

‘What on earth is *she* drinking?’ Doing Femininity through Drink Choice on the Girls’ Night Out

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Abstract

In a supposed ‘post-feminist’ society of gender equality, engagement with contemporary spaces such as the Night Time Economy (NTE) may offer young women positive opportunities to redefine femininities through leisure activities and alcohol consumption. Whilst the NTE is depicted as an increasingly ‘feminised’ space where women’s drinking is normalised and expected, this essay will demonstrate some of the ways in which alcohol consumption remains highly gendered and women continue to be expected to buy into normative femininity through their beverage choice by looking at a specific mode of engagement with the NTE - the ‘girl’s night out’. Drawing on the findings of my PhD research with young women in the North-East of England, I will highlight some of the ways in which young women manage drinking practices and choices in the potentially highly gendered and (hetero)sexualised contemporary leisure spaces of the NTE when going out with female friends. With the consumption of more ‘girly’ drinks such as wine and cocktails both normalised and positioned as a key way in which to ‘do’ gender and femininity on the girls’ night out, I argue that women’s scope to rewrite the dominant scripts of femininities in these particular contexts is limited and constrained. However, other social occasions or drinking contexts and settings may potentially offer women more opportunities to resist, challenge or ignore gendered expectations and norms around alcohol consumption. Highlighting specific examples of resistance from the data, I will draw attention to the important role of context in shaping the ways in which women manage and negotiate their drinking choices in contemporary leisure spaces.

Key words: alcohol, gender, interviews

Introduction

Traditionally, public drinking has been a privilege reserved for men and appropriately situated within the masculinised space of the pub, and whilst men’s alcohol consumption has long held positive associations with masculinity and toughness (Lyons and Willott, 2008), women’s drinking - particularly in public - has historically been labelled a threat to health, respectability and femininity itself (Day, Gough and McFadden, 2004). Even as women’s

drinking becomes increasingly tolerated and normalised, there have long been clear distinctions between ‘men’s drinks’ – such as beer – and ‘women’s drinks’ (Towns, Parker and Chase, 2012). However, these gendered distinctions in terms of drinking spaces and beverage type are potentially beginning to blur, with researchers noting the expansion of an increasingly ‘feminised’ Night Time Economy (NTE) where young people of both genders are expected to engage in hedonistic practices of alcohol consumption. With drinking potentially playing a key role in women’s negotiations of pleasure, fun and sexual identities (Sheehan and Ridge, 2001), traditional understandings of gendered drinking divisions may be outdated, and the NTE has been conceptualised as a contemporary site in which women can reinscribe drinking with more positive meanings and rewrite the scripts of contemporary femininities (Hutton, 2006). However, it is important to understand the consequences of this supposed ‘feminisation’ of the NTE for the young women who frequent these spaces, and explore the impacts of changing theorisations of drinking on women’s embodied, everyday practices within nightlife venues. This essay will explore some of the ways in which young women may individually and collectively ‘feminise’ their consumption practices in order to situate them within the boundaries of respectable femininities through continuing to subscribe to binary gendered distinctions that position some drinks as ‘manly’ or ‘masculine’ and others as ‘girly’ or ‘feminine’. Firstly, the theoretical frameworks behind conceptualisations of ‘appropriate’ or respectable femininity will be explored, before moving on to consider the NTE – and specifically the ‘girls’ night out’ - as a site for the negotiation of contemporary femininities. The essay will then draw on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with young women (undertaken as part of my PhD project, the ‘Girls’ Night Out Project’) to consider the ways in which their consumption is ‘feminised’ both individually, in terms of beverage choice, and collectively, through the positioning of practices such as sharing a bottle of wine as a way to ‘do’ girliness as a female friendship group.

Doing Gender / Doing Drinking

As Skeggs argues, ‘women are not feminine by default...femininity is a carefully constructed appearance and/or form of conduct’ (1997, p. 107). It is widely recognised that gender is something we ‘do’ rather than something we are born with, meaning bodies become gendered through social and cultural – rather than biological – processes. According to Butler (1990), gender is performative in that bodies become gendered through this continual ‘doing’ of masculinities or femininities, creating the false impression that gender is fixed and natural. Individuals are thus expected to perform the characteristics, behaviours and practices

associated with ‘doing’ masculinity or femininity (Rahman and Jackson, 2010) in order to be successfully read as male or female. It follows from this that some ways of doing masculinity or femininity may be read as more normative or ‘appropriate’ than others. For women, traditionally, appropriate femininity has long been associated with passivity (Korobov, 2011), lack of agency (Wilkins, 2004) and respectability (Skeggs, 1997), where feminine respectability can be associated with a control over one’s sexuality and sexual behaviour, often embodied through marriage and motherhood (Lees, 1989). As Budgeon notes, women are required to ‘discipline and survey their own bodies by engaging in practices which produce their own ‘docile’ bodies according to the dictates of idealized constructions of feminine embodiment’ (2003, p. 39), and these normative assumptions about what it means to be feminine can be understood as a form of social control where women are expected to collude in the privileging of masculinity and their own continued subordination (Holland *et al.*, 2004).

However, feminist literature has long identified various contradictions within young women’s performances of appropriate femininity, suggesting it may be more useful to imagine women as negotiating a *plurality* of femininities in different contexts (Laurie, Dwyer, Holloway and Smith, 1999). These have become particularly salient in recent years, where supposed ‘new’ femininities advocating agency and empowerment (see McRobbie, 2007) may continue to sit awkwardly alongside more traditional notions of femininity. Within a supposed ‘post-feminist’ society (Valentine, Jackson and Mayblin, 2014), young women may arguably be increasingly able to access the pleasure-seeking, assertive definitions of sexuality traditionally reserved for men and rewrite the scripts of femininity drawing on elements of empowerment, sexual agency and independence within contemporary spaces. The NTE is recognised as a ‘liminal’ space of uncertainty and pleasure (Hayward and Hobbs, 2007), and thus may represent a key site within which such rewriting or redefining may be enacted through practices of consumption.

The term ‘Night Time Economy’ was coined early in the twenty-first century to reflect the expanding number of bars and clubs concentrated in city centres and predominantly targeting 18-24 year olds (Roberts, 2006). Historically, public drinking has been understood as a solely masculine pursuit, with Willott and Lyons (2012) highlighting the historical legacy of a gendered separation of drinking domains. Gendered norms around the *types* of alcohol that should be consumed are well-recognised, with women traditionally expected to drink ‘softer’ and somehow more feminine beverages (Papagaroufali, 1992), whilst beer is associated with manliness and masculinity (Rolfe, Orford and Dalton, 2009).

The pervasive and enduring associations between beer and constructions of hegemonic or normative masculinity may continue to remain salient, for example with Campbell (2000) recently highlighting the way in which the ‘pub’ drinking environment continues to operate as a site for the legitimisation of hegemonic masculinity. However, participating in the NTE more widely has also been recognised as an important component of the lives of many young women (Hollands, 1995), and research suggests that there has been an increase in alcohol consumption amongst young women in the UK during the 21st Century (Plant, 2008). As a result, the NTE has been conceptualised as an increasingly ‘feminised’ space, with broader changes in social positions allowing women to enter this previously male space, drink publicly, experiment with different feminine identities (Hutton, 2006) and re-write sexual scripts through shared embodied practices such as collective drinking (Waitt, Jessop and Gorman-Murray, 2011). For example, Eldridge and Roberts argue that ‘alcohol is a means through which identity is lived and imagined - and through alcohol consumption we are then able to perform new subjectivities that are both temporally and spatially located and dependent’ (2008, p. 327). Drinking has also been theorised as a key component of female socialising and the negotiation of fun, and has also been linked to conceptualisations of femininity as assertive and sexually empowered for both heterosexual (Sheehan and Ridge, 2001) and non-heterosexual women (Peralta, 2008).

At the same time, it is important to consider the extent to which women might remain constrained in their ability to redefine femininities, particularly in the highly gendered and heterosexualised spaces of the NTE, where they remain subject to a number of competing and contradictory scripts regarding ‘appropriate’ dress and behaviour (Cullen, 2011). Drinking has long been intertwined with women’s sexuality and respectability (Brooks, 2008), and excessive consumption has been seen as particularly damaging as it demonstrates a perceived lack of feminine control and restraint (Measham, 2002). As Day *et al.* argue, the ‘long-standing, traditional discourses around femininity and sexuality are still pervasive’ (2004, p. 177), and this essay will highlight some of the ways in which participating in the NTE continues to be a highly gendered activity where young women are expected to conform to certain modes of respectable, heterosexual femininity. Griffin, Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley and Mistral (2013) - in recent and pivotal work on the tensions of performances of femininities within the NTE - note that there are clearly contradictions inherent in contemporary femininity in a supposedly ‘post-feminist’ climate that render contemporary femininity a ‘profoundly contradictory and dilemmatic space which appears almost impossible for girls or young women to inhabit’ (2013, p. 184). With drinking now portrayed

as a means ‘for women to accomplish a range of both traditional and non-traditional femininities’ (Measham, 2002, p. 362), the need for further research in this area in order to untangle this complex and contradictory interplay of factors is further highlighted. This essay will address these tensions, drawing on recent research employing semi-structured, in-depth interviews with young women to highlight how gendered norms and stereotypes around beverage choice continue to restrict the ability of young women to rewrite femininities through alcohol consumption.

The Girls’ Night Out Project

Whilst alcohol consumption has received increasing attention in recent research, Haydock (2009) argues that such work often fails to explore how young people themselves negotiate drinking, and how drinking practices within the NTE actively *construct* - rather than simply reflect - gender (2009, p. 20). Furthermore, previous research has tended to focus predominantly on accessible heterosexual, student populations, according to Gill, Donaghy, Guise and Warner (2007). Similarly, the ‘girls’ night out’ (nights out as a group of female friends) as a distinct form of engagement with the NTE – and one that arguably may be particularly illuminating in highlighted gendered patterns of alcohol consumption and the role of alcohol in ‘doing’ femininities – remains under-researched. This paper will draw on the findings of my PhD research - The ‘Girls’ Night Out Project’ (Nicholls, 2015) – which sought to work towards addressing these gaps and limitations. Fully-funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the study consisted of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 26 young women aged 18-25 who went on nights out with female friends in the city, exploring and discussing femininities in relation to appearance, drinking practices and risk management. The study highlights young women’s understandings of what it means to be (in)appropriately feminine, the ways in which the boundaries of femininities are negotiated through women’s embodied practices in the NTE and the types of behaviours and identities that are enabled or constrained as a result.

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to highlight these dynamics here, it should also be noted that the study was geographically situated within Newcastle-upon-Tyne, a formerly industrial setting in North-East England which has in recent years undergone an attempted ‘rebranding’ as a cosmopolitan ‘party city’ with a regenerated NTE (Hollands and Chatterton, 2002). Recruitment for the study took place through a range of routes, including snowballing, Facebook and presentations at universities and colleges. The sample of women was diverse in terms of current circumstances, sexuality, education and background, with 12

self-identifying as working-class and 8 self-identifying as middle-class¹, and with one-third identifying as non-heterosexual.

Theoretically, the study draws on elements of a symbolic interactionist perspective, which has been recently recognised as a useful means through which to better understand how sexualities and genders are constituted through everyday practices (see for example Coleman-Fountain (2014)). In their recent work on sexuality, Jackson and Scott seek to locate sexuality ‘within the mundane activities of social life’ (2010, p. 2), where it is constructed through practices and interactions. Sexuality and gender are thus ‘fully social, embedded in everyday interaction and understood in terms of wider social meanings and patterns of behaviour’ (Coleman-Fountain, 2011, p. 26). As a result, a focus on the links between practices and identities and the ways in which identities might be constituted by individuals through everyday interactions and experiences was crucial to this study. Drawing on elements of feminist methodologies, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were felt to be the most appropriate means through which to elicit the richness and depth of detail required to obtain rich understandings of individuals’ experiences and practices, the meanings young women themselves give to these and how they construct social reality (Warren, 2002).

Doing Girly Individually: Drink Choice

There was a widespread recognition across the data that some drinks continue to be regarded as more or less feminine than others. Beer was almost universally recognised as a more ‘masculine’ drink that continues to be tied to traditional drinking practices within the masculinised pub environment, with the young women occasionally drawing on historical images of the traditional working man’s club environment where pints would be consumed and contrasting this with more feminised drinking practices:

I think people have this image of, you know, the men down at the working men’s club with their pint.... or, you know, the guys in the pub with their pints.

(Georgina, 20, doesn’t identify with a class, lesbian)

Similarly, Lyons and Willott (2008) position beer as ‘integral to masculinity’ and performative of hegemonic masculinity in New Zealand, acknowledging that whilst the industry has now broadened its target market somewhat, advertising of beer still appeals

¹ 6 participants did not identify with any class.

heavily to the ‘hard man’ image of masculinity. The current study strongly suggests that such conceptualisations continue to be relevant and applicable in a UK context. In contrast, wine, cocktails and some spirits – usually gin and vodka – were positioned as more ‘feminine’ or ‘girly’. This gendered labelling of beverages was often attributed in part to the visual appearance of the drink, with more feminine beverages typically described as attractive or ‘pretty’ and linked to more feminine colours:

I think wine in general is considered quite girly. I’m not exactly sure *why*, but rose especially just because it’s pink, or something stupid like that. Cocktails I’m not sure about either. I think it might just be because they look physically attractive, and are often quite pretty and stuff.

(Eve, 24, doesn’t identify with a class, bisexual(ish))

Linked to this, feminine beverages were described as frequently smaller in size and more ‘delicate’ or ‘elegant’. In contrast, the associations between beer and masculinity were epitomised when beer was consumed in pint form. There was some suggestion that the large pint glass doesn’t ‘look’ feminine:

...it is always so associated with... ‘men should drink pints, and women should be seen and not *heard*’, with them being smaller and more petite...

EN: So is it about the size of the pint, or the beer itself? Like, is beer acceptable in a *bottle* or...?

I think it’s more acceptable in a bottle or a smaller glass, it’s almost like some women are trying to *hide* it, the fact that they’re drinking beer.

(Fran, 18, working-class, bisexual)

As Fran suggests, one way in which women might attempt to mitigate the unfeminine practice of drinking beer might be to drink it in a smaller, more feminine glass or from a bottle, and there was evidence that some of the participants subscribed to this rule themselves in order to individually perform ‘girliness’ through drinking:

I would maybe have a *bottle* of beer, but I would *never* drink a pint of beer. I just would not wanna be seen with a pint.

(Megan, 25, working-class, straight)

Interestingly, Megan's reason for not drinking a pint of beer is explicitly because of the way in which she might be seen or perceived by others. Rolfe *et al.* (2009) note that in their own research on female heavy drinkers, some women attempted to retain appropriately feminine identities and mitigate the negative associations of women's heavy drinking and beer consumption through drinking half-pints. Lyons and Willott report similar findings and argue that '(i)n this way women are subverting the beer/masculinity association by engaging in the behaviour but performing it in feminine ways' (2008, p. 702).

As well as looking visually unappealing, the pint of beer could also represent particular drinking practices that were regarded as unfeminine:

EN: So what's manly about drinking a pint then?

I think it *suggests* that you're drinking to get drunk. As a woman, I think it's the suggestion that you're downing pints with the intention of getting as drunk as you possibly can...

EN: So why does that then link back to being manly?

I think because men can handle pints. Men can drink more than women can, normally because of physical size I guess.

(Claire, 25, working-class, straight)

Here, Claire expresses the commonly held view that pint-drinking is manly, suggesting that this may be because it makes it look as though women are drinking with the intention of getting drunk. Whilst *some* alcohol consumption was normalised and expected for young women on a night out, drinking with the specific *intention* of getting very drunk continued to be positioned as problematic for women, and heavy drinking was depicted widely as unfeminine behaviour. Interestingly, Claire then draws on the idea - mentioned by

over a third of participants – that men are capable of drinking more than women. Participants tended to take these differences as given, citing biology or differences in physical size between men and women. There were marked differences in the ways in which the young women talked about men and women's drinking, with a common expectation that men tend to drink more heavily than women and that it is inappropriate for women to attempt to match or exceed the drinking levels of their male peers, or to engage in particular practices such as 'chugging' (rapidly drinking or downing) pints. Thus the status of the pint of beer as unfeminine appears to derive in part for the participants from its volume and the suggestion that the drinker is consuming large quantities to become drunk.

The data also indicates that when women *do* drink beer, they may be able to do it in more 'girly' ways not just through drinking half-pints or smaller bottles, but also drinking fruit-flavoured beer or cider. The young women generally found it difficult to articulate why this might make drinks more feminine or girly, but it may be related to the idea that fruity or sweeter beverages are considered more feminine:

...a typically 'man' drink would be beer or lager – whereas a lot of my friends would have that and really enjoy it. To be fair, they would usually have it with blackcurrant cordial to make it slightly more feminine.

(Sophia, 20, middle-class, straight)

As illustrated by Sophia, similar strategies such as adding cordial to beer could also be a useful way to limit the negative associations of beer consumption, and it is interesting to note that women were both aware of and actively engaged in some of these practices for the explicit reason of appearing less unfeminine. Such practices highlight the importance of maintaining an appropriately feminine identity for some of the participants and demonstrate the ways in which choices were made on an individual level regarding the ways in which identity was performed through beverage choice.

Femininity often intersected with notions of 'classiness' in terms of describing different drink choices. Wine and cocktails were generally positioned as both feminine and 'classy':

I like white wine because - it's so stupid, and I can't believe I'm even gonna say this – I just like the way it *looks*, and I do obviously like the taste. I just *feel* nice with a glass of wine. It just seems a bit more elegant.

(Megan, 25, working-class, straight)

Megan - a self-professed 'girly girl' – draws here on the way in which a glass of wine both looks and feels in her hand, describing it as 'more elegant' than other options. Cocktails were also defined by the majority of participants as feminine, and by some as classy. The positioning of some drinks as both feminine and 'elegant' mirrors research that describes traditionally feminine drink choices as 'glamorous and sparkling' (Lyons and Willott, 2008, p. 701). In contrast to the links made between feminine beverages and class, pints of beer were seen as both manly *and* rough by some of the young women, mirroring the recent work of Emslie, Hunt and Lyons (2015) who report similar findings with a sample of midlife women. For example, Nicole associated what she regarded as masculine drink choices with the working-class and went on to argue that drinking pints is not associated with respectable middle-class femininity:

...women who drink pints is [sic] a bit *manly*, therefore a bit rough. If you were well-to-do and middle-class then you just *wouldn't* do it.

(24, working-class, straight)

Lyons and Willott (2008) noted in their own research with young people in New Zealand that young men sometimes viewed women who drank pints as 'not well brought up', and the above example and others within the data suggest that particular 'masculine' drinks could also be read as 'rough' by women themselves. This demonstrates some of the ways in which gender and class may intersect to define what it means to be appropriately feminine. However, although Nicole resisted drinking pints in particular settings – such as the girls' night out - in other contexts she regarded this as more acceptable, alluding to the ways in which the girls' night out could be associated with particular collective norms and expectations around drinking that did not necessarily apply to other drinking contexts:

If I go and watch the football, I'll have, sometimes, a pint of snakebite² on an afternoon. And I think if I was to drink that in town, people would think that I was a bit... *manly*... [cut]... It's only cause I'm sitting with my dad and his mates [watching the football in the pub] so I don't care. *They* don't care either, they're not gonna sit and be like 'Oh my god, you're having a pint'... They'll say 'Do you want a pint of snakebite, like?' And I'll say 'Yeah' cause I *do* like it. I think it's your *company*. *My* friends wouldn't care if I had a snakebite in the house, but I *don't* think I'd be comfortable standing in a bar, because I would just be aware that people would be like 'What on earth is *she* drinking?'

(24, working-class, straight)

For Nicole, drinking a pint of snakebite was more acceptable in the masculine pub environment or private home environment, but not in the public spaces of 'town'. This suggests that performing femininity in certain ways can take on a differing level of importance in different contexts and with different company. It is also a clear example of one of the ways in which traditional expectations around 'feminine' drinking practices could at times be challenged or ignored. A number of other participants also suggested that feminine or classy drinking choices and practices take on varying amounts of significance in different settings, again highlighting the importance of context in shaping women's drinking practices. As Nicole claims above, one of the key distinctions for the participants was around drinking in the pub compared to the club environment:

If I was in the pub, I would happily drink a shandy³ or - what's it called? – cider. But if I go out to a club, I don't wanna be walking round with a pint... [cut]

EN: So why wouldn't you want to be walking round with a pint? What wouldn't you like about that?

I just don't think that's very girly. But it is in the pub, but it's not in a club.

(Joanna, 24, working-class, straight)

² Cider mixed with lager and blackcurrant

³ Lager topped up with lemonade

This suggests that what it means to be ‘girly’ varies in different settings, and the criteria of girliness or femininity appear to be stricter in a club setting. This was often also echoed in terms of dress and appearance, where looking *more* girly than usual was perceived to be particularly important in certain settings, such as clubs. Again linking to clothing, Ruth explained that she would happily drink a pint on a quiet afternoon in the pub, but not if she was all dressed up for a night out. This mirrors the recent findings of Emslie *et al.* who report that in their work with older women ‘clothing and drinks were deployed for different performances of gender on different occasions (high heels and wine vs. trainers and beer)’ (2015, p. 4). It may be that there is something jarring about bringing together feminine dress with less feminine drinking choices. As Holliday (1999) argues, individuals often wish to convey a coherent identity, and it may be that particular ways of dressing seem to sit at odds with certain drinks. Furthermore, getting ‘dressed up’ can typically be associated with the girls’ night out, and these various examples clearly suggest there may be particular patterns of drinking that are distinctive to this context, as the next section will illustrate.

Doing Girly Collectively: Shared Practices of Consumption

Drink choices were not made solely on an individual level, and several women described experiencing pressure to consume particular types of drinks on the girls’ night out. The data clearly highlighted not only that women continue to experience what Griffin *et al.* (2013) describe as an ‘imperative to intoxication’ – or pressure to drink in moderation - but also that the young women felt they often experienced pressure to consume more feminine or girly drinks with female friends. Pre-drinking (drinking together at home before going out) often took on a particularly important role within the female friendship group, and was strongly associated with catching up and socialising:

... if I go out with only *female* friends, we make a bit more of a, kind of, *thing* of drinking *together* beforehand, and chatting and that.... [cut].... as in like ‘here’s a bottle of wine, now let’s sit and chat about our lives’.

(Gail, 24, middle-class, bisexual)

Commencing pre-drinking together through the collective act of opening and sharing a bottle of wine - for example - could mark out private time and space for young women to

talk and be together (see also Stepney, 2014), and it is almost difficult to separate out the processes of drinking and chatting above, as they are closely intertwined. It is interesting to note how Gail comments that such practices become important when going out with ‘only *female* friends’ [her emphasis], suggesting this is unique and would not be the same in a mixed-gender group. Whilst shared practices of alcohol consumption, particularly through sharing a bottle of wine, could mark out ‘girl time’ with female friends, masculine beverages could have very different associations:

I think pints are just associated with *men* sat in your local pub drinking a pint by themselves, grunting at each other.

(Ruth, 21, doesn’t identify with a class, straight)

It is particularly interesting that when alluding to imagined beer consumption practices by men, Ruth actually removes the collective element and associates beer with men drinking ‘by themselves’ and engaging in minimal levels of communication with other men in the pub. Whilst this of course is only a perception of the functions and circumstances of male drinking rather than necessarily a reality (see Thurnell-Read, 2012), it is interesting that the collective value of drinking in terms of bonding and doing friendships is reserved for women here.

Research also suggests that drinking can facilitate a collective sense of belonging, downplay social differences and give people a feeling of corporeal participation and ‘togetherness’ (Jayne, Valentine and Holloway, 2010). Some of the women felt pressure to engage in shared practices of consuming more feminine drinks such as sharing a bottle of wine, even when these would not be their preferred choice of beverage. Eve in particular contrasted going out with her female friends from sixth form with going out in a mixed-gender group with her PhD friends in a number of ways, including around the type of alcohol she would typically consume:

I would say when I do go out with my friends from sixth form, we tend to start drinking really girly drinks, like rose wine and cocktails. But when I’m with my PhD friends, I don’t feel as though I have to do that as much. I don’t mind doing it when I’m out with my sixth form friends, but when I’m out with my PhD friends, I just drink *cider* and things like that.

(24, doesn't identify with a class, bisexual(ish))

It is interesting to note that Eve changes her drinking practices when out with only female friends in order to consume more 'girly' drinks, and this was also noted by other participants, suggesting there may be specific expectations around drinking that are more likely to apply to the girls' night out than to other types of night:

Drinking on a girly night? I tend to drink wine when I go out with the girls. If I go out with the boys, I'll have a pint. So I guess it's *what* I drink...

EN: So why's that different?

[long pause]..... Dunno, I think it's cause all the other girls drink wine, I've made myself like wine.

(Ally, 21, doesn't identify with a class, bisexual)

Ally also preferred to drink cider but had trained herself to like the taste of wine so she could drink it with female friends. This mirrors the findings of Willott and Lyons (2012) in their work on young men and drinking in New Zealand, where training oneself to like the taste of beer played a role in the construction of masculinity.

The consumption of beverages identified as more feminine may thus represent a way to do girliness collectively though 'doing what the other girls do'. For example, Ally drinks wine 'cause all the other girls drink wine', and Eve also talked about how drinking cider or lager and declining the offer to share a bottle of wine could potentially be read as a way to snub female friends, although it is interesting to consider whether this might be more a result of peer pressure from the immediate group or wider societal pressure to engage in femininity:

EN: So why wouldn't you feel comfortable drinking a pint of lager when all the girls are sharing a bottle of wine, say?

I guess it's because I feel like I kind of *have* to become part of that *identity*. And I'd feel like I was almost pushing them away a bit if they asked if I'd like to share a bottle

of wine with them and I was just like ‘oh no, I’ll go and get a lager’. It’s kind of like, when you’re all there together, obviously you’re an individual, but you’re part of a group as well. And you feel inclined to do the same things, and drink the same kind of things because of it.

(24, doesn’t identify with a class, bisexual(ish))

Eve draws on the importance of ‘being together’ and the contrasts between individual and group identity here. Drinking together could be a key way to forge shared group identities, and in this way, drinking was feminised and defined by several participants as an important component of female bonding and a means through which to forge a strong sense of shared identity with girl friends.

Conclusion

Whilst the NTE is increasingly recognised as a useful avenue through which to research young people’s lives, less attention has been given to the girls’ night out as a specific type of engagement with the NTE that may illuminate some of the nuances in the ways in which young women might ‘do’ gender and femininities. The data clearly showed that these nights offered opportunities to individually and collectively engage in particular drinking practices and choices that the women recognised as ‘feminine’, in order to buy into collective enactments of femininity and friendship through, for example, sharing a bottle of wine. The study highlights how drinking on the girls’ night out – and to a lesser extent when engaging more generally with the NTE - may serve specific functions in constructing both individual and collective feminine identities through the consumption of feminine and ‘upmarket’ drinks.

I would argue that such practices are likely to be important for young women who - in contrast to their male peers – have only comparatively recently been permitted to consume alcohol publicly and to access a more ‘feminised’ contemporary NTE (Day *et al.*, 2004). Whilst young men may be able to draw on historical, traditional narratives around male drinking within the spaces of the ‘pub’ (Leyshon, 2008) as positive characteristics of masculinity, it may be that women have to work harder to create positive associations between femininity, participation in the NTE and drinking in a culture of intoxication where some alcohol consumption is expected and normalised on a night out, yet traditional discourses still position women’s drinking as unfeminine and unattractive (Day *et al.*, 2004).

The young women used various techniques to link participation in the girls' night out and NTE more widely with positive and feminine meanings, including positioning certain drinks as feminine. These ways of talking about nights out and drinking may also to some extent reflect alcohol advertising aimed at young people, which frequently centres around drinking as a social or collective activity, often within gendered friendship groups (Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Mistral and Szmigin, 2009).

There were some limited counter-examples where women did not experience pressure to drink feminine beverages with female friends and drank whatever they wanted, and although these were not widespread across the data, it is useful to consider what they tell us about challenges to expectations, pressures and norms around drinking, particularly as at times women actively experienced resistance when they attempted to engage in more masculine drinking practices. For example, one young woman's ex-partner refused to buy her pints of beer. There was some resistance amongst the women themselves to normative expectations around women's drinking through attempts to adopt masculine drinking practices. For example, for some women, the idea of being able to 'keep up with the lads' in terms of alcohol consumption was seen as a source of pride. This supports Griffin *et al.*'s argument that drinking 'like a girl' can actually have negative associations for some women, who conflate this with being boring or a lightweight (2013, p. 188). This is supported by Young *et al.*'s (2005) study of American female students, where participants believed that women who could match men's drinking were seen as more attractive by men than non or low-level drinkers (cited in Plant, 2008, p. 165). Yet Lyons and Willott argue that although young people may frame women's increasing drinking, consumption of 'male' drinks such as beer and attempts to 'keep up with the guys' in terms of greater equality, such practices could alternatively be read as (hetero)sexualised performances of a type of femininity that may be attractive to young men (2008, p. 704). I would argue that imitating masculine drinking practices - particularly to enhance heterosexually desirability - is unlikely to be liberating for women and fails to challenge gender norms or assign more positive meanings to female drinking in its own right.

It should be noted that that this study found clear evidence that the girls' night out can be a source of fun and pleasure for young women and a way to relax, socialise with female friends and 'let your hair down', although it has been beyond the scope of this essay to explore these themes in depth. However, this study also highlights the continued presence of entrenched and pervasive gender distinctions in drinking choices and in terms of which types of beverage are seen as appropriate in the construction of feminine identities in this particular

context. In light of these findings around the real ways in which gendered drinking norms continue to have impacts on the lived experiences of young women, claims that the NTE represents an increasingly ‘feminised’ space in which to challenge, reject or rewrite scripts of normative femininity must be approached with an awareness of the importance of context and setting in shaping women’s drinking choices. I do not seek to downplay the examples of resistance and challenge to gendered norms and expectations around drinking present in the data, but rather to draw attention to the fact that non-normative drinking practices tended to be more likely in specific settings or contexts, such as mixed-gender social occasions and in ‘pub’ rather than ‘club’ locations. Future research could usefully build on and develop these conclusions to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which decisions and choices around drinking are made and the potential opportunities for young women to reject or resist conventional gendered behaviours in the NTE and beyond.

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