find that the perceived threat of stereotyping appears to dissipate with greater self-confidence, security and a clearer sense of self-identity in a wider context. Factors that facilitate these traits (like growing maturity and established friendship groups) are likely to reduce the fear of stereotyping, whilst those that hinder their development (like moving away from family and friends, beginning a new degree course, etc.) are likely to enhance the perceived threat.

DISCUSSION

Considering their apparent fear of negative stereotyping, there are a number of paths which our participants select in order to deal with, and prevent the actioning of, this perceived threat. These have commonalities with strategies adopted by non-drinkers articulated elsewhere (e.g. Kinney and Kinney 2013; Nairn et al. 2006; Piacentini and Banister 2009) but are taken here in response to the perceived threat of stereotyping rather than direct experience.

The consequences of this perceived threat include attempts by non-drinkers to exclude themselves from drinking contexts and social engagement with drinkers (a preventative measure); concealment of their non-drinking (a limitation strategy); and finally overt self-confidence, a more positively positioned strategy. This last strategy serves to promote non-drinking as a viable option for those with a strong character, countering the threat of negative stereotyping (and in the process often stereotyping drinkers as weaker characters, less
in control). The implications of the findings for research and policy in this area will be discussed in the full paper.

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