

“And then I’ll have a good time, enjoy the days and drink the wine”: alcohol consumption in later life as a material-discursive practice

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Abstract

Pleasure is a neglected topic in ageing research, particularly when it comes to activities that are deemed as unhealthy and/or immoral, such as alcohol consumption. In this article, I explore the question how – that is, in which discursive-material practices and arrangements – alcohol is consumed throughout the retirement transition. To analyse alcohol consumption as a material-discursive practices, I draw on empirical material from a qualitative longitudinal study, comprising interview and photo diaries and following 30 older adults through their retirement transition. Based on this material, I discuss five categories of elements that constitute drinking practice assemblages: (1) things and spaces, (2) people, (3) temporalities, (4) discourses, and (5) bodies. Across those elements, research participants drew boundaries between positive, responsible and negative, irresponsible alcohol consumption. These boundaries, however, were different than those drawn by experts: While the latter tend to differentiate based on the quantity and frequency of alcohol consumption, the former

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draw boundaries based on quality, i.e. the “how” of alcohol consumption. I conclude by arguing how approaching alcohol consumption from a material gerontology perspective can enhance our understanding of alcohol consumption as “multiple” and an embedded, situated practice with blurry boundaries between problematic and pleasurable use.

Keywords: alcohol, life course transitions, retirement, situational analysis, material gerontology.

Introduction: Alcohol Consumption across the Life Course

Drinking alcoholic beverages is a normalised and pleasurable part of everyday life for many people in the world. However, health research about alcohol consumption is overwhelmingly focused on risk factors and negative outcomes (Sudhinaraset et al. 2016), like morbidity and mortality, accidents, violence, and the related societal and economic costs (e.g. Bouchery et al. 2011; Rehm et al. 2009). From this perspective, alcohol consumption might seem irrational and unnecessarily risky, overlooking the aspect of pleasure that is integral to much of substance use. As Phoenix and Orr (2014) have argued, understanding pleasure is crucial to better understand health behaviour, and with Nicholls and Hunt (2025) we can consequently ask: Should alcohol research say more about fun (or pleasure)?

The answer to the question why people drink lies not merely in weighing the costs against the benefits – much rather, alcohol consumption is a socially embedded practice in which affects, cultural norms and societal structures play a major role. Research around such “drinking cultures” have therefore aimed to avoid a purely problem-centred approach to alcohol consumption and instead explored how macro- (often: nation state) or micro-level (milieus or subgroups) norms, meanings, settings/spaces and practices shape how (much), why, when and where which people drink (Heath 1976; for a review see Aresi & Bloomfield 2021). Consequently, studies have analysed differences in alcohol consumption between countries, genders, religions, ethnicity, socio-economic status and health (e.g. Huckle et al. 2010). Germany, where the empirical material of this article stems from, has among the highest average alcohol intake across Europe: In a recent representative study, 32.5% of adults reported moderate to high-risk alcohol consumption, with significant differences in gender

(men drink more) and education (people with higher education drink more) (Richter et al. 2025).

Regarding age, research suggests that older adults are one of the groups with the highest alcohol consumption. For Germany, self-report studies indicate that 18.5% of women and 27% of men at or over the age of 65 years show what experts rate as risky alcohol consumption (Lange et al. 2016), and research based on the quantity of alcohol consumption in Germany suggest that the proportion of people with moderate or high-risk alcohol consumption is particularly high in the age group 45–64 and, among men, also in the age group 65 and older, where 48.5% of 65+ men consume moderate or high-risk amounts of alcohol (Richter et al. 2025). Even though such findings highly depend on the definitions of older adults, (risky or problematic) alcohol consumption, and the methodology used in obtaining samples (Barry & Blow 2016), one may ask: Why are older adults (in Germany) comparatively strong drinkers?

The literature gives several possible explanations for this, some of which are rooted in life course, others in generational theories. Life course research assumes that alcohol consumption is not stable across the life course but increases in later life. This is attributed to, for example, retirement-related loss of a fixed daily structure, decrease in responsibilities and increase in boredom, or the use of alcohol as “self-medication” against pain or illness that is more frequent in older age (Britton & Bell 2015).

Longitudinal studies, however, show mixed results regarding such assumptions. The Swiss Health Survey 2016, for example, indicates that daily alcohol consumption increases through the transition from work to retirement from 10 to 26%. However, 40% of participants of the Whitehall II cohort study between the ages of 61 and 85 years have decreased their alcohol consumption in the past 10 years, mainly for health reasons and a decrease of social occasions, while only 11% increased it, mainly due to an increase in social occasions and a decrease in responsibilities (Britton & Bell 2015). For the US, Polenick et al. (2018) demonstrate individual stability in drinking patterns over a 16-year period from middle to later life, but also finds influence of wives’ and husbands’ drinking behaviour over time. Brennan et al. (2010) focused specifically on the retirement transition and reconstructed its effect on older adults’ drinking trajectories.

They found that their participants' drinking frequency declined moderately over a 10-year interval, and retirement hastened this decline, however health, income, and problem-drinking history are more important.

Another strand of research draws on generational theories to explain why certain age groups drink more than others, assuming they have been socialised with a certain pattern of alcohol consumption that they keep relatively stable as they grow older. Kauppila and Hellman (2018) as well as Room (1989), for example, speak of "wet generations," referring thereby to the hedonistic lifestyle of the (pre-) Baby Boomer generation in the US (Barry & Blow 2016) or the "Rødvingeneration" in Denmark (Wolter 2015). Moreover, generational perspectives suggest that there are specific formative events in different generations' lives that facilitate certain patterns of alcohol consumption. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased alcohol consumption around the world – including among older adults (Pollard et al. 2020; Weerakoon et al. 2020) –, which might have long-lasting formative effects on upcoming generations.

We can thus summarise that:

- (1) alcohol consumption differs between age groups, and that older adults consume, on average, more alcohol than younger adults and that
- (2) this might ever be a generational phenomenon or induced by certain life-stage specific changes, e.g., the transition from work to retirement and the transformation of daily lives and responsibilities that this entails.

However, while there is substantial research on drinking cultures in youth and early adulthood (e.g. Järvinen & Room 2017), we know little about the socially embedded practice of alcohol consumption and drinking cultures in later life – hence the affects, cultural norms and societal structures that might play a role in understanding these differences and potential dynamics in consuming alcohol across the life course. Against this backdrop, this article approaches the question how alcohol consumption changes throughout the life course from a qualitative, material gerontology (MG) perspective. Firstly, we outline what such a perspective, applied to alcohol consumption, entails. Secondly, we present empirical material from

a qualitative longitudinal study following 30 older adults through their retirement transition. Drawing on situational analysis (Clarke 2005), we analyse alcohol consumption as a material-discursive practices, reconstruct how it changes in the retirement transition and where boundaries between “good” and “bad” alcohol consumption are being drawn. Finally, we discuss these findings against the backdrop of the existing literature and conclude that approaching alcohol consumption from a MG perspective can enhance our understanding of alcohol consumption as an embedded, situated practice with blurry boundaries between problematic and non-problematic use.

A MG Perspective on Alcohol Consumption as a Material-Discursive Practice

MG is an approach to the study of age(ing) that is inspired by the “material turn” in the social sciences and humanities (Hoepfner & Urban 2018). While this turn provides an umbrella for a range of different theories, most of them share four core premises: relationality, post-humanism, generative materiality and non-dualism. In a materialist understanding, phenomena – like age(ing) – emerge and transpire in relational arrangements that position and link a range of material and discursive, human and non-human elements (Gallistl & Wanka 2021). This implies a shift from anthropocentrism towards a post-humanist performativity (Barad 2003) – that means, on the one hand, that material and non-human elements are as generative and agential as humans (Latour 2005), and on the other hand, it thereby aims to overcome (Cartesian) dualisms of human and non-human, body and mind, meaning and matter. Based on these fundamental premises, MG has inspired research that approaches pleasure in later life as sensory and bodily (e.g. Höppner 2015), entangled with affects, spaces and things, such as clothes (e.g. Twigg 2013), as well as practices of serious leisure in later life (e.g. Heikkinen & Alfredsson-Olsson 2020).

Alcohol consumption, however, has not yet been studied from such a pleasure-based MG perspective. From such a perspective, drinking turns from an (intentional) individual action to a material-discursive practice (Barad 2003) that is situated in and entangled with, *inter alia*, the places where alcohol is consumed, its look and taste, the medial portrayals of

alcohol consumption, the social situations in which alcohol is consumed, etc. Moreover, even though we will refer to alcohol consumption as “a” practice, it is much rather a complex of practices that “hang together,” ranging from buying alcohol to opening bottles to pouring, toasting, drinking, disposing of, etc., which are embedded in and connected to other complexes, bundles and constellations of practices, like eating or celebrating (Shove et al. 2012).

All these practices and elements are positioned in certain relations to each other, for example, a bottle of wine (often) requires a corkscrew to open it; some drinks habitually require a certain sequence regarding meals (e.g. aperitifs and digestifs); and for many, their sale is connected to certain calendrical ages (e.g. 18 years or 21 years). In relational thinking, such arrangements formed of the relations between practices and elements can be described with the Deleuzian notion of assemblages (Phillips 2006). As, essentially, relational processes, these assemblages become different with and through the changes in “their” practices, elements, and relations between them. To take a historical example, alcohol consumption changes significantly when only one of their elements – accessibility – changes, as in times of prohibition. But alcohol consumption is also a (more or less) different practice when you replace one drink with another, for example, wine and beer that tend to be served in different glasses, consumed in different places, times of the day, etc. Changing even one element or “sub-practice” thereby often also changes the other elements – for example, a drink might taste different whether served warm or cold.

Moreover, alcohol consumption changes those who consume it – dynamics that can be described as intra-actions (Barad 2003). On the short term, drinking can make people drunk; in the long run, drinking can change bodies severely and co-constitute subject positions, such as “an alcoholic.” Consequently, MG requires us to understand social phenomena “as a complex and open-ended set of relations” (Braidotti 2006: 197), and these relations form, shift and change throughout the performance of a practice and its iterations, as well as across the life course and history (Butler 2002). Whether alcohol consumption is deemed as pleasurable, normal, or dangerous, and boundaries between those definitions are thereby blurry and shifting, rendering alcohol consumption as potentially both unhealthy and pleasurable at the same time.

Practice-theoretical perspectives on alcohol consumption have therefore been deployed to study how drinking practices emerge, persist and decay, how they merge with other practices, and how they involve different social groups (cf. Meier et al. 2018). Most of studies drawing on such approaches have so far focused on young adulthood (cf. Hennell et al. 2019), yet with few exceptions: Lassen (2014), for example, studied older men playing billiard and drinking as a practice that is not represented in the active ageing discourse, and Katz (2000) similarly frames alcohol consumption as an “immoral activity” (similar to sexual intercourse in later life) that is thus not considered, and researched, as frequently as other more seemingly age-appropriate practices (e.g. physical or mental exercise).

From an MG perspective, we can thus ask: How – that is, in which discursive-material practices and arrangements – is alcohol consumed in later life and how do these discursive-material practice arrangements change across life course transitions?

Method and Empirical Material

The question posed calls for a methodological design that can both take material-discursive practice assemblages into account, and “zoom in” (Nicolini 2012) to their elements, relations and embeddedness, as well as the processual changes these assemblages undergo through time.

The empirical material analysed and discussed in this article stems from the project “Doing Retiring – The Social Practices of Transiting into Retirement and the Distribution of Transitional Risks” (2017–2021). The project deploys a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and different qualitative methods, the latter of which form the focus of this article. It follows 30 older adults in a qualitative longitudinal study from before retiring to 3 years thereafter.

Participants were recruited through an information brochure with the header “Are you retiring?” which was distributed via municipalities, shops and supermarkets, employers, educational institutions (e.g. Universities of the Third Age) and online forums. The main selection criterion was that people planned to stop working within the upcoming 12 months or planned to claim old age pension benefits within the upcoming 12 months. The final sample consists of an almost equal share of female and

male participants born between 1948 and 1965, living in different residential areas and family constellations (for example, eight lived without a partner and nine had no children or grandchildren). Former occupations comprised a wide range, from shift foreman and mechanical engineers to social workers, teachers, researchers, bank clerks, IT personnel and self-employed positions, and participants retired on different pathways, from retirement out of fulltime employment to partial retirement, early retirement, or retirement from unemployment.

This article focuses on findings from the first two waves of data collection that took place from September 2017 to April 2018 (wave 1) and December 2018 to March 2019 (wave 2). Each wave of data collection comprised a face-to-face episodic interview that was mostly narrative but based upon a guideline that provided rough orientation questions. The interviews were all conducted in German and began with an open narrative-biographical invitation for participants to elaborate on their occupational histories for the first wave, while the interviews of the second wave started with an open narrative invitation to talk about the previous year. After these narrative periods, which would last for approximately 45 minutes, participants were asked more specifically about retiring and their everyday lives before and after retirement.

Interviews lasted altogether between 60 and 180 minutes, with 90 minutes being the average duration. Interviews were fully transcribed and openly coded using the data analysis software MAXQDA 12. While the analysis was conducted in German, specific quotes were translated for publication purposes (including this paper). Translation was carried out in an iterative and interactive dialogue between two researchers (including the author) as well as the translation software DeepL Pro. It followed a postpositivist model of translation, emphasising the situatedness of language over technical-literal equation¹ (see e.g. Vinokurov et al. 2007).

In addition to the interview, each wave of data collection comprised 7 days of activity diaries, along with photo diaries of three pictures per diary day, resulting in 21 pictures per participant per wave. Participants created these diaries in the year after the interview and sent back by mail

¹This was particularly important as people used a lot of figurative language, drew on phrases and metaphors when describing changes in alcohol consumption. Hence, sometimes the original word will be referenced in addition to the English translation.

or e-mail. Diaries and photographs were then taken up in the following wave of data collection and discussed in the interviews (hence, in wave 2, pictures taken in the year after wave 1 were discussed).

Data analysis of both episodic interviews and diaries was based upon situational analysis mapping (Clarke 2005; Clarke et al. 2018). Situational analysis is a method that emphasises the situatedness of phenomena and their relations, and focuses on social phenomena as “situations,” that is processual and emergent arrangement of relations. It entails mapping techniques in which human and non-human, material and discursive, explicated and implicated elements that, through their relations, constitute a situation are identified and visualised. This can first be done in a non-systematic way through what Clarke calls “messy maps,” and then further developed into “situational maps” in which elements are categorised and located based on their relations to each other.

Alcohol consumption was not a topic in the interview guide but would continuously occur in the narrations of everyday lives, and thus started drawing my attention, while at the same time reflecting upon my own alcohol consumption and socialisation across the life course. It thereby struck me how pleasurable drinking was narrated, how aesthetically alcoholic beverages were portrayed in the photo diaries, and how painful abstinence was experienced by my research participants – against what I perceived as a dominant discourse that rendered alcohol as a public health threat, at least in my generation and social milieus. Against this backdrop, I started to explore changes in alcohol consumption in more depth.

For the analysis portrayed in this article, anything related to alcohol consumption was defined as a “situation” of interest. Hence, in a first step, all elements mentioned or portrayed in the interviews and photo diaries around the matter of alcohol were collected in a so-called *messy map*. These elements were then related to each other and inductively categorised in *situational maps*, which will be discussed next.

Findings

In general, alcohol consumption was brought up to various degrees in the interviews, diaries and photographs, and some study participants did not mention or portray alcohol consumption at all. Among those who did,

alcohol consumption was performed in different ways, ranging for example from photos and narrations of groups of people toasting to each other with beer glasses in a restaurant to a glass of wine while reading on the sofa. To cater for this diversity, we will first map elements that form alcohol consumption as a practice across participants, after which we will go into more detail about narrated changes in alcohol consumption across the life course, and boundary-making practices between “good” and “bad” consumption.

Mapping Alcohol Consumption as a Material-Discursive Practice in Later Life

Figure 1 portrays a situational map of alcohol consumption in later life, with five main categories of elements emerging from the interviews and photo diaries in relation to drinking: (1) things and spaces, (2) people, (3) temporalities, (4) discourses, and (5) bodies. Whereas the figure depicts an ordered, but not yet relational map, the closeness or distance of the elements bears no meaning; however, the empty hexagons in between point to the assumption that other elements might play a role in drinking practices, but did not become evident, or were made irrelevant/invisible, in this research. In the following, the five main categories of elements are briefly discussed in their relation to drinking across the retirement transition.

To begin with, participants took photos and talked about alcohol consumption in certain spaces, for example, in bars and restaurants or the home and garden, as well as in relation to other, related practices and their materialities, like reading books, watching movies, smoking cigarettes, talking to other people, and/or eating. Drinking was usually located in the evenings, even though some photos also portrayed alcohol consumption during the day. Roland, for example, describes a material setting in which he experiences pleasure and contentment that “obviously” also features alcohol:

I'm happy when I'm sitting on the sofa, a nice book in my hand, and can comfortably read a book, or watch a smart movie on television [...] and then some good food, good drinks, is part of that, obviously. (Roland, 65 years / born 1953; translated)

Figure 1. Situational map of alcohol consumption in later life



While this and other descriptions and photographs portray solitary drinking, most forms of alcohol consumption that were portrayed and narrated would circle around situations of drinking with other people, for example, with one's partner during a home-cooked dinner or with a circle of friends at a party or in a restaurant. Jan, for example, talks about feelings of loneliness that he experienced in relation to his retirement transition and the decline in social relations it entailed for him. He links this, *inter alia*, to a lack in drinking opportunities as a way to connect to like-minded people:

Like-minded people, that is, human beings that call me, take me away from the sofa, who say "It's great to talk to you," and, "Stop right now, I want to go for a little beer [Bierchen] with you," no matter if it's a woman or a man, that is a flaw, a longing that I feel. (Jan, 53 years / born 1965; translated)

In many narratives, alcohol was thereby portrayed as thoroughly pleasurable, and linked to discourses of the "good life" that people were looking forward to finally leading in retirement. This became apparent in verbs like "enjoying," "indulging in" or "treating oneself" that people used to describe their alcohol consumption. Mostly, participants talked about or photographed wine and beer, and the only spirit mentioned was whiskey. The drinks themselves were articulated in the diminutive, making them seem less strong or dangerous, for example, "*Bierchen*" or "*Weinchen*": German for little – but not necessarily small! – beer or wine.

What stayed mostly invisible in these depictions were hard liquors and spirits, as were the disposals of alcohol, for example, empty bottles or glasses. Nobody mentioned or portrayed the direct physical effects of alcohol, neither positive nor negative, and people hardly talked about being drunk or hung-over.

Narrated Changes in Alcohol Consumption across the Life Course

When talking about changes in alcohol consumption across the life course, participants mentioned (1) changes related to life stage transitions and (2) bodily transformations, like illnesses, decline in overall health and well-being, or decreased alcohol tolerance. Most of these changes, however, referred to a reduction of alcohol consumption in later life, and this reduction was not deliberate but induced through contextual changes and requirements.

Reduction of alcohol consumption was sometimes directly related to the retirement transition and thereby mainly attributed to the lack of routinised and habitualised opportunities to drink, for example, with colleagues. The institution of "after-work drinking" was continuously referred to here, giving alcohol consumption a specific temporal and social context and function to almost ritually end the working day:

[I] also drink less alcohol. When I was still working, I was drinking more alcohol. [...] Let's not fool ourselves; what is missing, for example, when you are working, once,

twice a week, in the evening after work, people got together... (Tina, 63 years / born 1955; translated)

Others related their reduced consumption to decreased alcohol tolerance that would come naturally with age:

And, um, it's not like I wouldn't drink any wine anymore at all. Um, but, I, I, I can't take anything anymore. I used to be able to, when I started at eight, I had emptied a bottle of wine by midnight. And that was it. And, um, now, when it occurs that I open a bottle of wine for myself, I'll finish it in three days. (Andrea, 67 years / born 1951; translated)

In rare cases, however, severe illnesses required a sustainable, conscious and drastic reduction in drinking. Most bodily and health changes that would require restrictions in alcohol intake – for example through the use of certain medications or illnesses – were, however, very much pitied and hoped to be of temporary nature. In the second interview, Roland talks about a medical check-up that revealed:

[...] all kinds of conditions that you get with age (laughs) [...] which means that I drink a bit less alcohol than I did before for the time being. It's not like I would have boozed before, but I was living a relatively good life, with my little wine in the evenings, I liked that a lot, and I don't treat myself to that anymore everyday... (Roland, 65 years / born 1953; translated)

Reflections about the finiteness of life and one's own mortality would, however, not necessarily lead to decreases in alcohol consumption, but could also have the opposite effect. Some participants legitimised their drinking with exactly the realisation that their lives would end eventually, and they wanted to enjoy themselves as long as possible.

Boundary-Making between "Good" and "Bad" Alcohol Consumption in Later Life

As outlined above, and contrary to the scientific debate about the risks and negative outcomes of alcohol, most participants rendered (particularly their own) alcohol consumption thoroughly pleasurable and as an inherent component of a good retirement life. Richard, who acknowledges the finitude of life and health, nevertheless reasons:

But as long as I can do that, okay, wonderful, I will do it. And then I'll have a good time, enjoy the days and drink the wine, before a flowerpot hits me on the head (laughs). No, seriously, this really important to me, I am determined to enjoy and make most of the lifetime that remains to me. (Richard, 64 years / born 1954; translated)

"Good" practices of alcohol consumption were linked to enjoyment of life, indulgence in pleasure, and being sociable, and "goodness" was assessed through the amount (moderate), quality and kind of alcohol (wine was framed most positively); through the spatial and social context in which alcohol was consumed (as outlined above, either home alone together with a good book or smart movie, or in a social setting with friends); and through the timing of its consumption (afternoons or evenings).

"Bad" alcohol consumption was, however, also mentioned, even if more rarely and only in relation to other people and not oneself. Bad drinking practices were characterised by their abundance, the "wrong" kind of alcohol (bad quality and/or hard liquor) and "wrong" timing in the daily structure (too early in the day). This was then also narratively framed as "boozing" (German: "*saufen*") instead of "drinking":

Well, a little glass [Gläschen] of red wine in the evening, nothing speaks against that, of course not. But I definitely don't want to drink a glass of red wine already in the mornings (laughs), something I have been observing in my circle of acquaintances, that boozing runs rampant. And I don't feel like that at all... (Roland, 65 years / born 1953; translated)

This "bad" drinking was problematised because it would easily spiral out of control, and was attributed to have its cause in other issues, like mental health problems and loneliness. Petra remembers one vacation where she, similarly to Roland, observed practices of alcohol consumption that she framed as problematic:

[...] well, we ordered wine, and they brought us a box full of wine bottles, and someone said: "I ordered another box!", that's such a collective boozing, right? I do believe some are on the way to addiction, right? When they become lonely or so... (Petra, 63 years / born 1955; translated)

Hence, boundaries between "good" and "bad" alcohol consumption were drawn by the research participants based on material and temporal setting, controllability, and motivation, and not so much based on quantity,

frequency, or adverse health effects of alcohol consumption – as is being done in the scientific literature.

Discussion

While health research on alcohol consumption across the life course draws boundaries between problematic and non-problematic drinking mainly based on the quantity and frequency of alcohol consumption as a proxy for thereby-caused morbidity and mortality (Barry & Blow 2016), drinking culture research, aiming to avoid such purely problem-focused approaches, has been primarily interested in the life stages of youth and young adulthood. Consequently, we yet know little about drinking cultures and practices of drinking in later life. This research aims to shed some light on such late life drinking practices and registers of value (Heuts & Mol 2013) attached to them.

For many of the older participants of this study, alcohol consumption was framed positively when it took place in the evening, involved “good” liquor, like high-quality wine, whiskey or beer, and was embedded in a set of other practices that were rendered acceptable for the occasion, for example, reading, having dinner, or getting together with friends. Conversely, alcohol consumption was framed negatively when it happened too early in the day, involved drinking of low-quality and hard liquor, lacked control, and happened for the “wrong” reasons, like loneliness or mental health problems. Speaking with Heuts and Mol (2013) these registers of value “indicate a shared relevance, while what is or isn’t good in relation to this relevance may differ from one situation to another” (p. 129).

The importance of differentiating between this form of “civilised” drinking as opposed to uncontrolled “boozing” for the assessment of good or bad alcohol consumption point to both the age-codings and class-codings of drinking. Age-coding can be understood as “practices of distinction that are based on and preserve representations of actions, phenomena, and characteristics as associated with and applicable to demarcated ages” (Krekula 2009: 7), and classes, respectively. Such practices, hence, constitute age and class difference in its intersection. They materialise, for example, in time norms or “norma-/temporality” (Krekula et al. 2017) as the interconnections between temporality and normality that are being practised on an everyday basis – as exemplified here in “right” and

“wrong” times for drinking throughout the day. Practices that deviate from such temporal norms can be framed as “guilty pleasures,” as one form of affective ambivalence rooted in contradictions between (evaluations of) self-indulgence and self-control (Miao 2011; Wanka 2020).

This age-coding of drinking becomes (even more) visible when contrasting drinking in earlier and later adulthood. While research on drinking cultures has shed light on, for example, “the first drink” (Rolando et al. 2012), “binge-drinking” in adolescence (Järvinen & Room 2017), or the “sober shift” among younger generations (Schmitt 2022) gerontological literature is yet lacking similar research on “late life drinking cultures” (e.g. on “the last drink”) and the generational changes we will witness with new (wet or dry) generations ageing.

Moreover, drinking practices are not only age-coded and situated in age cultures, but also in historically contingent drinking cultures. While this article has not followed a country-comparative approach, findings do hint at this local situatedness, for example, when research participants using the diminutive to talk about beer and wine. In Germany, it is legal to consume such fermented alcoholic beverages (beer, wine and sparkling wine) at the age of 14 under adult supervision, and from the age of 16 onwards without, hence institutionally rendering them less dangerous than spirits and liquor.

Summary and Outlook

In this article, I explored the question how – that is, in which discursive-material practices and arrangements – alcohol is consumed in later life, and how this changes across the retirement transition. Based on a MG perspective and qualitative interview data, I identified five categories of relational and intra-active elements that constitute drinking practice assemblages, and render them pleasurable or unpleasurable: (1) things and spaces, (2) people, (3) temporalities, (4) discourses, and (5) bodies. Across those elements, research participants drew boundaries between “good,” that is, pleasurable and responsible, and “bad,” that is, unpleasurable and irresponsible alcohol consumption. Whereas much of research in the field of ageing predominantly frames alcohol consumption as a risk factor (for a discussion of this see e.g. Sudhinaraset et al. 2016), older study participants understand it inherent part of a good retirement life and saw

conditions that would prevent them from drinking as a loss that was encountered with pity. Hence, the assessment of drinking as pleasurable or not can vary greatly between gerontologists and older adults, and within the heterogeneous group of older adults. Acknowledging this multiplicity, the findings contribute to the reconstruction of registers of value through which alcohol consumption is mapped (Gallistl & Wanka 2022). For research, the study suggests a more differentiated approach towards alcohol consumption in later life, taking boundary-making practices as well as the age-codings, class-codings, gender-codings, race-codings, etc. into account. For ageing research in particular, we need a better understanding of lifestyles that deviate from imperatives of active and successful ageing, not only through those practices that are deemed as “inactive,” but also those that are rendered “immoral” (Katz 2000). Research on drinking cultures in later life could thereby profit from entering into a dialogue with youth drinking culture research – a life-stage contrasting approach that has been framed by the author as “Linking Ages” (Wanka 2025).

For policy and practice, this implies that the “ABC-model” of attitude, behaviour, change (Shove 2010) reaches its limits when promoting more responsible drinking, and might be complemented with an “APC-model” of affects, pleasures and cultures, as “silence on the pleasures that motivate behaviours not only risk causing health messages to fall on deaf ears, but [...] it risks entrenching resistance to a health discourse perceived as opposed to fun on principle” (Nicholls & Hunt 2025: 1081). On a smaller scale, this may imply the (financial and political) support of alcohol-free “but” convivial spaces for social encounters (similar to smoke-free bars) as well as no or low-Alcohol by Volume (ABV) alternatives to the after-work beer or the wine pairing for dinner (e.g. tea or kombucha pairings). On a larger scale, it hints at a culture change in which drinking is no longer necessary to “take the edge off” everyday life, but where alternative, healthier pleasures are integrated into work, everyday life and retirement.

Ethical Statement

This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences (FB04) at Goethe University Frankfurt. All participants were fully informed about the aims, procedures, and scope of

the project prior to participation and provided informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw at any time without providing a reason. To protect participants' privacy, all names and identifying information have been pseudonymised throughout the data and in any resulting publications.

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