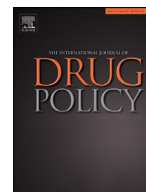




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## Research Paper

# How Covid-19 restrictions affected young people's well-being and drinking practices: Analyzing interviews with a socio-material approach



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The Covid-19 restrictions – as they made young people's practices in their everyday life visible for reflection and reformation – provide a productive opportunity to study how changing conditions affected young people's well-being and drinking practices.

**Methods:** The data is based on qualitative interviews with 18- to 24-year-old Swedes (n=33) collected in the Autumn 2021. By drawing on the socio-material approach, the paper traces actants, assemblages and trajectories that moved the participants towards increased or decreased well-being during the lockdown.

**Results:** The Covid-19 restrictions made the participants reorganize their everyday life practices emphatically around the home and communication technologies. The restrictions gave rise to both worsened and improved well-being trajectories. In the worsened well-being trajectories, the pandemic restrictions moved the participants towards loneliness, loss of routines, passivity, physical barriers, self-centered thoughts, negative effects of digital technology, sleep deficit, identity crisis, anxiety, depression, and stress. In the improved well-being trajectories, the Covid-19 restrictions brought about freedom to study from a distance, more time for significant others, oneself and for one's own hobbies, new productive practices at home and a better understanding of what kind of person one is. Both worsened and improved well-being trajectories were related to the aim to perform well, and in them drinking practices either diminished or increased the participants' capacities and competencies for well-being.

**Conclusions:** The results suggest that material domestic spaces, communication technologies and performance are important actants both for alcohol consumption and well-being among young people. These actants may increase or decrease young people's drinking and well-being depending on what kinds of relations become assembled.

## Introduction

In this article, we study how Covid-19 restrictions on social proximity affected young people's well-being and drinking practices in Sweden. Our starting point in the article is that the restrictions on social proximity transformed young people's everyday life practices, making them visible for reflection, and forced young people to reorganize their habitual everyday life practices. By questioning the self-evident nature of their everyday life practices, the restrictions made young people more aware of what is essential for their well-being.

After arriving among us, the Covid-19 virus was soon categorized as a global threat to the continuity of human life, menacing the overall foundations and practices of the current neoliberal economic, political,

social and cultural arrangements (Törrönen, 2021). In March and April 2020, diverse kinds of restrictions on social proximity around the world were introduced. The Swedish strategy to limit the spread of infection differed from other countries' strategies by being more based on "soft-law" recommendations (SOU, 2022:10). Despite this, for many of the young people we study here, the Covid-19 period appeared as a "lockdown". During the pandemic, face-to-face education in upper secondary schools and universities was transferred to online from 17<sup>th</sup> March to August 2020 and again from December 2020 onward. In addition, the sale of alcohol in bars, pubs and nightclubs was forbidden after 8 pm. Moreover, if young people wanted to meet each other in public drinking places the restrictions limited the maximum group size to four, prohibited dancing and required them to sit at their table (SOU, 2022:10).

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Prior to the inception of the Covid-19 pandemic, changes in the well-being and in the drinking patterns of Swedish youth had already been observed. An increase in mental health problems among young people was noticed in Sweden at the beginning of 2000 (Socialstyrelsen, 2013), at the same time as a decline in alcohol consumption among youth started. Since then, these two trends have persisted (Socialstyrelsen, 2017). Similar patterns of declining alcohol use and increasing mental health problems have been identified also in other high-income countries (De Looze et al., 2015; Kraus et al., 2018). The existing studies suggest that the increase in mental health problems among young people may be caused by multiple social mechanisms. Some of these social mechanisms may be related to an increased presence of social media among young people which makes them vulnerable to online comparison, competition and harassment (Twenge & Park, 2017; Länsförsäkringar, 2017) as well as to increased performance demands at school, on the labour market and in leisure time activities (Wyn et al., 2015; Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2018; Mind, 2018). As young people are expected to become “competitive units” (Brown, 2015) and “entrepreneurs of themselves” (Rose et al., 2006), this promotes performance culture and individualization among them (Giddens, 1991). When young people experience significant pressure to perform well in studies, work, career and personal relationships this entangles their life around concerns over whether they are making the right choices and whether their “projects of the self” will pay off in the future (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Wyn et al., 2015). This makes young people’s navigation into independent life unpredictable, diversified, and vulnerable (Brannen & Nielsen, 2007).

These aspects of young people’s lives may explain why young people’s mental health problems are increasing and why they are drinking less. First, in the performance-oriented environment, excessive, unhealthy, irresponsible, or undisciplined drinking may become categorized as a moral failure of the self (Goodwin & Griffin, 2017). Secondly, when young people are encouraged to enhance their abilities and competencies to become competitive units, lead healthy lives and organize their everyday life to serve the pursuit of success, this may not only increase their mental health problems but also dampen their desire to binge drink (Törrönen et al., 2020). Thirdly, when young people’s everyday life activities become tightly scheduled around practices that increase their capacities to compete in the main areas of society, they do not have any more time for (unproductive) drinking with their friends (Caluzzi et al., 2022). Lack of time and possibilities to engage in activities related to spontaneous unstructured time could thus partly be an explanation for young people’s decreased well-being.

In view of these considerations, the overall aim of this article is to explore how young people’s (18-24 years old) mental health is entangled with drinking practices. As the pandemic period provided laboratory-like circumstances (Moretti & Maturro, 2021) to study what kind of relations young people consider essential for producing well-being, the Covid-19 restrictions on social proximity will be the starting point for this analysis. A few articles on how the Covid-19 lockdowns affected drinking habits suggest that they made home (Callinan & MacLean, 2020; Conroy & Nichols, 2021) and social media (Nichols & Conroy, 2021) more important actors in alcohol consumption, which have been under-researched topics in previous studies. With a socio-material approach, detailed below, we address this lack of research and analyze how the pandemic conditions affected young people’s well-being and drinking practices. Our analysis shows that Covid-19 restrictions reorganized young people’s relations at home, around studies, at work and in terms of drinking and moved their lives either towards decreased or improved well-being.

### A social-material approach

In what follows, we approach well-being and drinking practices by drawing on socio-material approaches, such as assemblage thinking (Duff, 2014), actor-network theory (Latour, 2005) and the new mate-

rialism (Fox & Alldred, 2017). In the socio-material approach to well-being, human and non-human entities are handled on a par, symmetrically, as actors who can equally mediate, steer and transform action (Latour, 2005). Therefore, when we explore how Covid-19 restrictions affected young people’s relations to well-being and drinking practices, we pay attention to what kinds of diverse human and non-human elements they were linked to and what kinds of ‘assemblages’ (Fox & Alldred, 2017) they then formed.

In this view well-being and drinking practices are approached as processes that get their meaning through their relations to diverse actors and as part of specific assemblages (Törrönen, 2022). From this perspective, improved well-being can be defined as a process of becoming in which actors are able to multiply their relations to human and non-human elements in a way that their capacities for a good life increase. Decreased well-being, in turn, can be understood as a process of becoming in which actors’ actions become linked to relations that diminish these capacities (Fox & Alldred, 2017). Drinking, again, can be seen as a practice that may increase or decrease actors’ capacities for well-being.

Who or what acts in assemblages is called an actant (Latour, 2005). Human and non-human actors become actants when they become linked to action so that they translate, transform, modify or alter its expected course. Since actants inform us what kinds of specific forces affect our participants’ well-being by enabling, hindering, blocking, increasing or decreasing it (Law, 2004; Latour, 2005), they are one of the main objects in our analysis. We can identify the transformative power of actants by paying attention to uncertainties and matters of concern that make them visible. The Covid-19 pandemic is an example of a disruption that introduced multiple uncertainties and matters of concern to everyday actions. As Covid-19 unsettled our current neoliberal economic, material, political, institutional, and socio-cultural habits and practices, it sent us to build new kinds of actants, relations and assemblages with which we aimed to overcome the difficulties and stabilize new kinds of routines for our everyday lives (Törrönen, 2021).

Besides paying attention to the human and non-human actants that affected our participants’ well-being and drinking assemblages, we further trace what kinds of trajectories they became embedded in. We especially pay attention to how these trajectories modified and translated their well-being and drinking practices and how –as their established everyday life practices became transformed in these trajectories into something else – their capacities for well-being in them situationally decreased or increased (de Vries 2016).

By examining how Covid-19 restrictions reorganized our participants’ relations to well-being and drinking practices, we aim to clarify what kinds of relational patterns turned out to be damaging or beneficial for our participants’ well-being.

### Method

#### Participants and data collection

The 33 participants were recruited through a purposive sampling procedure from secondary and upper secondary schools in central parts of Sweden, as well as from non-governmental organizations and social media platforms. The recruitment took place in 2017 and 2018 as part of a larger longitudinal research project investigating health and declining alcohol consumption among youth (Törrönen et al., 2019). The purposive sampling procedure was guided by the aspiration to recruit participants with varying characteristics in terms of drinking habits, gender, age, and ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The data we analyze in this article constitutes the fourth round of interviews for these participants. Based on the participants’ wishes, the interviews were held in person ( $n=2$ ), over the phone ( $n=21$ ) or on a video calling platform ( $n=10$ ). After informed consent was given, the interviews lasted for a median of 50 minutes (minimum 37, maximum 81) and were audio recorded. The interviews covered topics of the current living situation but were mainly focused on the influence of the pandemic on the lives of the in-

**Table 1**  
Participants.

	N	%
Gender		
Women	19	58
Men	14	42
Drinking category		
Abstinent	8	24
Moderate drinker	11	34
Heavy drinker	14	42
Occupation		
Unemployed	2	6
Employed	5	15
University student	26	79
Native or foreign background		
Born in Sweden	21	64
Parents born abroad	8	24
Born abroad	4	12
Social class <sup>a</sup>		
Lower	10	30
Middle	12	37
Higher	11	33
Total	33	100

<sup>a</sup> Based on categorisation of the socio-economic status of parents' occupations.

interviewees. In the interviews, we asked questions such as “How has the pandemic influenced your life? Has your consumption of alcohol and ways of drinking changed due to the pandemic?” Moreover, we asked the participants to specify the effects in terms of family life, relations, friendship, work prospects, studies, travels, leisure time activities and social media practices. The study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (protocol codes 2016/2404-31; 2021-02158).

The interviews were mainly conducted during September and October 2021. At the time of the interview, the participants were between 18 and 24 years of age (median 22). The participants were categorized according to their drinking practices into abstainers, moderate drinkers or heavy drinkers. A participant was categorized as a moderate drinker when s/he drank only a little and avoided intoxication and as a heavy drinker when alcohol was used for intoxication and drinking resulted in drunkenness at least once a month or more often (Törrönen et al., 2021). As displayed in Table 1, the majority of the participants were women, and mainly university students. A bit more than one-third of the participants had a foreign background, primarily with Middle Eastern or South American ancestry. In terms of their parents' occupations, the participants came from various socioeconomic backgrounds.

### Coding and analysis

The data were coded by using the NVivo software program. First, we read the whole material for identifying the passages where our participants speak about the effects of Covid-19 on their well-being and drinking practices.

After this, we analyzed these passages by drawing on the concepts of ‘actant’, ‘assemblage’ and ‘trajectory’ as explained above. We noticed that Covid-19 restrictions displaced and translated our participants' actions towards both worsened and improved well-being trajectories.

In worsened well-being trajectories Covid-19 restrictions mobilized multiple actants. The changes the restrictions brought about weakened our participants' relations with others, leisure time, home, studies, work and with themselves. Moreover, we noticed that performing well in studies emerged as one of the most important goals in these trajectories.

In improved well-being trajectories Covid-19 restrictions became associated with actants and assemblages that increased our participants' personal freedom, mobility and opportunities to be flexible in relation to others, leisure time activities, studies, home, work and with themselves, which led to translations that enhanced their overall well-being.

Moreover, we noticed that in both worsened and improved well-being trajectories drinking practices either diminished or increased our participants' capacities and competencies for well-being.

Since in the beginning the public health restrictions on social proximity produced mostly negative outcomes for our participants' well-being, we first analyze what kinds of worsened well-being trajectories, assemblages and translations the Covid-19 restrictions mobilized in our participants' everyday life. After this, we examine the well-being trajectories.

### Findings

Our findings below show that the Covid-19 lockdown mobilized processes in which the relations and practices at home, doing studies, working and spending leisure time (by drinking or doing other activities) changed, thereby also transforming our participants' identities as students, workers, family members or drinkers.

#### *Drinking parties helped restore sense of normal life in decreased well-being trajectories*

Mia's account below is an example of a worsened well-being trajectory in which Covid-19 restrictions reorganized her practices into an assemblage through the relations of which her everyday routines collapsed, her sleeping became excessive, her eating habits became disordered and her studies became unfocused. The trajectory describes how, through these translations, Mia's encounters with the world led to a loss of her competencies and abilities to be an active agent who can resist the complications in life and transform them to serve her own well-being. This moved her towards worsened well-being.

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel during this pandemic?

MIA: At first, I thought it was hard to just stay home and not to go to school ... or it was hard not to have any routines, I thought. I just got up a few minutes before school started, turned on the computer, and stayed in bed. Didn't eat breakfast, nothing. After two hours of online teaching the school was over ... and then I went back to bed. So, there were no routines, and this affected me, because I need them so that I feel that I have control over things in my life.

INTERVIEWER: And how did this come out for you then? How did it affect you and your life?

MIA: I started to feel tired and lethargic, no matter how much I slept. No matter how much I rested during the day, I felt bad. (19-year-old woman, moderate drinker, middle class)

During the lockdown, Emilia experienced a similar loss of routines and agency as Mia, as her encounters with the world became narrowed down to home. While Mia tried to regain her agency by sleeping and resting, Emilia used drinking parties as a counterforce against the negative effects of restrictions. By participating with her friends in drinking parties at each other's homes, she was able to bring normality to her life and momentarily take distance from the abnormality of the situation.

EMILIA: All I did was sleep.... I started feeling sad and angry. And then I got anxious.... During the fall and winter, I started hanging out with people. But we were not really healthy. We partied every weekend just to drink. And then we did that, from say November until December. We were a gang that met up. Or I met people, although I would rather have stayed home. But I like got my act together and went out anyway since I never met anyone and well, I guess I felt I had to meet people.... I've been drinking more during the pandemic.... There were quite a lot of weeks when I was drinking every Friday and then every Saturday it was party again.... We were usually in someone's home. And sat on like a couch and drank.... We never went out or anything. And we were not that many people.... I started going mad by sitting inside here. (19-year-old woman, heavy drinker, middle class)

In retrospect, Emilia identified that although drinking parties were healthy as a way of breaking her isolation at home, these situations and their assemblages made her drink more than before, and this aspect of her drinking practices was “not really healthy”. Emilia’s account, with its focus on drinking as an actant for restoring normalcy, is typical primarily for the heavy drinking participants. They usually reacted to the pandemic restrictions by moving their drinking to each other’s homes. For some, this meant that home became translated into a never-ending drinking scene, into an assemblage in which the physical boundaries between diverse drinking situations disappeared. This tended to increase their drinking. For example, Oliver (23-year-old man, heavy drinker, middle class) disclosed that during the pandemic his heavy drinking friends shared a lot of pictures on Snapchat of them drinking beer in diverse times and situations at home.

#### *Non-drinking practices were questioned in decreased well-being trajectories*

Arin’s account below is an example of a worsened well-being trajectory in which Covid-19 restrictions interrupted the socialization processes in a new place of study. As this assemblage distributed all activities and relations at home, it highlighted the role of digital devices, apps and platforms as possible actants in mitigating or overcoming the effects of isolation and loneliness caused by the lockdown:

ARIN: I was alone in a completely different country, in my own room and was completely lonely there for a year and a half.... I won’t lie, I couldn’t handle the situation in the beginning.... I tried to distract myself and lie to myself that everything was good, to run away from the truth.... My studies didn’t go well either and I felt very bad about that.... I tried to get rid of everything that distracted me. As social media bombarded me with too much information about the pandemic. I stopped using social media.... In this way I was able to concentrate on my studies a little better. Then I asked: “Am I a person who studies better in a group or alone?” and tried to study together with other students, which didn’t work. Because as a perfectionist I felt very bad when I noticed that some students were better than me.... Then I developed a technique of studying alone first, before meeting the other students online, which made me feel more competent. And then I started to schedule my day completely [laughs], I wrote down when I should wake up, when I will eat, when I should have leisure time, when I should talk to mom or exercise, and so on. I’m a very autistic person and I need to have a certain time-frame. This worked. I still felt bad and there were some days that were worse than others, but I was able to function. (22-year-old woman, abstainer, lower class)

Through encounters with the adversities the lockdown entailed, this account demonstrates how Arin learnt what kind of actants she needed to avoid and what kind of actants to engage with to get through her lonely days. She first stopped using social media platforms that provided her with too much information about the pandemic. This translation increased her capacity to focus better on her studies, but did not help her loneliness. Then she tried to study in online groups. This translation away from loneliness made her feel worse as she noticed that there are some students who perform better than she does. This concern then made her develop a technique to study alone before meeting others online. This improved her performance in her own eyes, and she was able to continue her online life with her peer students. Moreover, she managed to transform and standardize her everyday life activities to follow a strict minute-by-minute schedule, which further increased her competencies and abilities to deal with worsened well-being periods in her physically cramped small space.

The following excerpt from Maya’s interview illustrates how isolation from one physical environment can also lead to the development of an assemblage of “mental barriers” that blocks the use of digital devices, apps and platforms and prevents the establishment of relations

with other actants and settings that would help in overcoming the isolation.

MAYA: I like to be going somewhere. For me, just like the possibility to go to school [laughs] feels nice. Maybe I felt bad because I had nowhere else to go. I had to be in my little apartment. And then I couldn’t meet people. I became very trapped in myself. I could have called my friends. I could have fixed digital stuff, but I didn’t. I think I set up mental barriers for myself, where my whole body just said, “no, now it’s corona. I can’t do anything”.... I was kind of sucked into a corona bubble and thought “now it’s like this. I’m sitting here on my little ass in front of my little screen until this is over”. It’s a very strong part of myself to be active and driven. And I did not feel driven under the corona. And this was very hard for my self-image. I just watched TV and did nothing productive. (23-year-old woman, abstainer, middle class)

As Maya became trapped in herself due to the Covid-19 restrictions, this led to an identity crisis and made her feel bad and unproductive. Moreover, the changing conditions made her question her non-drinking. In her isolated and socially restricted life during the pandemic, when sociability and dancing in public venues were transformed into drinking at home, Maya felt immature due to her decision to abstain from alcohol. As the home was translated into a setting for diverse drinking assemblages that provided possibilities for new drinking rituals, Maya’s habit to keep on drinking “Sprite” in the cozy intimate home events became an actant that increased her feelings of being not fully included in the fun of others:

MAYA: But right now, I feel like an involuntary abstainer. I don’t know. It was really, well, when all those social situations and not going out .... The thing is that to go out and party and not drink, that is easier, but sitting at a cozy dinner with friends and everyone drinks wine and then I drink my Sprite, that is harder.... It’s not fun to feel like you are sitting at the kids’ table.... No, I’ve felt sort of, “fuck, why not just learn how [to drink]?”

#### *Moderate drinking was translated into abstinence in decreased well-being trajectories*

The above examples of decreased well-being trajectories display how the lockdown led to diverse affective responses among our participants. Because of it, Mia became “tired and lethargic”, Emilia anxious through sadness and anger, Arin moved towards feeling low and Maya, by collapsing into herself, became passive. Among these participants, alcohol, social media, television, and sleep grew into actants that helped these participants to survive the restrictions. In our data, there are also participants whom the assemblage of restrictions pushed towards such deep anxiety and increased stress that they were not able to stop without actants of therapy or medication.

For Sophie the pandemic first led to difficulty with sleeping, which then started to act as an actant that increased her anxiety and stress by destroying her motivation to study and by weakening her performance at school:

INTERVIEWER: How would you describe your feelings when you felt the worst?

SOPHIE: I was very stressed, I had a lot of anxiety which resulted from difficulties to sleep, mainly. And a general loss of motivation to do the schoolwork that was expected of me, or that I expected of myself. So, I went to a psychologist and now use sleeping pills to be able to sleep more than three hours a night. (23-year-old woman, moderate drinker, higher class)

Similarly, for Tara, the assemblage of Covid-19 restrictions led to translations in which her capacities for well-being were diminished in relation to her physical body, exercise, eating, love, friends, studies, sleep, and everyday life routines. These relations accumulated into an

assemblage that moved her towards such a state of mental stress and inability to achieve satisfying academic results that she needed to contact healthcare and start to use sleeping pills. As actants, sleeping pills helped mitigate the problem but did not eliminate it.

INTERVIEWER: How would you say that the pandemic affected how you feel?

TARA: I gained weight. I trained less and I ate much worse. I lost the routines ... at the beginning of the pandemic I found out that my partner had been unfaithful, and we ended our relationship.... This was also mentally stressful. I had only two friends and I didn't meet them every day. It was very hard.... I didn't have enough motivation and I woke up late. I postponed my studies.... I ended up in this vicious circle.... I also had trouble sleeping.... Finally, I contacted healthcare and got sleeping pills.... It helped – but I'm still very stressed about school.... I cannot study now. I feel that I do not get anything done. (21-year-old woman, moderate drinker, lower class)

For Sophie and Tara, stress and depression following the Covid-19 restrictions translated into non-drinking practices. The same was true for Erin, who experienced a deep depression during the pandemic, and for whom being home and feeling low formed an assemblage that decreased her interest in drinking:

INTERVIEWER: What do you miss? What do you want to do now that society is opening up?

ERIN: Before, it was partying. But now, when you can do that, then I don't want to do it anymore. I don't know, there's nothing.... No, I can't think of anything.... But I think that it's because I've been home so much and I've been feeling very low, so I haven't.... I'm not so stoked about going out and stuff like that anymore. (19-year-old woman, moderate drinker, lower class)

Erin's, Sophie's and Tara's shift towards non-drinking practices due to lockdown exemplifies a typical translation especially among our moderate drinkers. They described how assemblages of anxiety, depression and loneliness did not move their actions towards drinking. For them drinking was associated with assemblages of sociability in public areas (e.g., student pubs, clubs), and collective effervescence (e.g., having fun, being "stoked"). The private space at home affected their drinking negatively as an actant that translated it into a "boring" and "unnecessary" activity. What they missed was not the alcohol per se, but rather the sociability of drinking situations, and therefore the pandemic restrictions did not distribute their drinking practices at home. This is illustrated well by Sophie:

SOPHIE: When I was home and felt bad it wasn't like "oh, I want to go to a pub", it was like "oh, I want to meet my friends".

On the other hand, Sophie also articulated a link between social drinking practices and stress. To her, drinking together with others in social situations can function as a powerful actant against study-related stress and anxiety. She reasons that as the assemblage of Covid-19 restrictions took away social drinking situations from her life, this could have affected her well-being during the lockdown:

SOPHIE: When I drink regularly, this automatically shuts down my brain in a way, so that I can take a break from my studies and all of those stressful moments in life, which I didn't do during the pandemic. So maybe this has affected [my well-being], but at the same time I can't say for sure that it was a contributing factor.

#### *Drinking was reduced in improved well-being trajectories*

Even though most of our participants experienced negative outcomes in relation to the pandemic, some of them experienced the Covid-19 pandemic as a positive period. For them, time, digital technology, online communication, domestic material resources and leisure time hobbies

grew into pivotal actants that helped in translating the effects of restrictions into improved well-being trajectories. When education, work and bigger leisure time events were transferred online, this enabled them to spend less time commuting and engaging in unwanted social activities and increased their time for themselves, loved ones and "healthy" activities such as exercise. The pandemic further helped them identify what is important in life and what is essential for their well-being. The following quotation from Alice's interview exemplifies this:

INTERVIEWER: How has the pandemic influenced your generation's life?

ALICE: I think a lot of people have found new interests and learned to appreciate other things, like hanging out with friends in other ways. When everything just goes on as usual, you don't think about and maybe don't appreciate it, but then if suddenly you're not allowed to go to school or you're not allowed to exercise ... then you learn new perspectives on things.... And you might just realize what is most important to your well-being. Like for me, it's my family and relatives, or loved ones, and time for doing things that feel good, these have been the most important things to me. I also enjoyed studying in another city by staying home in my parents' house because of the online education.... I also went up to my family's mountain cabin for a week to ski, which online courses made possible. This was wonderful. (22-year-old woman, moderate drinker, higher class)

In the above quotation, Alice realizes that the main actants for her well-being are her "family and relatives, or loved ones", "time for doing things that feel good", "online teaching", "staying home in ... parents' house", "family's mountain cabin" and skiing. For Alice, this realization also moved her towards drinking less even after the restrictions were lifted. Her new assemblages did not include "partying", as the lockdown made her find new ways to "hang out" with her loved ones:

ALICE: People have sort of, I don't know, well, lost interest a little bit in partying. Or, they have found other stuff to do, or other ways to hang out. I have that perception. And I feel that for myself also.

Similarly, for Mario the assemblage of pandemic restrictions provided actants that enabled him to develop practices that suited better his self-image of being introverted. The restrictions facilitated him to be away from bigger social events and to reorganize his everyday life routines to follow his own inclinations. Pandemic circumstances delivered him excuses and justifications not to take part in drinking parties, to engage in new hobbies that did not require sociality, to decrease his workload, to move away from home and to meet his mother merely online. These translations moved him towards sobriety and empowered him to build an assemblage of relations that made his life less hectic, less social, less working- and cleaning-oriented, more mother-loving and more training-centered.

INTERVIEWER: How did the pandemic affect how you feel?

MARIO: I'm very introvert. It was nice to be away from all those bigger social events. I also quit drinking and the use of nicotine completely ... and started to train three times a week while reducing my workdays to three days a week. My life was so nice during the pandemic.... Not so hectic and my job was quiet and nice too. It was a bit trendy to start doing things for yourself. I started baking and a new sport. In Sweden no one cared a shit about the pandemic anyway, so I was quite free to do what I wanted.... I felt so lucky to be in Sweden.... I had a good time.... I exercised and was sober. It was great. I developed a great relationship with my mom, as I moved away from home and met her only online once a week. I lived in a 76 square meters apartment, shared it with my friend, and I didn't need to care about my mother's strict cleaning rules and things like that. (23-year-old man, ex-heavy drinker, higher class)

Emily also benefited from the changes in circumstances initiated by the assemblage of Covid-19 restrictions. When face-to-face teaching was



translated into digital encounters, she realized how much better her well-being is without travelling to the university by subway and without being physically there. She describes how the crowded subway journey to the university caused her stress and unpleasant sweating, how uncomfortable she felt in walking to the lecture halls in cold and rainy weather, and how she suffered from bad air conditioning and the multitude of students at the university premises. These material, physical, social, and emotional actants formed an assemblage that made her feel bad, and she was happy to have the possibility not to encounter and interact with them daily:

INTERVIEWER: How would you say that the pandemic affected your well-being?

EMILY: I felt pretty good. I like to be at home and spend time with my family and my partner. And I like this freedom. I was stressed by other people when I took the subway to the university. It took an hour in the morning, and I was sweating. Then it was not nice to walk in cold and rainy weather to the lecture hall, and it was always such bad air conditioning on the university premises. Or the library. All law students are sitting there and there is no oxygen.... I like to study at a distance, it's really nice. (23-year-old woman, moderate drinker, higher class)

As it was for both Mario and Alice, the pandemic moved Emily towards drinking less. Before the pandemic, Emily had a hectic party-life, which changed drastically during the pandemic as the restrictions blocked her possibilities to participate in bigger drinking events. According to her, this reduced her drinking and made room for her to replace the attachments of drinking with healthier assemblages. Through this process her relations to training, work and studies multiplied and became stronger:

EMILY: [During the pandemic] I drank very little. I think it had a lot to do with the fact that I couldn't participate in bigger social events. I became more interested in training, work, and studies. For example, I was at my cousin's birthday party a while ago and didn't drink.... because I wanted to study the next day.... I nowadays prioritize being able to get up early and be ready ... and to exercise. If you drink, a whole day is ruined, and I don't want to waste a day.

Moreover, as the Covid-19 pandemic continued over a long period of time, most of our participants – also those whose life was first turned towards a worsened well-being trajectory by the restrictions on social proximity – learnt in the process to form relations with actants that bettered their well-being. For example, Arin argues that without encountering the events and relations to which the pandemic restrictions took her, she would not have learnt this early in her life what she wants, what she likes and what she needs to change in herself as a person. By learning to deal with tough moments during the pandemic, she became more confident of herself, and this empowered her to break away from relations that diminished her capacities for well-being:

ARIN: It was during the pandemic that I began to go a little into myself and ask “but what do I want? What do I like? What is the weakest thing in me that I want to change?” During the pandemic, for example, I broke up with many friends. I started to be a little more confident in myself. I broke up with my boyfriend, and so on. Sure, it was tough, but ... now I almost think it was nice, because if the pandemic wouldn't have happened, I think it would have taken me many years to get this understanding. I'm very outgoing and I'm very good at not seeing things, but I know that subconsciously I feel very bad about the things that I don't see. So now in retrospect, I think the pandemic was something I needed. (22-year-old woman, abstainer, lower class)

Like Arin, William (an 18-year-old man, moderate drinker, middle class) describes how the difficult events and relations he encountered during the pandemic made “him know himself better”. They enabled

him to become a more mature and “responsible” person. Benjamin (22-year-old man, heavy drinker, middle class), in turn, explains how the matters of concern during the pandemic changed his relation to home. As he had used to do his studies and training outside the home in specific material settings, at the beginning of the lockdown he was not able to concentrate on his studies and training from home. His home acted as an actant that diminished his abilities to concentrate on his studies and training. But as the pandemic continued, he learned to concentrate on doing these activities at home and even started to feel good by being able to perform them in his domestic space. Like this, his home became translated from an actant that partly diminished his capacities for well-being, into an actant that in a versatile way increased them.

## Discussion

### *Remarks on social-material approach*

This study shows how mental health is a sensitive and complex process of becoming in which one moves towards or away from well-being in interaction with multiple human and non-human actors. Our socio-material analysis demonstrates how Covid-19 restrictions on social proximity facilitated for our participants identifying the relations essential for their well-being and how drinking as a practice increases or decreases their well-being.

Our analysis firstly shows how actants such as the physical presence of others, bodily mobility in different material environments, the physical structures and boundaries of different practices and the possibilities for action in private spaces are important in young people's well-being. As the restrictions diminished or blocked our participants' relations, especially to public material actants as well as face-to-face encounters, this tended to move our participants towards worsened well-being trajectories in which they felt lonely and disconnected from life. Those with ample family-owned material and economic resources were able to build relations that enabled them more easily to reverse the crisis to serve their own well-being. For them, the pandemic could even act as an actant that improved their quality of life. In our higher social class participants' accounts, actants such as parents' mountain cabins or spacious homes were assembled in assemblages that facilitated fertile conditions for introspection and provided time and possibilities to identify what is vital in life. For those participants that struggled with economic problems and cramped student housing, such narratives were not as prominent. They rather experienced their homes as prisons in which time and circadian rhythms lost their meaning or as hostile environments that needed to be tamed by strict minute-by-minute schedules.

Secondly, our analysis demonstrates how the restrictions transferred to the home a number of activities previously carried on outside it, thereby transforming the temporal and spatial contours, functions and meanings of our participants' domestic space. For example, restrictions could make the home into a setting for new kinds of drinking habits, rituals and assemblages (Conroy & Nicholls, 2021; MacLean et al., 2022) that had their origin in public drinking venues but now were fully materialized at home from start to finish. As a result, the home could turn into a café where you can enjoy wine alone or with your friends, into a fine dining restaurant where you share with your guests a full meal with carefully chosen wines, or into a nightclub for dancing and having fun. Moreover, the home could become translated into a never-ending drinking scene where alcohol was all the time present for spontaneous consumption. Here again, spacious private homes provided more possibilities for the translations of domestic spaces into diverse forms of drinking settings and rituals than small student studios that were not even allowed to be used for those kinds of purposes during the lockdown.

Thirdly, our analysis illustrates how in the pandemic conditions, technological devices, apps and platforms became important actants for our participants' well-being, acting as counterforces against the restrictions on physical mobility and interaction. As digital technology facili-

tated online education and the communication between significant others and friends from a distance, it mitigated the negative effects of lockdown and helped our participants to overcome their physical isolation virtually, although the virtual encounters did not always feel as rewarding as physical encounters.

Fourthly, our analysis elucidates how the lockdown disrupted our participants' biological and habitual daily rhythms, with the result that they could for a period lose their sense of direction and control over their lives.

Moreover, our socio-material analysis reveals that public material environments such as transportation systems and university venues – their construction, design and uses (see Emily's quotation above) – may function as important actants for worsened or improved well-being.

### Reflecting on results

To sum up, by forcing our participants to reorganize their everyday life practices emphatically around the home, and by channeling their physical mobility into virtual mobility, the Covid-19 restrictions mobilized among our participants both worsened and improved well-being trajectories. In our participants' worsened well-being trajectories, the pandemic restrictions gave rise to translations that moved them towards loneliness, loss of routines, passivity, material and physical barriers, self-centered thoughts, negative effects of digital technology, sleep deficit, identity crisis, anxiety, depression, and stress. This weakened the quality of their attachments to family, friends, leisure time and school and decreased their competencies to perform well in studies, which exacerbated their predicament.

In our participants' improved well-being trajectories, again, the Covid-19 restrictions brought about freedom to study from a distance, more time for significant others, more time to take care of yourself, more time for your own hobbies, for new productive practices at home, and for a better understanding of what kind of person you are.

As the improved well-being trajectories were common among the participants who come from families with rich material resources and worsened among those who lack them, this shows how the material elements may act as helping or opposing actants in overcoming the adversities. While our participants from higher social class were able to translate the restrictions into relations that increased their time to focus on attachments that enhanced their agency, mobility and well-being, our participants with fewer material resources were moved by the restrictions towards relations that decreased their time and capacities to take care of themselves and their well-being.

Our results are in line with existing studies by highlighting how young people's well-being is linked to social and physical proximity to others, meaningful studies and hobbies, self-control, positive relations with significant others and economic and material resources and security (Wyn et al., 2015; McLeod & Wright, 2015).

When we compare our participants' assemblages of worsened and improved well-being, we notice that also improved well-being trajectories are related to the aim to perform well. In both trajectories, young people articulate an understanding of well-being as a process of becoming in which you need to build and multiply relations that increase your performance. When your competencies and abilities to do this are blocked or weakened, this produces anxiety and stress. This suggests that young people's becoming processes of well-being align with neoliberal and biopolitical discourses on the importance of growing your individual human and material capital and developing diverse techniques of taking care of yourself. These are crucial in optimizing your capacities while you compete for success with others (Burns & Davies, 2015; Wilson, 2018). Hence, our participants approach well-being as an individual "project of the self" that requires constant attention and work (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and in which material forces, as described above, act as significant actants. At the same time, as our participants' accounts show how their well-being is moved by multiple cultural, social and material forces, this calls into question the neoliberal

ideal that individuals themselves could alone be responsible for their success and happiness.

In our participants' becoming processes of well-being, drinking practices also played a role – either in their absence or in their presence. The socially restricted situation during the pandemic seemed to have polarized drinking among our participants – at least in the beginning. In some participants' (primarily heavy drinkers') worsened well-being trajectories, drinking at home with friends acted as an actant that brought normality to their lives by bringing people momentarily together from the abnormal isolation the pandemic caused. However, it was also common that drinking decreased or disappeared from heavy and moderate drinkers' assemblages, and this made room for new and "healthier" relations (e.g., in training and studies). What was also striking was that in improved well-being trajectories drinking was typically described as a positive force, but in worsened well-being trajectories as a negative force (primarily among moderate drinkers) that amplifies their problems and weakens their mental health (Kuntsche et al., 2005). On the other hand, some participants approached drinking as a helper also in worsened well-being trajectories. Then they positioned it as an actant that mitigated the anxiety and stress the expectations to perform well at school it produced. Our participants thus connected drinking in a complex way to both worsened and improved well-being trajectories. Drinking either acted as an actant that diminished young people's capacities for healthy living or as an actant that increased their capacities to engage in relations that facilitated the movement towards well-being.

While the restrictions forced new drinking situations upon the participants and transformed the contours of the home (Moretti & Mauro, 2021), they also made them consider their drinking habits in new ways (Caluzzi et al., 2021; MacLean et al., 2022). For some, this meant questioning their abstinence, for others, it meant that they could find new means to define what they like about going out (meeting friends rather than drinking alcohol). For some, it meant reducing their drinking and replacing it with other attachments, while for others it meant that they developed new drinking rituals and practices without reducing their drinking or by increasing it. Regardless of whether our participants' alcohol consumption increased, decreased or stayed the same during the pandemic, several of our participants accentuated its presence or absence in their worsened or improved well-being trajectories, and they strongly connected its use or non-use to performance.

The study has some limitations. When we asked our participants how the pandemic affected their well-being, they did not always comment in their accounts on their drinking habits. Therefore, as we later in the interview asked more specifically how the pandemic affected their drinking and how their drinking or abstinence was related to their well-being or feeling bad, we may have made drinking or abstinence more significant actants to their well-being trajectories than they really are. On the other hand, our participants did not have any difficulties producing accounts on these issues. This implies that drinking practices provide one possible entryway to young people's well-being.

### Conclusions

Overall, our results suggest that material domestic spaces, communication technologies and performance are important actants for both alcohol consumption and well-being among young people. Domestic spaces can either participate to decrease or increase drinking and well-being, depending on how spacious and multipurpose they are and whether their materiality can be translated to serve introspection, relaxation, sociability, and building human capital. Social media and communication technologies – by facilitating greater flexibility and interaction between different practices and physical spaces – may increase or reduce drinking and well-being, depending on whether they strengthen young people's sense of connection with others or weaken it by directing their interactions to anxiety- and stress-generating comparison and competition. How pressure to perform well is related to drinking and well-being and what kinds of assemblages they co-constitute is also a com-



plicated question. Our results propose that among non-drinkers performance seems to be linked to reduced drinking, on the one hand, and increased mental health problems, on the other hand. But among drinkers, the relation between decreased drinking and increased mental health problems is constituted in a more complex way. For some drinkers, the anxiety and stress on being successful, for example in university studies, may set limits on their drinking and reduce the frequency and amount of their drinking so that their recovery from a drinking occasion would not lead to a loss of a study day. Therefore, they tend to drink moderately. For other heavier drinkers, the expectations to perform well may stabilize their drinking to a level that may cause them to lose one of the weekend days but not any of the study days. But there may also be heavy drinkers that feel that they must reset their performance stress once a week with more transgressive drinking, even though they know that it is unhealthy, and makes them feel ill for some days. For these drinkers, the relations between heavy drinking, improved well-being and worsened well-being manifest as a delicate matter that requires constant reflection, monitoring and rationalization.

### CRedit author statement

**Jukka Törrönen:** Conceptualisation, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Funding acquisition. **Josefin Månsson:** Data collection and curation, Writing - review & editing. **Eva Samuelsson:** Data collection and curation, Writing - review & editing. **Filip Roumeliotis:** Writing - review & editing. **Johan Svensson:** Writing - review & editing. **Ludwig Krauss:** Writing - review & editing. **Robin Room:** Writing - review & editing

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### Ethics

The study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (protocol codes 2016/2404-31; 2021-02158).

### Declarations of Interest

None.

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