

Rural Youth and Alcohol Use

by

Jean A. Thompson

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ABSTRACT

RURAL YOUTH AND ALCOHOL USE

Jean A. Thompson
University of Guelph, 2020

Advisor:
Dr. Al Lauzon

By exploring the reflections University of Guelph students had on their high school drinking experiences, this thesis discusses themes that provide insights into the contexts of rural youth drinking practices in Ontario. While these themes are not generalizable beyond the study, they do speak to common phenomena that contribute to a deeper understanding of alcohol use amongst rural youth. Expectedly, several social and cultural factors influenced where, when, and with whom participants first and then subsequently used alcohol. These factors included ethnicity and religion, rurality, gender, and elements of the North American high school experience. Relationships, both existing prior to alcohol use and because of it, also impacted the ways in which participants used alcohol. Finally, deterrents to alcohol use are discussed noting that none were successful in encouraging any of the participants to abstain completely from alcohol, and their effectiveness at reducing harms was not measured in this study.

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NOMENCLATURE

Standard Drink

One standard drink could be one of the following:

- 12 ounces/341 ml of beer made with 5% alcohol content
- 5 ounces/142 ml of wine made with 12% alcohol content
- 1.5 ounces/43 ml of spirits made with 40% alcohol content (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2008)

Binge Drinking (also known as Heavy Episodic Drinking)

- Five or more drinks for a male on one occasion
- Four or more drinks for a female on one occasion (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2008)

Frequent Binge Drinking

- Binge drinking on 4 or more days in the past month (Boak et al., 2017)

Harmful Drinking

- Based on scoring of the World Health Organization's Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) screen
- A pattern of alcohol use that is already causing harm such as injuries (Boak et al., 2017)

Hazardous Drinking

- Based on scoring of the World Health Organization's Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) screen
- A pattern of alcohol use that increases the likelihood of future physical, social, or mental health problems which includes dependence (Boak et al., 2017)

Canada's Low Risk Drinking Guidelines

State that:

- Women should consume no more than 10 drinks a week, with no more than 2 drinks a day most days
- Men should consume no more than 15 drinks a week, with no more than 3 drinks a day most days
- On special occasions women can reduce their risk of injury and harm by drinking no more than 3 drinks at a time
- On special occasions men can reduce their risk of injury and harm by drinking no more than 4 drinks at a time (Butt et al, 2011).

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1 Introduction

Rural youth drink more frequently and in greater quantities than their urban counterparts, and Ontario youth are by no means an exception (Boak et al., 2015), (Alberta Alcohol & Drug Abuse Commission, 2007). In rural regions across the province, youth are drinking more harmfully or hazardously than their city-dwelling peers (Boak et al., 2017). While this puts them at greater risk of sexual violence, injury, academic disruptions, and the harms associated with drinking and driving because of alcohol use than their counterparts, it also increases the population's likelihood of experiencing alcohol related use or abuse issues later in life as research has demonstrated that the age of first use of alcohol has such implications (Chou & Pickering, 1992; Skidmore et al., 2011). Considering the risks associated with excessive alcohol use, and how risks are greater for rural youth, determining the motivations and context for the choice to use alcohol to intoxication is very important. Quantitative data has been regularly collected on the use of alcohol amongst youth throughout Ontario, Canada, and around the world for decades (Alberta Alcohol & Drug Abuse Commission, 2007; Boak et al., 2015; Measham & Ostergaard, 2011; Schrans et al., 2008). There has also been considerable research into intervention strategies to reduce alcohol related harms amongst youth (Giesbrecht, N. & Bosma, L., 2011; Hughes, C. et al., 2008). However, bridging research is limited in that there is little qualitative data to contextualize the motivations for excessive alcohol use -- amongst rural youth or otherwise. Similarly, while interventions are tried quite often as a result of the significant impacts on individuals and

communities of excessive alcohol use amongst rural youth, few results are published for implementation elsewhere.

1.1 Location

Ontario's biannual student survey on drug use and health has shown a precipitous drop in alcohol use over the more than forty years the study has been conducted with 72.8% of students using alcohol in 1977 and 41.7% of students using alcohol in 2019. Additionally, hazardous and harmful drinking have reached all-time lows in the province for high school students. Still, alcohol continues to be the most frequently used substance of youth in grades 9 to 12 in Ontario. Further still, students in the Greater Toronto Area are statistically less likely to report being drunk than all other areas of the province. Outside of the province's major urban centres, youth are also more likely to drink hazardously or harmfully (Boak et al., 2019). This is consistent with research in Alberta that demonstrates that the areas outside of the province's big cities that youth are drinking more dangerously than their urban counterparts (Alberta Alcohol & Drug Abuse Commission, 2007). These generalizations about Ontario's urban and rural students are challenging to impose on a single community as much of the research is all conducted by defining regions by their Local Health Integration Network (LHIN). Due to low participation rates in some areas, these LHINs have been collapsed on occasion for analysis. While Ontario is a very large region with varying youth subcultures throughout, the sporadic nature of the existing data could be enhanced with an equally wide qualitative dataset. By interviewing recent youth from rural locales throughout Ontario,

this project sought to help provide context to the quantitative research that was previously completed.

1.2 Goal & Objectives

Goal

When information about youth and alcohol use does exist, it exists primarily from survey data. Very little qualitative research has been done on the subject. The purpose of this study was to explore the social and contextual motivations for alcohol use in rural youth with attention being paid to the youths' reflections on their experiences of alcohol use. This study sought to reveal the impact of alcohol use on the lives of young, rural people by exploring the contexts in which university students from rural areas drank while in high school.

Objectives

- To determine social and contextual factors that lead to the first instance of alcohol use amongst youth from rural areas
- To determine social and contextual factors that lead to subsequent alcohol use for youth from rural areas
- To investigate rural youths' reflections of their experiences of past instances of use and the impacts on their lives

1.3 Methodology

Personal Connection

Perhaps not despite but because my personal life has involved excessive alcohol consumption in a variety of ways, I was ignorant to the importance of study in this area for a considerable amount of time. In 2012, I was working at a university on the east coast at a period when Atlantic Canadian universities began considerable work in reducing alcohol related harms experienced by students that the importance and impact of this work became clearer to me. I also found myself meeting with students who lived in the residences in which I worked on a regular basis after they had been taken to hospital, walked off into the cold, or experienced and/or perpetrated sexual violence after a night of drinking. These students' upbringings were very different from the previous group of students I had been working with who attended an international education centre operated by a Canadian institution. The two groups differed in their socio-economic statuses as well as whether they were likely to have grown up rurally. What was similar was the lack of entertainment beyond alcohol use near the schools. Both were situated far from major cities.

When I left the east coast and moved to the University of Guelph to work in wellness education, the focus on alcohol use amongst student affairs practitioners was still evident.

One of my first major projects was to develop a social norms training program for student leaders that hoped to correct misconceptions of alcohol use on the campus.

Data suggested that students believed far more students drank, and in greater quantities, than reality dictated (NCHA, 2013). While this pattern existed at many other universities that were involved with the study, one statistic caught my attention. Essentially half of students at the University of Guelph had used alcohol before the age of 16 and more than a third had been drunk before the age of 16 (University of Guelph, 2014). I was immensely curious about these statistics as an early age of onset of alcohol use is a serious indicator of future alcohol use and abuse issues (Chou & Pickering, 1992; Skidmore et al., 2011). I was also hooked on exploring this finding further as I wondered if it had anything to do with my prior observations around rural upbringings.

It was only around this time that I began to consider my own youth spent in a rural area as a considerable influence on not only my perceptions around alcohol use, but on many elements of my character. I gave considerable recognition to the fact that both of my parents pursued university education for being able to easily blend into undergraduate life which made navigating a city only one challenge I needed to overcome and resulted in many of my new friends surprised to learn I had grown up on a farm. This ability to slip between worlds, at some point, caused me to forget the importance of my first 18 years in small-town Ontario where I attended bush parties and was intoxicated before the age of 16, which literature suggests places people at risk of alcohol use disorders later in life, a statistic which will be discussed throughout this research (Chou & Pickering, 1992; Skidmore et al., 2011). Initially, my alcohol use was only around other teenage girls, and then later at mixed-gender parties as I aged and

believed I was learning how to handle my alcohol. My experiences parallel many of the findings for typical use amongst rural youth. My experiences also resulted in typical harm including concern from parents, injury, and sexual violence (Schrans et al., 2008).

While my professional and personal lives (if they can be distinguished) have both involved the subject of excessive alcohol use by rural youth, I also find it important to note that again, perhaps not despite of this fact but because of it, I do not abstain from alcohol and enjoy using it socially at home, at restaurants and bars, and with family and friends. My experiences in my youth and at work have contributed to trying to balance my constructed views of alcohol use, leisure, and wellbeing.

Epistemology

Given the significance the above discussion places on my own development and experiences on my current attitudes, interests, and reality, it may not be surprising that this research took a constructivist approach to design and analysis. As the research explored youths' motivations for alcohol use, the context and attitudes that shape those actions and choices were considered. This research attempted to understand the meaning of the subject of youth and alcohol use, while also exploring the meaning of alcohol use in the lives of the youth participating in such behaviour, and acknowledged that these youths' actions are a result of their attempts to make meaning of their own experiences and observations. Considering the gap in the literature of qualitative research related to rural youth's alcohol use, there is importance in exploring the way youth perceive alcohol to impact their lives.

Conceptual Framework

The sampling for this study primarily relied on the existing grey literature from provincial surveys, while analysis considered the findings of similar qualitative studies from other grey literature from Nova Scotia while academic literature will influence sampling, interview questions, as well as analysis (Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission, 2007; Boak et al., 2015; Schrans et al., 2008). Research in alcohol harm reduction and alcohol use prevention including intervention strategies was also considered, as well as research about the impacts of alcohol use on youth (Boden & Ferguson, 2011; Chou & Picking, 1992; Giesbrecht & Bosma, 2011; Hughes et al., 2008; Meaghan & Ostergaard, 2011; Skidmore et al., 2011). What literature on motivating factors of alcohol use exist were also used (Strunin et al., 2015; Swaim et al., 2010). Based on these studies, this project believed that peer pressure, gender, culture/ethnicity, age, local policy, age of first use, and perceived norms would impact whether or not youth used alcohol to excess, what their first use experience was like, and the experiences of youth while using excessive amounts of alcohol which is visualized below.

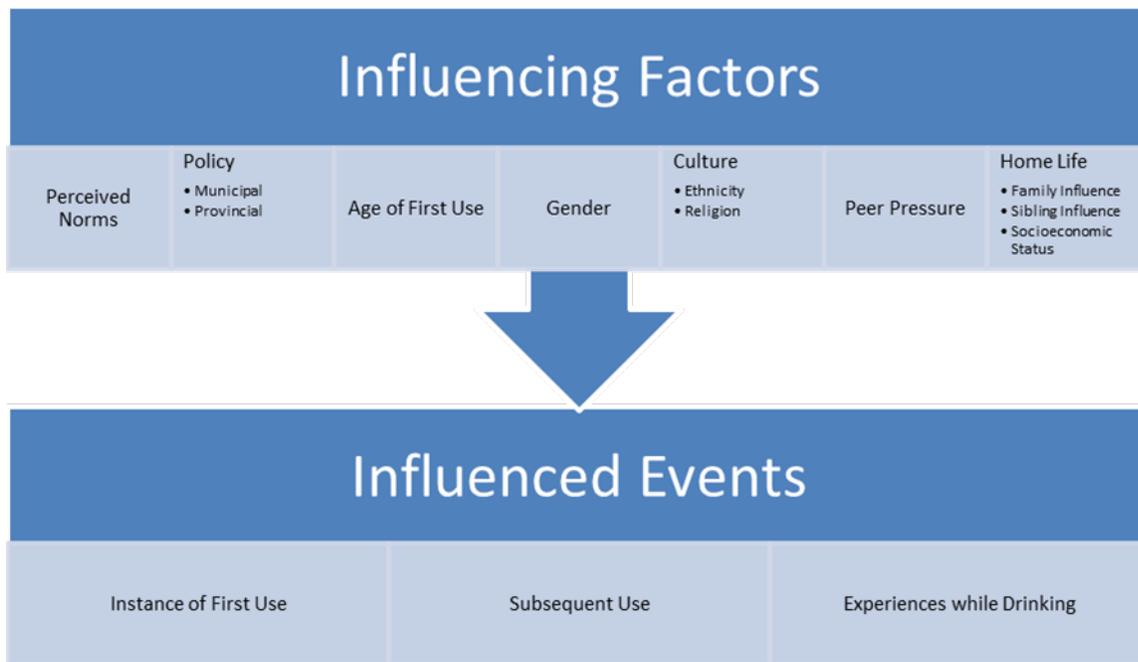


Figure 1: Anticipated Influencing Factors

1.4 Data Collection Methods

Interviews were conducted with twelve individuals who grew up in rural Ontario and are now attending the University of Guelph as students. They were invited to participate in the study if they were already of legal drinking age, that is, at least 19 years old. They needed to also be under the age of 25 in order to compare more recent quantitative data to their experiences.

Data Collection Safeguards

Data, once collected, was the responsibility of the primary researcher. The data was encrypted on a secure device. The recordings and transcriptions were stored on an encrypted device and deleted from any initial devices. Data will be discarded after 5 years.

Risks to Participants

Participants risked repercussions from others for their participation in a study around illegal behaviour. The participants also risked having their behaviour or experiences reported to the appropriate body by the researcher if it was warranted, but this was never the case. In reporting, anonymity may be difficult to maintain due to population size in small communities.

Benefits to Participants and Community

This project shared findings with participants. Depending on the context, the final research may be presented to various communities including pertinent students, staff, and faculty at the University of Guelph.

1.5 Sampling Methodology

Younger youth tend to drink with peers of their own gender, however as students age, they no longer tend to drink separately (Schrans et al., 2008). As such, finding a balance between equal numbers men and women for this study was important as experiences may differ.

University of Guelph students were invited to participate in the study if they met the above criteria. They needed to self-identify as participants in the study based on seeing non-targeted advertisements on posters, social media post, and through email listservs. As an employee of the University of Guelph working on alcohol use education initiatives, I refrained from directly recruiting any individual or group.

After the interviews, NVIVO software was used to assist with coding and analysis of the collected data. Emerging analysis provided coding for the transcribed data. Analysis concluded when no new themes were found.

1.6 Limitations

A major limitation to my capacity for extensive research and analysis was my inability to spend extensive amounts of time in the field nurturing relationships and conducting research due to my full-time job. As a part-time graduate student, I was also limited in the amount of time spent on the project due to appropriate time to graduation. This professional work and my personal experiences with the subject matter are also limitations as bias may encroach the research, analysis, and conclusions. The format of this research may have also limited the outcomes. The information provided in the interviews was filtered by the views and recollections of the participants and may further be impacted by my own bias. My presence may also have biased the responses as my professional work includes providing alcohol harm reduction education. The interviews were held outside of the typical context of excessive alcohol use for rural youth, and thus may not have allowed for an accurate retelling of events.

1.7 Assumptions

While the research design anticipated the inability to draw generalizations from the data, it also assumed that the recruitment process would produce participants that fit a typical rural youth drinking experience. The approach also assumed that participants

would be comfortable sharing their motivations and experiences with the researcher.

The project does not assume that the participants, and thus the research, speaks for all youth in rural Ontario, and certainly not all rural youth more broadly speaking..

1.8 Significance of the Study

This study allowed for the voices of rural youth to be shared and summarized. There is significance for the province in that this study allowed for greater insight into the reasons youth choose to engage in excessive alcohol consumption. As this research explored the experiences of University of Guelph students, the campus now has greater insights into its students to develop appropriate supports. Additionally, the study contributes to a gap in the literature around motivations for excessive alcohol use amongst youth in general, and particularly amongst rural youth. It may serve as a template for future studies in other regions to bridge the gap between quantitative data and a selected intervention. This may allow for interventions to be more effective as they attempt to reduce the risk of harms from alcohol use amongst rural youth, thereby contributing to greater health and wellbeing for individuals and the communities at large in the short and long-term.

1.9 Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is presented over the course of six chapters followed by appropriate appendices. This chapter, the first, introduces the importance of the study and the researcher's background with the subject matter. The second chapter reviews relevant

literature related to alcohol use in Canada, alcohol use amongst Ontarian youth, and broader ways to study alcohol use in the form of interventions or internationally.

Chapter three provides an explanation of the methodological approach undertaken in this research. In chapter four, the research findings are explained and then discussed in chapter five. The thesis' conclusion found in chapter six reviews the key findings of the research, its limitations, and potential future areas of research based on the discoveries of this project.

2 Literature Review

Extensive research has been conducted on alcohol use, especially amongst youth. A significant amount of this research involves quantitative analysis of consumption amounts, frequency of use, as well as individual and environmental factors that may lead to use on a population basis. Research has been conducted on the efficacy of interventions (Giesbrecht & Bosma, 2011), on familiar influences (Strunin et al., 2015), and short- and long-term harms from alcohol use have been studied. Research of this manner has been conducted all over the world (Swain et al., 2010), (Meagham & Ostergaard, 2011; Strunin et al., 2015). Some of this research has considered the rurality of the study participants (Hughes et al, 2008; Alberta Alcohol & Drug Abuse Commission, 2007; Swain et al., 2010), however, less has used qualitative methods to provide context to the existing data. Consequently, youth's beliefs and attitudes about their alcohol use have received little scholarship to date, particularly in rural Ontario.

Consistently, research has demonstrated that the age of first use of alcohol has implications for alcohol use and abuse issues later in life (Chou & Pickering, 1992; Skidmore et al., 2011). As a result, researchers have tested numerous intervention strategies that avoid the onset of alcohol use at an early age and have also investigated risk factors that may lead to early onset drinking (Geisbrecht & Bosma, 2011; Skidmore et al., 2011). What little scholarship exists around the context in which youth drink in rural Ontario requires further inquiry to develop intervention strategies that consider the particular needs of the community to be able to reduce alcohol related harms of which rural youth are more susceptible than their urban peers (Swain et al., 2010).

2.1 Ontario Alcohol Policy

Ontario's legal drinking has been 19 since 1978 (LCBO, 2016). Most of Canada's provinces are consistent with this age limit except for Alberta, Manitoba, and Quebec that require people be at least 18 years old to legally purchase or consume alcohol (CCSA, 2016). While provinces legislate who may legally access alcohol as well as how alcohol is sold and distributed, municipalities and smaller governments can play a significant role in reducing rates of intoxication, verbal abuse, underage drinking, violence, vandalism and litter in the creation and enforcement of more locally based policy. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health encourages all Ontario municipalities to establish rules for how alcohol can be used and distributed in municipally owned and operated venues. Municipal Alcohol Policies (MAPs) have been effective in reducing alcohol related harms in towns and cities across Ontario as controls are placed on the use and sale of alcohol in arenas, concert venues, and other public spaces (Narbonne-Fortin et al., 2003). A study of 107 communities using MAPs found a reduction in alcohol related problems by 44% with only 7% of municipalities reporting no change in issues related to alcohol in municipal venues (Giesbrecht & Bosma, 2011). While MAPs do not specifically target alcohol use amongst youth, training for servers around personal identification requirements, and establishing legal-drinking-age only areas of venues are regular components of a Municipal Alcohol Policy (Narbonne-Fortin et al., 2003). As such, any research on youth alcohol use in Ontario communities should consider whether a MAP has been prepared for that locality and what provisions address youth. With this knowledge, researchers may identify whether the MAP's

enforcement is effective at reducing underage alcohol use or concentrate their investigation on areas that are not within the MAP's purview with the assumption that those areas may allow for greater risk to youth. Further review of the role that the community's MAP contributes to youth alcohol consumption should be explored. There is also opportunity to discuss with youth what perceptions they have of their community's MAP policies, and whether they circumvent any of those policies to obtain or use alcohol.

Ontario municipalities create and review their MAPs on their own timelines. As an example, Goderich reviewed its MAP in 2015 and published an *Alcohol Risk Management Policy*. The stated purposes of the by-law and policy were to educate and provide procedures to the public hosting events in municipal facilities, to reduce liability, to encourage and reinforce safer drinking practices, and to ensure that alcohol use at events were not the stated purpose of such events but, instead, a safe part of the event. According to the documents themselves, these rules were introduced partially in response to a report and media attention on the fact that South Western Ontario had the highest number of drinks consumed per week in the province and the highest incidence of drinking and driving according to a 2011 Toronto Star report referred to in the policy (The Corporation of the Town of Goderich, 2015). Youth are explicitly mentioned in the policy in that it recommends that alcohol not be served at youth focused events such as minor league sports games, and then also discusses how events that will attract both youth and adults should address the use of alcohol by distinguishing legal-drinking aged adults (i.e., those above 19 years of age) from minors by requiring those of legal

drinking age to wear bracelets. Event staff or volunteers should require identification from anyone who appears to be under the age of 30 and explains that a physical separation of space should be made between alcohol free areas and those where alcohol will be consumed. The ratio of these spaces at the event should be in proportion to the number of minors expected in attendance (The Corporation of the Town of Goderich, 2015).

The reach of this policy should be noted. There are only two indoor locations and three outdoor locations under the explicit purview of this policy, with the public able to make application to have other areas considered (The Corporation of the Town of Goderich, 2015). Further investigation could determine if the limited access to locations owned by the municipality where alcohol is able to be consumed safely is encouraging safer drinking practices for the community or reducing them. This is particularly important for youth and young people as one of the locations under purview of the policy is a senior's centre, thereby potentially reducing the opportunity for younger people to access this safer drinking location either due to stigma or social norms.

Educational Related Policy

Municipal Alcohol Policies may include some educational information within them. This is the case for Goderich as their policy contains appendices with the Canadian Low Risk Drinking Guidelines as well as a portion that defines standard drink sizes. It also encourages that these pieces of information be posted at events in municipal areas where alcohol will be consumed but does not require it (The Corporation of the Town of Goderich, 2015).

Perhaps the alcohol related policy with the most reach when it comes to Ontario youth is the Health and Physical Education Curriculum. The 2015 and then subsequent 2019 revisions of the curriculum for use in both Ontario elementary and high schools acknowledges that education is critical in preventing substance abuse, and that alcohol and tobacco are the most readily available drugs in the province (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015; 2019). Alcohol is introduced in the curriculum as early as grade three but is primarily focused on the use by adults and in identifying if that use is problematic. By grade 5, students are introduced to drink refusal skills, the short- and long-term impacts of alcohol use, and factors that may influence decision making around alcohol use. As the grades progress, teaching includes harm reduction techniques such as not mixing substances and connects problematic substance use with mental health challenges. Later, discussions are also had around alcohol, consent, and sexual activities. By the time students reach high school (grade 9), the curriculum dictates that they already be exposed to these conversations in the classroom. With grade 9 being the last year students in Ontario are required to take a health and physical activity course, the last mandated exposure to alcohol related education focuses on ways to deal with stress that do not include alcohol or other drugs and encourages youth to discuss alcohol use with their parents. There is a focus on making “healthy choices” which includes identifying others who are making such choices as people they should spend more time with in lieu of those who are making less healthy choices. The curriculum also addresses overt peer pressure and encourages assertiveness in such situations (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015).

For current university students, and students who were in elementary school when the province briefly returned to the 1998 Health and Physical Education Curriculum, youth in Ontario were still introduced to discussions around alcohol in the classroom in grade three that are related to the impacts of alcohol on the body, but did not discuss how they view alcohol use in their homes and communities among adults. In grade 5 students discussed pressures around alcohol use and refusal skills, similarly to the updated curriculum. Alcohol continued to be discussed in the classroom when teaching about substance use and abuse, but in the older curriculum there were no conversations regarding consent or sex with regards to alcohol use (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1998). It is important to note that while the updated curriculum was in place for three years, university students participating in this study are more likely to have had teachers teaching the older curriculum with regards to alcohol as they are not required to take health beyond grade nine.

2.2 Community Based Research on Youth Alcohol Use

Much of the community-based research on youth alcohol use involves the study of intervention strategies (Giesbrecht & Bosma, 2011). MAPs are one such intervention that are developed individually by communities. While MAPs and other locally based policy interventions have shown to reduce the amount of alcohol related harms in communities and, as such, can be considered effective, there are more political reasons that highlight the importance of community-based initiatives.

Central governments regularly receive funding or experience lobbying from alcohol distributors and/or manufacturers. These occurrences often block the

implementation of more comprehensive public health measures to reduce alcohol related harms even though the negative impacts of alcohol are among the top-ranking risk factors for disease and disability worldwide, having increased rapidly in the first part of this century. As a result, researchers have suggested that lower-level governments fill the gaps of policy and enforcement of alcohol control. Smaller communities can address issues of foremost importance to the members of their community and can avoid bending to the lobbyists (Giesbrecht & Bosma, 2011).

Giesbrecht and Bosma studied a variety of community-based research projects with regards to alcohol use amongst youth and determined many are designed in a consistent manner. Case studies, temporal comparisons of data, and community comparisons are research designs that are frequently used (2011). The authors created a 12-step process to designing a research study in community which may benefit the design of this study, however, there appears to be a gross oversight in the described process. The title of their chapter is *Community-Based Approaches to Prevention: Reducing High-Risk Drinking and Alcohol Related Damage among Youth and Young Adults*. Despite the focus on the community, the author's process does not mention involving locals until step #10, and even then, they necessitate that the involved community members be committed to a harm reduction approach to youth drinking. While I personally believe interventions around youth and alcohol use should be grounded in harm reduction, some communities may have experienced such a profound impact by alcohol that they believe the only approach to an intervention can be complete abstinence. If this is the desire of the community, the outside researcher

should not be responsible for changing this perspective, nor should they begin research that is against the wishes of the community members.

While Giesbrecht and Bosma's oversight in community perspectives and involvement is clear, they also suggest important caution with regards to common challenges to community-based interventions to youth alcohol use issues. Regularly, interventions attempt to take on too much, their complexity is underestimated, and researchers or interventionists may initially anticipate the community's resistance to change (2011). They also recognize that many interventions are created at the community level, without a researcher's participation, and as a result go unmeasured and/or unpublished (Giesbrecht & Bosma, 2011). The importance of sharing learning with regards to the effectiveness of interventions strategies is evident as the harms related to youth alcohol use are extensive as discussed above. Through publication, when communities identify the issues that are of importance to them, intervention designs that have proven effective in other communities can either be applied directly to the issue at hand or tailored for the community context. The work to fully create a new intervention each time is not necessary in these cases. This way, as there are so many more interventions attempted than studied, potentially due to a lack of resources to invest in studies, communities can attempt proven interventions at an accessible cost.

Proven interventions include providing social norming educational programming to communities. American universities have used this approach effectively including the University of Arizona that reported a reduction in heavy episodic drinking of 29% over the course of three years and Northern Illinois University that saw a drop of 44% over

10 years (Hughes et al., 2008). These initiatives taught students accurate numbers of their peers who drank and at what frequency through educational campaigns. This intervention was chosen because as more people are perceived to drink, more people drink. The reverse is also true, and so the institutions tried to correct misperceptions. This strategy was adopted for rural youth in Australia and developed with communities. The process involves collecting actual data, analyzing it for key messages, disseminating these messages, and then evaluating the impact. The study involved four rural, Tasmanian, public high schools with two schools experiencing the intervention and two schools acting as controls. Preliminary reports suggested that youth overestimated the number of youths drinking two or more times per week and underestimated the number of youth drinking one time a month or less. Researchers attempted to correct this belief in youth in the hopes it would alter alcohol use behaviours. In preliminary findings researchers did find that the overestimation of friends' alcohol use was the only predictor for the age of onset of alcohol use. This, the researchers explain, peer influence is often conflated with overt peer pressure to drink. Educational programming that causes youth to believe that they will be overtly pressured into using alcohol has been shown to be ineffective, while normalizing actual behaviour instead of perceived behaviour can be effective at reducing alcohol related harms (Hughes et al., 2008). The Canadian Centre for Substance Abuse advocates this strategy as effective health promotion for both communities and campuses (CCSA, 2016).

2.3 Recommendations for Working with Youth on Alcohol Use

Canadian public health organizations have studied alcohol use amongst youth for decades (Boak et al., 2019; Alberta Alcohol & Drug Abuse Commission, 2005; Schrans et al., 2008). This has allowed for important lessons to be learned with regards to how to conduct this work in the future. Schrans et al.'s 2008 study of youth in Nova Scotia discovered findings that they stressed as important for future work within that particular province but are worth considering in other provincial contexts as limited qualitative data collection has been completed in other Canadian jurisdictions. In particular, the study used focus groups to build context for the extensive amounts of data collected over the decades. Their study divided youth into two age groups, either 13 to 15 years old or 16 to 18 years old. This resulted in the younger participants deferring to the older youth in their focus groups for responses, and perhaps more of a concern than an incomplete sample, the younger participants were exposed to attitudes that they did not yet hold earlier than they might have been had the focus groups not occurred. The study suggested that youth be divided into age categories of 13-14, 15-16, and 17-18 instead. It also encouraged future researchers to avoid straddling education levels with its participants. Focus groups that consist of 13- and 14-year-olds should not have both students from elementary and high school; participants should be surrounded by their peers (Schrans et al., 2008).

Recommendations were also made from that study to split participants into groups based on their existing level of use of alcohol (Schrans et al., 2008). This recommendation is potentially made to avoid skewing social norm perceptions amongst

youth; however, it can have other consequences on a community. Focus groups that are created with such a sampling pattern may inadvertently connect youth to other young people who have access to alcohol, drink with the same frequency, and/or enjoy drinking to intoxication. There might be an increase in this behaviour as a result.

In addition to dividing youth into age categories, the Nova Scotia study also divided focus groups by gender and conducted their research in both urban and rural areas of the province. Schrans et al. suggested it is common place for focus groups around youth alcohol use to be divided by gender, however, they found few differences between boys and girls with regards to their primary research questions around why youth drink, how they access alcohol, and the context for their alcohol consumption. The participant sample was created to reflect existing quantitative data for the province, however, the research reminded its readers that despite the potentially accurate sampling strategy, the qualitative nature of the study explored attitudes and perceptions of the participants only, not of the province at large. Thus, generalizations were discouraged (Schrans et al., 2008).

The Schrans study revealed that youth believe that alcohol use is partially the result of a variety of pressures on young people in their communities. Many of the reasons listed, including peer pressure, expectations from parents, bullying etc. seem to be commonly held beliefs about why youth drink. I question the method of collection of these ideas, which involved youth brain storming answers to the question 'Why do youth drink?' The focus groups may have offered an opportunity to ask more exploratory questions about the youths' experiences to answer the question of 'why do youth drink.'

Instead, the study really explored the perceptions of why youth drink which was not extensively discussed in the study.

There are clear perceived reasons as to why youth drink in Nova Scotia that are worth considering when conducting qualitative research in other provinces. These include the issue of limited age appropriate ways for youth to socialize, few consequences existing around underage drinking, and stress (Schrans et al, 2008). In conducting qualitative interviews with youth from rural Ontario, these themes could also be explored without asking youth to list reasons in order to avoid the participants listing issues that are not relevant. The Nova Scotia study also found that the younger teens wanted to 'get drunk as soon as they could' while older youth believed they had settled into their drinking more (Schrans et al., 2008). Future research could also explore whether it was the youth's age that played a larger role in this attitude or the length of time since they first began using alcohol. This would be of importance to studies involving rural youth as the age of first use amongst rural youth is statistically younger than their urban counterparts (Boak et al., 2015).

The Nova Scotia study attempted to consider rurality; however, the research design did not allow for rural boys and girls and age levels to be compared against each other. It did, however, have findings about gender. While the study stated that it found few differences between boys and girls and alcohol use, it also stated that youth are more likely to drink with peers of the same gender. It also noted changes in alcohol use when genders mixed. Around girls, it was suggested that boys drank less as a result of the boys' belief that they were required to protect their female friends or dating partners.

Additionally, girls suggested that they were 'turned-off' by boys who were intoxicated. Worryingly, girls drank more when they were around boys, and boys perceived this to improve their chances of sexual activity (Schrans et al., 2008). The authors do not name this as predatory sexual behaviour nor as sexual violence. There is little concern shown to explore these attitudes or beliefs about alcohol-assisted sexual assault. With sexual violence a pervasive alcohol related harm, it would be incumbent upon future research to explore this issue.

2.4 Qualitative Research in Youth and Alcohol Use

While much data has been collected around youth and their alcohol use, little study has occurred to establish greater context for the quantitative information, particularly at the elementary and high school levels. The Nova Scotia research is one of very few studies that has explored youth behaviour, attitudes, and beliefs around alcohol using focus groups (Schrans et al., 2008). More qualitative studies are emerging with regards to youth and their alcohol use; however, these studies often fail to explore the early teen years. This is potentially due to restraints around consent and ethics approval for studies. However, Schrans et al. were able to conduct their research in accordance with tri-council ethical standards, which included seeking permission from parents for their children to be a part of the study. As a result, youth at high-risk of alcohol related harms were unable to be a part of the study. Youth that live without their biological parents are at greater risk of using and abusing alcohol. As these youths could have experienced challenges in seeking consent from parents, they were left out of the study all together (Schrans et al., 2008). As a result, there is a gap in the

literature involving those most at risk of alcohol related harms that necessitates research.

Seeking consent from parents is not always necessary when researching with youth if the research is deemed to be low risk to participants. If youth are participating in research that is similar to a regular activity they are used to participating in, and the research activity is of equal risk or less risk than that regular activity, then parental consent may not be necessary (Mitchell, 2013). As discussed above, it could also limit participation if parents choose to control with whom their children speak (Williams, 2006). Williams also suggests that parental consent may not be required if it is inadvisable or against the best interest of the youth participant (2006). Participation in a research study about illegal behaviours may not be in the best interest of the youth to disclose this to their parents. To help ensure safety in these circumstances, Williams encourages criminal record checks be conducted on researchers and that limits of confidentiality and anonymity be very clearly defined for youth who are self-consenting to research (2006). While researchers may be bound by a duty to disclose criminal acts, if this disclosure could compromise the research or the relationship with the researcher, it may be unethical to do so (Williams, 2006). With these considerations in mind, research on youth and the illegal behaviour of their alcohol use could be conducted without requiring consent from parents. It may be further supported by the fact that youth may be deemed competent to receive services or support around alcohol use but are 'protected' from taking part in evaluative research aimed at improving those services and support (Williams, 2006).

The impact that family members have on a young person's alcohol use was explored by Strunin et. al in 2015, but this was solely within the Mexican context. The study found that extended family members could influence how a young person used alcohol, especially in families in which a young person was introduced to the concept of wine with food; these youths were less likely to engage in risky alcohol use behaviour (Strunin et al., 2015). Extrapolating these results more widely is cautioned as how youth use alcohol is varied between cultures (Measham & Ostergaard, 2011). Additionally, the Strunin et al. study conducted interviews with first-year university students on their beliefs and behaviours around alcohol use (2015). As Schrans found that age impacted how youth used alcohol (2008), it is not possible to conclude that youth younger than their first-year of university would be either in the same risk category or be similarly impacted by their extended family. As such, further exploration of youth and their relationships with their family members is required, particularly in the younger years as well as in cultures that do not normalize wine with food.

2.5 Culture, Ethnicity and Youth Alcohol Use

Attitudes around alcohol use do not just vary between age groups as demonstrated above but are also documented to be considerably different between cultures. Considerable statistical data collection has occurred around youth alcohol use in Europe with the European School Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs conducted every 4 years in 35 countries, as well as with the Health Behaviour in School Age Children Survey that also collects data every 4 years throughout 41 countries (Meagham & Ostergaard, 2011). Analysis of this information as well as broader surveys

looking at adult populations have identified several alcohol consumption patterns. These include exploring wet, dry, and damp cultures, as well as wine, beer, or spirits cultures. Cultures or countries that are considered wet are those that drink a small amount of alcohol, frequently while those that are considered as dry cultures are those that drink heavily, but usually infrequently. In Europe, Southern Europe is often considered an example of a wet culture while Northern Europe is considered dry. North America is, perhaps shockingly, also divided between north and south with the US considered a wet country and Canada considered dry, that said, in both the US and Canada fewer 15-year-olds drink on a weekly basis than their European counterparts (Meagham & Ostergaard, 2011). While Meagham and Ostergaard's work explored differences amongst youth drinking across the globe, they also suggested that, particularly for youth, traditional drinking cultures have begun to merge with drinking to intoxication a wider norm. This merging is referred to as a damp model of alcohol consumption (2011). If we know that youth alcohol use patterns can merge internationally, exploring the cultural differences between youth more locally in terms of urban versus rural is also important.

While Meagham and Ostergaard's study explored generalizations across countries, Swain et al. determined that youth alcohol use patterns are the same across the United States, even when considering urban versus rural, age, or gender (2010). That study explored 260 communities with accurate stratification across variables aside from including additional communities that consisted of more than 40% of ethnic minorities than would be representative. Communities with more African Americans saw

reduced alcohol use. However, African American students living in communities that were majority white were more likely to use alcohol (Meagham & Ostergaard, 2010). The reverse was also proven to be true of ethnically Dutch students who attended schools with a larger percentage of the population identifying as a minority – the Dutch students drank less than their Dutch counterparts at more Dutch schools (Meagham & Ostergaard, 2010). Considering the role that ethnicity and cultural drinking norms played across America, it is worth exploring this concept in Canadian rural communities as well.

2.6 Alcohol Use in Youth Across Canada

Usage statistics have been collected across Canada, with Alberta, Nova Scotia, and Ontario tracking this data and publishing the results. There are, however, issues with data collection in these provinces as access to youth is usually done through schools, and provinces are divided into school boards that set different standards for youth surveys. That said, what data has been able to be collected suggests that these three provinces experience similar differences between urban and rural use. These variances suggest that youth in metropolitan areas are less likely to consume alcohol than their non-metropolitan peers (Alberta Alcohol & Drug Abuse Commission, 2007; Scrahns et al., 2008; Boak et al., 2015). As a result, youth in rural areas are at a greater risk of alcohol related harms than their urban peers, thus further exploration of rural youth drinking is required in order to develop interventions that meet their unique needs.

The Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey has been conducted every two years since 1977 and documented the trends in alcohol use amongst youth since that

time. Ontario's biannual student survey on drug use and health has shown a precipitous drop in alcohol use over the forty years the study has been conducted with 72.8% of students using alcohol in 1977 and 41.7% of students using alcohol in 2019. Additionally, hazardous and harmful drinking has reached an all-time low in the province for high school students. Still, alcohol continues to be the most frequently used substance of youth in grades 9 to 12 in Ontario. Further still, students in the Greater Toronto Area are statistically less likely to report being drunk than all other areas of the province. Outside of the province's major urban centres, youth are also more likely to drink hazardingly or harmfully (Boak et al., 2019). This is consistent with research in Alberta that demonstrates that the areas outside of the province's big cities that youth are drinking more dangerously than their urban counterparts (Alberta Alcohol & Drug Abuse Commission, 2007). These generalizations about Ontario's urban and rural students are challenging to impose on a single community as much of the research is all conducted by defining regions by their Local Health Integration Network (LHIN). Due to low participation rates in some areas, these LHINs have been collapsed on occasion for analysis. As an example, Goderich lies in the South West LHIN which, along with the Erie St. Clair LHIN suggests that 17.6% of high school students are drinking in hazardous or harmful ways. This is in comparison with the provincial average of 14.1% and other areas such as the Central West LHIN (i.e., Brampton) that has only 6.1% of its youth reporting their drinking to be harmful or hazardous (Boak et al., 2017).

While the Erie St. Clair/South West LHIN and the Central West LHIN both had an equal number of schools represented by this study, generalizations are cautioned as

that number was only 12 and the latter area's geography is significantly smaller than the combination of the other two areas. Because of the lack of clarity behind these numbers for the community, further research to provide clarity for not only what the data represents, but also for explanations of the data is needed.

In Alberta, risk factors for alcohol use include attendance at outdoor parties (Alberta Alcohol & Drug Abuse Commission, 2008). These opportunities are more available to rural youth, both inside and outside of Alberta. Limited qualitative information exists about the experiences of youth at outdoor parties. Younger youth in Alberta were more likely to only consume at special events, a term that was not defined (Alberta Alcohol & Drug Abuse Commission, 2008). Exploring the occasions for outdoor parties amongst younger grades is warranted to determine if they are perceived as special events.

Of youth who used alcohol in Alberta, there was consistent distribution of how many drinks on average a young person would consume at a time in the four surveyed areas of the province. However, other behaviours such as frequency of use were more likely to result in individual youth being labelled as hazardous drinkers in Central and Southern Alberta (44.6% and 43.2% of youth met hazardous drinking criteria, respectively) compared to Edmonton (30.9%) (Alberta alcohol & Drug Abuse Commission, 2008). This indicates that rural Alberta youth are drinking in riskier ways than their more urban counterparts.

2.7 Conclusions

While rural youth consume more alcohol and do so more hazardously than their urban counterparts, limited literature exists of a qualitative nature that provides insight into the stark figures and offers explanation as to how rural youth experience intoxication. Some focus group studies have occurred in other parts of Canada, however, published findings from research of this nature does not exist for Ontario. Qualitative studies that interview youth about their alcohol use history are not readily available. The literature that does exist provides potential topics for exploration including ethnicity, perceived drinking norms, perceptions of sexual violence, location of consumption, and a review of local government policies.

3 Research Design & Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the decisions taken in research design and describes the methods employed in data collection and analysis.

This study focuses on the lived experiences of the participants as it relates to their alcohol use as youth living in rural settings. It seeks to understand the social and contextual factors that influenced their experiences with alcohol, as well as the meaning that participants ascribed to those experiences. Thus, the researcher holds a constructivist worldview to the research. This necessitated a qualitative approach to data collection, and semi-structured interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interview questions were developed considering expectant themes identified in a literature review that built rapport and ensured basic questions were answered. Often probes were required to explore meaning or seek clarity on a response. These were then analyzed using a phenomenological approach to explore the topic with the support of NVIVO software.

3.2 Research Methodology

Two of this study's objectives were to determine social and contextual factors related to the first instance of alcohol consumption and subsequent instances of alcohol consumption. The third was to investigate their reflections of these experiences for what they see as impacts on their lives. A qualitative approach was selected to explore these questions in depth with the belief that answers to these questions can be found in the

recounting of experiences in the relatively recent past by participants through the form of semi-structured interviews. The epistemology that the researcher brought to the review and analysis of these tellings was that of constructivism, believing that the participants' responses and stories, or their knowledge or perspectives to the answers, are a construction of their experiences.

Creswell's (2015) phenomenological analysis process was then used which is based on Moustakas' approach (1994). Phenomenology, as a qualitative design method, asks questions about a singular phenomenon that all persons involved experience (Creswell, 2007). For the purposes of this study, this meant that the phenomenon of drinking in a rural context as underage youth was explored. The study investigates the meaning of this experience for the participants, and as the method encourages, determines the essence of the subject based on the descriptions of the participants. The participants shared what and how they experienced using alcohol as youth which is distilled upon analysis (Creswell, 2007).

During analysis, the researcher's experience growing up in a rural setting and working in alcohol use education was bracketed with a description of this experience found in the introduction of this thesis and in the subsequent sections. This attempt to separate the researcher's experience from that of the data through self-reflection is imperfect, however, the description in this thesis is meant to provide transparency so the reader can garner a similar view.

The researcher reviewed the transcribed data, making notes on themes. These themes were significant statements in answering the research questions such as social and cultural themes (i.e. ethnic heritage or gender) or various relationships (i.e., current friends or parents), and phenomena that were discussed regularly such as prom or fires. These themes were then both amalgamated into broader codes that responded to research questions (such as ‘access to alcohol’ or ‘deterrents to drinking’) and the data was reviewed again to be coded in NVIVO, typically with both the original theme and the broader theme. These broad themes were rewritten as summaries with links back to the original text. Textural description is found in the findings section with verbatim examples. The summaries were then reviewed for relevance in responding to the initial research question and rewritten below to describe the key learnings from the student volunteers. The distillation process of analysis describes the “essence” of the phenomenon of rural youth and alcohol consumption in the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

3.3 Researchers’ Positionality

Epistemology

This research is grounded in a constructivist approach in that it seeks to understand the meaning that participants ascribe to their alcohol use behaviours in their youth. It asks broad questions so that those being interviewed can share their past actions and attitudes and the social and cultural contexts that have shaped such things. The research focuses on the rural context for youth and alcohol use to understand the role that such a setting has on the using of such a substance, and the ways in which the

participants view the risks and experiences associated with alcohol use at a younger age.

Academic Preparation

The graduate researcher holds an undergraduate degree in Anthropology and Religious Studies that exposed them to a variety of Social Science research methods. Additionally, following the completion of graduate course work for the conference of their degree in Capacity Development and Extension, the researcher brings into this study experience with qualitative research methods that were implemented throughout this project. Completion of Tri-Council Policy Statement 2: CORE (Course on Research Ethics) was also completed to demonstrate ethical conduct for research involving humans.

Relation to the Topic & Participants

My high school experiences related to alcohol use are like many of the experiences described in this study and by its participants. I can relate to many of the behaviours expressed during the interviews, and as such was relatable in many ways with participants. This said, I am their senior by at least ten years, and my professional role as a campus staff person may have impacted being seen as an insider to their experiences. In some interactions it became clear that the interviewees interpreted my age as closer to their own, while in one interview the participant was interested in the supports I had access to as a result of my professional role.

3.4 Choice of Population

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this study had a variety of iterations in its design and particularly its choice of population. The goals of the study were to determine the social and contextual factors impacting rural youths' experiences of alcohol use, thus initially the researcher hoped to interview current youth. The concerns with such a study was that the participants would all be discussing ongoing, illegal behavior. While ethical considerations were weighed with logistical and pragmatic concerns, it was decided to interview individuals who would not be asked potentially legally compromising questions. As such, it was decided to interview recent youth who could reflect on these experiences. These reflections hoped to be differently valuable to the project in lieu of younger participants who potentially had not yet made meaning of their experiences or seen the implications of their behaviours. It was also hoped that there may be more honesty in disclosure about something that was no longer illegal, and potentially avoid providing responses that were constructed externally from themselves such as may have been a factor in the Nova Scotia study. University of Guelph students were chosen as they were accessible, their rurality is a commonly shared experience, and to be able to potentially provide recommendations to campus about its own students.

3.5 Data Collection

Participant Recruitment

University of Guelph students were invited to participate by emails sent from various student organizations on behalf of the researcher. A draft was disseminated to groups including the Central Students Association, the Inter-Hall Council and the

Student Federation of the Ontario Agricultural College along with information for a social media post should they choose to disseminate the information in that way. Further, several participants passed the information on to friends separately from the initial emails in a snowballing fashion. Four of the interviewees were known to the researcher at varying levels prior to the interviews. One had participated in safer alcohol use educational workshops led by the researcher in the past, two were involved with health promotion educational initiatives overseen by the researcher, and the fourth was familiar to the researcher due to their positional role on campus. All participants contacted the researcher first to arrange for the interviews. Recruitment letters were initially disseminated in late July, with the first interview held on August 1st. The last interview was conducted at the end of October. It is worth noting the timing of these interviews. Four occurred over Orientation Week, and two occurred in the week leading up to Homecoming.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using the guide in Appendix 4. Interview lengths varied based on responses to the key questions and discussion of emerging themes. They also varied based on the individuals' comfort in sharing – i.e., some interviews were longer than others due to long stories being told, whereas others may have been short due to succinct answers from participants. The interviews ranged in length from 25 minutes to 53 minutes with an average of 39 minutes and 18 seconds. A total of nearly 8 hours' worth of interview time was collected.

Questions were developed based on an initial literature review, hoping to illicit responses to the central research questions. At each interview, the interviewer reviewed the basic information about the study, ensured the participant met the study criteria, reviewed the consent document which the participant then signed, and collected simple responses at the start to put the interviewee at ease. Further probing questions were then asked to more explicitly respond to the research questions or to clarify and understand perspective or phenomena. The interviews were closed by asking if there was anything else the participant wanted to share about their experience drinking as youth, which sometimes led to stories that had not yet been shared and other times indicated the participant was satisfied with what they had contributed.

Sample

Twelve participants were interviewed, with a gender and geographic breakdown described in chapter four. No volunteers were deemed ineligible for the study. Their responses to the screening questionnaire deemed them admissible in that they were between the ages of 19 and 24, grew up in a rural setting, and had consumed alcohol during high school.

Sample size

At the onset of this research, a goal of 12 interviews was set. To the amazement of the researcher, precisely 12 people made contact and could be interviewed. There was no need to extend recruitment measures, nor deny people the opportunity to participate. Based on the findings below that demonstrate several emergent themes, the point of saturation seems to have been achieved.

Creswell suggest 5 – 25 interviews for phenomenological research (1998) and Morse suggests at least 6 (1994). The chosen goal of 12 was also a feasible endeavor as a part-time student conducting graduate research. Extending the data collection period may have resulted in challenges to interview times as the semester edged into midterms and could have varied the results on current drinking patterns, no longer representing a time period or more precise phenomenon.

Guetterman notes that qualitative study sizes have increased in recent years without always bringing justification (2015). As such, Guetterman's paper urges caution not in under sampling, but in superfluous sampling which could lose depth and burden more participants than need (2015). The recommendation is made to base the sample on similar published studies, however as noted in the literature review based on the topic, few exist. This said, there are many studies that use semi-structured interviews; therefore, Creswell's guidelines are used here to the point of saturation.

Selecting the sampling strategy

A nonprobable sampling strategy was implemented. Such a strategy allows for human judgement (Henry, 2009). This was important partially because there were no incentives for this study, therefore calls for participants needed to be placed in locations that were likely to find individuals that qualified to participate. The sampling strategy anticipated a convenience sample, but participants often passed the information on to others that would fit the research criteria thus the sampling process had elements of snowballing.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded by the graduate researcher and transcribed by the firm Transcript Heroes. The transcriber signed a confidentiality waiver with each submission of recordings. Transcriptions were made word-for-word. They were then read in completion by the graduate researcher. Notes were made on themes that stood out. Some of these notes were observations based on the researcher's own experience of the phenomenon being studied: rural youth and alcohol use. Others were based on the literature review. Still more emerged as themes that had not been expected.

Transcripts were then uploaded into NVIVO for coding and analysis. Transcripts were reread by the researcher for key themes about specific phenomena. Many of these themes were specific topics such as "prom" or "first instance of intoxication." These overarching topics were then reread within their topic area for meaning. A list of significant statements was developed for each of these codes. These statements were then written to include textural and structural descriptions of the experience to give the reader of this thesis an understanding of both the "what" of the topic and the "how" the participants experienced drinking as rural youth. This was based on Moustakas approach to phenomenological analysis (1994) as described by Creswell (2013). The thesis also uses the participant's own words to further illustrate this essence.

Particular phenomena are detailed in chapter four and five of this thesis along with the overarching subject of rural youth and alcohol consumption. Attention was paid to some of these specific phenomena as they were discussed so prevalently by the participants, there seemed to be specific meaning ascribed to them.

3.6 Verification and validity

Participants were asked at the start of their interviews if they wished to receive findings at the end of the study to confirm validity. All participants were interested in this process, and several eager individuals expressed interest in early findings. No themes were shared until all data was collected. The researcher also has carefully expressed their own positionality throughout this thesis, which began in the introduction and carries through this chapter.

3.7 Reporting the findings

The subsequent chapter will detail the findings of this study. In it, basic demographic information will be displayed in charts to provide an overview of the participants. Most of the information gathered will be shared in the form of descriptive narrative interspersed with quotations from the research participants. Phenomena that were commonly expressed by the participants will be described individually to demonstrate shared experiences within the population, and then rational and beliefs will be described as they relate to the main research questions.

3.8 Summary

This chapter reviewed the methodology of this research project. It situates the researcher's positionality and approach to the topic, acknowledging the constructivist perspective taken to the research and providing an explanation for the phenomenological analysis of the semi-structured interview data collected. The ways in which participants were accessed was discussed and rationale for the sampling method

is established. This chapter also provides a brief overview of who the participants were based on how the call for research reached them and the choice for this population: University of Guelph students who, predominantly, belonged to student groups who were invited to participate via email listservs. The chapter also discussed the sample size and justifies the number of interviews conducted as it relates to the phenomenological analysis conducted. As such, it explains that the choice of 12 participants was both a decision based on feasibility and fell within the accepted range to provide adequate analysis.

4 Findings

4.1 Introduction

The findings of this study are due primarily to the voluntary sharing of experiences by the study's participants and are discussed in this chapter. The data collected from the twelve interviewees is characterized below, not to draw generalizations or conclusions about rural youth and alcohol use in Ontario, but to speak to themes and both common and unique experiences amongst those interviewed. The major themes that the semi-structured interviews elicited include social and cultural factors impacting alcohol use, relational factors impacting alcohol use, and deterrents that are perceived to impact use. This chapter will discuss these themes and other findings in the data.

4.2 Research Population

The participants all identified as current University of Guelph students while the interviews were taking place in August, September, and October 2019. They were all undergraduate students who had completed at least one full year of study. This was not substantiated formally, however, all used University of Guelph email accounts when communicating with the researcher. All participants self-declared that they met the study inclusion criteria of being above the age of 19, drank alcohol while in high school, and grew up in a rural setting. No further substantiation was done to determine the validity of these statements. No participants were in their first year of their undergraduate degree, possibly due to the age requirement, but there was diversity across the other academic years of study.

While this study did not explicitly collect demographic data aside from the location that participants grew up, gender presentation was recorded by the researcher tacitly. This was not only useful to ensure an accurate representation of genders were studied, but also because many participants directly or indirectly pointed to gender playing a role in their experience of alcohol use.

Of the twelve participants, the researcher noted that eight were men and four were women. This is at odds with the majority female population of undergraduate students at 60.3% (Office of Institutional Analysis and Research, University of Guelph, 2019). This discrepancy is visualized in the graph below.

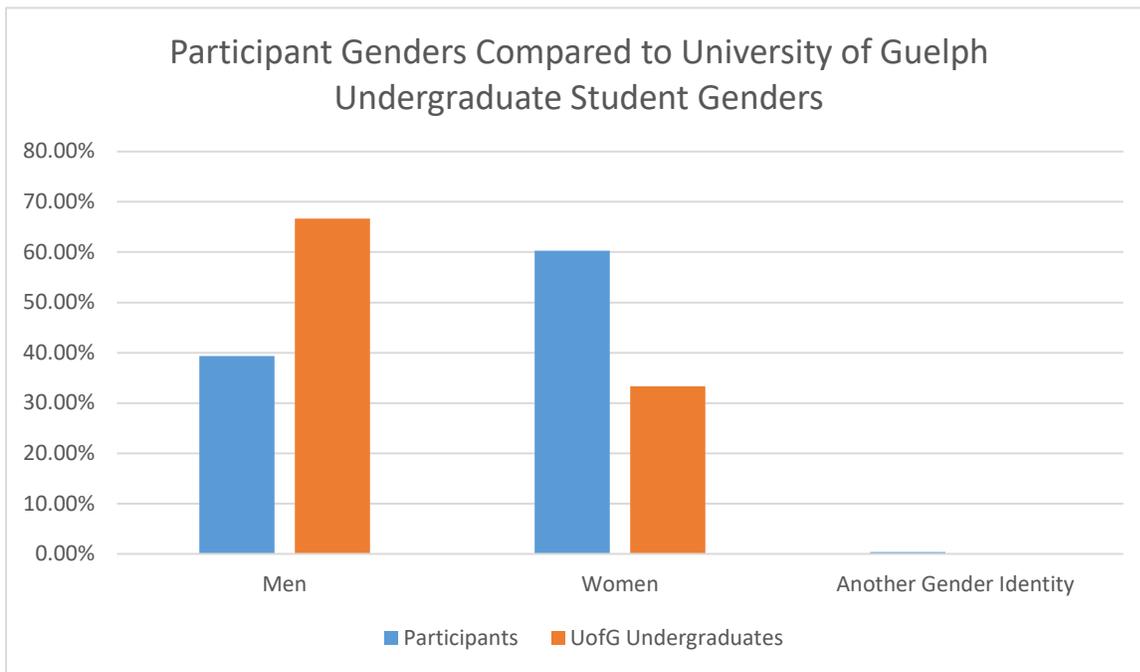


Figure 2: Chart of Participant Genders

Participants were asked where they grew up and their municipalities were recorded. The graph below depicts the regions in which the participants grew up. There

were no participants from Dufferin, Peel, York, Simcoe, Toronto, or Durham counties that make up the Central East and Central West regions. While rural areas exist in these counties, they are generally more urban regions of the province.

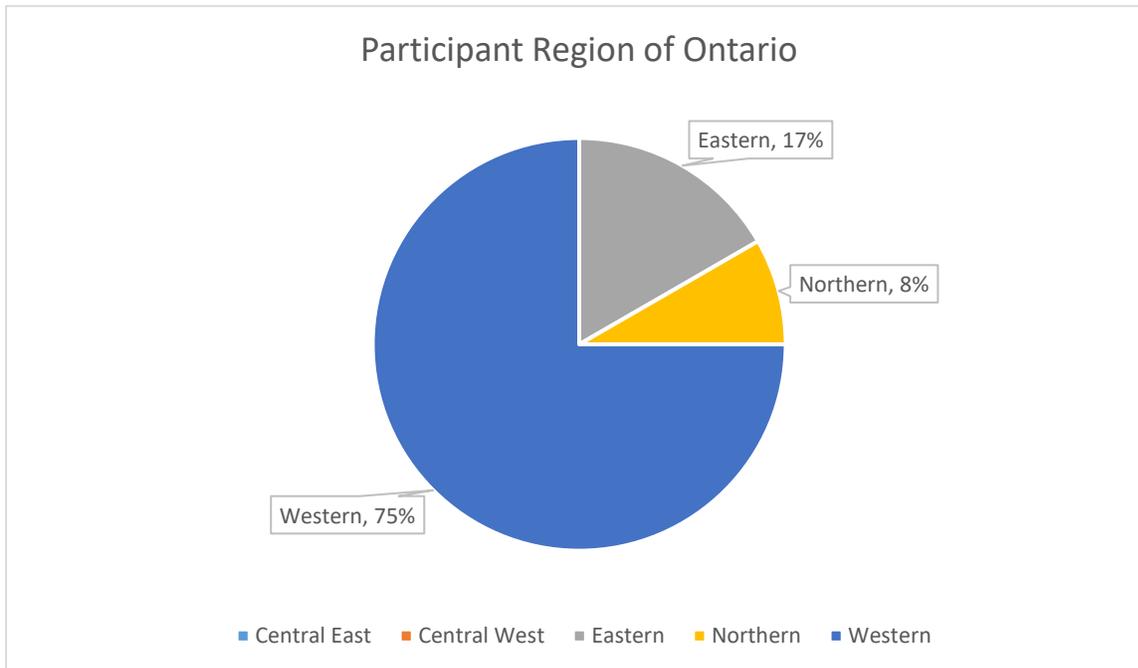


Figure 3: Chart of Participant's Region of Origin

Participants were invited to describe where they grew up. Three participants described growing up on a farm of some kind. Five participants described living on the edge of town or close to fields and farmland. Each of these participants emphasized these components of their upbringing early in the interview.

Others described their towns based on the observed demographics, or their proximity to other, larger towns.

Participants had an easier time recalling when they first used alcohol based on the grade they were in. Most dismissed sips of alcohol with family as not counting as the

first time they consumed alcohol. The researcher did not define this for them.

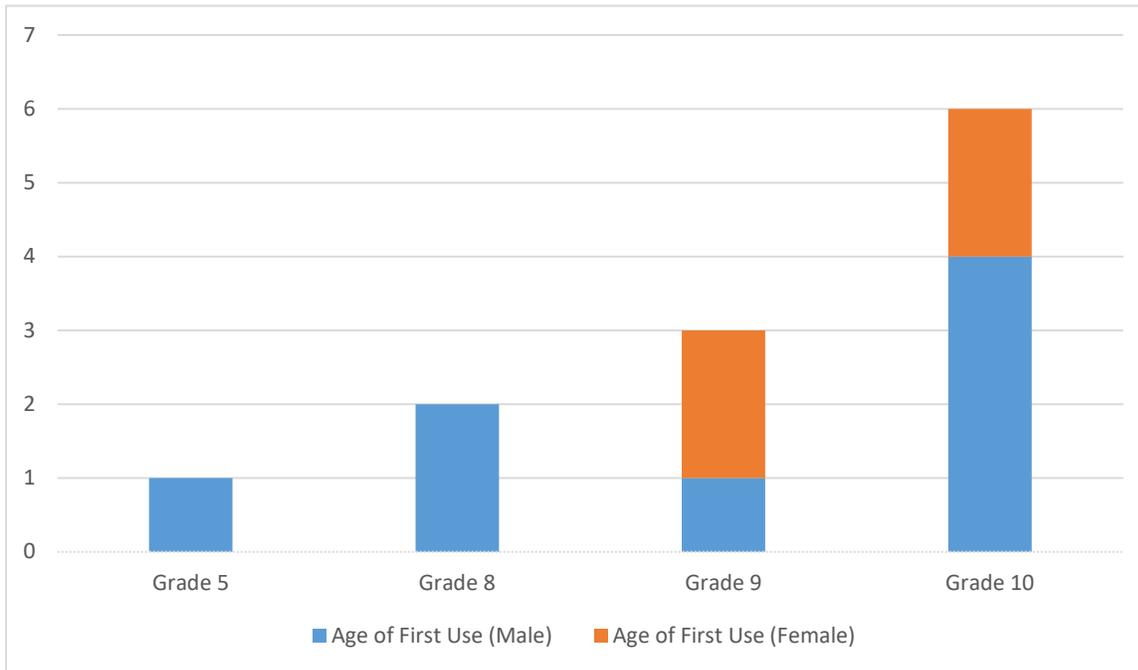


Figure 4: Chart of Age of First Use of Alcohol by Participants

The outlier here, the student in grade 5, described walking to a friend's house during lunch and drinking with friends whose parents were not home. This happened more than once and ended with other students being caught by the school, but not the participant. Other experiences will be described below. None of the women in the study discussed drinking (except for sips with parents) until high school.

All participants lived in Ontario during their elementary and high school years, and all but one attended publicly funded schools. As such, most participants experienced the various Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum to some extent. They also all lived in the province with the same liquor laws in effect, thus experiencing that overarching policy. Two lived close to the border with Quebec and

spoke about their experiences with the liquor laws in that jurisdiction. The third most common policy that could have impacted participants' experiences with alcohol use are the various Municipal Alcohol Policies (MAPs) across the province. No questions were made of the participants as to their awareness of the policies. Instead, the researcher examined Public Health Ontario's (the designer of MAPs) website for whether each of the participants' municipalities had one during their youth.

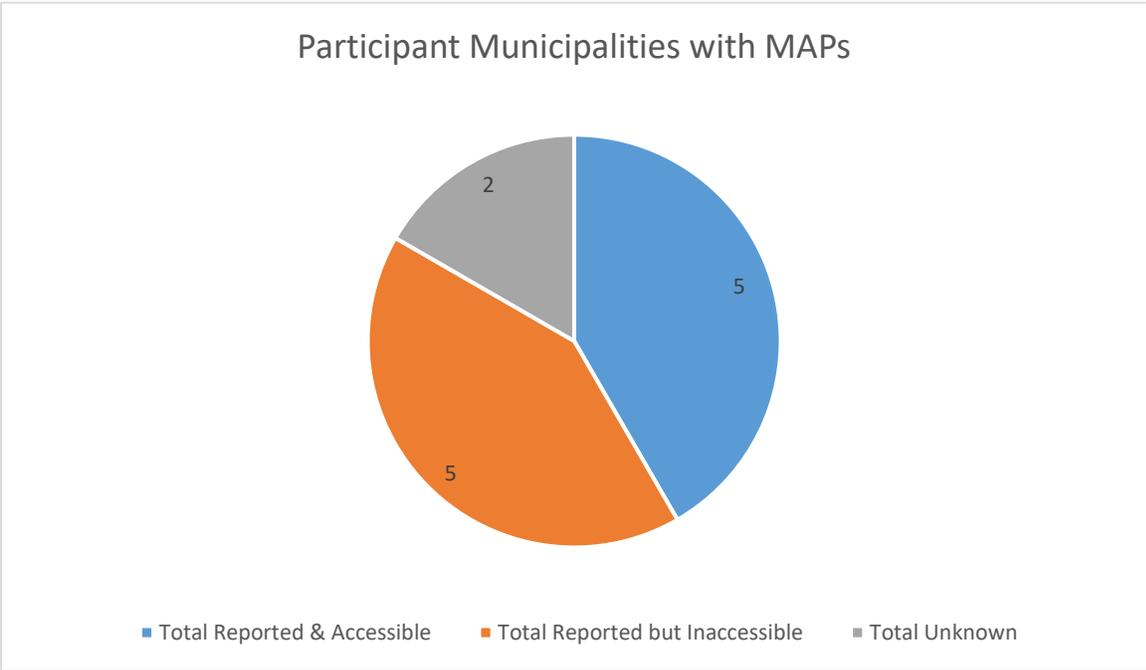


Figure 5: Participant Municipalities with MAPs According to Public Health Ontario (2019)

4.3 Perceived social & cultural influences

Ethnicity & religion

All interviewees were white. This said, several, identified an ethnic heritage over the course of the interviews. In all cases, this occurred when the participants were asked to discuss their family's attitudes towards alcohol use. It seemed to be an explanation for each of the respondents for their parents' or grandparents' behavior.

Participants disclosed that their families had Italian, Hungarian, Dutch, or Scottish heritage and offered this as either rationale for what or how they drank, or with pride for the ability to drink considerable amounts.

This participant describes the morning after their first experience with alcohol use, which was spent with their father and brother, in the following way:

I woke up the next morning fine. I mean, the grilled cheese really helped, obviously, but I feel as long as you're smart about it – I don't know, my dad always says, because we're Hungarian, we have a pretty good alcohol tolerance.

Two of the participants identified themselves as ethnically Italian and that this contributed to their parents allowing them to drink with their families at an early age. Both discussed the presence of wine at family dinners that children would consume alongside their parents. One of these participants spoke about the difference between themselves and their friends around alcohol in high school that the participant attributed to their cultural appreciation of wine:

I think, well I remember one New Year's I was – like we were at my best friend's boyfriend's house and they were having champagne when the ball dropped and so his parents were there and then it was us and some friends and I remember all of my friends like just downing the champagne and I was kind of like 'savour it', like this is not something that I wasn't – like I was already used to having it but I felt like it was more of like a special thing that they finally got to have some alcohol so they were like chugging it.

The remaining two participants who discussed their ethnic origins spoke about them as added explanation to their family's religious identity, both emphasizing that it was the practices associated with their faiths that influenced their drinking behaviours

more than the ethnic origins.

The participant who described their family as Scottish and English, but connected their family's attitudes around alcohol use to the Presbyterian Church for which their grandfather was a minister, discussed their mother's and father's families settling in the area of their upbringing 180 years ago. This was the only participant who discussed their rural routes stretching back to mid-nineteenth century settlement. This played a role in the participant's narrative that was connected to the Church. They discussed alcoholism impacting their ancestor's ability to financially support their farm, and the families being 'dry' to avoid future concerns of alcohol impacting their livelihoods which the participant believed stemmed from the prohibitionist rhetoric held by past leaders of the Presbyterian Church.

The participant who identified their family as being ethnically Dutch spoke about that as secondary to their belonging to the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). This participant then separated the CRC community's attitudes with relation to alcohol, and therefore their parents, siblings, friends, and teachers as they their life was quite tied to the Church, as dependent on what actual church they attended.

Like, there were parents from one church who would ... their kids would drink but they wouldn't tell their parents but when they found out it was kind of okay. There was another church where, like it was very open and accepted that your kids would drink, and you'd probably buy it for them. And then my parents went to a church in [name of town] and that was probably the more conservative one, which was weird to me, but ... yeah.

While other participants did not discuss their own experiences of religion impacting their family's attitudes or behaviours about alcohol use, they did note the

possibility for this to impact other people's experiences in their communities. One community that was home to two of the participants, who came to the research independently, pointed to friends and classmates whose families were a part of the Brethren in Christ community. Both participants discussed this impacting the town's attitudes, and their friends lying to their parents and/or being punished if they were found drinking.

Rurality

The physical location of the participants' alcohol use experiences was often linked to the access to isolated locations. A participant shared that they would actively avoid parents and other adults when drinking and would therefore go out into the bush regardless of the time of year. Another participant talked about spending time in new subdivisions on construction sites as a drinking location. When parents were avoided, participants discussed lying about their whereabouts, not wanting them to know that they were "in the middle of nowhere." One participant shared that their parent started using the mobile app "Find my Friend" to track their sibling, and was actually satisfied to know that they were in the middle of a field as it was deemed safer than potential alternatives. While one participant talked about their friend's backyard as hosting many fires and get togethers, another stated that they had never attended a party at the same location twice suggesting there were lots of open spaces for large groups to gather. This person suggested 50+ people would attend such parties in barns, fields, or backyards. Participants talked about driving to parties up to an hour away (and still within their school district) or getting rides from parents to nearby towns.

Five participants spoke about growing up “just on the edge of town,” or on the “outskirts.” This seemed to be important to the participants to emphasize their rural status. It also indicates access to space like some of the depictions above. The distance challenged one participant who believed that they would have used alcohol more frequently if they were closer to their friends, and as a result, when they were able to be together, drank more than they may otherwise have. Another stated that biking to a friend’s house with a backpack of beer was something they did not want to do often and so moved quickly from drinking beer to liquor in order to carry it long distances to be with friends.

Participants discussed walking, biking, driving, and getting rides from parents to parties. Two also mentioned cabs, one as being unreliable, and the other as something that was sometimes necessary as friends lived in other towns, but in that case, they were using them in the summers once they were of legal drinking age.

Fires

Half of the participants pointed to if not their first, then one of their earliest experiences of drinking as being around a campfire. It varied who they were with, whether it was older siblings, parents, or their close peer groups. When these early drinking experiences with a close peer group around a fire was considered as the activity for the evening (i.e., not called a party), they were always with the same gender, and always fewer than ten people. At subsequent drinking events or later in the participants’ drinking experiences there may have been larger gatherings that included mixed genders as well as fires.

Many of the participants reflected on these fires as being perceived as safe at the time. Now, however, at least one felt there should have been more concern about mixing fire and drinking. This reflection was not common. For example, one participant explained,

We'd go out – I mean, in a small town there's not really much to do, so it was mainly instead of going to the movies or something like that, it would basically be, like, go to a buddy's house. It was huge to have, like, a fire, which is kind of weird, like, in terms of alcohol-wise, it would always be, like, oh, we're just going to all sit near a field, have a big fire, there's no potential fire hazard, because it's just all dirt, and you could have as big a fire as you want, burn whatever you want, there'd be no-one there.

They also believed that the adults that knew about the fires generally saw them as safe, while many kept the experience from their own parents. A different participant from above said,

Yeah, yeah so we're all – like we were all going to hang out, like on Friday we're going to have a bonfire, this, that and why not bring a couple of drinks guys because my friend's parents were much more okay with him drinking as long as it was in a safe environment, which yes they weren't there but they were there and then they weren't. They were kind of in and out of the house.

Participants pointed to these experiences with others around the fire as having influence on their relationships with whom they were drinking.

These conversations about campfires sometimes led to participants discussing implicit peer pressure. They sometimes showed up to hang out with friends at a fire and did not plan on drinking, having had campfires with friends without alcohol many times up to that point. One said,

So they had some [alcohol] and they offered me some and I was, like oh, I don't know. Like, my parents would be really upset if I did. I was really on the fence about whether I would or not. And they were pretty good about it. They were like, you know, if you want you can, if you don't, whatever, right? And then I eventually was, like yeah, I'll have a beer, and then it's like this is pretty nice, I can do this. So, then I had some more. I didn't get, like extremely drunk, but yeah.

Another, who explained that their first beer was around a campfire and that they did not enjoy it persevered in similar situations in the future:

I guess you just drink because everyone else is and then all of a sudden it just tastes good. Like if you eat anything enough it's going to be, like okay.

Gender

While some participants drank with parents or their siblings for the first time, others expressed that their first and then other early experiences with other alcohol consumption were with friends, and more specifically, friends of their own gender. While all prom parties discussed were of mixed genders, experiences in earlier high school years were often characterized with one gender present. Five of the participants expressed this type of situation to characterize their first-time consuming alcohol in a meaningful way. Two examples are found below:

I hung out with generally a lot of guys, but a lot of the times, and especially for more special occasions – like, I know for my prom party, for example, we did – like, every person and their partner got a tent, we went into a field that one of my friends owned, and set up a bunch of tents around a big pit.

Usually guys, yeah. Yeah, mostly guys I would say. A couple of girls came and went too but it's, you know, whenever you're little it's more so I found that our school was very much cliques of guys and cliques of girls. So, once you got to high school it kind of was parallel, it was cliques of guys and cliques of girls and you didn't get too much in the way of mixed groups like that.

These single-gender incidents occurred within and because of a variety of contexts. The explanation above came from a participant who described their frequent drinking spot as a friend's basement. The friend's father did not permit girls in the basement as the boys' bedrooms were down there.

One participant described her peer group as consisting of girls and that many of her early experiences of alcohol use with peers were just with other girls. That said, she did note influence from boys in her grade on her friend's views about alcohol use:

My friends ... like I think at first in Grades 9 and 10 they were like, "Alcohol is so bad", and they would kind of judge other people that they knew who would drink a lot. They'd be like, "Oh I can't believe they did that" and in Grade 10 and 11 they were doing it [laughs], so it totally changed and they were like, "Oh it's kind of fun just to have a couple". They never really went crazy... I think that their boyfriends started drinking so they kind of socialized more with their boyfriend's friends and so then they started to drink because of that influence.

While friends' homes and basements played host to some participants' early drinking experiences, outdoor settings, particularly around fires, were regular locations for single-gender drinking gatherings for others. The same participant as above suggested these single-gender gatherings continued along the same time period as mixed-gender parties, including into grade 12.

Yeah so like a bonfire it would just be me and like five other girls, like our close friend group, and then at like a house party it was a whole bunch of people, like almost all of the Grade 12s and then some older students as well, both males and females.

While many participants pointed to their high school friend groups being of a single gender, others discussed other common characteristics that brought their friends together:

[My friends were] guys and girls. All from school. I kind of got into a friend group, it was like some French Immersion kids in that friend group, but also some other ones in there so and then we all just all made one big group and that's who was there.

This participant shared that they had been in a French Immersion elementary school and did not know a lot of the neighbourhood kids who went to the local English school. Their high school experience with friends was not centred on a common gender, but on the people who were in the majority of their classes.

Gender did not only provide company for alcohol use amongst participants, but it was also noted by some to play a role in how people in their high schools were perceived when it came to alcohol use. One participant pointed to “*double standards*” when it came to promiscuity stating that after parties, at school, girls and boys would be treated differently for what happened while they were drunk. The participant recalled situations where boys and girls would consume the same amount of alcohol, and the girls would be “*plastered*” where the boys “*maybe not as much.*” In fact, one participant viewed sex as the primary explanation for why youth drank. When asked how they felt about their high school experiences of alcohol use, they responded with:

Yeah, no, I mean, it wasn't about the alcohol, right? So, it was we were having fun. Yeah, it was good... You know, beyond socializing it was about, like people developing their sexuality, I guess, and ... like, that wasn't a main theme, I guess, until, you know, 16 or 17.

A different participant similarly saw their later years of high school bring changes to who they spent time drinking with. This participant talked about some boys as “enablers” who encouraged excessive drinking in others but avoiding getting too drunk themselves. This was discussed at the same time as the participant stated:

Guys were talking to women in order to get laid, or for other reasons, I don't know.

The student did not point to any specific consequences for either the boys or girls who drank to excess as a result of these situations.

Another participant saw the earlier days of drinking with their own gender as an easier experience to navigate, socially. After stating that the first time they consumed alcohol it was with other boys, he was asked if that type of gathering was consistent throughout high school:

No, as everyone kind of went through puberty and matured, more people took interest to women and started inviting them out, and at one point it was a 50/50 mix, a good ratio of guys and girls. And at that point alcohol and sex kind of became intermittent in that group and got all sorts of messy for a bit there... People started sleeping with each other, people didn't like each other after that, people broke up, people got together, you didn't know who to talk to and who not to.

Participants' recollections of alcohol use demonstrate that there were different stages to their usage with them regularly using alcohol for the first time and in subsequent early experiences around peers of the same gender and that changing overtime to include additional peers, with some pointing expressly to sex or relationships as the motivating factor for this shift.

High School Culture

While the narratives described by the participants were unique to the individual, there were some experiences that were discussed by many if not all the participants. The topic below is prom or prom parties, which was brought up unprompted by most participants. This topic seemed inextricable from discussing high school drinking behaviours.

Prom

There were no questions about prom on the interview guide. This shared experience was so ubiquitous that it was discussed by all but two of the participants. Participants described it as a “*special occasion*” or “*huge.*” Despite these parties, in fact, happening regularly, there was a lot of focus on these events. Most of the participants did not describe going to just one prom party. They often started attending in their early high school grades and went up until their graduating year. They may also have attended prom parties for other nearby high schools.

One participant described encouraging younger students on the school’s football team to participate in such events in the following way:

So when it came to like prom parties and stuff like that, all the guys, you know, all the senior players would, you know, kind of take a rookie so if I was in grade nine a grade 12 or a grade 10 would pick you up and go you're going to be my rookie, you're going to have to drink with me throughout this prom party. So, it was similar to that, like it was very much a hazing process without the official hazing term on it.

Other examples of overt peer pressure will be discussed later in this chapter, but the above example demonstrates that prom party attendees were often not graduating

students and were attending not to celebrate their own cohort but to engage with other aspects of the school's culture.

While the participants might attend before their grade 12 year, none of them attended after. That said, several made mention of other former students attending, with some continuing to go into their mid-twenties. These people were viewed as either predatory or uncool, such as in the examples below from different participants:

So for my prom party, prom parties were huge, people would like – there were people that were two, three years graduated that would show up to these places, which is not cool but they do it anyways.

It's kind of a joke in our town where there's a particular group of guys and girls who continuously show up to prom parties and I think they're like 26 and 27 now and they're still showing up to prom parties and grad parties?

It's, like, when it starts getting, like the age gap is bigger and, like try to hit on really drunk girls it's kind of, like, yeah, a little bit greasy.

A fourth participant talked about the reasons why they would not attend prom parties after

graduation:

Because you see a lot people who just graduate high school and like maybe they'll do six months of police foundations and then drop out and then they just stay in [name of town] and just are just degenerates pretty much. And then they show up at like every high school party and just like cause trouble and pick fights with people and whatnot. And I'm just like that's not the person I want to be at all, yeah. I don't even really like going back to [name of town] after leaving, there's not much there for me.

Gender at drinking events is described elsewhere in this thesis, but one participant singled a prom party out as an event when genders would mix.

I hung out with generally a lot of guys, but a lot of the times, and especially for more special occasions – like, I know for my prom party, for

example, we did – like, every person and their partner got a tent, we went into a field that one of my friends owned, and set up a bunch of tents around a big pit. We just had a fire in the middle, everyone had a couple of drinks.

The communities seemed very aware of these parties, and seemingly accepted them in some way. Parents sometimes offered advice about prom night, as depicted below, or in many of the descriptions would pick up their child from the events. The below example is from a participant whose mother did not know they had been drinking alcohol for several years at this point, but was anticipating their child would on this occasion:

For prom my mom's like "Here are four Mike's Hard Lemonades." I'm like that's great, I have a 26 of rum in my backpack.

While some participants described parents or friends' parents picking them up, others described camping in fields or at the events. Some described a mix of both ways to ensure party goers would not drink and drive.

Several of the participants talked about their schools not being involved with prom at all. Despite this, teachers may have still been aware and shared their concerns or advice with students, such as in this example:

Like they would, especially around prom season, even when we were in like grade 10, like everyone went to the prom parties and teachers would like always warn us about it. We would have like assemblies where the cops would come in and talk to us about it... And then like my one gym teacher, Miss [X], she like used to lecture us all the time about drinking because she knew that we were all drinking and she would give us all seminars on risky behaviour and stuff. Like she'd definitely, she would like ask us if we went to parties on the weekend and we would tell her because we were like open with her. But yeah, other than that like most of the teachers knew for sure, especially around prom season.

Other members of the community were aware of these parties, and one participant described the police attempting an intervention in advance of the school's prom party:

Yeah, like when – the year that I went to prom there was supposed to be like one big one and then like something happened, like during our assembly with the cop he like knew the address because it was a common place to have parties. He was like oh, where's the party this year and then like said whatever the address was. So, we were like okay, we're not going to have it there. And then it split into a bunch of little ones from then on. But like usually the years before when we went to a prom party it was like one big one like in someone's field.

While this example demonstrated some behavior change amongst the students as a result of the intervention, all other participants described a single party for everyone to attend. That said, participants would not only attend the prom party in their graduating year. They may attend those of older grades, but then also the prom parties of other high schools in their town. Two participants spoke of their high schools being connected to a different school – one a public high school, and the other a Catholic high school. Both participants attended the prom parties for both schools. Participants also differentiated between 'prom parties' and 'grad parties.' The former were held after dinners and dances where participants dressed formally, and were often not associated with the school, and the latter were held after formal commencement ceremonies held in association with the high schools.

Another participant discussed other ways the community responded to prom parties by sharing that they had a ride home from a friend's mom and that the police were ensuring no one was drinking and driving:

So I, not my parents because my parents had no idea I went to this prom party, but it was the mom that picked us up and drove us home, she was

obviously not okay with us drinking and driving as well as there was police officers there who were checking each car going through. Yeah, so the cops basically just stood outside because they know there's no way they're shutting down a party with 500 kids at it pretty well going. Okay, so as long as you're not drinking and driving have a safe ride home and as long as you have somewhere where you're staying. And so, they were basically checking cars just going through making sure that everyone is going to be alright.

Parents, teachers, police, and even employers were described by participants as condoning drinking at prom/prom parties by youth. One store that regularly employed high school students allowed them to switch their shifts trying to ensure that they would not call in sick. While most discussions with participants were about the behaviour being overwhelmingly accepted by the communities, one participant noted a potential deterrent to excessive alcohol consumption put in place by their school: host graduation ceremonies the day following prom. That participant noted that the efforts were not effective on everyone as a student who was hospitalized from alcohol poisoning after prom still came to the ceremony the following day. However, as other participants discussed parties after both graduation and prom, this may have reduced the occasions on which excessive alcohol consumption occurred.

While the events themselves were not often once-in-a-lifetime experiences based on the interviews, they also were not short experiences. One participant described a “*prom pre-party*” which meant the whole grade met at one student’s home where event tents were set-up and people brought their own alcohol. They then boarded chartered buses that went to prom itself, drank on the buses, and up until they entered the premises where prom was being hosted. Private security escorted some attendees out

if they were deemed to be too drunk or had passed out. Another participant summarized the day in the following way:

Prom itself, a lot of people, my group of friends didn't, they like drank before prom. Yeah, [prom was] not associated with the school at all. It was all student-run. Like I know my roommates when they had theirs, like all their pictures they had like bedazzled drink cups and stuff. Ours wasn't like that. Ours was like you go to the [scenic] area, like you go down to take pictures. Then we went to [nearby city] for our actual prom. Then everyone goes home, you put on your ratty clothes and the prom after party was in the middle of a field, it was on a farm. Because one of the girls in our grade, her parents owned a farm and you just pitch a tent and you get drunk to like 5 in the morning... like everyone had during the day before prom people went and set up their tents. So, by the time we got there, you start drinking basically as soon as you're at the after party and then you stay the night.

While there were differences in the narratives that each participant discussed about prom, each description included using alcohol while underage and there being some form of community acceptance. These were generally large parties, and when participants did describe them, they were outdoors around fires or in fields.

4.4 Impact of relationships on drinking behaviours

Participants experienced a variety of impact on their relationships as a result of their decisions related to alcohol use. Some of these were negative in the form of explicit peer pressure or lying to parents, while others were perceived as positive such as the bonding that came from the shared experiences alcohol use offered. In other cases, participants believed that their choice of beverage or choice to drink at all conveyed a message of maturity and belonging amongst older adults. Perhaps most importantly for the behavior to be present, relationships also impacted participants ability to access alcohol in the first place.

Access to Alcohol

The way in which participants obtained alcohol was central to the interviews. The aim was to provide some understanding as to how youth access the substance and their perceptions of these illegal practices in the hopes of being able to eventually develop interventions that capitalize on or counter these beliefs, believing that social or cultural connections would influence the ways in which participants obtained alcohol. In general, participants did not access alcohol in a single way either for themselves or as a group. However, some methods were discussed more often than others.

Fake IDs

Three participants discussed the use of fraudulent identification to purchase alcohol. One discussed their younger sibling using an older sibling's ID to purchase alcohol and believed that was acceptable but perceived their using it to go to bars at 16 to be radical and potentially dangerous. Only one discussed using a fake ID themselves, and even then, did not use it until they were 18 in order to go to bars with their friends who had already turned 19. The last participant to discuss using a fake ID admitted that their friend used one to purchase them alcohol but was fearful of doing so themselves. They believed that there would be negative consequences to using a fake ID that included "*not getting into schools.*" The participant did not express whether these ramifications were realistic in retrospect but seemed to hold firm to their belief that it posed a large risk.

Siblings

The comfort that participants felt either buying alcohol for or having alcohol bought by their siblings appeared dependent on the proximity in age of their siblings. Many of the participants had older siblings with whom they drank for the first time ever, and thus what they consumed depended on what their siblings were drinking. Three of the participants discussed their older siblings buying them some type of sweet alcoholic beverage as one of the first times they drank (raspberry vodka, Sourpuss, coolers, etc.). Various combinations of genders did this for each other (i.e., brothers for sisters, sisters for brothers etc.). The biggest age gap in siblings that was described (6 years) regularly purchased alcohol for their younger sibling however was diligent about monitoring how much alcohol was available and did not let their younger sibling have sleepovers with individuals outside their own gender. A different participant with a sibling that was also six years older described drinking beers with their older brother and his friends casually around the fire, but not buying alcohol for him otherwise. Another participant with an older sibling with a large age gap (4 years) did not accept alcohol from their older sibling as they viewed them as a parent and did not feel comfortable. Finally, a participant who had a 16-year-old sister expressed concern for them going to bars at their age. They did not purchase alcohol for their younger sibling but was not concerned about them drinking, which they discussed openly together. These various concerns or monitoring of alcohol consumption was not present in the discussions with participants whose siblings were closer in age.

Parents

The participants' parents demonstrated a variety of attitudes related to providing their children with alcohol while not of legal drinking age. There were reports of alcohol being provided for the whole family to consume at gatherings. These might have been family meals that were explained by two participants to be "cultural" events, or on summer holidays, either camping or at a cottage. One participant described the alcohol in the house as being available at their pleasure, but that their parents would not go out to buy them alcohol specifically. Two others expressed that their parents would buy them alcohol for parties, one drinking 12 to 15 beers a night that their parents would purchase.

Stolen from Parents

There was limited first-hand accounting of stealing from parents amongst the participants, however, some alluded vaguely to friends who had consequences for stealing their parents' alcohol. This said, one participant was eager to share the ways that they took their parents' alcohol without them noticing. They explained that they would take their dad's beer but ensure that however many beers they took they returned with that number of empty bottles to put back in the case. This was an attempt to make it appear as though their dad had consumed them himself. Others described stealing "*fruity*" liqueurs from their parents as they would not notice that they were gone due to drinking them infrequently themselves.

Friends

One of the most common groups of people who obtained alcohol for the participants when they were underage were friends from their jobs. Five participants noted that friends from work had obtained alcohol for them in the past. Those that lived close enough also noted that friends would drive to Quebec to buy large amounts of alcohol for a variety of friends as they could legally purchase beer and liquor in the province upon turning 18. One participant whose friend groups centred around sports teams pointed to their teammates purchasing large amounts of alcohol for the whole team at a time.

Three participants discussed their friends' siblings purchasing them alcohol and each of them stated that this was for the first time that they were drunk. Sources seemed to expand or change after these first experiences as purchases by friends' siblings were not mentioned as an on-going source of alcohol.

Explicit peer pressure

Some form of peer pressure was discussed in more than half the interviews. Often, participants were able to label this as such when reflecting on these experiences. One participant pointed to one friend who did not show a lot of interest in consuming excessive amounts of alcohol but wanted everyone else to be drunk around him. He would pour additional alcohol into someone's existing drink or put shots in their hands to do alongside him. This person suggested there were other friends of his that behaved similarly and would act like this to both girls and boys, but it was always boys behaving this way.

One participant pointed to instances of explicit peer pressure that resulted in a friend being able to defy the pressure and remain friends with their group. They talked about people encouraging someone to play drinking games and to “*drink this.*” The friend would occupy himself by actually playing the drinking game but “*give away his drinks*” if the rules dictated that he consume alcohol. The participant pointed to this person’s interest in working out as the reason they did not want to drink, and this seemed to be respected by his peers.

Another participant discussed a situation where they were able to affirm their ‘no’ to pressure to drink. This pressure did not initially come from their peers, but from their parents or parents’ friends would encourage them to have a drink with them. They later discussed pressure to drink to excess that did come from friends who would brag about how much they could drink:

I feel like people like to brag about how much they can drink. Especially in high school people were like oh yeah, I can kill two 26 in one night or I'm going to – I'm just going to buy two 26, I'll just drink the whole thing at this party coming up and just yeah people just try to drink as much as possible sort of thing.

The situation discussed earlier in about a sports team encouraging alcohol consumption at prom was not the only time explicit peer pressure was discussed around sports. One participant talked about a junior hockey team they belonged to having rookie parties and expressly called some of the activities hazing. These activities included costumes, quickly consuming alcohol, and spinning around with their foreheads on a baseball bat. While the participant saw this as peer pressure and hazing, they believed there was good that came from the experience and that if

someone did not want to participate, they could say no. The participant did not describe anyone saying 'no' but did provide the following description:

I did it when I was a rookie, and then the next year you're not and you don't have to do it, and then the next year those people aren't. It's just kind of, like ... honestly, it's just team bonding, like - It's just kind of like ... because at the start of the year it's always like the rookies are kind of here and then all the guys that know each other over here. But then, like once you do that everyone just kind of bonds together. Yeah. And as long as, like ... obviously back in the old days people did, like crazy stuff, but like now it's pretty tame. Like, there's nothing too crazy that happens. And if anyone ... obviously if someone didn't feel comfortable doing something no one would make them do that.

There were mixed reactions to discussing overt peer pressure amongst participants. Some believed it to be useful for bonding, and others saw it as potentially predatory. Still others experienced occasions where overt peer pressure could be challenged successfully without social consequences. These above examples were generally accepting of the fact that peer pressure was a factor in their experiences of alcohol use in high school. As demonstrated below, some participants were not always as willing to identify these experiences as having occurred.

Implicit peer pressure

For reasons that were not fully articulated, some participants hesitated with labelling their experiences as peer pressure. They were not explicitly encouraged to drink by friends and appeared to believe there needed to be an active component of peer pressure. One participant described this as "*peer activities*" and agreed with the researcher who offered that there was an expectation to drink amongst their peers. A

second student who hesitated with naming the experience as peer pressure talked about a “mood.”

It's more of like a social acceptance, not acceptance, but you're together and you're drinking instead of a couple of people are drinking and a couple of people aren't and it's kind of like, not that you're being forced into it, but you kind of need to get there eventually type of thing.

When the researcher asked the above participant if this was peer pressure, they responded with:

It wasn't peer pressure, it was just like a mood. Like if you have two different groups at a part, one that's drinking and one that's not, the one that's drinking will be having more fun type of thing. More clumsy or falling around, people are laughing.

This participant did not feel like they were actively been coerced into drinking but that it appeared to be something that they too wanted to experience. Similarly, another participant who described overt peer pressure from their parents above, also expressed that they felt that because all their friends drinking that they should too.

Securing friend group

As mentioned in the section on gender, participants regularly bonded with close same-gender groups in early high school, and alcohol brought them together in many of these circumstances. One participant discussed how challenging it could be to make friends, and that alcohol assisted in removing some of the barriers:

The benefit, yeah, like I liked the effects. I didn't feel hung-over in the morning. I don't know, it was just ... made me talkative more. It made me feel a lot looser, which was nice. Because there's a lot of anxieties surrounding friendships and finding out who you are in high school and,

like trying to fit in, and this was just, like I feel relaxed and I can say what I want to say, and it's funny, right? So that was good.

Another participant talked openly about their belief that alcohol helped secure friend groups, but that their group was an exception to this rule. This participant had a small circle of single-gender friends, with a variety of relationships with alcohol. This uniqueness, they suggested ran contrary to their expectation that they could tell which small groups drank, and which did not, as expressed below:

But you could kind of look at a group and say, I don't think they drank that much, and if they did, it would probably be a really small amount on a certain occasion.

This suggestion indicates that the use of alcohol not only secured a friend group, but also secured some type of view or status in the minds of their classmates.

The positive elements of being drunk were good memories amongst peer groups from high school. Participants discussed how much fun they had, and that they can continue to return to the memories of strange, funny, or ridiculous things that occurred, even from their first instance of being drunk, with this memory serving as an example of the small moments that had lasting impact:

It was just a lot of fun; we were all just like very like I don't know, we were just like laughing a lot, just doing dumb things, thinking it was funny. My one friend, he went into our mini fridge to get some Gatorade and he saw a bottle of ranch dressing that we had in there. And it was like – the bottle was flipped around so the French label was there and he was like [Name], you didn't tell me you had champagne [laughs] and he's holding it up and it's clearly a bottle of ranch dressing.

Participants discussed these shared experiences as leading to an “inner circle” where they could open up about themselves. One participant talked about having

already had a group of friends from elementary school, but that sharing while drinking allowed them to get to know each other and become closer, beyond just the happenstance of being in the same classes. Another person discussed their first time drinking with their friends as something that brought acceptance and belonging along with the excitement of trying alcohol.

The relationships that developed during high school were regularly maintained to some degree as participants attended university. One participant talked about seeing their friends anytime they would go home to visit family. There was a tight group of five, two of whom went to the University of Guelph together and another two went to another university together. In addition to seeing each other in person when they made the four-and-a-half-hour drive, the group kept in touch on social media and through group chats. The participant discussed not seeing each other all that often, but with homecoming nearing, they were going to have visitors which would involve time for drinking and time to be more sober.

We haven't done that a whole lot so when we do get together we end up partying fairly hardly. But next time we do get together I think they mentioned, my two friends from [city where they are studying], were going to come down for homecoming, and I think they said they're going to come down a bit earlier so we can just like go out for dinner and just like stay sober, catch up and remember our conversations [laughs] a bit more.

Another participant had a different experience with attending post-secondary. They stated that all their friends had dispersed to a variety of universities. That said, they also stated that they would get together when they were all home and that they would almost always be drinking in such circumstances.

It is worth noting that both the above participants were men. Two women participants talked about their close friend groups that stretched from elementary to high school but that they were no longer close, and in fact expressly stated that they were either no longer friends with some of their former peers, or that “*sometimes people end up being shitty.*”

Based on these interviews, alcohol appeared to play a role in the relationship development of peer groups in high school. Some of these relationships stretched into university with their foundations in memories of drunken experiences and futures together involving alcohol use.

Relationships with parents

Alcohol impacted relationships with parents in a variety of ways. For some participants, they saw the experience as positive; they believed themselves to be seen more as an adult in the eyes of their parents for drinking. Another participant talked about their father’s ability to connect more intimately while they were all drinking, expressing pride that he did not do when they were all sober. The participant remarked that this had an overall favourable impact in that it allowed the father to learn more about his children and bring that knowledge up in more sober settings.

Participants discussed lying to their parents about alcohol use, even if they did drink around their parents on other occasions. Both participants who had earlier disclosed that they had Italian heritage and that their parents let them drink at the dinner table shared that they did not want their parents to know about a lot of their drinking

outside of the house. One explained that their parents always trusted them “*to do the right thing*” and that trust extended to who they were spending time with and what activities they were engaging with amongst friends. They would openly answer questions about where they would be and how they were getting home. That said, on some occasions the participant would omit the fact that alcohol would be present. Their rationale was the following:

I don't know, I just didn't want them to worry because I knew that I was doing it responsibly but sometimes they overreact and they would be like, "Oh my gosh like why are you doing that?" and it's not – it wasn't a big deal to me so I didn't want it to be a big deal to them.

This sentiment was shared by the other mentioned participant. They believed that their parents had modeled responsible drinking for them at home, and that they had even engaged in that with their parents. This suggested why they did not want their parents to know that they had been drinking in excess: they did not want their parents to see them not live up to the expectations they had set. They did not believe they would get in trouble, perhaps that their dad would be angry, but they, like the above participant, did not want to bring a concern into their relationship with their parents.

Another participant shared this sentiment, but it caused them tremendous internal concern. They talked about lying to their parents about the first night they used alcohol and having to continue to lie to their parents through high school after that experience. While they did not regret the parties or drinking with friends, they did regret the lost time being close and truthful with their parents as seen below:

I would say negative for me because that officially began when I had to start continuously lying to my parents for the next four years. So every time there was a prom party or a grad party or just sneaking out and going and like getting drunk in Hull because we're only, you know, an hour and 20 minutes away, you know, that became like the starting point of view all these lies. And I remember these lies starting to build up and I'm like oh, I want to tell you this funny thing that happened, oh wait I can't because I was drinking with my buddies and that situation wouldn't have come up if we weren't drinking so I can't tell you that. And that eventually took quite a bit of toll on me too because I mean I'm not able to – like my parents asked me how was your night, good. What did you guys do? Hung out because it's just if I open up that little bit of information, oh why were you doing that and then it dives into other questions, next thing you know I'm in a fair bit of trouble.

This participant felt more comfortable about their relationship with their parents in the present because they were now of legal drinking age and no longer felt like they had to hide parts of their identity.

A different participant shared that gratitude to be of age and able to not only talk about their alcohol use with their father but make beer with him. This was a major departure from the conservative, Christian, parenting the participant received as a child which resulted in lying throughout high school about plans with friends.

Concerns about alcohol use amongst parents

All participants were asked about their family's attitudes about alcohol use early in the interview, and this often led them to share the frequency at which their parents did or did not drink and what types of alcohol they would consume in what types of settings. Half of the participants, though not usually early in the conversation, shared information about alcohol misuse or excessive consumption by a parent in their life. One participant shared that their parent who raised them and their siblings alone and through

challenging relationships had reduced their excessive alcohol use more recently, but still expressed concern about the amount they consumed. The participant clearly understood that there was stress and was empathetic, however, seemed to desire a change in their parent that was not always shared,

She does recognize it sometimes and sometimes it's – you bring it up and she's completely against it. She's like oh, it's not a bad thing, I'm perfectly fine. I managed to raise you guys, I keep the house up.

No participant discussed how they might support a parent with substance misuse concerns, but some, such as both the above and below participants, were able to note changes in their parents' use of alcohol to cope.

So she was like at that point in her life super, super depressed, and was like figuring that out and that's when I remember like the drinking a lot more. And now that she's like everything's like sorted out and she goes to therapy and is like on meds, now she doesn't, so.

These observed coping behaviours did have an impact on the above participant perceived alcohol. They saw it as something they did not want to engage with and delayed their own use. Eventually, they did try it, and could see the fun the consumption brought, no longer placing solely negative connotations on its use.

A third participant did not point to explicit impacts of their parent's alcohol misuse on their own perceptions of alcohol use, but in fact spoke favourably about that time in other ways,

All I really remember of it, because he wasn't the type of person that was drunk all the time. Like he would have shop nights on Friday nights and he would just go work in our garage for hours and he would drink, I don't know, there's like 20 beers or something like that. Then he would sleep in

the basement. So we would sleep in my mom's bed with her on Friday nights. It was like cozy bed night. But I never really saw him when he was drinking. Like he would work in the garage and then he'd go to bed in the basement.

This participant spoke about their parent as having previously had a drinking problem, and that they are now sober. Again, in this instance, the participant did not point to their role in the transition, or even major discussion of the change occurring in their presence. Instead, they stated:

I never really – It was never really a conversation about it, because once my dad decided to stay sober it was just like he went cold turkey and he hasn't had anything since. So it was just he wanted to do it to better himself.

When a different participant spoke about the concerns they currently had about their parent's drinking, they shared that they were not the only one with worries,

My mom drinks now. I don't know if it's to the point where it's concerning sometimes, because I like to think that my mom is like not an alcoholic, obviously, but, yeah, sometimes my dad and I pick up on certain things and it's a little bit concerning. But I would never say that to my mom, because if you make comments like that, which has happened in the past, she gets like angsty about it.

This participant discussed being able to share their concerns with their dad, but neither of them being able to address this issue with mom. This participant reported getting drunk for the first time with their parents, and not drinking more than three times until undergrad. Unlike the earlier participant, they did not point to concerns about their parent's drinking as a reason for the delay in alcohol consumption. This said, while they discussed their concerns about their mom's alcohol use, they stated that the two of them share a preferred drink: kit-made wine which was noted to save on costs.

The only participant to articulate the impact parental alcoholism had was a participant who shared about her friend's father. That said, this participant stated that they were only able to come to these conclusions in retrospect and were not aware of the issues as they were ongoing. The participant shared that the marriage deteriorated as a result of the alcoholism and then that they witnessed this impacting their friend in the following way:

Yeah like when she would get drunk and we were at house like her mom would get mad at her.

The number of participants who discussed concerns about alcohol misuse by their parents was surprising to the researcher. None of the participants discussed sharing these concerns with their friends, and few talked about discussing it with their parents. There was no mention of discussing these concerns with a therapist or support person of their own, and no one articulated ways in which their parents' alcohol misuse impacted their own current drinking behaviours.

Desired perceptions by others

Participants described messages that they hoped to send or received from others as a result of their alcohol use. A common theme in this area was that of alcohol use indicating some sense of maturity or adulthood that was often associated with the type of alcohol consumed.

Maturity

There were some indications that participants viewed some substances or some behaviours as an indication of maturity and having attained adulthood or the respect of

other adults by using these alcoholic beverages. This was particularly present in discussions about wine. A participant who was first permitted wine at the dinner table as a 13-year-old expressed:

It was just positive because it was they were kind of treating me like an adult and saying, "We trust you to have some of this" and like kind of finally becoming a part of the larger culture that I observed all of my aunts and uncles in, so it was kind of nice to just be accepted in that and to share more cultural traditions with them.

This experience of drinking wine as a demonstration of adulthood expanded to participants who did not discuss alcohol use around their parents. One participant reflected on their earlier years of university as a time where they were drinking a lot and saw this negatively in retrospect, and that now, in third year, they liked more relaxed use of alcohol which they associated with drinking wine:

Yeah, I still like drinking. Now that I've like moved past the fun of first year and I had that fun while it lasted, I like just having drinks with friends. Going out isn't my favourite, like I'd rather just sit at home and watch a documentary with a glass of wine kind of thing, like an old person. So I still really like drinking. I like drinking with friends. If it's just a couple of us and we have like a girls' wine night, I'd prefer that over going out in first year and getting crazy like that.

Further still, another participant pointed out the difference in their alcohol use choices in comparison to the expected choices that he would make – that he preferred to drink wine “*instead of beer.*” They did not grow up with parents drinking wine and many of their friends, like their parents, would drink beer or liquor. This participant pointed to a trip to Italy during high school that changed their drinking pattern: they drank more subsequently, but their consumption became more focused on wine. There

was an appreciation by the participant that this drink choice set them apart, and they were eager to discuss the types of wine that they enjoyed.

This desire to share what types of wine the participant enjoyed was shared by another interviewee. Initially, they, while seemingly hoping to sound sarcastic, referred to themselves as a “*expert*” in wine. They talked about bottling their own wine as it was a way to reduce spending on alcohol and when asked how that behavior started replied with,

My mom. She did it one time a couple of years ago and then it didn't happen and then I decided I wanted to be a mature adult and start drinking wine. Because I remember hating the taste and I was like why would anybody want to drink this and now it's like – I'll go home, not every night, but I'd say like four times a week, I'll have one tiny glass of wine, just casually. My roommates think about me drinking all the time, but I'm like “That's a very small glass and it's not like I'm doing it because I'm having problems.”

This explicit mention of viewing wine use as an expression of adulthood was also emphasized by the participant as no longer enjoying “*going out*” to bars but preferred to stay home and drink wine around a smaller group of friends.

These views of wine as an indication of adulthood were shared by participants who drank wine at home as one of their first experiences of alcohol use and also by those who transitioned to drinking wine after having used different forms of alcohol amongst their peers.

4.5 Perceived Deterrents to Alcohol Use

Costs

Cost was shown to be both a deterrent and something that could lead to excessive alcohol consumption for different individuals. Participants discussed alcohol use resulting in less money as they shared that alcohol use required them to spend money and that alcohol use could interfere with the ability to make money. Many of the interviews were conducted in the first few weeks of classes with participants sharing that they had consumed less over the course of the summer than during the academic year. The rationale was that they were working regularly, and that their friends' jobs and schedules did not line up such that there was a lot of heavy drinking nights. Another student saw their costs rise in their first year of university which they attributed to drinking on three or more nights out of the week. This participant no longer wanted to drink all the time, partially due to cost.

This said, one participant did point to not wanting to “*waste*” the expense of buying alcohol to only have a drink or two. Instead they desired to get drunk. Another participant shared that they had begun bottling their own wine to keep their alcohol costs low.

While participants discussed how alcohol use impacted their finances, the conclusions that they drew from this fact were varied and resulted in different behaviours.

Parental punishments

Participants spoke about either real or the perceived threat of consequences from their parents as a result of being caught drinking or being caught drunk. There were discussions of what they had heard had happened to friends or others, such as being grounded for refilling liquor bottles, but such things were not spoken about in the first person. The participants were split as to whether their parents knew about their alcohol consumption, and so fear of consequences differed amongst the participants. That said, parental expectations did not disappear if they knew their child drank, or even if they themselves regularly consumed alcohol with their child.

One participant's parent who had previously consumed alcohol with their child, made their hungover child work outdoors in high heats doing challenging manual labour while they were significantly hungover. The participant explained that their parent did not explicitly express their knowledge of the hangover but did make suggestions they were aware. The child interpreted this as punishment, and as an effective one, noting that they had not been that drunk since.

Another participant expressed fear that an adult would find out about the first time they used alcohol. They were afraid that the eye doctor they saw the following day would be able to tell they had consumed alcohol and this would lead to consequences.

Generally, participants' fear of consequences were more likely to result in them lying to their parents than in being punished. For some participants, these lies had

lasting consequences on their relationships, and for others, they believed they were protecting not only themselves from punishment but their parents from worry.

Grades

Half of the participants discussed either choices they made around alcohol use to minimize the results on their academics, or actual impacts on their academics that they attributed to alcohol use. Several of these students pointed to choices they had made following their first semester or first year of undergrad related to alcohol use as a result of a decline in academic performance upon entering university.

One participant made clear to highlight the scholastic achievements of their peer group from high school. This was explained alongside stories of drinking regularly on the weekends, and occasionally during the week. They were awarded an entrance scholarship to the University of Guelph and felt motivated to keep that, after doing poorly in their first semester which is when they recalled drinking a bottle of wine every other day. The participant perceived their motivation to keep the scholarship changed their drinking habits for second semester and beyond in that they shifted to drinking on weekends.

For another participant who did not drink during the week in high school, they attributed morning classes to prohibiting them from drinking during the week now that they were in university. When asked if they do drink during the week now, they responded with:

Now, the odd time, very odd time. I've had a lot of morning classes lately so it's just not worth it at all. But like well, last night actually I went out with two friends to trivia at [name of pub] so had a couple of drinks there and that was fairly late when we got back but like I still make it to my 9:30. I wouldn't stay out too much later, we got back around midnight, so.

Over the course of just over two hours, this participant had three drinks and then got up for class in the morning and felt fine. They attributed this to not drinking before going out to the bar.

While university courses caused some students to alter their drinking patterns, others did in high school as well. One participant referred to assignments as “*deterrents*” to drinking, even on the weekend. The same participant believed they did not drink very often during the week in high school because they or their friends would be working.

While both the impact of drinking on academics was noticed by participants as well as the impact of academics on drinking, most participants who discussed these results believed that their current behaviours were more responsible than those in the past, particularly in comparison to their first year of university, even if their current behaviours were far in excess of Canada’s Low Risk Drinking Guidelines and could indicate that their experiences of alcohol use are actually having an impact on their lives that they either did not perceive or did not disclose.

Physical Impacts

No participants talked about major injuries during their interviews, however, some did talk about the impact of alcohol on their bodies either during the use episode or the

following day. One student explained that they had quit getting drunk on a weekly basis which they did in first year.

In first year, definitely. Like once, twice probably, a week. I had a 3-day bender one time. I was just like I feel so bad for my body.

This participant also talked about a concussion they sustained in high school unrelated to drinking. This came up in the context of gaps in their memory while drinking. The participant did not associate this simply with alcohol consumption as they perceived that they did not always consume enough for that to be warranted. An example of having two shots and two glasses of wine, and then continuing to drink more wine throughout the night, the day prior to the interview was given. The participant woke up to find their roommate reminding them of a phone call the night before. These memory lapses were frequent, and seen as negative, but did not deter the participant from drinking, stating that the experience of being drunk is fun.

Another participant stated that their body felt awful after a night of excessive alcohol consumption, something they believed was vastly different from their experiences of alcohol use in their first year of undergrad and in high school. They talked about needing to “*prepare*” their body for future use by not consuming a lot in anticipation of a big party. This participant was expecting to drink a lot at Homecoming on the upcoming weekend, but they were worried about how this would impact them. Still, they expected to go ahead.

Both participants appeared to accept the physical consequences from excessive alcohol use. They expressed that it might have altered the frequency of their behaviours

that resulted in hangovers in comparison to the past, but that they would still participate in such activities on other occasions. It should also be noted that the two examples above and in the data both came from women.

Perception of Safety

The location of drinking came up repeatedly as something that impacted a participant's ability to feel safe while consuming alcohol. This was true both during high school and university. One participant felt unsafe when she went to the bar and now, in third year, preferred to hang out with a smaller group of friends drinking. The same participant discussed going to recent trivia nights, and so the inference of going to '*the bar*' was intended to mean going to a night club, or something that did not act as a pub.

Another participant believed that as they had used alcohol with friends in high school, they were more prepared to drink when they started university than their peers who used alcohol for the first time once they arrived at university. They suggested that because they had been drunk in places they perceived as safe then, they were able to become accustomed to being drunk with less risk. The proximity to home brought safety for the participant and they stated that there could be more consequences for someone who was drunk for the first time far away from home. When asked to specify what those risks might be, the participant provided traffic as a concern. They also suggested that the peer pressure from new friends could be different from an established group who you might be trying to impress. The vastness of empty fields at home made this participant feel as though there were fewer dangers in their hometown.

Drinking and Driving

The researcher discovered a lot of stigma amongst participants when it came to drinking and driving which was consistent across all who mentioned it. Initially, participants dismissed the concept as something that they did not do. The same respondent contributed the following statements over the course of the interview:

- (1) *I mean, none of us drank and drove, obviously, so that was never a problem in my town, at least not that I really knew of.*
- (2) *Maybe on the rare occasion, if I'm going to be honest, did a person go home with a drink in them.*
- (3) *I remember at the bar I worked at, even though I was, like, seventeen or sixteen, however old I was, with the waitress, she would say... here's a drink, like, whenever it's nine o'clock. And then I'd wait at least two and a half hours, three hours, and then yeah, I'd drive. And it would be, like, one drink. Like, I know that's still obviously bad, but it was kind of like, yeah, have it, I know you're going to drive later, but just – you're two minutes down the road, and here's one drink, you're driving in three hours, so just be smart about it.*

Participants would point to their parents, the community at large, and police as places that ensured that message was instilled. One participant talked about one occasion after acquiring their license and then picking their father up from the community Legion where he had been drinking. This was often the only explicit rule or expectation that parents would impart in their children about drinking. To ensure this happened, several participants pointed to their parents picking them up from parties. For example:

During the weekend it was more common, I'd say, for our parents or someone other than our group of friends to drive.

While explicitly the message may have been to not drink and drive, implicitly, participants would understand some flexibility to this rule, as demonstrated above. Another participant, after saying that their parents encouraged them not to drink and drive, immediately, when asked what their parents' feelings about alcohol were, stated:

Yeah, no, someone would be ... I would say ... I can only think of a few instances, in high school, where someone wouldn't have been sober, yeah.

For one participant, however, this rule was so important it forced them to confront their fears about their parents finding out that they drank:

When I hit like grade 12 was like the first time they actually let me go to a party and like knew I was drinking because I had my license so I had to tell them that I was because they would be like why don't you just drive and then drive home? But up until then no, they were a lot stricter than my friends parents for sure about drinking.

Two participants pointed to the deaths of high school students in their community from drinking and driving. This seemed to solidify for at least one of the participants how crucial it was to not drink and drive:

But yeah, that one was all everyone was like holy, that actually happens here? Because no one thought it did because like I don't know we've learned about not drinking and driving since we were little so I didn't think anyone would be stupid enough to do it.

These two students were adamant that they did not drink and drive, and that they had never been in a vehicle with someone who was drinking, but also both stated that they were not close with the deceased. An additional student talked about contributing to the explicit messaging not to drink and drive by shaming those that did. This person was also adamant that they did not ever participate in these behaviours.

It [drinking and driving] became more prevalent as we got older too. And there was ... like a lot of my close friends would never, and we really tried to keep people from doing that, and tried to, like quote, unquote, shame people who would do that, right?

4.6 Summary

By exploring the reflections University of Guelph students had on their high school drinking experiences, several themes emerged that provided insights into the contexts of rural youth drinking practices in Ontario. While these themes are not generalizable beyond the study, they do speak to common phenomena that contribute to a deeper understanding of alcohol use amongst rural youth. Expectedly, several social and cultural factors influenced where, when, and with whom participants first and then subsequently used alcohol. These factors included ethnicity and religion, rurality, gender, and elements of the North American high school experience. Relationships, both existing prior to alcohol use and because of it, also impacted the ways in which participants used alcohol. Finally, deterrents to alcohol use are discussed noting that none were successful in encouraging any of the participants to abstain completely from alcohol, and their effectiveness at reducing harms was not measured in this study.

5 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This thesis seeks to explore the social and cultural contexts surrounding the first instances of alcohol consumption for rural youth, as well as subsequent drinking experiences. It also attempts to investigate the impacts that alcohol use had on their lives through the analysis of their reflections. While this study does not intend to generalize the experiences for all rural youth, themes emerged throughout the interviews that are fitting with the literature. Those themes will be discussed in this chapter along with how the findings of this study compliment the body of research that exists on rural youth drinking patterns, most of which was conducted using quantitative research methods. Additionally, some unique findings that would warrant further investigation are also identified in this upcoming chapter.

Social and cultural factors, as well as relationships have various levels of influence on youth drinking behaviours according to this study. This is certainly consistent with the existing research and each area of the findings will be discussed below. Deterrents, either perceived ones or effective ones, were also identified for various individuals and are also expanded upon in this section as to their effectiveness on individuals in this study in comparison to the population more broadly.

5.2 Social & cultural influences

Gender, rurality, ethnicity and religion, as well as contemporary high school culture were all discussed by study participants as having influence on the contexts of

their alcohol use and behaviours while drinking while they were high school students in rural areas. All these aspects were anticipated based on the literature review, but the role that prom played as a normalized experience appeared more frequently than expected in the responses.

Gender

Overall past year alcohol use amongst Ontario students in grades 7 to 12 was 40.6% for males and 42.8% for females according to the 2019 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey or OSDUHS, however, both showed significant decreases over the last two years. Male and female rates of likelihood to get drunk and binge drink were similar according to the survey and no statistical significance was demonstrated in the rates of use over the last year (Boak, 2019). These rates were higher for students in grade 12, with up to 66% of grade 12 students using alcohol over the last year. The published OSDUHS data does not describe gender rates by age or grade. However, the participants in this research demonstrated consistent experience to that of other studies; that girls show less alcohol involvement than boys during the pre- and early- teen years (Kelly et al., 2011). In this way, gender appeared to have some influence on the context for first instance of alcohol consumption.

The consistency in binge drinking and alcohol use rates amongst boys and girls in Ontario is a divergence from older trends in alcohol use. While the rates for alcohol use across both genders is decreasing, the parity has changed. Historically and ongoingly in other jurisdictions, male children were more likely to report alcohol use than females with 2009 data across Canada suggesting this as well as in the US more

recently (Leatherdale & Burkhalter, 2012; Mahalik et al., 2015). This has been studied in other countries that have reduced gender inequality more generally, and it has been determined that as women and girls lifestyles become more similar to that of men, so too do aspects of their lifestyles that involve alcohol (Measham & Ostergaard, 2011). One rationale for the traditional use of alcohol amongst young men is that boys and society have perceived alcohol use as a typically male behaviour and using it for the first time has been considered an entry into 'manhood' (Mahalik et al., 2015). No participants in this study talked about the masculinity associated with alcohol, other than to sometimes describe the type of alcohol used, despite both genders in the study discussing 'fruity' drinks or coolers as an early beverage of choice, which speaks to the disappearance of the perception of it being a male activity. However, men and women participants did discuss alcohol use as an entry into adulthood. With Ontario's girls drinking as likely in the past year as the province's boys, and with men and women in this study viewing alcohol use as an indication of their maturity, it appears as though the historically male rite of passage of first use of alcohol has transferred to all youth, supplanting the masculine norm onto all genders, and thus increasing the likelihood of risk for more people in the population. This is very important for interventions around health risk behaviour as gendered interventions may no longer be effective.

Religion and ethnicity as influences on alcohol use

Some participants pointed to religious and cultural backgrounds impacting their families' views and usages of alcohol. This was anticipated based on the literature review which found that ethnicity and religion played roles in youths' alcohol use.

Participants always pointed to ethnicity as having a positive effect on their likelihood to use alcohol and religion having a negative effect on their or their friend's or family's likelihood to use alcohol. All participants who disclosed a religion were associated with Christian denominations, Presbyterian, Christian Reformed, Brethren of Christ, or Catholic. Those that discussed Catholicism focused more on their Italian heritage than their religious heritage, and the participant that discussed their participation in the Christian Reformed Church saw that as having a larger impact on their alcohol use than their Dutch heritage. The participant who discussed Presbyterian ministers in their family was referring to earlier generations. The Presbyterian Church's temperance views came more from the social popularity of the movement than from scripture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but Church leadership did instruct ministers to preach in support of temperance despite not all Presbyterians reducing or eliminating alcohol from their lives (The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 2017). This connection to family history that was multiple generations back for the participant was important for them in explaining their relationship with alcohol in that they viewed it as having influenced how their parents were raised, and in turn, how they were raised by their parents. Similarly, the participant who pointed to their upbringing in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) described some churches in their community being more tolerant of alcohol use than others, but that drunkenness was not tolerated amongst any, and that this experience impacted their relationship to alcohol in their youth, in particular. These teachings are consistent with the CRC's Acts of Synod (Christian Reformed Church, 2020). The participants who spoke about their community and high

school having a lot of members of the Brethren in Christ Church (now Be in Christ Church of Canada), who are part of the Anabaptist tradition, have a fairly stern stance on alcohol (Be in Christ Church of Canada, 2020). This comes from an early affirmation of the Church which is 'moderation in things good and abstinence from things harmful' which is typically taken to mean alcohol. The denomination preaches simplicity in life which also fits the non-use of alcohol (Curry et al., 1976). None of the participants in this study were members of the BIC Church, but they were able to point to these non-mainstream influences specifically, suggesting that the Church's views were widely understood and had some level of impact on non-members.

Participants who pointed to these traditions as having an influence on their alcohol use are not alone. Adults in Ontario who are members of a religious group with prohibition or abstention views are less likely to engage in risk drinking than their non- or other religion counterparts (Tuck et al., 2017). None of the interviewees discussed regularly attending religious services in high school or at this point in their lives. The amount of religious services that Ontario adults attend also plays a role in risky drinking behaviours (Tuck et al., 2017). While risk scores were not calculated with participants in this study, all the participants discussed instances of drunkenness. This may suggest that the frequency of attending religious services may also impact youth drinking behaviours in Ontario in addition to the adults it has already been found to impact.

Two participants discussed their experiences of alcohol use with their family that they associated with their Italian heritage. With both participants hiding their peer-based alcohol use from their parents, these two participants exhibited some of the

characteristics that are described in the literature as a blending of wet-and-dry cultures amongst youth. Italian culture is 'wet' in that a little bit of alcohol is consumed frequently (Meagham & Ostergaard, 2011). This said, both Italian participants did not describe using alcohol in this way tremendously frequently. They discussed family gatherings where they would be permitted small amounts of alcohol from a young age that occurred around major holidays, but not on a daily or weekly basis that might best describe the wet cultures. One of these participants expressed comfort around alcohol use that differed from that of their peers in that they were more comfortable slowly consuming in ways that their families had imparted on them. Both, however, pointed to friends and even their own experiences of binge drinking that were more aligned with a 'dry' which is typically how Canada is classified. This merging of the two cultures is expected amongst youth globally and is referred to as a damp model of alcohol consumption in the literature which sees intoxication as the norm or expected outcome for alcohol use (Meaghan & Ostergaard, 2011). These experiences indicate parental and familial norms, even those that are generations established in cultures, may not have as wide an impact on rural youth alcohol use as their peers and the dominant culture. They appeared to have an impact on perceived expectations from parents around alcohol, but peer and peer culture's influence seemed to moderate the effect of the Italian cultural norms amongst the youth interviewed.

Rurality

This study required that all participants be both rural and have consumed alcohol in high school; it did not require that participants binge drink or have been drunk in high

school. This said, all but one participant was able to respond that they had, in fact been drunk in high school. The remaining individual stated that they had been drunk since leaving high school. It is worth considering that volunteers for the study may have been more comfortable talking about excessive alcohol use because they had participated in the behaviour repeatedly, however, these findings were consistent with the quantitative data available regarding youth alcohol use across the province. In 2019, there was a statistically significant difference between the percentage of students both using alcohol and binge drinking in the GTA compared to the rest of the province. Fewer students in grades 7 through 12 drank in the provinces most urban areas than in the less populated, more rural regions (Boak, 2019). This was also found in earlier data with the same survey tool from when the participants in this study were in high school (Boak, 2015; 2017). The nature of this qualitative study was able to add context to what this type of location offers youth when it comes to alcohol use. Participants discussed drinking outside, and, around fires; something that is illegal or requires a permit in more urban regions of the province (City of Guelph, 2019; City of Toronto, 2020; London Canada, 2020; Ottawa, 2004). This consistent experience of alcohol use around fires is not readily found in existing literature. This context appears as though it may be uniquely accessible to rural youth, and therefore may be unique to their experience of early instances of alcohol use. Further study in this area may be warranted to determine if these are consistently the safe experiences the participants claim.

Prom

Prom was found to be a ubiquitous experience of rural youth alcohol use in this study. It was also determined that communities were overall accepting of underage alcohol use in these settings, despite some efforts to reduce harm such as educational sessions from police, parental controlling of alcohol use, and accepted overnight, mixed-gender camping. Quite often there were also efforts to remove liability around youth alcohol use with many participants discussing their schools not being involved in the ritual, or venues denying their usage. Modern American proms in high school settings have a history of over a hundred years (Chen, 2012). This may explain part of the widespread acceptance of the practice and the exceptions that are made for behaviour such as parties with hundreds of students that may otherwise be less tolerated. This said, alcohol was not prevalent at early twentieth century proms as temperance views were popular (Chen, 2012). This departure is important as this study showed that it is widely accepted that high school students will now drink, and often excessively, at prom parties, which are not experienced just one time in a student's life. The importance placed on the experience does not mean that they are unique and allow for excessive alcohol consumption to be sanctioned and accepted by the community on a regular basis. There is limited research in this area, despite the multiple measures referenced by participants of attempts at interventions at multiple levels; by parents, schools, school boards, communities and private companies. The discussion of concern or at least acknowledgement of risk by all these community partners suggests change is desired at some level. This seems to be mitigated by the overwhelming acceptance of

the practices as evidenced by property owners continuing to host the events that police do not disrupt and that parents who had previously not acknowledged their child's drinking purchased alcohol for these occasions.

5.3 Impact of relationships on drinking behaviours

Amongst Ontario youth who have consumed alcohol in the past year, the most common source for that alcohol was found to be a family member (Boak, 2019). While this study found that various family members were often the source of alcohol for participants, participants did not point to a single access point to alcohol. Therefore, in considering any intervention strategy to reduce harms, it is important to recognize that removing one source of alcohol may not drastically alter usage. This important finding enhances the existing quantitative literature on the topic. This study also enhances the quantitative findings in discovering a variety of relationships within a family as access points for alcohol, with some more prominent than others. This is not specified in the Ontario data collection survey.

Parents and siblings were both found to purchase alcohol for their family members who were under legal drinking age. While more often parents or siblings were discussed as using alcohol with their underage family member, some parents and some siblings purchased alcohol for their family member to use unsupervised. In these instances, there were both older siblings and parents who believed that they could control the quantity of alcohol their younger family member consumed by supplying them with alcohol. For the participants in this study, this attempt was not effective as the participants always had multiple sources of alcohol. An Australian study of alcohol use

amongst youth determined that youth who were provided with alcohol by their parents for use in unsupervised environments were more likely to engage in risky alcohol use behaviours (Gilligan, 2012). This disproves the family members' hypothesis that they could keep their children or siblings safe by providing them with alcohol and is consistent with findings in this study. This attempt at a harm reduction technique did not appear effective at preventing overconsumption of alcohol by the participants in this study, nor did it prevent the participants from accessing alcohol in other ways.

Peers

Participants in this research all used alcohol around their peers, with many suggesting peer pressures, either implicit or explicit was a partial explanation for some of their behaviours. This influence could impact the early age at which participants used alcohol such as the participant who drank at lunch in elementary school, or delay the first instance of use until new peers are introduced such as the participant who shared that her peers viewed alcohol negatively until they had boyfriends who were drinking. Peers could also influence excessive alcohol consumption; including the hazing incidents that were described or the physical pressuring to consume. Participants discussed that even if their parents allowed them to drink at home, they often withheld information about drinking with their peers from their parents. These participants were either concerned by their parents' potential reactions to perceived irresponsibility, or a desire not to worry their parents. This sometimes had a negative impact on the reflections of participants, for instance the participant who believed their relationship with their parents was not as strong due to the lying. This said, this separation from

parents is a key phase of life for youth, and is consistent with the research as to why, in fact, peers hold a lot of power on the health behaviours such as alcohol use in which youth engage.

One of the key developmental tasks of adolescence is for youth to individuate themselves from their parents (Crosnoe & McNeely, 2008). This is regularly accomplished with the influences of their peers, which Crosnoe & McNeely articulate as the “multiple, overlapping layers of social relations,” that we see discussed by the participants in this thesis research. The importance of these relationships then, on a variety of behaviours but for our purposes, on alcohol use, require exploration to appreciate the choices that were made. This study’s participants described small circles, mostly single-gender, friends that mixed and mingled with a larger peer crowd and that those crowds often include circles from other schools, or towns. This is all consistent with Crosnoe & McNeely’s classifications of potential peer influences on health behaviours. Their final group is adolescent culture more broadly, which was also found to be an influence here, primary in the form of proms and high school graduation rituals (Crosnoe & McNeely, 2008).

The peer groups that alcohol helped establish in high school continued to be important for participants, particularly for the men interviewed. Young, male, friendships have been found to hold important connections for boys in early adolescence and be valued more than other-gendered friendships. These connections have been found to allow for vulnerability and secrets to be shared, whereas later in adolescence, as this study’s participants discussed, their drinking circles becoming more mixed-gendered. At

this stage, young men are found to be more distrustful and less willing to be close with their male peers for fear that their behaviours would be labeled immature or feminine (Way, 2011). Way's findings indicated that young men miss these connections and it is possible that for the participants in this study, young men remain close with their early high school friends in more cases than the women in the study, due to the connections that were established early that they now find challenging to create in later adolescence and early adulthood. With the participants pointing to the ability of alcohol to create these connections, the context of alcohol use as a tool to permit vulnerability in early experiences appears to have an important impact on emotional connection later in life for several members of this study.

Parental alcohol use concerns

This study found that multiple participants had concerns about a parent's use of alcohol, and that none of them identified strategies to support their parent or themselves with the misuse. Further, the findings about peer groups forming with the support of alcohol brings concerns for these participants. There is a correlation between the presence of a genetic marker and the perception of increased social bonding in group settings when alcohol is used (Creswell, 2012). This possibility for the participants in the study to be at higher risk for alcohol misuse, not only because of their age of first use but also because of genetic disposition that is activated by a socially accepted practice should raise concerns. This speaks to the need for supports for youth with parents who experience substance abuse, not only to process how they can help their parents, but also to learn other strategies for socializing themselves as well as the fact that the

contexts for early alcohol use really do matter with regards to longer term consequences.

Comparable trends in youth alcohol usage behaviours

The interviewed rural youth usually had multiple sources for alcohol. Fake ID use by participants was low with only one participant discussing its use, which is consistent with the research. Fake ID ownership amongst incoming first-year students at US colleges was found to be low at 7.7% (Nguyen, 2011). It appears rurality does not impact the rate of use of fake IDs. The American study determined that fake ID ownership was associated with students who sought memberships in fraternities and sororities and believed that targeted interventions should focus in that area. The participant who discussed their fake ID use was on a junior hockey team. Outside using a fake ID which is more prevalent amongst Greek Life members in the US, they discussed other similarities to fraternity life including living with their teammates, collectively buying alcohol, heavy episodic alcohol use, and hazing. The hegemonic masculinity displayed in both hockey's culture as well as within fraternities is considered to contribute to the rates of alcohol consumption by adherents of the sport (Roy & Camiré, 2017; Peralta, 2007). This connection between Greek Life in the US and junior hockey in Ontario could be expanded in future research. There are many studied interventions regarding alcohol use in Greek Life at US colleges that may be applicable for Ontario students who are also hockey players off-campus (Danielson, 2001; DeSimone, 2006). Roy and Camiré's 2017 follows Canadian junior hockey players through a season and notes similarities to the findings in this study; that at younger

ages (13-14), players drank with the approval and presence of parents and coaches, and by the time they were in junior hockey (18-21) a climate of excessive alcohol consumption was normalized. While the hockey player in this thesis research shared a similar experience, so did the vast majority of participants who talked about drinking around parents and other adults in early high school and then by undergrad they were involved in a normalized culture of excessive alcohol consumption. The Roy and Camiré study was conducted in rural Québec, suggesting that themes in alcohol use amongst rural Ontario youth may be similar to those in the province's neighbour, Québec (2017). It should also be noted that two participants in this research discussed regularly purchase alcohol in Québec, further connecting the two studies.

Access to alcohol from coworkers

Five of the twelve participants recounted occasions, including first instance of alcohol use, when their coworkers purchased liquor for their use. This access point, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, has limited published research and is an important area for future exploration. The influence that families play on health behaviours is studied more frequently than peer groups (Crosnoe & McNeely, 2008). This said, the influence of similar age and same gender peer groups does have evidence in the literature to support their influences, whereas, older friends or acquaintances are not discussed. This is important in Ontario where youth have limited employment options with a higher than average unemployment rate – 16% in 2014 when many of the participants would have been entering the workforce, and 12.4% in 2019 (Rural Ontario Institute, 2014) (Ontario, 2020). With few options for work, effective

interventions, whether structural or parenting decisions, may not be effective in reducing younger youths' access to 19+ year old co-workers. Youth typically have a greater rate of unemployment than the general population. As the Canadian economy experiences an anticipated recession in 2020, job options for youth are anticipated to be further reduced. Future research could explore if this impacts youths' access to alcohol overall with the option of a regular source being reduced.

5.4 Deterrents to unsafe alcohol use

There were no deterring factors for alcohol use that were shared by all interviewees. The closest shared risk reducing factor was the belief that drinking and driving was inappropriate, though, some participants still displayed this activity.

Grades

The qualitative data from this study was able to speak to the fact that the generalized, quantitative, data does not accurately reflect all experiences. Several of the participants discussed alcohol impacting their grades in a way that either motivated them to change their behavior or caused them harm academically. According to the National College Health Assessment survey conducted in the Winter semester of 2019, when all participants in this study were students at the University of Guelph, the only health concern that students listed as impacting their grades less frequently than alcohol was allergies. Approximately 35% of students stated it impacted their grades (University of Guelph, 2019). This inconsistency with the findings of this thesis demonstrates the importance of the study's design in that it allowed for individuals to share their experiences that can be hidden within numerical data. Participants

discussed reducing their alcohol use in order to improve their grades or because of increased academic workload. They believed that the changes they made to their consumption rates improved their academic outcomes, thus their grades or motivations to keep academic scholarships deterred them from using alcohol in the same ways they did or may have done otherwise.

Costs

Participants discussed alcohol prices impacting their decisions around alcohol use in a variety of ways; from what types of alcohol they drank (i.e., kit-made wine) to binge drinking for maximum impact of the drug. Some participants discussed the cost as a drawback, but no one shared that it was prohibitive or the primary reason that they wanted to reduce their consumption. This is consistent with findings that high school age youth's alcohol use frequency is not impacted by increased taxation on alcohol, suggesting unlike the general population, price is not a deterrent for youth drinking (Ajilore et al., 2016). Earlier research determined that in the US, college completion rates were positively related to the cost of alcohol, suggesting that the cheaper alcohol was, the more it was consumed by youth which negatively impacted their ability to study or complete classes (Grossman et al., 1993). This finding holds for the general population, which typically responds to an increase in the cost of alcohol by decreases use. When prices rise, the heaviest users tend to buy the cheapest products and not their preferred product (Saunders et al., 2011). The participants in this study discussed their choices of alcohol product in their youth as sometimes having shifted into their adulthood, away from the cheapest forms of beer in particular. This suggests that some

of the youth in this study were already acting as though they were heavy drinkers motivated by price. Younger drinkers are also responsive to price in that it can delay the age when youth start to drink (Saunders et al., 2011). The survey data from Ontario's youth may help to support this as the age of first use has increased over the last 40 years (Boak, 2019). These long-term changes are not identifiable in the data collected in this study.

Drinking and driving

Participants in this study overwhelmingly expressed beliefs that drinking and driving was inappropriate. Participants who experienced a death of a peer from drinking and driving did not relent on the level of inappropriateness of drinking and driving whereas some participants, despite repeating the messages of inappropriateness that they received from a variety of sources, did admit to instances where they or friends would use alcohol and drive. Participants pointed to not drinking and driving as one of the only explicitly communicated messages about alcohol use that their parents expressed. They also pointed to occasions when the community cared about this above all else related to alcohol use amongst youth, such as when police would arrive at parties to ensure that party-goers had a safe ride home. There is a lot of evidence for effective drinking and driving policies and educational campaigns that have been implemented over the years (Robertson & Vanlaar, 2013; White et al., 2018). There is also a lot of focus on impaired driving in rural jurisdictions in the literature because there has been a more significant decline in impaired driving fatalities in urban centres than more rural settings (Robertson et al., 2016). Data on Canadian youth demonstrates that

students from rural high schools are more likely than their urban counterparts to both drink and drive and be a passenger in a vehicle with a driver who had consumed alcohol (Minaker, 2017). One participant alluded to this as a possible concern as they suggested there were more risks for them getting to and from their friends' homes by bike or foot on busy roads but did not expressly state they were concerned about impaired drivers. Another participant was more concerned about traffic while drunk when they were at school in Guelph. While this study demonstrated that there was acceptance of the dangers of drinking and driving, it also demonstrates that many of the participants are potentially either unaware of exact risks or still willing to take those risks. University of Guelph survey data also found that found that 16.5% of students had driven after having consumed alcohol in the last 30 days. This was much higher than the only 0.24% of students who reported driving after having 5 or more drinks in the last few days (University of Guelph, 2019). These trends are consistent with the explanations that the participants shared about their drinking and driving behaviours while in high school: that they might have a single drink and wait a prolonged period.

Physical impacts

Men were more likely to discuss sexually violent behaviour during interviews, making references to their male peers' or older students' attempts to use alcohol to facilitate sexual assault. There were no explicit questions about sexual violence in the interview guide, but questions were asked about occurrences while intoxicated, both positive and negative. Alcohol is the most common drug used to facilitate sexual assault and has been found to be used more often than forced sexual assault (Krebs, 2009).

Women are more likely to experience verbal, sexual, and physical aggression on heavy drinking days (Parks et al., 2008). Even with all the female respondents discussing heaving episodic drinking, none discussed sexual violence for themselves or friends, other than in one instance where a participant was explicit in obtaining consent from a partner for non-penetrative sexual activities. Participants did not appear to make connections to discussing sexual violence when the topic at hand was labelled as alcohol. When discussing expectations or concerns parents had, participants did not list sexual violence as a concern, suggesting that parents did not raise these issues with their children in the same way they raised other risks, particularly drinking and driving.

5.5 Summary

Various aspects of the lives of the rural youth studied in this research played a role in influencing their decisions and behaviours around alcohol use as youth and now as young adults. This study has similar findings to existing literature that gender, religion, and ethnicity have such an influence along with peer and familial role modelling. This study also enhanced the Ontario data regarding access to alcohol amongst youth which previously suggested that family members are the most accessed source. Amongst the participants in this study, while many did use parents and siblings to help them access alcohol, none of the participants relied on these sources exclusively.

6 Conclusion

Alcohol use at an early age is an indicator of later substance use problems, can result in harms at the time of occurrence, and is more prevalent in youth in rural areas of Ontario. These statements were known going into this study which has provided explanations for the context of the first instance of alcohol use and those that followed as those early incidents are so crucial in determining long-term health behaviours and outcomes. Through the semi-structured interviews, this study investigated the reflections of University of Guelph students on their past instances of alcohol use, and the perceptions that they have on how those instances have impacted their lives.

Social and cultural factors at multiple levels influenced participants views of alcohol and the ways in which they engaged with the substance. Their gender, where they lived, their ethnicity, and religion were all discussed as factors that had a role in their alcohol use as teenagers. Additionally, whether they had older siblings, had a part-time job, or had friends with older siblings impacted how they obtained alcohol, although they all obtained alcohol from multiple sources. Participants in the study described a variety of parenting approaches to alcohol use, but the variety of interventions at the community level was minimal and failed to consistently address the drinking occasion that was most prevalent in the data: prom parties. These parenting styles offered different role modelling but also different levels of concern as participants shared their own concerns about alcohol misuse by their parents. While these parental behaviours may play a role on substance use patterns in the long-term, participants' peers critically influenced how, where, and when they used alcohol. For some participants in the study, these peer

groups continued to be valuable sources of support and connection into their undergraduate degrees.

While intervention strategies were not measured in this research, participants did offer reasons for their personal reduction in alcohol use. This included concerns about their academics, particularly during the transition from high school to university, messages they had received about drinking and driving, and hangovers. The qualitative study was important in eliciting these stories which were occasionally in opposition to the existing quantitative data or evolved as the interviews continued.

The final chapter of this thesis reviews the goals of the project and provides an overview of the analysis of the research. It also offers recommendations for Ontario's rural communities to attempt to achieve parity with more urban efforts when it comes to the age of first use of alcohol. While this age has continued to rise over the last forty years, it is necessary for that to continue so that the health disparities between urban and rural dwellers as a result of the age of first use of alcohol are also changed for the better. The limitations of this research and its implications will be discussed, as well as possibilities for future research that centre the experience of rural youth.

6.1 Recommendations

- 1) Many participants disclosed concerns about a parent currently or previously misusing alcohol. None of them discussed methods of formal support for themselves, or skills that they had to support their parent. It is recommended that rural communities and schools work on stigma reduction surrounding alcohol

misuse and abuse so that youth can more comfortably access support in this area. Additionally, there is opportunity to explore tailored resources for rural youth in coping with a parents with a substance misuse concern.

- 2) Communities are encouraged to develop comprehensive responses to prom parties. Open dialogue about concerns is important as specific attempts at interventions appear to be occurring amid widespread acceptance of the events and thus the behaviours of youth and these parties. It is important that all stakeholders, particularly youth, be involved with these responses to ensure their concerns are met. Hazing and sexual violence were discussed by participants in these contexts, but despite other community responses, there was nothing addressing these specific concerns in the collected data.
- 3) This study demonstrated that participants had multiple channels for accessing alcohol before the legal drinking age. Some of their parents and older siblings believed that if they obtained alcohol for their child or sibling, then the participant would not exceed using a set amount of alcohol. This was determined to be false, with participants able to access alcohol in other ways in addition to what had been sanctioned by their family member for use unsupervised. It is therefore recommended that parents and older siblings not purchase alcohol for their adolescent family members use in unsupervised environments.
- 4) It is recommended that parents and educators openly discuss real risks and harms associated with alcohol youth with rural youth based on researched data.

6.2 Limitations

This research was designed to elicit the unique individual experiences of rural youth's alcohol consumption. The qualitative nature of the design offers insights into each of the participants' lives, but it cannot be used to generalize for all rural Ontario youth. The researcher's personal lens played a significant role in the analysis and collection of the data which is detailed in the first two chapters of this thesis. Their relationship with the participant, or the way that the subject perceived the interviewer, may have also impacted what stories were shared. The insights that are described throughout are limited to the researcher's interpretation despite following established process in reviewing the transcribed interviews. The nature of the subject matter, that is, past illegal behaviour that has its own stigma, may have been challenging for participants to be fully truthful in their tellings, or they may have withheld accounts.

6.3 Future Research

- 1) What are the experiences on friendship development for boys and girls in rural Canadian settings? What role does gender play on the length and impact of these friendships into adulthood?
- 2) What similarities exist between junior hockey culture in Canada and fraternity culture in the US? Can interventions about alcohol use that have been applied in the US setting be effective with Canadian hockey teams?
- 3) An investigation into the stigma of alcohol misuse in rural Canada and its impact on youth.

- 4) An exploration of the connection between alcohol use as symbol of maturity and adulthood, particularly against the historical context of first instance of alcohol use as a symbol of manhood.
- 5) What do rural youth believe are risks associated with alcohol use and how does this compare to actual risks they face?
- 6) Further exploration of the perceived impact of ethnicity on youth alcohol use versus actual impact on use in comparison to their peers of differing ethnicities.
- 7) Further exploration into the role specific religious groups play on a community's attitudes and actions around alcohol use (i.e., BIC Church, CRC etc. in their specific geographic community)
- 8) Does attending religious services impact youth alcohol consumption?
- 9) Are Ontario rural youth alcohol usage experiences comparable to the experiences of rural youth in other Canadian provinces?
- 10) Do economic downturns impact youth's ability to access alcohol, particularly from co-workers?
- 11) Explore the impact that university entrance scholarships have on alcohol use amongst first-year students.

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APPENDIX 1

Recruitment Tools

Facebook Advertisement

Are you a University of Guelph student that grew up in a rural area? Did you drink alcohol in high school? Are you interested in participating in a study on rural youth and alcohol use? Contact Jean Thompson at thompsja@uoguelph.ca if you are interesting in sharing your experiences. University of Guelph Research Project, REB# 19-02-001

Instagram Advertisement

Are you a University of Guelph student that grew up in a rural area? Did you drink alcohol in high school? Are you interested in participating in a study on rural youth and alcohol use? Contact Jean Thompson at thompsja@uoguelph.ca if you are interesting in sharing your experiences. University of Guelph Research Project, REB# 19-02-001

Email List Serv Advertisement

Are you a University of Guelph student that grew up in a rural area? Did you drink alcohol in high school? Are you interested in participating in a study on rural youth and alcohol use? Contact Jean Thompson at thompsja@uoguelph.ca if you are interesting in sharing your experiences. University of Guelph Research Project, REB# 19-02-001

Office of Research Participant Recruitment Site

Are you a University of Guelph student that grew up in a rural area? Did you drink alcohol in high school? Are you interested in participating in a study on rural youth and alcohol use? Contact Jean Thompson at thompsja@uoguelph.ca if you are interesting in sharing your experiences. University of Guelph Research Project, REB# 19-02-001

Letter to Student Organizations

Dear _____ (club name/student government) Executive:

I am writing as a graduate student researcher at the University of Guelph studying alcohol use in rural youth. I am hoping you can share this call for research participants with other students in your organization. This project seeks to invite participants to interviews of approximately 45 to 60 minutes in length that will ask questions regarding their experiences with alcohol while in their teenage years living in rural communities.

Any student that is currently 19 – 24 years of age and grew up in a rural setting is invited to participate.

For questions, or to arrange an interview, please do not hesitate to contact me at thompsja@uoguelph.ca or by phone at 519-824-4120 ext. 56150.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jean Thompson

Graduate Student

School of Environmental Design and Rural Development

University of Guelph Research Project, REB# 19-02-001

APPENDIX 2

Consent to Participate in Research Information Letter

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Al Lauzon and Jean Thompson of the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development at the University of Guelph. If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please feel free to contact Jean Thompson at 519-824-4120 ext. 56150 or thomsjsa@uoguelph.ca or Dr. Al Lauzon at 519-824-4120 ext. 53379 or allauzon@uoguelph.ca .

Purpose of the Study: This project will attempt to explore the social and contextual motivations for alcohol use in rural youth with attention being paid to the youths' reflections on their experiences of alcohol use

Procedures: If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview for 45 – 60 minutes.

Information Collected: Participants will be asked questions regarding their experiences with alcohol use in their teenage years.

Data Collected: These interviews will be audio-recorded with the recordings stored on a password protected recording device and then an encrypted computer. All data will be kept on an encrypted password protected computer. Identifying information (i.e., names) will be placed in a master list and associated with a participant ID number. The list will be stored on an encrypted computer. This information will be used only for arranging interviews and will not be included in any research outputs.

Potential Risks and Discomforts: Because you are asked to discuss past experiences, this may bring up painful memories or lead you to question past choices, however, these thoughts could be experienced as part of everyday life.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria: Participants must have lived in a rural area of Ontario while they were 12 to 17 years old and currently be between the ages of 19 to 24.

Potential Benefits to Participants and/or to Society: You will not receive direct benefit from participating beyond information about resources and the opportunity for some reflection. Your answers will contribute insights on rural youth alcohol use that is limited in the literature, and could lead to better supports for University of Guelph and rural students.

Available Resources: Participants will be provided with a list of resources available to University of Guelph students related to alcohol use following the interview.

Confidentiality: Any information you provide in this study will be kept private, unless information is shared that demonstrates ongoing or present illegal behaviour that presents a high degree of risk to self or others. In such a case, police would be contacted. We will not record any personally identifying information. De-identified data will be kept on a password protected computer, and physical copies will be kept in a locked office until April 30, 2019. The Primary Investigator (Dr. Al Lauzon), the student researcher (Jean Thompson), and a transcriptionist will be the sole individuals with access to the recordings and data.

Participation and Withdrawal: You can choose whether to be in this study or not. At any time, you can withdraw from this study by ending the interview. Following the interview, you may withdraw your responses until April 30, 2019 by contacting the researcher at thompsja@uoguelph.ca. If you volunteer to be in this study, however, you may refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study.

Research Dissemination: This research is part of a master's thesis. This research may be presented at conferences, in journal articles, in workshops, or as a poster presentation. In all of these methods, the participants will not be identifiable, however, direct quotes from participants may be used.

Rights of Research Participants: You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. This project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board for compliance with federal guidelines for research involving human participants. If you have questions regarding your rights and welfare as a research participant in this study (REB# 19-01-002), please contact: Director, Research Ethics; University of Guelph; reb@uoguelph.ca; (519) 824-4120 (ext. 56606). You do not waive any legal rights by agreeing to take part in this study.

Participant Name:

required

Participant Preferred Contact Information for Results Dissemination:

not required

Participant Signature:

required

APPENDIX 3

Screening Questionnaire

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Dr. Al Lauzon and Jean Thompson of the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development at the University of Guelph. If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please feel free to contact Jean Thompson at 519-824-4120 ext. 56150 or thompsja@uoguelph.ca.

Please circle your response:

1. Are you currently 19+ years of age?

Yes No

2. Did you consume alcohol while in high school?

Yes No

3. Do you consider where you went to high school to be in a rural setting?
(i.e., on a farm or in a small town)

Yes No

APPENDIX 4

Semi-structured interview questions

- 1) Where did you grow up?
- 2) What did you do outside of school?
- 3) Who did you spend time with?
- 4) What attitudes does your family have towards alcohol use?
- 5) What attitudes do your high school friends have towards alcohol use?
- 6) Have you used alcohol before?
- 7) Can you tell me about the first time you used alcohol?
- 8) Do you remember how old you were?
- 9) How did you obtain the alcohol?
- 10) Do you remember how much you drank?
- 11) What happened that day/night?
- 12) What happened the next day/night?
- 13) Who did you discuss that day/night with?
- 14) What, if any, were the positive aspects of your first alcohol use experience?
- 15) What, if any, were the negative aspects of your first alcohol use experience?
- 16) Have you used alcohol since then?
- 17) If so, how long after?
- 18) What was that next experience like?
- 19) How frequently did you drink in elementary school/high school?
- 20) Have you ever been drunk?
- 21) If yes, how old were you?
- 22) If yes, what was that experience like?
- 23) What, if any, were the positive aspects of your first experience being drunk?
- 24) What, if any, were the negative aspects of your first experience being drunk?
- 25) Looking back, how do you feel about these experiences?
- 26) What do you think your town's attitudes towards drinking are?
- 27) What do you think your town's attitudes towards youth drinking are?

APPENDIX 5

Poster

CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT AND
EXTENSION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF
GUELPH

**DID YOU GROW
UP ON A FARM?
IN A SMALL
TOWN?**

**Did you drink alcohol in
high school?**

Volunteers are being recruited for a study on
Alcohol Use and Rural Youth

**PARTICIPANTS ARE NEEDED
FOR 45 - 60 MIN. INTERVIEWS**

CONTACT JEAN THOMPSON
THOMPSJA@UOGUELPH.CA
REB #
19-02-001