Identity Refusal and the Non-Drinking Self

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We examine the identity refusal work of non-drinking university students who contest the collective ‘non-drinker’ identity by employing a range of identity refusal positions. We outline these positions and contribute to theoretical development in the CCT identity projects stream. This identity refusal risks providing support for the stigmatized non-drinker identity.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction
This paper focuses on the identity refusal work of consumers; a refusal to accept a collective (‘non-drinker’) identity. Prior academic studies have invariably positioned non-drinkers in terms of collective identities based on their (non) drinking behaviors and motivations. In contrast we seek to develop understanding of the means by which non-drinkers defy or refuse the collective identity that is bestowed upon them, that of ‘the non-drinker’.

Conceptual framing
We frame our study within CCT-oriented work which has focused on the way in which marginalized groups seek to develop legitimate and positive collective identities (e.g. Izber-Bilgin, 2012; Scarboto & Fischer, 2013); adopt practices of demythologization in order to protect themselves from identity devaluation (Arsel & Thompson, 2011); and demonstrate symbolic identities through the refusal of tastes (Wilks, 1997). Prior work provides examples of contexts where consumers are drawn to a particular practice, identity or brand yet disagree with the connotations, associations or meanings that others link to their consumption choices.

Non-drinkers are invariably positioned in terms of collective identities based on their (non) drinking behaviors and motivations (e.g. Nairn et al., 2006). The identity position as a non-drinker is, therefore, primarily understood as a spoilt identity (Goffman, 2009), which necessitates the employment of strategies for stigma management (Herman-Kinney & Kinney, 2013). While a number of studies have explored identity work in relation to non-drinking practices, these studies do not identify circumstances where those who do not drink question their assigned identity as a non-drinker; suggesting an acceptance of the (non-drinking) identity yet the challenge of what to do with it, how to re-position it. In contrast the concept of identity refusal has received little research attention. We question whether non-drinking is (always) perceived as an effective or relevant means of categorization by non-drinkers themselves, and consider this question in relation to work focused on consumption communities.

For some alcohol abstainers, not consuming alcohol can be an integral part of an important collective identity. However, under what conditions do consumers refuse a collective identity, perceiving it as an irrelevant or unwarranted identity marker? In community terms, some non-drinkers view the ‘non-drinking’ community as too heterogeneous (Thomas et al., 2014) to suggest shared experience. While communities of practice, by definition, suggest shared practices (e.g. not drinking alcohol), these shared practices should reflect a common endeavor (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). The focus of our study is on those consumers who ‘happen’ to share practices with others (not drinking alcohol) but reject commonalities, shared meanings, experiences and endeavors; essentially they resist the notion that not drinking alcohol is relevant to their identity work.

Methods
Eighteen undergraduate students participated in interviews. These 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 and discussion
Our findings reveal that non-drinkers specifically refuse understandings that position their non-drinking practices as central to their identity work, a set of practices that we term ‘identity refusal’. We elaborate this understanding with four themes: (1) Irrelevant identity marker: rejection of the ‘community’ of non-drinkers; (2) A matter of taste, not a moral judgment; (3) An identity marker but not relevant to me; (4) Concealment: the secret non-drinking self. These themes range from a complete rejection of the relevance of the non-drinker as an identity marker (1), to the concealment of non-drinking practices (4), a concealment that provides support for the existence of a non-drinking community with associated practices.

We demonstrate that identity refusal can be understood as a form of distancing from the perceived community of practice of the non-drinker. We reveal a complexity around defining ‘otherness’. We demonstrate that for some non-drinkers, it is non-drinkers who are ‘othered’ and viewed as more alien than drinkers. We therefore demonstrate that ‘otherness’ or difference is constructed in relation to consumers, but also in relation to other non-consumers.

We question whether alcohol refusal can be understood as a personal act of resistance (incorporating symbolic associations), regardless of the route to abstention and whether or not there are conscious political/ideological motivations (Portwood-Stacer, 2013). For some non-drinkers, the potential ‘misreading’ emerges from them not consuming something that has become normalized within their wider culture. The identity that they distance themselves from frustrates them, because they do not see it as their own making. Their refusal to embrace the identity, however, risks providing tacit support for the negative connotations (e.g. not social) and an acceptance that these associations are relevant to abstainers more generally. This risks marginalizing non-drinkers further and emphasizing abstainers’ positioning as against the norm, and is a key concern for public policy and social marketing in this context.

It is clear there is not one unified, homogeneous community of non-drinkers, and our informants demonstrate their refusal to be identified in this way. From a public policy point of view we need to be more open and informed to the heterogeneity that exists within non-drinkers (Thomas et al., 2013), and indeed what value emerges from this identification at all, since some people (such as our first category of informants) refuse to be identified in these terms.

REFERENCES


