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Ambiguous Encounters: Young Women's Expectations and Experiences with Intoxicated Sexual Relations in Danish Nightlife

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Abstract

This article is based on 28 in-depth interviews with young women (18–25) about their experiences with intoxicated sexual encounters in Danish nightlife. Little research has examined the role intoxication plays in the processes of consensual and non-consensual sex. Using theories of intoxication and sexual scripts, this article focuses on how alcohol is used and perceived by these young women as a potential way of modifying behaviours and norms in their sexual encounters; how they characterize sexual consent and how they navigate intoxicated behaviour that can result in inappropriate, transgressive or victimizing situations. While the women talk about pleasurable and regrettable experiences, many described situations took on a much more ambiguous, fluid and nuanced role. The study points to the lack of knowledge on how ambiguity may play an active role in managing processes of sexual consent in intoxicated settings, especially for the youngest age groups.

Keywords

Intoxication, young people, sexual encounters, nightlife, gender

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Introduction

Concerns in Denmark about sexual victimization have recently become more prominent, fueled by the emergence of the *#MeToo* movement and recent research highlighting Denmark's high prevalence rates of sexual victimization (FRA 2014). These findings indicate serious discrepancies between the reputation of Denmark as a 'gender-equal' country and the lived experiences of many Danish women (Einarsdóttir, 2020; Heinskou et al., 2020). Such discrepancies between reality and ideology have led to the term 'The Nordic Paradox' (Gracia et al., 2019), suggesting that specific cultural and structural conditions may explain the prevalence of sexual violence (Gracia & Merlo, 2016) even though the term is still contested (Humbert et al., 2021). Regardless, the increasing concerns about sexual victimization may indicate changing views and a marked decline in the tolerance of such occurrences.

While researchers have sought to identify different factors that have undermined gender equality (Anttiroiko, 2019), one potentially significant area has been largely neglected, namely the role of alcohol, especially within the social, cultural and sexual lives of young adults. In comparison with other European countries, Denmark has a distinctive alcohol culture in which young people drink more and get drunk more frequently than young people elsewhere (Tolstrup et al., 2019). Although alcohol consumption has declined slightly in recent years, studies show that Danish young people still drink heavily and often more than their counterparts in other countries (ESPAD Group, 2020; Pedersen et al., 2020).

Both Nordic and international research has addressed the contradictory expectations young women face in nightlife; the extent to which they experience and perform sexual empowerment, while still being held accountable to ideals of sexual respectability when intoxicated, especially in situations involving sexual violence (Bernhardsson & Bogren, 2012, 2020; Griffin et al., 2013; Vaadal, 2019; Simonen, 2011). Similarly, research has highlighted that both young men and women engage in derogatory labelling and 'slut-shaming' of women, who fail to fulfil local norms of respectability related to certain drinking practices, socio-sexual behaviours, physical appearance and risk management practices (Bernhardsson & Bogren, 2012; Day et al., 2004; Fjaer et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2013). Thus, young adults' heterosexual encounters in nightlife seem to be influenced by the interactional management of pleasures and risks, which is specifically related to vulnerability and empowerment for women. Despite the research on these issues, and on 'hookup culture' which has focused on patterns of social interaction, sexual capital, status competition and emotional hierarchies (Ford, 2020; Wade, 2021), the broader variety of roles that intoxication may play in sexual encounters and sexual victimization has been left relatively unexamined.

Given the importance of alcohol consumption within the social and sexual lives of young Danish adults, coupled with the extensive research on the role of alcohol in sexual assault, the overall aim of this paper is to examine young Danish women's (18–25) experiences of intoxicated sexual encounters, using narrative data from in-depth interviews, and exploring what the women describe as pleasurable, regrettable and ambiguous aspects of their experiences.

Youthful Intoxicated Encounters: A Combined Theoretical Framework

While much psychology literature has viewed intoxication as an individual component of drinking, anthropological and socio-cultural research has emphasized the importance of seeking explanations at the social rather than the individual level. Developing a more socio-cultural approach, MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969) argued that intoxication entails a 'time-out' from the socio-cultural norms that apply to sober behaviour, allowing, within limits, the performance of violent, rowdy, and other transgressive behaviours. Others have developed this notion further, arguing that drunken interaction is governed by *other* norms and meanings than sober interaction (Järvinen, 2003) and that drinking can be conceptualized as a boundary marker (Hill, 1978) symbolizing this shift. More specifically, research indicates that when alcohol is present, interaction is 'sexualized' in several ways. First, young adults (both men and women) tend to see alcohol as a disinhibitor of sexual desire, drinking with the expectation that alcohol will increase their sexual drive and decrease their restraints (Abbey et al., 1999; Kuntsche et al., 2005). Second, young adults draw on these expectancies in interactions. For instance, some men encourage women to consume alcohol because they believe that women will become more promiscuous, sexually available, and interested in casual sex (Cowley, 2014; George et al., 2006; Lindgren et al., 2008). Research also suggests that men perceive women's gestures as more sexually motivated when they have been drinking (Crowe and George, 1989; Muehlenhard et al., 2016). Third, research indicates that undesired sexual encounters often take place or are initiated in nightlife settings that are characterized by a heavy drinking culture within which rigidly defined gender arrangements are present, and where displays of hypermasculinity, sexual assertiveness and aggression are common and even normative (Grazian, 2007; Mohler-Kuo et al., 2004; Weiss & Dilks, 2016). Participating in heavy episodic drinking to the point of intoxication and 'hooking up' are viewed as normative behaviours within these settings, and intoxicated sexual events are often central features (Harris & Schmalz, 2016).

One way to examine how alcohol intoxication influences sexual encounters is via the concept of 'sexual scripts', which seeks to explain how heterosexual women and men are expected to act in sexual situations (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). According to traditional 'scripts', men are expected to initiate sexual activity, while women typically play a more passive role as 'gatekeepers' (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Peralta, 2007). However, today, sexual freedom has become one of the dominant cultural frameworks people use in making sense of sexual encounters. Recent research suggests that some, especially younger women, take a more active role and purposefully participate in experimenting with different sexual relationships and 'one-night stands' (Donaghue et al., 2011; Gill, 2007). In these contexts, alcohol intoxication typically plays a prominent role (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Fielder et al., 2014). At the same time, researchers have disputed whether contemporary ideals of sexual freedom necessarily imply gender equality. For example, Illouz (2012) argues that gendered differences in the social values attached to youth, sexiness, and modes of expressing sexuality place a greater limit on women's than on men's opportunities to practice sexual freedom. Similarly, research on 'hookup

culture' shows that although young women's increasing involvement in casual sex can be seen as part of a more active sexual agency (Gill, 2007; Levy, 2005; Paul & Hayes, 2002), women are also exposed to more harm within this culture (Wade, 2021) because of their greater exposure to sexual violence and because of the gendered reputational work hookup culture entails (Farvid et al., 2017; Marks et al., 2019). Research also suggests that settings are themselves scripted. For example, the climate within many nightlife party settings 'discourages intervention and normalizes risk', allowing young men greater space to transgress normative boundaries and engage in sexual harassment and provocation, knowing few consequences will occur (Weiss & Dilks, 2016: 174). Where such 'cultures of coercion' operate, the stage is set for sexual aggression, harassment and assault (Benson et al., 2007; Harris & Schmalz, 2016).

Finally, while drinking to intoxication and losing control may allow young women to escape the demands of living in a neo-liberal society, using drunkenness as a way of engaging in behaviours deemed to violate normative gendered expressions, they still have to negotiate traditional notions of femininity, and manage elements of risk and uncertainty. Such tension between possibilities and troubles, or idealized and problematized subjectivities, is central to what is described as the challenges involved in achieving successful femininity today (Budgeon, 2013; Gill, 2007; Gill & Scharff, 2013). Tensions shape both young women's drinking and sexual practices, rendering their attempts to engage in post-feminist notions of freedom and sexual empowerment within contemporary cultures of intoxication a precarious path to negotiate (Griffin et al., 2013; Waitt et al., 2011). For example, research shows that young women can also be held accountable for rejecting unwanted sexual contact from men, as this goes against the traditional prioritization of masculine sexuality and desire (Hutton et al., 2013; Simonen, 2011). Acting on these conflicting norms can result in the reinforcement of traditional 'scripts' but also the enabling of new spaces for action where norms, gender, and power structures are up for negotiation (Bogren et al., 2022; Cowley, 2014; Hunt et al., 2021).

The concepts of sexual scripts, 'new' and 'traditional' femininities, and scripted settings are all necessary in developing a deeper understanding of young women's interactional management of pleasures and risks in nightlife. Using this combined theoretical framework allows us to focus on the social effects of intoxication as experienced by women in our study, and more specifically, to analyse the ways in which intoxication enables and disables their sense of agency, as well as creates multiple ambiguities in sexual encounters.

Data and Methodology

The article is based on 28 in-depth interviews with young women between 18 and 25, who have experience of drinking alcohol, participating in nightlife and have been involved in intoxicated sexual relations.

Recruitment and Participants

The majority of the women were recruited through social media networks, NGOs and educational institutions, using a digital postcard with a 'nightlife photo' as background and the title 'sexual boundaries in nightlife'. Twelve of the women were 18–20 years

old, and 16 of them were between 21 and 25. Almost all were in secondary, university or vocational educational programs. The majority lived in one of Denmark's four largest cities. Approximately half of the women were in a committed relationship and the sexual orientation of our sample was primarily heterosexual.

Interviews and Research Ethics

Interviews were semi-structured, but open to modification according to participants' individual differences. Most interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours. The interview guide was divided into the following three themes: (a) participants' alcohol consumption, (b) the meaning of intoxication and (c) sexual relationships in an intoxicated context. With the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, instead of conducting our planned face-to-face interviews, we began to interview digitally. This resulted in 25 of the interviews being done online. The video connection made the interaction somewhat similar to face-to-face interviews (Stewart & Williams, 2005; Sullivan, 2012) and while it may in several ways be more convenient to interview online (Willson, 2012), it may also complicate achieving rapport (Mann & Stewart, 2000). Making sure that participants felt comfortable with potentially sensitive questions, especially for online interviews where body language and facial expressions may be less obvious or noticeable, we emphasized the voluntariness of participation (Bier et al., 1996; Mann & Stewart, 2000). All interviews were conducted by female researchers (the first author and two assistants) and we believe that this further contributed to the creation of a safe environment for the participating women. Digitally signed informed consent was obtained before each interview and all quotes and descriptions have been anonymized. Overall, the project complies with the Danish Data Protection Agency's GDPR rules and the handling of personal and sensitive data.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded according to selected analytical perspectives on the role of alcohol and intoxication in (a) desirable and undesirable nightlife situations, (b) sexual and gender norms and behaviours and (c) communication about and processes of consent. Coding was done manually by selecting quotes from each participant and placing them in documents under the main headings. Once the overall categories were completed, the interviewers went through them to gain an overview of salient topics or patterns that emerged, such as age, setting or time-related issues, or the importance of social relations and/or previous sexual experiences. In this way, we were also able to pay close attention to divergent patterns amongst participants and conflicting perspectives within each interview to identify themes as well as increase the valid interpretation of the data (Antin et al., 2015). All quotes are accompanied by pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Intoxication as Desired Change

The women associated drinking not only with being social but also with many other positive qualities, such as becoming more relaxed, feeling a release of their

inhibitions, and beginning to feel free and less responsible. Almost every one of them said that they felt more courageous in their interactions with men. However, while research suggests that becoming more courageous is often expressed in terms of increased aggressiveness among men, the young women in our sample experienced intoxication more as something which enabled them to act in ways otherwise not possible. Several dimensions were involved in this ability to act. First, echoing research on young women in other countries (Griffin et al., 2013; Simonen, 2011; Vaadal, 2022) the majority of women explained that flirting and being more active in approaching young men was the biggest difference—an example of how intoxication can enable young women to modify traditional sexual scripts providing them with a possibility to express a more active sexuality (Bogren et al., 2022).

As most of the women feel that they can only ‘perform’ when intoxicated, it is clear that they have positive expectations of their social and sexual abilities when they have consumed alcohol (Patrick & Maggs, 2009), and hence view drinking positively (Kuntsche et al., 2005). Such positive expectations were often expressed retrospectively in the interviews, as in Maja’s (22) statement here:

This one guy had just been the sweetest guy for so long, and then we finally ended up at some party where we were drunk, and then it finally worked out. And it has just been so amazing, and I’ve just been like: ‘yes, it was good that I got drunk at that party’, because then I got drunk with him and then it’s just been a really good night ... if we hadn’t been drunk, then I would never have had that opportunity.

Several women mentioned that they had met their boyfriends while drunk and, emphasizing the cultural expectations attached to alcohol, they believed that intoxication helped them, not only to flirt, but also to act more assertively or speak more openly about sex with their partners. Selma (22) noticed that she often would combine what she sees as feminine and masculine behaviour when intoxicated:

When I am drunk I get very silly and girly, but also more masculine, sitting with my legs spread out, speaking very loudly, and generally taking up more space in the room.

And Lisa (21) explained that until she got drunk, she was unable to tell her boyfriend that when they had sex, it hurt:

I’ve wanted to say it for a long time, and then I actually said it. The first two times I actually said it while I was drunk (laughs). Yeah, that is when it comes out. But the problem is that he was so drunk that he couldn’t remember it. But by then I had said it twice, so I was able to say it again.

Regardless of their relationship status, a number of women also mentioned that their sex drive intensified when they became intoxicated, supporting the notion that alcohol can facilitate not only sexual encounters but also stimulate and increase women’s desire (Abbey et al., 1999). Several participants felt that it was only permissible to admit to a more ‘promiscuous side’ when drunk, again alluding to how intoxication contributes to a reconfiguration of sexual scripts (Bogren et al., 2022). Mona noted that kissing, especially several men in one night, was perceived as more legitimate when drunk. Neither she, nor any other woman she knew, would find such

behaviour acceptable if she had been sober. Similarly, Camille (18) described the difficulty of admitting to a more assertive sexual side:

Maybe I am a little sleazy. The thing about not being able to say no: 'okay, am I one of those people who can't say no or do I just crave sex or boys when I'm drunk?' Like, is that a part of me? It can be really hard to accept, both the day after but also just in general when you're sober, but when you're drunk you can do this and that and break these boundaries.

Our examples suggest that becoming intoxicated operates as a boundary marker symbolizing a shift in the norms and meanings of acceptable behaviours, which allows women to be more assertive sexually (Hill, 1978; Järvinen, 2003) and adopt a more active role in sexual relationships (Donaghue et al., 2011; Gill, 2007). They also suggest that becoming intoxicated may play a potentially prominent role in their ability to experiment sexually and engage in 'one-night stands' (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Fielder et al., 2014). However, while it may be enjoyable to explore a more sexualized version of the intoxicated self, it may not be simple to move between different acceptable sets of norms and behaviours for the intoxicated and the sober self. Additionally, while some women might criticize their own intoxicated sexual behaviour, this sexualized 'power' is sometimes applauded by friends, as Henriette (24) remarks:

I met up with the girls from my class later in the day and they were like ... well, I thought that is a bit stupid but they thought it was funny that I was like kissing this one guy, and then suddenly no longer wanting him, but going with another guy (...) I think they just thought that maybe it seemed like I might have a bit of power somehow.

As this section has shown, most of the women view intoxication as a possible way of modifying traditional feminine behaviour, while working to maintain a reputation of also being a 'nice girl' thereby still adhering to more traditional criteria of the respectable woman (Bogren et al., 2022; Skeggs, 1997).

Intoxication as Compromising Boundaries

In this section, we focus on the range of negative sexual experiences, from the pressures and expectations that impacted the women's actions, to their feelings of regret or occasions of harassment and assault.

Several women in our sample felt pressured to act in a sexual and assertive manner even though they did not feel like it. Here Louise (20) describes how she persuaded herself to act more 'sexually':

But then it's one of those things where I've just convinced myself that maybe I was a little boring if I didn't kiss him here or dance a little more sexually on the dance floor. Where I might not have felt comfortable, but where I thought 'oh, people won't think I'm fun to be with if I don't do this.

Similarly, Marie (23) noted that she often felt forced to engage in sexual activities even though she didn't really want to:

So, I think it was really awkward that we were put together and we were both like ‘well, now you just get on with it!’. And I remember we kissed at one point because ... I felt like that’s what I was supposed to do, so that’s what I did.

Such experiences illustrate how these young women perceive the norms in their social group, which pressure them into more explicit sexual encounters when drinking, even though they might have been happier just sitting at a table chatting with others. However, our data also suggests that many women only realize pressures or regret their behaviours later. They admit to getting carried away in the intoxicated moment, as Laura (24) explains:

I had sex with one of my friends, and I only afterwards realized that maybe it wasn’t the smartest thing to do, to bring our friendship in that direction. I would probably not have done it if I had been sober. It’s like, ‘ugh’ it seems totally insignificant when you’re standing there having a few beers and having fun.

Examples like these suggest that getting carried away and ignoring potential regret could be ascribed both to alcohol myopia (Steele & Josephs, 1990) and to the scripted set of group norms which sometimes dictate what kind of behaviour is expected in intoxicated nightlife settings.

Many of our participants recounted one or more instances of regret in relation to intoxicated sex. While some of them described occasions in which they had had a prior relationship, others described regret because they had had sex with someone they were not really attracted to. Josephine and Mona (22) both explain that this happens, in part, because they sometimes forget their ‘standards’ when drunk: a regret also sometimes voiced by men, although maybe for different reasons (Hunt et al., 2021).

Strikingly, all the women in our sample had also experienced some form of sexual harassment or assault. The majority explain that unwanted physical touching usually happens in nightlife settings, echoing results from several Danish and Nordic studies (Deen et al., 2018; Mellgren et al., 2018; Oldrup et al., 2016; Petersen et al., 2021; Vaadal, 2019), and as Henriette (24) describes, often it happens without knowing who did it:

When you’re on the dance floor there are often ‘ghost hands’, like when there’s a hand running down your back or maybe someone has grabbed your ass but you don’t know who did it.

While most of the women felt that being touched was uncomfortable and inappropriate, they nevertheless described these behaviours as normal and even expected when attending clubs and bars, a situation noted by others (Fileborn, 2016; Mellgren et al., 2018; Petersen et al., 2021; Weiss and Dilks, 2016). Laura (24) says she used to think that she had to learn to live with ‘a hand on her ass’ on the dance floor, and Line (18) recalls her first parties where she learned that this was ‘normal’ party behaviour:

In my teenage years, I went to these ‘soda-discos’ and it felt like it was part of the experience of going to a party to go there and have your ass touched. I still feel like it is like that in the nightlife and at parties now. But it is mainly when people are drunk or under-the-influence.

While she does not explicitly say it here, Line connects unwanted touching to men and male drunken behaviour. As others have noted (Hirsch et al., 2019; Stefansen, 2020), these narratives suggest that the setting shapes women's interpretations of what sexual transgression is and whether or not it is 'normal'. However, not all types of unwanted touching are tolerated or ignored, as emphasized by Laura (24):

Then some big tall guy comes and grabs me from behind. I never saw his face, and he sticks his hand down my pants, under my panties and starts touching me. Um. That's just a crazy thing to do and that he felt entitled to do so.

While the unwanted touching is usually sudden and short-lived, there were examples of men who continued to want physical contact, dancing too close or in other ways forcing themselves onto women, in spite of attempts to push them away. Lisa (21) tells:

It was a guy. He works right next door to us at a pizza place and he kept trying to kiss me. And he kept doing that, and he's huge—he's scary. And nobody said anything about it. And I just kept saying that I had a boyfriend.

Both Lisa and Laura eventually managed to stop the aggressive behaviour, but without assistance from others, indicating that certain clubs are 'hot spots' (Graham & Wells, 2001; Krebs et al., 2009; Weiss & Dilks, 2016) where these behaviours are tolerated or viewed as normal (Pugh et al., 2016). Some women also recounted stories of rape. Mona (22) describes how she was assaulted by two men in a Copenhagen nightclub:

They pushed me to my knees, put my hand here and my mouth there ... and ... sort of without me really knowing what was happening. It was very dark. I couldn't see anything. And it was them who did all the movements and told me to hold it ... you know ... I had to fight two people.... But I have no doubt at all that they singled me out in a crowd because they could see I was very drunk.

Being targeted because of visible intoxication, is commonly noted by other participants and some research has documented how men excused targeting drunk women on the grounds that intoxicated women were obviously more willing to engage sexually (Cowley, 2014; Franklin, 2010; George et al., 2006).

While our examples highlight how sexual harassment and aggression frequently occur in public, the women also described how such behaviours were even more common in private and with men, whom they already knew, supporting the insight that women are seldom sexually assaulted by strangers (Deen et al., 2018; Friis-Rødel et al., 2021; Ullman et al., 2006). Rikke (18) describes how she slept at a friend's place after a party and woke up to him forcing himself upon her:

I had felt really bad when we went to bed, so I was just completely 'passed out' while I was sleeping, very deep sleep. But then I wake up and there's like, something's moving me and I'm thinking like this for a little bit: 'what the hell is going on?' and then I wake up to find that my childhood friend is raping me.

Not all women in this type of situation realize what is going on until after the sexual act, and some describe waking up unsure about what actually happened during the

night. These examples indicate a direct link between being intoxicated and being sexually victimized. In fact, many of the women stated that they had cut down or ceased to drink alcohol altogether at parties precisely because they wished to return home safely. As Emma (22) explains:

Of course, there is also an element of security, because at home you can drink exactly as you like without fear. I think as a girl, you always have in the back of your mind that you have to be able to take care of yourself to a certain extent when you're out.

Although many studies have noted the extent to which sexual assault occurs in private (Chen and Ullman, 2010; Ullman et al., 2006), what is often omitted is that intoxication is a significant factor. Moreover, when women are sexually victimized by friends, especially when intoxicated and less able to take care of or defend themselves, they feel not only violated but also betrayed.

The Ambiguities of Intoxicated Consent

We have shown that becoming intoxicated can affect the sexual relationships of young women both positively and negatively. However, for most women, many experiences are neither clearly unpleasant nor pleasurable. In this section, we highlight the multiple ambiguities they face when engaging in intoxicated sexual encounters. The underlying but significant theme in many of the narratives is that becoming intoxicated creates difficulties in being able to accurately interpret others' sexual signals. As Line (18) notes:

Or you can be misread yourself, you can feel that you are perhaps giving some pretty clear signals yourself: 'I don't think this is cool' or 'I find this uncomfortable', 'would you please not do that?', without it then being perceived by another person, right? Especially when you drink, it doesn't get any easier to read people when you drink.

While the idea that intoxication potentially added to miscommunication was prevalent in our data, other research has documented that intoxication frequently appears as an excuse by those who have committed sexual assault (Schierff & Heinskou, 2020; Scully & Marolla, 1984). Researchers have also questioned the extent to which miscommunication is widespread, finding instead that women who say no to sex often do so by refusing norms and men clearly understand (Beres, 2014; O'Byrne et al., 2008).

Several nonconsensual situations specifically developed between individuals who had previously been sexually intimate (Petersen et al., 2021). Maja (21) explains:

He suddenly just forced my head down to his cock until I gave him a blowjob. I kept saying no, and eventually, I just decided to get it over with.

They had kissed, but she had not intended to engage in additional sexual activities. Likewise, Laura (24) decided to remain passive and get it over with:

I did nothing. I think I almost froze. Um. Which, I've learned, is a fairly normal reaction. I don't know if I was thinking: 'well, the damage is done, so I might as well just stay calm and it'll be over in a minute.

Maja, Laura and several other women ultimately consented in order to avoid conflict. Unwilling consent to sex as a way of quickly handling an unpleasant situation has been documented before (cf. Alcoff, 2018; Muehlenhard et al., 2017) but as Laura (24) later explains, it was especially when she was younger, that she was more likely to ignore her lack of desire and personal boundaries:

It was at a party, and I had agreed to it in the first place.... I definitely found it hard to say stop in the middle of it all. When I was a bit younger.... I tended to go along for a bit too long, even though I didn't think it was fun. But it's been a matter of maintaining the good atmosphere, of not feeling ashamed at school next week.

Such examples of the influence of the scripted setting, where not spoiling the good atmosphere weighs heavily, is a tendency especially prevalent among younger women.

Also frequent in our data, was the implicit connection between agreeing to go home with somebody and implicitly conveying the meaning that they were also agreeing to have sex. Many described it as difficult to avoid if the man expected it. Lotte (24) explains:

I think when alcohol is involved, people don't say no. I was much younger and was like, well, that's just the way it is. And if he thinks we should have sex, then we should probably have sex.

Many of the above examples can be seen to highlight how norms of gender, sociality, and sexuality exert a form of disciplining power (Linander et al., 2021), resulting in women agreeing to certain actions that uphold traditional gendered sexual scripts, which men define and control sexual relationships (Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Peralta, 2007). Other examples include some of the women describing how they agreed to have sex because the man in question was physically stronger and they were scared of the consequences if they tried to refuse. Rikke (18) reflects:

Sometimes I wish I'd just ... swung a proper fist. But still, when I think back on it, I couldn't have done it. Because for one thing, you get mega scared, there's a man on top of you who's bigger and stronger. So, I just couldn't have done much.

In this case, the man's size and stature, independent of his behaviour, operated as an unspoken form of power, even though he had not been violent (for similar findings, see Ford, 2020). While only a few of our participants reported agreeing to have sex because of the man's physical size, they more commonly felt the need to consent because refusal would mean creating a bad atmosphere, which in turn could possibly affect their reputations or social standings. The women were concerned about how they might be portrayed later by their friends if they refused. Although they also described how today, because they were older and more experienced, they would

probably behave differently. Below, Louise (20) describes how saving face worked as a coping strategy to avoid the anticipated social consequences of awkwardness and rejection (cf. Scarduzio et al., 2018):

I think it was very normal in my very early days, because I didn't want to be so ... boring. I wanted to be exciting to the guys.... But it could very well be that somebody was hitting on me and I didn't really want to, but I also didn't want to get into that situation where there was that awkwardness and ... rejection, so I just interacted with them how they wanted it. But thankfully that's something I've grown out of.

Age and inexperience were especially pertinent for the younger women, who often described how they feared that their reputations may be impugned. They describe how difficult it is to reject a guy and even more so when drunk. Anna (18) explains that if someone refused to have sex after kissing, they would be talked about negatively by their friends:

You're a bit of a dry cracker (...) No one says that. But then you hear from others: 'Oh, we were just getting started, and then she didn't want to, and that was just really bad style'. And then you don't want that blame put on yourself.

As our examples suggest, sexual consent processes are subject to various forms of power relations, where the norms, values and ideals associated with social and sexual relations, and intoxication, can help to control how a woman behaves and what she will agree to (Linander et al., 2021). And as we have shown, women sometimes consent without actually wanting to have sex or be sexually intimate. Consent, therefore, as a concept, can contribute to hiding the forms of power that influence, especially young women, who also have little experience with intoxicated sexual encounters. As Vaadal (2022) has suggested, age scripts may be intertwined with sexual scripts, and while especially the youngest in our study may wish to portray themselves as being more sexually active and hence able to determine what takes place in sexual encounters, they may nevertheless be constrained to abide by the norms of more traditional sexual scripts. These situations may produce 'schizoid subjectivities', (Ringrose, 2011) forcing young women to occupy an 'impossible space', which becomes even more difficult to navigate when intoxicated (Fjaer et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2013; Renold & Ringrose, 2011).

Consent has also been shown to be socially contingent in that the woman's friends may become involved in determining and defining the precise nature of the intoxicated sexual experience (Jensen & Hunt, 2020). Although we saw examples of this, what emerged to be more prominent was the extent to which our participants recounted changing views of specific incidents over time. Camille (18) describes how, in a conversation with her sister, shortly after an intoxicated sexual incident where she couldn't remember anything the next day, she gradually relaxed about the event, but then after some more time returned to feeling victimized:

My feelings were actually okay with it afterwards, but I was still in shock. But I also think that whole shock feeling passed quickly because I felt like it was something that happened to a lot of girls. And I remember searching a lot on the internet about it, and it just seemed like it was a bit every-day-like. Or not an everyday thing, but something that had happened

many times. And then I just thought, okay, I calmed down since I wasn't the only one ... only ... this winter, where I kind of relapsed into it, where I was like: 'wow, that was a victimizing experience for me actually'. Which I've probably only realized now.

In believing and accepting such incidences were commonplace, Camille felt less violated, at least for a while. Similarly, Maja (21) first ignored the 'victimizing' aspects of an experience in which she was assaulted by two men at a party:

This thing with the two guys, it is only in the last month that I realized that it was kind of an assault and that what happened was not okay. It happened about 2 years ago. But only now am I clearly seeing that it was a really fucked up thing.

However, downplaying the victimizing aspects was also something that some women deliberately decided on. Ditte (20), walking home from a bar with a man who insisted on having sex with her, despite her attempts at saying no, decided not to let the incident upset her:

I was so drunk and I had puked on the way home, and was sure that I did not want anything with him, but he said that now he had walked me home, then he should also come in. He did not care that I said no. But I decided that I do not want such negative things to pull me down. Making such a decision made it easier to get on with things.

Whether the normalizing or downplaying of sexual harassment and assault happens immediately or over time, it may be connected to issues of non-reporting, where women feel partially to blame because they were intoxicated or because they do not wish to tarnish their reputation and draw attention to themselves as sexual victims (Hansen et al., 2021). The seemingly passive acceptance of sexual victimization appears to be in sharp contrast with the increasing politicization and broadcasting of women's unwanted and undesired sexual experiences (Lee, 2007), promoted most recently by the #MeToo movement and the growing solidarity and collective action against male sexual harassment. Perhaps, it is the ambiguous nature of many intoxicated sexual encounters that makes it so difficult for young women to understand victimization and react against it.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined the expectations and experiences of young Danish women describing their intoxicated sexual encounters as pleasurable, regrettable and ambiguous. Their stories reflect the Janus headed nature of alcohol (Yokoe, 2019), which is both 'celebrated and tolerated, while at the same time condemned and controlled' (2019: 267). While consuming alcohol and experiencing a certain degree of euphoria may create a belief that more traditional norms of feminine behaviour can be 'thrown off' or temporarily rejected and the promise that something sexually exciting and enabling can occur (Bogren et al., 2022; Patrick & Maggs, 2009), such beliefs, as feminist researchers have highlighted, may be short-lived. Young women may still find themselves 'boxed in' by more traditional expectations of others and themselves, but especially by young men,

who may view the sexual encounter not through the lens of a 'sexual freedom script' but instead a more traditional script (Hunt et al., 2021). Consequently, instead of finding young men willing to embrace the new liberated, but inebriated, young woman, our participants found themselves too often the victims of sexual pressure, harassment, assault, and in some cases, rape.

Becoming intoxicated sometimes gave several of the women a real sense of sexual courage and even the potency to actively flirt with different men and feel some degree of sexual freedom. It allowed them to act outside the confines of heteronormative sexual scripts in several ways, not only when flirting and making sexual advances, but also enabling more assertive, powerful and expressive behaviour. Thus, the pleasurable experiences with intoxicated sexual encounters were related to the women's own agency.

The regrettable experiences seem, in contrast, to relate to a lack of agency. These had to do with processes of sexual consent, in particular problems of correctly interpreting the sexual signals of others or ensuring that others understood their own signalling. The young women found themselves being misunderstood and attempting to extricate themselves from potentially unpleasant situations.

Even when they didn't want to have sex, they sometimes found themselves unwillingly agreeing. For some, it was easier and faster to get the sexual encounter over with, instead of creating a conflict. A few felt intimidated by the physical stature of the man (Ford, 2020) but the majority agreed to have sex that they did not really want because they were concerned that if they said no, their reputation or social standing among their friends and peers could be jeopardized, not because they had been too 'free', or sexually 'loose' but instead because they would be judged to be not 'cool' and hence boring. While this suggests that sexual freedom scripts are less an option than an imperative (Illouz, 2012), it also points to conflicting sexual and social norms, emphasizing the complexities and hidden power structures of sexual consent processes (Hunt et al., 2021; Linander et al., 2021; Petersen et al., 2022). The women also discussed transgressing their own boundaries when engaging sexually. Navigating the balance between being aware of and taking care of one's own boundaries and living up to social and cultural expectations is not easy and illustrates the strength of traditional sexual scripts where women must also manage both their social and sexual reputations (Bogren et al., 2022; Hunt et al., 2021). Consent processes are highly gendered, and our analysis confirms gender differences between young women's and men's experiences of intoxicated sexual encounters. While the men might regret having sex, when drunk, with someone they find unattractive or low status (Hunt et al., 2021; Petersen et al., 2021), they rarely compromise any sexual scripts in ways that young women are likely to.

Finally, the ambiguous aspects of intoxicated sexual encounters may explain how intoxication and related norms and practices may exert their own 'pressure' on women to consent to unwanted sex or to avoid defining an experience as regrettable. There are so many positive expectations connected to drinking, making it difficult to admit that intoxicated sexual experiences were not as pleasurable as hoped for. But understanding a situation or event as ambiguous may also be a socially productive way of not allowing one's identity or self-understanding to be harmed by what occurred (Huemmer et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2018). In this way, ambiguity might be a way for women to navigate the delicate balance between norms and expectations

and experiences that did not live up to either of these aspects. Our findings point towards the importance of further exploring intoxicated sexual encounters, especially among adolescents, who have less experience with intoxication and sexual encounters, making them more vulnerable to being sexually exploited. Our analysis may also point towards the importance of discussing ambiguous encounters as narrative strategies for maintaining agency and a sense of self that goes beyond the confines of an intoxicated sexual situation.

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