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## Young women's narratives on sex in the context of heavy alcohol use: Friendships, gender norms and the sociality of consent

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### Abstract

**Background:** Although young women's friendships remain understudied in drinking contexts, some researchers have pointed to how young women can make use of each other to manage sexual advances when drinking. In this paper, we explore how young women make use of friends to negotiate their sexual boundaries, and construct the meaning of sexual experiences in a context of heavy alcohol use.

**Methods:** The data stems from a large scale research project at the Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research, Aarhus University, which included 140 interviews with young Danes between the ages of 18–25. In the present study, we primarily use narratives from 33 in-depth interviews with young women, who recall their personal sexual experiences with men in the context of heavy alcohol use.

**Results:** We find that these young women make meaning of their sexual experiences in relation to friends through a negotiation of their emotional response as well as dominant gender norms. We argue that friends may serve to prevent sexual regret and offer support in instances where young women feel regret after engaging in sex when drinking heavily. However, we also argue that friends may encourage a more humorous approach in recounting sexual encounters in the context of heavy alcohol use, which may contradict their initial feelings of the encounter and gloss over issues of sexual consent.

**Conclusion:** With this article we point to how young women's ability to negotiate the meaning of their sexual experiences as well as that of sexual consent more generally, are interlinked with prevalent gender norms that play out in the context of friendships. The young women in our study narrated friends as more central to negotiations of sexual boundaries than sexual partners when in a context of heavy alcohol use.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest.

On this basis, we develop the term ‘social consent’, which we suggest that future studies and preventive efforts should take into account in order to challenge the gender norms that can serve to normalize sexual violence in drinking contexts.

### Keywords

Gender; Alcohol; Sex; Emotions; Consent; Young women

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### Introduction

Among young people, sexual norms are changing, as “casual sex” or “hook-ups” have become more normalized (Dahl, Henze-Pedersen, Østergaard, & Østergaard, 2018; Fjær, Pedersen, & Sandberg, 2015; Johansen, Pedersen, & Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2019; Pedersen, Tutenges, & Sandberg, 2017). Such developments can be seen in Denmark, where attitudes towards gender roles in relation to sexual relationships have undergone significant changes in recent decades, insofar as it is becoming more acceptable that both men and women live out their sexual preferences (Dahl et al., 2018; Fjær et al., 2015). However, such changes do not necessarily eradicate more conservative ideals and moral concerns about gender and sexual relationships. In fact, in spite of an increasing awareness of gender equality, that is more accepting of both women and men’s sexual lives and desires, the meanings that young people ascribe to (hetero)sexual practices continue to be influenced by more traditional gender roles. This includes a culturally persistent gendered double standard which, while encouraging young men to boast of their sexual accomplishments and sexual assertiveness, potentially threatens the social reputation of young women if they have different sexual partners (Dahl et al., 2018; Johansen et al., 2019).

These contradictory tendencies in Denmark reflect a broader paradoxical development. Although an increasingly liberal approach to sex for women is occurring, there nevertheless co-exists a potential clash between the development of this more liberal approach with an existing social norm of feminine sexual restraint which also regulates women’s behavior, creating a so-called ‘normative minefield’ which is difficult for young women to navigate (Bay-Cheng, 2015, p. 286; see also Cense, Bay-Cheng, & van Dijk, 2018; Johansen et al., 2019). Similar developments have also been identified in studies on young women’s experiences of drinking contexts, demonstrating again an area of tension between increasing gender equality on the one hand and a (hetero) sexual double standard on the other (Bailey, Griffin, & Shankar, 2015; Fjær et al., 2015; Griffin, Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, & Mistral, 2012; Hutton, Wright, & Saunders, 2013; Tan, 2014). For example, Griffin et al. (2012) argue that when women drink and go out, a notion of femininity has become “increasingly difficult and even [an] impossible space to occupy” (p.186). Young women are expected to not only adhere to ideals of feminine sexual restraint but also simultaneously live up to post-feminist ideals of young women as empowered and sexually assertive. While sexual practices tend to be considered highly intimate and personal, existing research thus points to the ways in which sex is not exempt from the impacts of more traditional gendered norms that shape young women’s social practices, including those within drinking contexts.

In fact, some researchers have argued that young women's space for action decreases even more when negotiating sexual boundaries within a drinking context (Beres, 2007; Cense et al., 2018; Horvath & Brown, 2007; Wallerstein, 2009). Possible reasons for this are associated with the way in which alcohol consumption is viewed as an indication of sexual availability and interest. Consequently when drinking, young women are more susceptible to sexual advances, and yet are nevertheless expected to manage these advances when intoxicated (Bernhardsson & Bogren, 2012; Brown & Greggs, 2012; De Visser & McDonnell, 2012; Horvath & Brown, 2007; Leigh, 1995; Pedersen et al., 2017; Wallerstein, 2009; Young, McCabe, & Boyd, 2007). While some studies have pointed to the potential role of friends in managing such advances, to date no studies have yet examined in-depth how sexual boundaries are negotiated in peer groups during and after a drinking occasion (e.g. Horvath & Brown, 2007; Maclean, 2016; Nicholls, 2017). Given this situation, it is therefore the aim of this paper to begin to fill this research gap and examine the potentially central role that friends can play in assisting young women to negotiate sexual boundaries, specifically in relation to both alcohol consumption and gender norms.

To this end, we utilize qualitative interviews with 33 young women who spoke about their personal experiences of sex within a context of heavy alcohol use. These interviews came out of a larger study with 140 young Danes between the ages of 18–25. Analyzing these 33 young women's narratives on sex, our aim is to provide a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the relationships between gender norms and sexual practices in social contexts where heavy alcohol consumption takes place. We will do this by investigating how these young women navigate gender norms, while making sense of their sexual experiences. In examining young people's negotiations of sexual boundaries in relation to heavy alcohol use, we also wish to emphasize how gendered social norms impact young women's sexual and social lives simultaneously.

### **Friendship, alcohol and sexual practices**

Alcohol consumption is a highly elaborate social practice, which allows young people to build and consolidate new friendships, strengthen existing social bonds, and engage in recounting drinking stories that enable them to position themselves socially (Bloomfield, Elmeland, & Villumsen, 2013; Demant & Østergaard, 2007; Thurnell-Read, 2016; Tutenges & Rod, 2009; Tutenges & Sandberg, 2013; Østergaard & Østergaard, 2018). However, in young adulthood, drinking practices play out simultaneously with young people's attempts at developing their competencies of engaging in romantic and sexual relationships. It is therefore not surprising that researchers have argued that drinking can provide young people with an excuse for experimenting with gender, sexual, and romantic identities, while aiding them to find the courage to approach others, who are romantically or sexually of interest (Abrahamson, 2003, 2004, 2010; Ferris, 1997; Fjær et al., 2015; Herold, 2015; Korobov & Thorne, 2009; Leigh & Aramburo, 1996; Østergaard, 2007; Peralta, 2008; Roberts, 2015; Room, 1996). Drinking thus provides a context that is both structured around opportunities of connecting with friends, whilst also potentially initiating sexual and romantic encounters. However, in spite of this inter-relationship of drinking, friendships and sexual encounters, little research exists on the role of friends in relation to how young people, and specifically young women, negotiate sexual boundaries while drinking.

Moreover, while considerable research has been conducted on male friendship groups and drinking, demonstrating that men's intoxicated behavior works to "affirm masculinity and increase male bonding and solidarity" (Hunt & Antin, 2017, p. 1), for example through the objectification of women (see also Bales, 1962; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Dunning, Murphy, & Williams, 1988; Gough & Edwards, 1998; Hunt, MacKenzie, & Joe-Laidler, 2005; Peace, 1992; Skeggs, 1997), little research has been conducted on the role of female friendships and drinking. For example, the relationship between sociality and sex within drinking practices has been examined by Grazian (2007), who demonstrates how sexual pursuits in the mainstream nightlife are highly developed social practices among young men, but comparable research on young women, with only a few exceptions, has yet to take place. Such exceptions include research that have pointed to how young women use their friends to fend off sexual advances (Brooks, 2008; Horvath & Brown, 2007; Maclean, 2016; Nicholls, 2017). The work of Nicholls (2018) is particularly important, as she examines how "a girl's night out," provides an opportunity for young women to accomplish femininity in different ways whilst, at the same time, reaffirming friendships with other young women. Through different types of drinks, styles of dress and different ways of carrying oneself, the young women in Nicholls' study make use of a girl's night out to bond with one another. However, her data also suggests that this bonding between women relies on a uniform approach to norms of "proper" femininity and therefore behaving in ways that potentially challenge their collective views of appropriate feminine conduct and drinking behaviors may provide a threat to the collective feeling of cohesion (Nicholls, 2018, p. 108–116).

Although these studies suggest that female friendship groups play a significant role in young women's negotiations of gender and sexual norms, it is still the case that the topic, at least within the alcohol research field, is still relatively under-developed. Consequently, within this paper we wish to address this research gap as, in ways similar to the findings of Nicholls, we also found within our interview narratives that our respondents described precarious moments within their friendship groups when the social cohesion of the groups could have been ruptured. These young women's narratives were therefore not only about constructing a meaning of sex within the context of heavy drinking, but also made clear, how their possibilities for constructing such meaning took place in relation to friends and gender norms. In their efforts to construct meaning, the young women also spoke a considerable amount about how they felt. Expressing a high degree of emotional ambiguity, they further reflected upon how they perceived what they *should* feel. Therefore, we find that the impact of gender norms on these narratives is understood best through a theoretical framework that allows for a focus on how emotions are intertwined with cultural norms and social settings.

### **Affective perspectives on gender, drinking and friendship**

In recent decades, there has been an affective 'turn' in gender scholarship as researchers have increasingly paid attention to the role of affect in people's lives (Christiansen, Frydendahl, & Petersen, 2013; Wetherell, 2012, 2015). The affective turn here refers to the growth of studies on emotions, including sensing, feeling, and bodily reactions. This re-thinking cuts across disciplines and theoretical frameworks, and in recent years, scholars have also begun to pay increasing attention to notions of affect in studies on alcohol and drug use (Christiansen et al., 2013; Jayne, Valentine, & Holloway, 2011; Wetherell,

2012, 2015). Such an affective focus has opened up a more in-depth understanding of how emotions play out for young people in specific affectively charged places, such as inner-city centers and nightlife. Researchers have noted that such atmospheres become intertwined with young people's own embodied identities (age, gender, etc.) and have an impact on the range of emotions they experience during their night out (Duff, 2008; Jayne et al., 2011; Maclean & Moore, 2014). For example, Maclean and Moore (2014) argue that violence in nightlife cannot be attributed solely to the effects of alcohol, because it involves a complex interaction with bodies, affective states, places, and charged atmospheres that influence young people's drinking behaviors. However, young people may also actively seek out specific places to experience such affective atmospheres, using drinking as "an active quest to experience certain feelings in specific contexts" (Jayne et al., 2011, p. 119).

Studies on affect and alcohol consumption add an important level of complexity when attempting to understand young women's narrative accounts of sex in the context of heavy drinking, because these studies address how emotions cannot be viewed as solely individually generated, but also as situated and part of a larger cultural context. However, in this present paper, we do not focus on specific places, such as the nightlife; instead, we examine in general how young women negotiate their feelings about their experiences with sex in the context of heavy alcohol use in relation to friends. We therefore find it necessary to account for how affect is not simply present as part of a charged atmosphere on a night out, but also more generally present in everyday life for these young women as they construct meaning of their experiences in relation to friends. Therefore, we draw on feminist scholarship on affect to illuminate how emotional responses are culturally situated, and by extension, how the legitimacy of different emotions and their directedness are intertwined with the powerful impact of norms.

The feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2004) has contributed significantly to the theorization of affect, as she has pointed to how queer, racial and ethnic minorities become marginalized through emotional processes that are both personal and collective. She argues that when bodies come into contact with one another, the emotions that circulate between them is affected by the past histories of contact that have played out in the specific cultural and political context. Emotions are therefore not internal psychological processes, but rather cultural practices that are inherently performative. This is because emotions cite norms that already exist, and through the continued iteration of emotional responses over time, some emotional reactions come to appear more legitimate than others (Ahmed, 2004). In fact, she argues that emotions are always directed at something or someone, and as emotions become directed repeatedly at specific objects or people, they, in turn, come to characterize the very object of our emotions as worthy of such an emotional response (Ahmed, 2004). For example, discussing how racial othering works through emotions, she writes that "... to feel hate towards another" is "to be affected by that other with hate such that the other is given the quality of being hateful" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 209). Thus, how we feel about someone or something is a process through which certain bodies, objects and experiences are ascribed qualities through the very emotions that others direct at them. However, when repeated over time, such emotional responses may also come to 'stick.'

Ahmed uses the concept of ‘stickiness’ to describe processes through which people can become marked by emotional responses that serve to marginalize them, for example as racial minorities become marked as the ‘disgusting’ or ‘fearsome’ other. Hence emotions are thus not simply a matter of how the individual subject *feels*, but also how such feelings are entangled with different social, political and cultural contexts, as well as by past histories of contact (Ahmed, 2004). While Ahmed focuses on specific cultural processes of marginalization of certain groups of people through the iteration of emotions, we use the concept of ‘stickiness’ to examine how young women negotiate the legitimacy of emotional responses in relation to their personal experiences with sex in the context of heavy alcohol use. In so doing, we argue that their negotiations of appropriate emotional responses constitute a process that is not solely personal, but rather socially and culturally situated, as their emotions are negotiated vis-à-vis gender norms and in relation to their friends.

The concept of stickiness is particularly relevant because young women’s drinking is often the subject of collective emotional responses in the forms of moral panic and judgment (e.g. Brown & Gregg, 2012; Jackson & Tinkler, 2007; Leigh, 1995). Brown and Gregg (2012), for example, demonstrate how certain emotions are particularly dominant in depictions of young women’s drinking. They point to how the notion of regret serves as a powerful tool in some prevention efforts that encourage women to work to avoid negative feelings after a night out by drinking less to avoid transgressive sexual experiences, including sexual abuse. Thus, women are often portrayed as responsible for the potential sexually violent behavior of others, and the relation between young women and sex in the context of alcohol use is already infused with gendered meanings that tend to exacerbate feelings of regret, regardless of whether these young women have been having fun or have been sexually abused. However, as we will demonstrate, such problematic and gendered notions of responsibility and regret affect not only prevention initiatives, but also the negotiations of consent and pleasure among young women and their friends. Most significantly, we demonstrate how such negotiations tend to take place with friends rather than with sexual partners, when alcohol is involved. Through this, we are able to discuss and problematize how negotiations of sexual consent and sexual pleasure are emotionally charged processes that are culturally situated, and, within the context of young women’s drinking practices, also inherently social.

## Methods

The qualitative material used here comes from a large-scale research project consisting of 140 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with young adults in Denmark (gender: 49% identify as female, 49% as male, and 2% as other. Age span: 18 to 25 years, average age: 21.2 years). We chose to focus on this particular age group because the existing research has shown how drinking prevalence and episodes of heavy episodic drinking are highest within this age range (Dawson, Grant, Stinson, & Chou, 2004). Furthermore, the Danish health authorities also point to how the majority of young Danes engage in binge drinking every month, defined as the consumption of five or more units in one session (Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2015).

The aim of the overall project was to examine the gendered aspects of young people's drinking styles and behaviors in their everyday lives within a diverse sample of young adults from different regions of Denmark. The chosen participants were also diverse in terms of education and employment as we recruited young adults enrolled in college, universities, and vocational schools as well as those who were in part-time or full-time employment, and those not currently working. The participants were required to have had experiences with drinking within the past three months, a criterion easy to fulfill given the current high levels of alcohol use among young adults in Denmark. To recruit these participants, we used a multi-tiered recruitment strategy, which involved recruitment through online platforms, educational institutions, chain referrals, and street-level recruitment. The interviews were conducted between April 2015 and June 2016 and took place most frequently in the participants' homes or at our offices in the university, as well as other locations such as libraries.<sup>1</sup>

We used a semi-structured interview guide, which allowed us to gain insights into cultural, embodied, and affective aspects of the participants' personal experiences with and opinions about alcohol use, intoxication, and gender. The guide was divided into closed-ended socio-demographic questions, open-ended questions, and photo elicitation techniques. The open-ended questions included themes such as drinking practices and settings, bodily experiences and feelings of intoxication, attitudes toward various drinking styles, and possible consequences. The open-ended questions and our use of photo elicitation techniques allowed us to facilitate in-depth conversations on affective and embodied aspects of drinking, which otherwise might have proved difficult for our participants to describe (Johnson & Weller, 2002; Laws, Hunt, & Antin, 2018; Russel, 1994). In utilizing the interview schedule, we were attentive to gaining information on gender not only through direct questions, as these tend to facilitate conversations on more stereotypical aspects of gender, but also through a focus on the subtle ways in which gender mattered in their everyday lives in relation to alcohol use (Haavind, 2000; Højgaard, 2010). This made it possible for us to gain further insights into their personal stories, instead of focusing solely on general reflections, including their personal experiences with sex in the context of heavy alcohol use. Such interviewing techniques also allowed our participants to open up on how they experienced drinking, including how they felt in different situations and how they were affected by different atmospheres and expectations when drinking.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. We then coded the interviews using the data-analysis software program NVivo 11. The data was subject to two rounds of coding. In the first round, we coded the material into 16 overarching codes, for example, "health," "age and personal development," and "sexuality/desire." The last code, "sexuality/desire," made up the foundation for this paper, and we sub-coded it into relevant themes including "flirting," "sexual pursuit," and "sex," among others. The material used in this paper consists primarily of data from the code on "sex," focusing mainly on the participants' narrative accounts of personal experiences with sex in the context of heavy alcohol use, but also including reflections on the narrations of gender and sexual norms across the

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different codes. Out of 140 respondents, 63 of them described personal experiences and opinions on sex under the influence of alcohol. Out of these respondents, 33 identified as women, 28 as men, and two identified as genderqueer and a-gender, respectively. We focus on young women's narratives of their personal experiences of sexual encounters with men within a heavy drinking context. Our choice of focus stems from the fact that the young heterosexual women in our study were much more inclined to talk at length about their *personal* experiences with sex in comparison with other participants, often whilst emphasizing strong emotional reactions. We consider this to be an indication of these experiences being a particularly pressing subject for young heterosexual women. This observation is further strengthened by the fact that these young women were not asked directly about sexual encounters or sexual boundaries, but instead these narratives arose from our general questions on experiences with alcohol.

### **Analysis: making meaning of sex in the context of heavy alcohol use**

Building on Ahmed's theoretical insights on emotions, we examine how the young women in our study negotiate the meaning of their experience with sex in the context of heavy alcohol use through a negotiation of their own emotional responses, specifically in relation to their friends. In the first part of the analysis, we analyze how they describe their friends as sources of support and/or judgment in relation to their sexual encounters, which took place while they were intoxicated. In the second part, we examine how these young women describe friends as a form of co-authors in their narratives, when they themselves struggle to remember what exactly happened. We are further attentive to how these young women negotiate their emotional responses in relation to the responses of friends, by navigating the existing gender norms concerning women's sexual behavior.

**Sexual regret in the context of friendship: support and judgment**—When the young women in our study talked about sex in the context of heavy alcohol use, many of them spoke about managing feelings of regret. Unlike regret stemming from other drinking behaviors, having sex was described as particularly problematic. For example, Sille says:

Sex - not when you are drunk. You will regret that for sure the day after. Some things are like embarrassing in the days after, but if you have sex, it is something you regret for a long time. At least that is how I would feel.

Sille's account exemplifies the special position sex holds in relation to heavy drinking among many young women in our study. Failing to avoid sex when drinking, and therefore not living up to the aforementioned gendered notions of women's responsibility (e.g. Brown & Gregg, 2012), carried the risk of 'sticking' in the form of a lingering feeling of regret and embarrassment, also when compared to other drinking behaviors. As Sille suggests, feelings of regret could be avoided by simply abstaining from casual sex altogether when drinking. However, declining sexual advances from men was described as not an easy task when drinking. For example, Malene says:

I have a friend who often gets drunk. It is like every time we disappear from each other, then I can meet her half an hour later, and then she has hooked up with some guy that she is escaping from. It has become sort of a routine and she is always very upset about it. They just kiss, but they probably want more. Then she suddenly



finds herself in a situation where she has given too much of herself and maybe given them the hope that she would go home and have sex with them, when in reality that is not what she wanted, so she doesn't know how to get herself out of that situation. And then she comes to me, and then you stand there with that, trying to tell the guy that it is not going to happen.

Malene explains how her friend does not know how to decline sexual advances, when she drinks. As a result, she is often "upset" after having sex with someone she met at a party. However, instead of abstaining from drinking and going to parties, friends become central in assisting them to avoid having sex, and by extension, having negative feelings. Malene actively negotiates sexual consent on behalf of her friend, demonstrating how sexual boundaries are not necessarily only negotiated between potential sexual partners, but also with and through peers, when young women drink heavily. However, not all of the young women described how they had been able to rely on friends in such encounters.

One of our participants, Henriette, talked about a sexual experience in the context of heavy alcohol use during a night out with a friend. She described how she had been so heavily intoxicated that she had stumbled outside where she had engaged in sex in public on the street. Afterwards, she returned to her friend with most of her clothes missing. Reflecting on the incident, Henriette says:

I thought it was surreal, and in a way it was fun. It wasn't like I felt that it was disgusting, but at the same time it was very disgusting and cheesy. I thought, I can't look my colleague in the eyes, he saw me without clothes on, throwing up and put me in the fetus position. ... I wish my girlfriend would have stopped me from going out to him.

Interviewer: Is it a good friend?

Normally it is, but she is not as good at handling these situations. If it had been any other friend, she would probably have been more like "now, we are going home," but I also think that she was drunk. It was a lot in one night.

Henriette describes her emotional ambivalence toward her sexual experience while drunk. She emphasizes how her friend failed to take care of her because she did not make sure she got home before getting too drunk to decline sex. The failure of her friend to take care of her, coupled with her inability to decline sexual advances, makes it difficult to navigate an appropriate emotional response, as she describes how she felt it was not disgusting but "fun," yet also "disgusting." In this case, Henriette's own feelings of regret, the role of alcohol, and her disappointment with her friend's lack of care takes center stage, and once again, sexual boundaries appear to be negotiated with and through friends, more so than with sexual partners. This emphasis on friends as caretakers, when drinking, in these examples mirrors research on how young women make use of friends to guard each other against unwanted sexual advances and sexual assault when drinking (Brooks, 2008; Maclean, 2016; Nicholls, 2017). Maclean (2016) argues that young women find it necessary to rely on friends *because* they themselves feel responsible for managing risks to their safety (see also De Crespigny & Vincent, 1999; Ferris, 1997). In our data, the emphasis on avoiding feelings of regret also includes matters of responsibility in drinking contexts, as the young women

see themselves or their friends as responsible, regardless of their level of intoxication. As a consequence, the responsibility of sexual partners is downplayed, or completely absent, as the young women describe how they themselves feel embarrassed of their behavior, or make use of friends to negotiate sexual boundaries, when they are drinking heavily.

Friends were not always described as possible allies in preventing sexual encounters while intoxicated. Instead, some of these young women described how friends accentuated their feelings of regret after they had casual sex. For example, Sandra says:

I was really drunk, had I not been that drunk, then I would not have done it. I think, at that time, I regretted it so much that I will never get to that point again. In the moment, I thought it was the best idea ever, but then the day after.. It is also because people laugh at you, when you have been with someone: "Oh my God, you just didn't do that?" ... And they laugh at you and say "Ha." I hate when people laugh at me; I can't stand it.

In this quote, Sandra recalls her own eagerness to have sex in the moment ("I thought it was the best idea ever"), but it stood in stark contrast to her feelings the day after, when she is sober ("I regretted it so much"). Thus, Sandra recalls having actively consented to sex, but her experience is still one of regret, because her friends ridiculed her afterwards. What constitutes an appropriate emotional response for Sandra is thus not about how she felt at the time, but instead, she adheres to the reactions of her friends that make it into an embarrassing story about which she ought to feel regret. In contrast to Henriette and Malene, who argued that friends could prevent feelings of regret, Sandra found instead that they exacerbated notions of regret. Her friends reproduce a notion of casual sex as regrettable for young women that 'sticks' to Sandra as she is made to feel embarrassed. While echoing more traditional gender norms of feminine sexual restraint, the example also speaks to the ways in which women may position themselves in alignment with conservative ideals of women as passive recipients of attraction, by shaming other women for their sexual behavior (Fjær et al., 2015; Kitzinger, 1995).

Similarly, another participant, Lina, explained that she felt that sex in the context of heavy drinking left her vulnerable to judgment by her friends and through them, herself. Lina tells the story of how she hooked up with a bartender on a night out with friends and then reflects on whether people knew about it. She says:

My girlfriends saw it, but normally I don't say it to anyone, because I might become like a bit embarrassed of myself, that I would do such a thing. I feel a bit like nasty and disgusting when I do it because even though sex today is very normal, right, I just have this thought that when I don't know him, when I don't know anything about him and then just take him home, it can make me feel disgusting. ... Unless they like figure it out themselves. I think it is embarrassing to say that I have been with someone I didn't know. I think I feel more nasty if others know.

Lina illustrates an awareness of changing norms of sexual behavior but also problematizes how casual sex with a stranger still makes her feel "nasty." During the interview, she describes her sexual experiences as positive at the time, but even so, she still emphasizes

feelings of being “nasty” and “disgusting” the day after. This indicates that her sexual experiences ‘stick’ to her afterward—not as a result of her experience, but rather because of the cultural and gendered meanings of her sexual behavior. Furthermore, she emphasizes how it is in the context of friendship that her behavior becomes ‘sticky,’ as she feels “more nasty if others know.” Lina’s emotional ambivalence to casual sex echoes the results of a study on young Danes’ attitudes toward gender and sex, as she simultaneously demonstrates an awareness of how it should be “normal” today to have sex in whatever circumstances she pleases, yet she seems to expect judgment from her friends for her sexual practices (Dahl et al., 2018). Our research data thus points to the findings in other alcohol research studies, which highlight the difficulties young women encounter in navigating gendered expectations in drinking contexts (e.g., Griffin et al., 2012; Hutton et al., 2013). Our analysis also adds to the existing research, as we demonstrate the central role of friends within these situations. Friends are described as central influences in negotiating sexual boundaries in practice, and, when the young women did have sex, friends become legitimate sources in determining how they feel about their sexual experiences. In addition, these negotiations of emotional responses are intertwined with existing gender norms, specifically where women’s sexual restraint is idealized.

**Friends as co-authors: in between sexual regret and funny stories**—Up to this point, we have argued that friends occupy a contradictory position as they can serve to either prevent feelings of regret or accentuate it. However, many of the young women also described how they had been drinking so heavily that they did not remember what had happened. In these instances, friends were also described as co-authors of the resulting account. For example, Ann-Sofie says:

I got so drunk that I have no idea how I got home. I don’t like that. I was told that I took a taxi home with some guy, and he then came up and slept at my place, and I have no idea who he is. I don’t even know his name. It is just not a good situation to be in the day after. My [girl]friend thinks it is funny, but it is just not cool; I don’t think it is funny.

Ann-Sofie explains how she makes sure not to drink too much in order to prevent repeating an experience in which she took “some guy” home whom she did not know *because* she had been drunk. His status as a stranger is emphasized as particularly problematic, and to prevent a similar situation, she now watches her alcohol intake, noting that she feels responsible, and, at the same time, alcohol is “at fault” (Horvath & Brown, 2007). Because Ann-Sofie could not remember what had happened, she relied on friends to tell her. However, once told, her female friend then challenges her feelings about the experience, because the friend describes it as being “funny.” It seems then that her friends reproduce the perceptions of women as responsible for managing sexual advances, but instead of finding such an incident regrettable, Ann Sofie describes the pressure to reframe the experience as “funny.”

Another participant, Linnea, also relied on friends to make sense of what happened at a party, and she too found that even an uncomfortable sexual experience had the potential of being a funny story among her peers. Linnea explains:

I don't remember it, so they [my friends] can make me believe anything. I was so drunk I couldn't stand on my own two legs. ... I fucked with some guy in one of my classmate's room. I managed to do that too. I don't remember it, but I for sure did not say yes to it, but I probably didn't say no either, so there is nothing to do about it, but it sucks. (...) A classmate came to me and was like "you had a lot of fun on Friday, huh?" "What did I do, I can't remember?" Then he told me that stuff.

In this part of the interview, Linnea explains how she was unable to remember what had happened during a party, because she was heavily intoxicated. She found out after talking to friends that she had sex, and although she questions her ability to have freely consented at the time, she emphasizes that *she* "managed" to do it. Thus, Linnea's description reproduces gendered notions of responsibility insofar as she directs feelings of regret at *her* level of intoxication and *her* loss of control, and not at her being unable to consent to having sex. Consequently, friends are central to her making sense of sex in the context of heavy alcohol use, serving as co-authors who help her to remember what happened and determine what emotional responses are appropriate. However, at the same time, this co-authorship can also be intertwined with a social pressure to frame sex in the context of heavy alcohol use as "fun," regardless of whether the person was actually able to freely consent to having sex.

Other young women also recounted how their feelings about a sexual experience did not match the reactions of their friends, but whereas Ann-Sofie and Linnea distanced themselves from seeing their experience as a funny story, others pointed out how they themselves had participated more actively in adopting such a humorous approach. For example, Marie is unsure what exactly happened, and although she expresses regret, the experience nevertheless functioned as a joke among her friends. She says:

I think that maybe he came up, and then we kissed and then we had sex in a dorm where there were like four others. That I do regret, and it sucks. I wouldn't have done that if I hadn't been drinking. ... It is a little weird to think back on because I don't think that I thought about how little I actually wanted to in the situation. I definitely remember that I didn't take the initiative to be with him, or like that we should have sex. I talked with my girlfriends about it, but it became more of a joke, like "Marie hooked up with that guy," and "she was so drunk." But like afterwards, we also had something going on, I don't know. We saw each other a few times after, where we didn't have sex or kiss, but there was a flirt, so it is not like I felt disgust towards him, but the way it happened. It was just too much.

While Marie barely remembers what happened when she had sex, and although she questions her ability to have consented, she nevertheless describes it as an incident that *she* regrets. However, this regret is not expressed when she talked to her friends about it. Instead, her experience serves as a collective "joke," which, together with the fact that she had dated the man afterwards, eases her negative feelings. This humorous approach does not reproduce a feminine ideal of sexual restraint, but it still constructs Marie, and her alcohol use, as responsible for the experience, without making room for her reflections on whether she was able to consent or not.

In a similar manner, Tanja narrates how her experience with sex in the context of heavy alcohol use functioned as a shared fun story among friends because of her relation to the person with whom she had sex:

It was crazy, this whole thing about sleeping with someone without knowing it. You would like to have control over that yourself, but it turned out to be OK because he was really nice, and we actually dated for a while. So it was alright, but it could also have been something else. It also really sucked that I didn't remember it. It was actually uncomfortable.

... It was good to get to know him, so it didn't feel as wrong. But it has also been like de-mystified with my friends, like they also think that it is just, like when you tell it to them, so it is not some secret, it becomes more like OK. It also becomes sort of a funny story that you have. And then again, it was also like this nice educated guy. It would have been different if it had been another person. Then I don't know.

Tanja negotiates how she feels about her experience by drawing on the reaction of friends in conjunction with her ability to form a bond afterwards with her sexual partner. Tanja is, like the majority of these young women, ambivalent in her emotional response, as she expressed how it is both "uncomfortable" and "OK." However, in the above quote, we see how her experience with sex, in collusion with her friends, changes from being described as an uncomfortable experience to that of a shared funny story. *Because* he is "a nice, educated guy," she can share it as a funny story with friends, but, as she notes, it would have been different had it been "another person." Thus, similar to many of the other narratives, it is not the sexual encounter itself, nor her ability to consent when heavily intoxicated, that are important when she narrates how she feels. Instead, her friends play a central role, together with the status of the sexual partner, as she constructs a meaning to what happened and how she feels about it.

## Discussion

When the young women in our study talk about their experiences with sex in the context of heavy alcohol use, feelings of regret are prevalent. Issues of sexual consent get little or no attention when they recall talking to friends about their experiences, even when they question their ability to have declined the sexual advances at the time. Furthermore, when these young women recall how they initiated sex, their experience were also framed as a source of regret, as they felt embarrassed or disgusted for having casual sex when drinking, regardless of how they had felt at the time. Whether or not they find their experience regrettable is thus not dependent on their level of sexual pleasure or even their ability to give consent. Instead, such regret seemed dependent on their ability to live up to ideals concerning either women's sexual restraint, or breaking with the possible stigma of engaging in casual sex. These findings echo recent research on how sexual practices tend to become defined as regrettable in drinking contexts if they break with normative perceptions of femininity and masculinity (Farrugia, 2017; Pedersen et al., 2017). Our study indicates that this may have serious repercussions for young women's well-being, because normative perceptions of femininity make little or no room for discussing sexual pleasure or possible

sexual violence. Instead, these young women narrate how, in the context of friendships, their initial emotional responses can become invalid, as their experiences become reconstructed as embarrassing events or funny stories.

It is also important to note the widespread tendency, within the narrative accounts, for sexual encounters to be re-interpreted as amusing in the context of friendships. In a study of young Danes party practices in “Sunny Beach” in Bulgaria, a holiday destination, Tutenges and Sandberg (2013) demonstrated how young people engage in heavy drinking to generate story-worthy experiences, and through this process, they argue that drinking stories are a crucial object of study in order to understand the meaning of young peoples’ drinking practices. However, while the authors discussed an important element of drinking events, they were nevertheless critiqued for ignoring how gendered inequalities may influence drinking stories, as well as for not being attentive to how sexual transgressions, even when “story-worthy”, may hold different consequences for young women and men (Bogren, 2014; Ettore, 2014; Griffin, 2014; Radcliffe & Measham, 2014). In line with this critique, we argue that our findings point to how the social norms reproduced in friendship groups are highly gendered, and consequently, the eagerness to share funny stories with friends may make sexual violence less visible in drinking contexts.

In her more recent work, Ahmed (2004) argues that Western societies are preoccupied with the notion of happiness, as these societies have a strong cultural imperative to acquire and maintain happiness. In relation to parties, this pursuit of happiness is of particular relevance, as young people seek out drinking contexts to experience specific forms of emotions, such as joy, fun and excitement (Jayne et al., 2011; Maclean & Moore, 2014). While drinking stories can function as a way for young people to bond with one another by recalibrating exciting and fun experiences, it may also make it difficult for them, if they wish to maintain bonds with peers, to express uncomfortable and negative experiences. Existing research has also demonstrated how female friendships serve as important sites for the cultural reproduction of romantic narratives (e.g. Brown, 1999; Herold, 2015; Korobov & Thorne, 2009; Søndergaard, 2002). With this paper, we extend this point, as we argue that gender norms are reproduced within young women’s friendships, which is highly problematic, because gendered norms stand in the way of discussions of both sexual consent and sexual pleasure.

Previous research has pointed to how negotiations of sexual consent are affected by dominant heterosexual discourses that normalize sexual violence (Beres, 2007; Henriksen & Miller, 2012; Henriksen & Bengtsson, 2018; Hlavka, 2014). With this paper, we demonstrate how these norms are reproduced actively in young women’s friendships, as sexual consent is negotiated with peers rather than with sexual partners, specifically in the context of heavy alcohol use. Our analysis suggests that this happens both in situ, as young women may actively manage sexual advances on behalf of their friends, and afterwards, as they negotiate how they ought to feel about a sexual experience. Consequently, we suggest that future studies and preventive efforts need to examine in more detail what we are calling ‘*social consent*,’ in order to emphasize *the sociality of sexual consent*. That is, the ways in which young people ascribe notions of sexual consent or sexual violence to events through their interactions with their friends and peers, thus providing meaning to sexual pleasure or

sexual violence in the context of friendship. Whereas the focus on sexual consent highlights negotiations of sexual boundaries in the interaction that takes place between existing or potential sexual partners, we suggest that the term *social consent* provides a framework for understanding negotiations of consent that take place together with or through friends. This is not to ignore the importance of looking at consent between sexual partners, but rather to emphasize that consent is also intrinsically social among the young people in our study.

Instead of solely viewing consent as a negotiation that takes place between sexual partners, we argue that consent is also social. In so doing, we encourage future sexual violence prevention strategies to take into account the interrelations between friends, gender norms and sexual consent in drinking contexts. Our findings also suggest the necessity for prevention strategies to actively work towards dismantling notions of respectability and expanding the space for action for young women in drinking contexts, in order to avoid reproducing the very norms that make sexual pleasure or sexual violence invisible for some young women. Lastly, we encourage future studies to examine the role of *social consent* among other groups of people, because the data we have examined here does not allow us to focus on how gender norms impact negotiations of sexual consent among young men, other genders, or LGBTQ + youth more generally.

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