

# Playing with gender borders: Flirting and alcohol consumption among young adults in Denmark

Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs

2019, Vol. 36(4) 357–372

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DOI: 10.1177/1455072518807794

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## Abstract

In this article we explore the gendered aspects of flirting as an integral part of a night out among young adults in Denmark, specifically a night out in mainstream bars and clubs. Empirically, we base our analysis on 140 qualitative interviews with regular alcohol users between 18 and 25 years of age. Drawing on Ahmed's notion of orientation in combination with Thorne's notions of gender play and borderwork, our aim is to explore and discuss how flirting – for these young adults – becomes an unavoidable interactional practice in night-time economy (NTE) contexts. This is in some cases experienced as easy and enjoyable, and in others as uncomfortable and challenging. In the analysis, we specifically focus on how gender norms related to the NTE is navigated and/or challenged by our participants, in relation to flirting. The study shows how the gendered norms of the mainstream NTE are, in some instances, supportive of its participants' flirting practices and experiences, and in other cases challenging. In conclusion, we emphasise that the young adults

Submitted: 24 May 2018; accepted: 20 September 2018

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relate challenges both to queer flirting and to heterosexual flirting, and that notions of risks in this context relate to risks of stigmatisation, rather than health risks.

### Keywords

alcohol, borderwork, flirting, gender, intoxication, nightlife, night-time economy, queer, sexuality, young adults

As in the rest of Europe, nightlife in Danish city and town centres has developed into what researchers have come to refer to as the night-time economy (NTE), defined as a commercialisation and capitalisation on heavy drinking, made possible through liberal alcohol policies as well as governmental and corporate interests (e.g., Hayward & Hobbs, 2007; Hunt & Frank, 2016; Szmigin et al., 2007). The NTE encourages young adults in particular to drink alcohol and engage in searches for pleasure and excitement.<sup>1</sup> However, at the same time, young adults' activities and behaviours have become the subject of public concern where heavy drinking is seen as a threat to the public order and safety, and associated with other public health problems, such as drunkenness and violence (Hayward & Hobbs, 2007; Jayne, Holloway, & Valentine, 2006; Measham, 2002; Sheard, 2011; Szmigin et al., 2007). Although participation in the NTE is linked with heavy drinking and transgression, researchers have at the same time argued that young people manage their alcohol consumption by restricting it to a certain space, time, and social setting, as a form of "calculated hedonism" or "controlled loss of control" (Brain, 2000; Measham & Brain, 2005; Szmigin et al., 2007). Young adults are therefore not merely viewed as passive recipients of intoxicating commodities, but also conceived as social actors who actively seek to control and regulate these practices amongst themselves. This duality is taken into account in this article.

An increased attention to gender has developed in the vein of this interest in the NTE (Hunt, Antin, Bjønness, & Ettore, 2016). Researchers have argued that the mainstream

nightlife caters to certain forms of gendered expressions in which heterosexual encounters are favoured and hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine gender expressions are dominant (Boyd, 2010; Hunt, Frank, & Moloney, 2015; Hutton, 2016; Measham & Brain, 2005; Tan, 2013, 2014; Valentine, Holloway, Knell, & Jayne, 2008; Waitt, Jessop, & Gorman-Murray, 2011). Venturing into the NTE thus implies that young adults enter a space that promotes and normalises not only heterosexual encounters through, for example, commercial material and musical lyrics (Boyd, 2010; Hubbard, 2000; Hutton, 2016; Tan, 2014; Waitt et al., 2011), but also a particular form of masculinity and femininity, where men are expected to be actively in pursuit of women and sexually confident, and women to fend off advances, yet embody modern sexual liberation for women (Griffin, Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, & Mistral, 2013; Tan, 2014). Night-time economy settings are, in other words, marked by a heteronormative "logic" of what is "normal" (and therefore also "deviant") sexual behaviour.

Youth is, overall, associated with transition and explorations of new aspects of social life (e.g., Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Room (1996) for example, has emphasised that experimenting with alcohol tends to start simultaneously with experimenting with romantic and sexual relations. In Denmark, researchers have shown that young adults actively make use of alcohol to present themselves as mature enough to pursue romantic and sexual interests, and to be seen as (hetero)sexually available (Abrahamson, 2003, 2004; Demant, 2007;

Østergaard, 2007). Combining alcohol intoxication with pursuing sexual and romantic interests becomes attractive to young people because they then feel more open and confident and dare to approach a person of romantic and/or sexual interest (Abrahamson, 2003, 2004; Demant, 2007; Østergaard, 2007).<sup>2</sup>

However, researchers also point to the gendered aspects of this combination. For example, Griffin et al. (2013) have shown that when going out, young women must manage contradictory expectations of femininity in clubs, balancing between “slut”-stigma and a liberal hook-up discourse, while Grazian (2007) concludes that modern courtship rituals among heterosexual men in the nightlife reproduce myths of sexual dominance through masculine gender performances. Bøhling (2015) also argues that sexual practices in night clubs, such as flirting, may both be experienced as sexually liberating or uncomfortable and frustrating, insofar as these are structured around certain norms and ideals (Bøhling, 2015, p. 147). As this implies, engaging in activities associated with romance, and especially in relation to the so-called “opposite sex”, is considered to be not only normal, but even a required gendered activity in youth. Youth researchers, focusing on the gendered aspects of this hetero-romantic imperative from a more critical perspective, conclude, for example, that it privileges some experiences and gender expressions while it marginalises others (Korobov & Thorne, 2009). In the present article, we demonstrate that a hetero-romantic imperative is dominant in, and arguably even supported by, the gendered environments of mainstream NTEs. This, in effect, holds deep implications for how young adults are able to participate in the NTE, including their possibilities of exploring and pursuing their sexual identities, romantic interests and, more generally, engaging in interactions and forming social bonds.

Flirting, which is the main focus in this article, differs from other romantic and sexual pursuits and relations. From a micro-sociological perspective, flirting can be seen as an

interactional form marked by fluidity and ambiguity, and thus it differs from other sexuality-related encounters, such as hook ups, in which the intention within the encounter is more well defined (e.g., sexual contact). This means that while people usually know if they take part in a flirtatious situation, at the same time, this situation requires from them that they treat this knowledge as an “open secret” and in turn enter a “game of possibilities” (Tavory, 2009, p. 61–62). From a communication theoretical perspective, this implies that flirting interactions are defined (at least partly) by more or less subtle bodily signs such as discrete touching, laughing or making eye contact, through which one invites proximity or orders distance (Madsen, 1993). As such, flirting can be described as an ambiguous and often playful form of social interaction, which is fleeting and elusive. Applying this broad operationalisation of flirting to drinking narratives of young alcohol users, we examine when and how flirting becomes enjoyable and easy – or complicated and uncomfortable in the Danish NTE.

We take our point of departure in young adults’ own accounts of flirting, and approach the phenomenon of flirting at a micro level focusing on narrated situations in which flirting plays out. While these accounts are predominantly marked by heteronormativity and heterosexual encounters, these young adults also convey a multitude of ways in which they engage in and relate to flirting – ways that challenge and problematise the heteronormativity of the NTE. In the present article, we aim to show the presence of (hetero)sexual and gendered norms in the mainstream NTE in Denmark, and contribute to an understanding of how young adults navigate and make meaning in relation to such environments. It is our intent to demonstrate how young adults do not simply reproduce such norms, but how, through flirting, they actively work with, on and against these norms in complex ways. Inspired by Thorne’s (1993) work on gender play, we demonstrate how notions of femininity and masculinity are enacted, delineated and

challenged. In continuation of this, we draw on Ahmed's work on orientations (2006), in order to grasp how flirting is not only social, but also an embodied practice formed by the particular space and normative environment in which it unfolds. With this article we add, not only to the still limited literature on flirtation in relation to alcohol intoxication and the NTE, but also to the growing discussion on how gender norms are actively negotiated by youth as they work with, on or against them. Furthermore, in examining gender norms we would wish to examine how these gender norms become modified through alcohol intoxication within the context of the NTE.

In the following, we first describe the data and methods that our study is based upon. We then detail our theoretical framework. The data analysis is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on articulations of what is conceived of as "natural" heteronormative flirting in the NTE; the second on how the young adults challenge the NTE gender norms through queer-oriented flirting. In the conclusion, we take up what implications these explorations of flirting, alcohol consumption and gender norms have for these young adults, and examine to what extent their experiences of "normality" and "deviance" challenge the policy and research concerns related to health and risks for young adults in the NTE.

## **Data and methods**

Our data consist of a total of 140 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with young adults living across Denmark with recent drinking to intoxication experiences (gender: 49% identify as female, 49% as male, and 2% as other. Age span: 18–25 years, average age: 21.2 years).<sup>3</sup> The sample size was selected to ensure that we were able to interview a diverse group of young adults. In order to fulfil this, we used a targeted sampling approach (see Bluthenthal & Watters, 1995; Peterson et al., 2008). In the recruitment process, we incorporated a multi-tiered recruitment strategy to target different

groups of Danish young adults. This included online and street-level approaches, in which we recruited interviewees through the use of flyers, posters, as well as calls on social media. We also made use of chain referrals and gained access to interviewees through educational institutions. Using this array of different methods allowed us to get in contact with young adults from different areas of Denmark and with a diverse range of backgrounds. Contrary to most studies on young adults, alcohol and intoxication, we did not wish to target a particular group of young adults such as college students, or young adults in a particular setting (e.g., the nightlife), but wanted to recruit as varied a sample as possible and to focus on how alcohol was integrated (or not) into everyday life situations.

The main objective in the overall research project was to focus on alcohol intoxication and young adults' experiences around this.<sup>4</sup> The intent of the project was in particular to explore how gendered meanings of intoxication are produced and enacted, as well as the effects of these gendered enactments in different contexts of youthful alcohol use. This meant that we were concerned in the interviews not only with producing detailed contextualised descriptions of everyday life experiences, practices and relationships within which alcohol use occurs, but also with being attentive to the ways in which gender operated within these descriptions (cf. Højgaard, 2010). Therefore, only a limited number of interview questions (four) explicitly focused on gender attitudes were asked in the latter part of the interviews in order to secure information directly related to gender (Haa-vind, 2000). A semi-structured guide was used to collect qualitative data on the interviewees' backgrounds and current lives, using open-ended questions focusing on drinking practices and settings, subjective and bodily experiences of feeling intoxicated, and attitudes towards and perceived consequences of alcohol use. The interviews left room for the interviewers to probe for other areas of interest that arose during the interview, and the interviewees were

encouraged to bring up any issues, concerns or ideas that they found relevant in the process.

The coding process was conducted by extensive readings of the data material, using data-analysis software NVivo 11. In the first round, the full research team was involved in coding the data in collaboration. This was to ensure a mutual understanding of the themes in the dataset, as well as to strengthen the quality of the selected themes for coding. The data were then organised according to larger themes, including for example “intoxication”, “sexuality”, “gender” and “age”. This article takes as its point of departure the coded narrative data on “sexuality”, which was further coded for sub-themes by a junior and senior researcher working collaboratively. When sub-coding the data it turned out that flirting was a central theme, differing from accounts on “hooking up” and “sexual relations”. In this way, we came to categorise flirting from an emic point of view as a practice or experience that did not necessarily have an expected outcome, as accounts on “hook up” or “sexual relations” did. We discovered that flirting was narrated as a more fleeting and emotional experience, and that the interviewees were interested in flirting in itself. Furthermore, we also found that flirting was mainly connected to social interactions in the nightlife taking place at bars or clubs, and it was also underlined as a potential reason for seeking out these venues.

Individual interviews generally lasted between two to three hours and were conducted by five experienced interviewers. The interviews took place between April 2015 and June 2016 at our offices at the University, the homes of the participants, educational institutions, or public settings such as library meeting rooms. All interviewees were granted anonymity and signed a written consent form. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. At the end of the interview, the participants received a gift card for a movie theatre for their participation.

## Theoretical framework

While much of the existing research on gendered encounters between young alcohol users in the NTE have focused on intoxicated sex and hook-ups within a risk perspective, using primarily quantitative research methods (for example Bradshaw, Kahn, & Saville, 2010; Cooper, 2002; Currier, 2013; Downing-Matibag & Geisinger, 2009; Lewis, Atkins, Blayney, Dent, & Kaysen, 2013; Træen & Kvaalem, 1996), some qualitative researchers have examined the relationships between intoxication and sexuality from a non-problematic perspective (Griffin et al., 2013; Szmigin et al., 2007; Wait et al., 2011). Still, situational and micro-level descriptions as well as ambiguous and playful aspects of these encounters are downplayed in the existing literature. In this article, however, we explore how young alcohol users navigate and give meaning to flirting in their own accounts on NTE alcohol use and gender. This entails that instead of approaching flirting as comprising risky encounters or practices which are necessarily fuelled by sexual intentions per se, we approach this phenomenon as gendered encounters marked by openness and ambiguity about what is going on and where it may lead (Tavory, 2009). In order to do so, we draw on Thorne’s (1993) notions of gender play and borderwork, which we situate in relation to the NTE as a specific space for flirtation by also adopting Ahmed’s (2006, 2014) notion of orientation. Taken together, this joint theoretical framework enables us to emphasise and illustrate gendered aspects of how flirting plays out situationally in the NTE, just as it allows for a focus on flirting that is not, per se, risk oriented.

As a feminist scholar, Ahmed has contributed significantly to theoretical understandings of gender and sexuality in relation to subjects such as affect, embodiment and spatiality. Ahmed approaches sexuality not as a static identity, nor as a directedness of desire that can be understood separately from the space in which it unfolds. Instead, in Ahmed’s

theoretical framework, queer and heterosexual orientations alike, “involves a way of orientating the body towards and away from others, which affects how one can enter different kinds of social spaces” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 145). According to Ahmed (2006), the ways in which we inhabit spaces, in this case clubs and bars, depends on what has been done in that space before, and what orientations have been repeated over time to constitute the norm. On this basis she argues that when we enter a room, we feel more or less comfortable and familiar with it, with the people in it, with its materiality and its (gender/sexuality) normative landscape. The space we inhabit, thus, guides our (gendered) actions; it shapes our bodily expressions and our feelings of comfortability (Ahmed, 2014). Importantly, however, this does not mean that we are passively socialised or shaped into specific sexual or gendered beings merely by our surroundings (Ahmed, 2006). Rather, we actively orientate ourselves towards or away from people and objects in a given space, depending on what performative acts are possible in the situation, and the “paths” that have been laid out before us (Ahmed, 2006). The term “orientations”, in other words, refers to how we inhabit a space and move around in it, and how we thereby contribute to the continuous (re)constitution of its existing paths. The spaces we inhabit impress on us, and we impress on them in a two-way process. For example, when going out, one is likely to be oriented towards alcohol as an object, which in turn enables new ways of orientating towards others. This can be illustrated by how many of the young adults in our study view alcohol and/or intoxication as a way to increase their ability to talk to strangers, and be more open towards others, and how particular situations for intoxicated flirting subsequently arise. This role of alcohol and intoxication in increasing sociability has also been noted by many researchers (e.g., Partanen, 1991; Sulkunen, 2002). The object of alcohol thus enables certain (new) orientations, while others seem more out of reach (cf. Ahmed, 2006). When interviewees

talk about flirting as a dominant expectation related to the NTE, they are noticing a certain path in the NTE, but they are, at the same time, actively considering how to orient themselves in relation to this path; whether or not to tread it, and if so how to do it.

As suggested by Ahmed, spaces such as the NTE offer certain paths of behaviour, which impress differently upon their participants, just as participants of the NTE impress on these paths through their specific engagements in it. As similarly suggested by constructionist gender researchers such as Thorne (1993), we actively “do gender”, not as a “detached” performance, but always in relation to existing gender norms. This means that the young adults in our study “do gender” through the ways that they engage in different spaces and interact socially, e.g., when they are flirting with friends or strangers. Based on playground ethnography, Thorne (1993) argues that while adults (including also often researchers) often perceive children as passive receivers in a one-way (gendered) socialisation process, they are, in fact, able to act, resist, rework and create the gendered norms and expectations of a given space. Thus, children (and youth) become gendered beings by doing gender in situ. Thorne introduces the metaphor of “play” to shed light on the ways that this agency is enacted in daily interactions. She defines play broadly as the collective activities we “do” and are engaged in; and, furthermore, as “dramatic performances” which are collectively acted out among peers, and which make it possible to enact (and challenge) a variety of gender-related practices such as, for example, drinking and flirting. It is through different forms of play that borders between “boys” and “girls” are enacted, and “boys” and “girls” thereby “become defined as separate and opposing groups” (Thorne, 1993, p. 64). But it is also through play that this binary construction is challenged and transgressed, and that gender boundaries are dismantled. Thorne uses the term “borderwork” to conceptualise such micro-level interactions which, hold the

possibilities to both strengthen or loosen gender borders.

When combining Thorne's and Ahmed's conceptualisations and vocabularies, we become able to understand how the existing gendered "paths" within the NTE are "done" and challenged by its young social actors through different forms of "play" which are performed in social interactions such as flirting. We argue that this perspective makes it possible for us to explore, not only how the gendered environment of the NTE shapes at a structural level the (gendered) practices and identities of young alcohol users but rather how gender is "played out" and gender boundaries between young alcohol users are (re)enacted and challenged at a micro-level, when they engage in flirting, including how these encounters are made sense of by young actors of the NTE.

## Analysis

As indicated above, our analytical starting point is *not* that men and women are two, naturally occurring, separate groups. Rather, we explore how young adults across genders engage in gender play and actively "(re)work" the gender norms of the NTE in different ways – not necessarily because of their identification with one gender or another, but rather because of how gender norms affect their bodies and feelings of comfortability when they go out. As shown above, alcohol use and alcohol intoxication is an integrated part of going out for almost all young adults in Denmark. Therefore, the analysis below takes as a point of departure that alcohol use and intoxication is part of a night out.

The analysis is divided into two sections, each focused around different ways of flirting and relating to the gendered aspects of this practice. In the first section, we show how perspectives on and performances of flirting as a "naturally" occurring heterosexual and heteronormative practice play out in the accounts of our participants. In the second section, we focus on how the dominantly heterosexualised and

heteronormative landscape of the NTE challenges and is challenged by our interviewees. In the latter section (as opposed to the first), flirting is presented as a practice in which gender norms are thoroughly *felt* by our interviewees as they (situationally) bump against them, work around them, or play with them in the NTE.

### *"Natural" heteronormative flirting in the NTE*

One dominant understanding of flirting among our interviewees was that it constitutes a "natural" way to be recognised as attractive by people who they identified as belonging to "the opposite gender". Feeling sufficiently attractive to engage in flirting was either related to dressing up before venturing into town, or ascribed to a certain state of mind defined by sentiments of confidence and openness that came with intoxication. For those who manage to achieve this state of mind, flirting was primarily thought of as a positive aspect of going out. Participation in the NTE enabled these young adults to flirt with strangers as well as to be recognised by friends in new ways; as someone with whom it is possible or even desirable to flirt. Troels articulates this in the following way:

When I go out and drink it is to be recognised and to be seen. Going out, flirting a bit, the feeling that girls see me and find me attractive. That is just a human need. I seriously think everyone needs that. And I do not for one second doubt that my girlfriend does enjoy feeling attractive when she goes out dressed up and with full make up on. Feeling attractive is what she seeks. (Troels, m, 21 y/o)

In Troels' case, the connection between drinking, going out, and flirting is unproblematic – it is a wholly accepted way for him to fulfil what he refers to as a "human need", and to feel good about himself without risking any existing social and romantic commitments.

Furthermore, he stresses that flirting is equally accessible for men and women, and that it is a central part of participating in the NTE. In Troels' account, the NTE thus presents a space that facilitates flirtatious encounters between gendered people as opposites, and flirting is presented, not only as possible, but also as expected. In congruence with many of the other participants, he thereby defines flirting as a naturally occurring and desired form of contact between young men and women which is closely related to alcohol use and participation in the NTE. In other words, in his way of relating to flirtation, Troels orients himself towards an already existing "path" in the NTE, which is accessible for both men and women who participate in the NTE. At the same time, this "path" strengthens the gendered borders between them, because it is dependent on interaction between women and men as "opposite genders", where contact is fuelled by a heterosexual orientation. As such, the descriptions in the existing literature of the NTE as a hyper-gendered space (e.g., Boyd, 2010; Tan, 2013, 2014) is easily recognised in our interview data.

Similarly, in Ninna's account, flirting arises "naturally" in the NTE as an effect of already existing gender borders between men and women. She thereby stresses how flirting is bound up in a certain timely and spatial situation. While flirting rarely occurs in her everyday life, it evolves almost effortlessly when she goes out:

If you are in the company of men, even if it is a good friend, there is quickly a flirt. It comes naturally [. . .]. The way you talk with each other just becomes more flirtatious, you know: "you are a boy and I am a girl!". This is different to when you are together with men in school for example. (Ninna, f, 21 y/o).

For Ninna, borders between men and women that constitute them as separate groups are strengthened, as the contact between them is defined as always potentially sexual in the context of going out and drinking alcohol.

Similarly to Troels, the relations between gender groups are marked by heterosexual attraction in Ninna's account, and this attraction is restricted to a certain space: the NTE.

Another example of how flirting is seen as a naturally occurring interaction between men and women is given by Maj who explains how she flirts in order to make new (male) friends. Maj is actively engaged in constituting new social bonds across gender borders through how she flirts:

You can go over to the guys and talk, and in some way half-flirt, like friend-flirt. I wouldn't do that normally [. . .]. You just sit and talk and laugh and the like . . . you hug, just for fun I mean, just cosy. But you don't start to touch the thigh or half-kiss or anything. (Maj, f, 20 y/o)

Unlike Troels and Ninna, Maj engages in what she refers to as "friend-flirting" as a specific form of interaction to make friends with young men. She is thus "working" with an existing "path" in the NTE, and in doing so, she strengthens the existing connection between alcohol use, gender and flirting, but without any intention of sexual contact. Thus, at the same time, she challenges the sexualised gender border between men and women, which dominates the NTE. However, in order for this approach to flirting to be intelligible, she needs to balance carefully between "friend-flirting" e.g., talking, laughing and hugging, and more sexual contact such as touching thighs and kissing. As such, gender borders which are strengthened through flirting are not necessarily limited to sexual contact, but are enacted on the basis of *potential* heterosexual contact. For Maj, borders between men and women in the NTE provide new opportunities for connecting with people who are not of her own gender, yet without pursuing any sexual contact.

In NTE settings where flirting is expected between men and women, any socialising across gender borders is easily perceived as flirtatious. Consequently, other participants note that gender borders could also be



experienced as restrictive, because any contact would possibly be perceived as flirtatious:

I am the flirting type, apparently. My ex-girlfriend told me that many times. When I had something to drink, then I became flirtatious, she said. But I don't think so! I am just talking to people. Maybe it is the way I talk to people or look at people. But I think it is common courtesy to look at the person you are talking with. But she thought I was flirting . . . (Lars, m, 21 y/o)

In the account above, Lars expresses his frustration with how, to him, “non-gendered” ways of being in contact with women (“it is common courtesy”) are interpreted by others as flirtatious, simply because they play out in the NTE. The mere presence of a woman in proximity to a man in this context possibly creates an expectation of flirting. For some, this is unproblematic, fun, or even a main motivation for participating in the NTE, whereas for others, this becomes more challenging.

Common to the accounts presented so far in the analysis is that they represent examples of how young NTE participants (strive to) live up to certain expectations of their participation in the NTE as gendered beings – they are all examples of how our participants, albeit in different ways, “play” with each other across gender borders and according to heteronormative and heterosexual assumptions. Borders between men and women as different groups are, in other words, not questioned, and neither is the underlying assumption of heterosexuality in flirting.

### *Challenging gender borders through queer flirting*

The predominantly carefree approach to flirting that Ninna, Troels, Maj and to some extent also Lars, share is not unique to their interviews only. Many other interviewees narrated similar accounts of how they conceived of “men” and “women” as two distinct social groups, how

they tend to socialise across gender borders through flirting, and how flirting is a key feature of their participation in the NTE. While their accounts arguably do differ in terms of specific approaches and attitudes towards flirting, they do not generally challenge the underlying assumption of gender as a binary construct and attraction between men and women as “naturally” occurring. However, as we will show in the second section of the analysis, other accounts exemplify how the heteronormative paths of the NTE at times evoke sentiments of uncomfortability and/or constitute a challenge in both playful and painful ways – not only for queer participants, but also occasionally for participants who identify with heterosexuality. Sven's account forms one example of how flirting in heteronormative and hyper-gendered contexts, in some instances, makes him uncomfortable:

I don't know how to flirt. I think it is uncomfortably uniform. It attracts certain types that fit into a certain pattern, like the alpha male types. I think there is something toxic about it. It supports the idea that men have to be big and strong and women their trophies. I think that is disgusting. (Sven, m, 24 y/o).

For Sven, flirting in mainstream NTE settings is in some situations both unattainable and undesirable. It is not that Sven is not attracted to women, but his attraction is difficult for him to act upon in the NTE, because of his association between heterosexual flirting and the hyper-gendered ways of being men and women that these settings facilitate. For him, the NTE setting in itself celebrates ways of being gendered, which he cannot, and refuses to, identify with. Sven, in other words, associates the NTE with gender norms which favour some gendered expressions and relations over others, and which make it difficult for him to engage in flirting with women. Therefore, Sven explores other aspects of his sexuality when he goes out. He refers to this as his “queer moments”:

I have my queer moments. [...] When I am sober I am remarkably more heterosexual, but the more I drink, the more open I become for something bisexual. It is my way of having a cosy time. (Sven, m, 24 y/o).

Sven's rejection of flirting with women is therefore arguably also a rejection of following a path in the NTE that invites him to embody a form of masculinity which is uncomfortable for him. For him, following an alternative and far less dominant path is made accessible through drinking, as feelings of intoxication allow him to engage in a flirtatious play with sexual attraction. Another interviewee, Mads, takes a similar critical stance towards the hyper-gendered ways of doing gender he associates with flirting in the mainstream NTE. However, whereas it is possible for Sven to challenge the heteronormative gender borders of the NTE in specific situations (his "queer moments") through simultaneous feelings of intoxication, this is not a possibility for Mads:

Because of these very, very stereotyped ways that men and women are supposed to be in [my old town], I wouldn't be able to go out and hook up with a guy, because there are no other guys or men in town who would want to hook up with a boy. In my old town men are men and they need pussy. (Mads, genderqueer with male pronouns, 20 y/o)

Mads describes that he has lived in multiple towns, and experienced different normative expectations of men and women marking the local NTEs. Like Sven, Mads is mainly attracted to women, but also occasionally to men, which is downplayed because of the heteronormative culture of the NTE in some of the places he has lived. Unlike Sven, Mads did not see any opportunities for non-hetero flirting when going out, because there was a heavy pressure on maintaining gender borders. Taken together, Mads' and Sven's accounts arguably illustrate that one's way of participating and flirting in local NTEs is not merely a question

of choosing a certain path. It is also very much defined by what paths are seen as possible or acceptable in specific settings in relation to how gender borders are enacted.<sup>5</sup> Through the account of Benny, who identifies as bi-sexual and who is currently romantically involved with another man, we are able to develop this point further:

My diverse sexual experiences is not something I flaunt. [...] I don't want to be perceived as gay, especially with the job I have. I am afraid that some people might avoid this place [...]. I often think about that there might be people who would not want to come here, because, because of me then. (Benny, m, 23 y/o)

Benny is a bartender in a small town. He goes out to drink frequently, and describes himself as a central figure in the local NTE, both as a participant and through his work as a bartender. In everyday life, and when going out, he is heavily affected by the assumption that inhabiting the small-town bar he works in, in a non-heterosexual manner would imply that his position is endangered – he fears that it would possibly cause him to lose his job, or even be excluded from his community. Thus, engaging in what Sven referred to, as "queer moments" in the heteronormative space of the NTE in his home town is not an actual possibility for Benny. He cannot afford to rework that specific path due to potential negative consequences. Furthermore, he notes how alcohol intoxication may constitute an increased challenge to his ability to manage the tension he experiences between following his own (queer) desire and participating in an NTE which is dominated by heteronormativity and heterosexuality. The NTE, in other words, may enable playful flirting as well as dismantling of the gender borders for some young alcohol users, but at the same time, it excludes others from this possibility. As particularly Mads' and Benny's accounts exemplify, these possibilities vary depending on both the gendered landscape of local NTEs, one's position in the local community and one's

self-experienced possibilities of being attracted to people of different genders.

Where Mads and Benny felt, albeit differently, restricted by the gender and sexuality norms of their local NTEs, and at times even pressured to follow heteronormative paths when going out, others, and most often young women, shared accounts of being able to engage playfully in non-heterosexual flirtation. The association of flirting with non-binding forms of intimacy enabled these young women to flirt with people of their own gender and, in doing so, to play with the pronounced expectations of engagements in heterosexual flirting, which is arguably a central part of participating in the NTE. For example, Natasja described how she was sometimes flirting and kissing with her female friend:

When we drink alcohol, [...] I become loving, and so does my friend, apparently. I don't know why, but it's fun. [...]. We often try to convince people that we are lesbians. Especially if someone hits on me or her. But they never believe us. (Natasja, f, 24 y/o)

Going out and drinking alcohol enables such flirtatious interactions between Natasja and her female friend, as alcohol makes them feel more "loving" and, furthermore, allows them to act on this feeling, which resembles Sven's "queer moments". This is not only a matter of finding new ways of having fun. It is also a way to escape the hyper-gendered expectations of the NTE, as flirting between Natasja and her female friend becomes a strategy to fend off men who want their attention. Natasja's account thus shows how the combination of alcohol use, NTE participation and flirting in some instances opens up new possibilities in terms of handling unwelcome approaches from men who want her attention through intimate contact *within* gender groups (between women) that in her experience can be facilitated through alcohol use. Thus, as a playful and non-confrontational way of handling "the male gaze", Natasja, engages in queer flirting with

her friend. She is, however, still read as heterosexual. Her flirting is narrated as an effect of alcohol intoxication in the NTE, rather than an expression of a sexual attraction towards her female friend. In that way, it is narrated as a way of playfully handling the expectations of women to engage in flirting with men in the NTE, rather than a matter of a particular sexual attraction. This kind of flirting is not a way of working against the (hetero)normative space of the NTE, but with and on it; arguably confirming the pronounced (hetero)normative landscape of the mainstream NTE also described in other studies (e.g., Boyd, 2010; Hutton, 2016; Tan, 2013, 2014). In Natasja's case, therefore, queer flirting is narrated as a dominantly fun way of engaging with her best friend, and the reactions it causes in their surroundings are perceived of as relatively harmless. Harmless in the sense that Natasja does not go against dominant norms, but plays with them. In other cases, however, queer flirting becomes much more challenging. Annika, for example described how she found it difficult to go to "straight" bars with female friends who were predominantly interested in flirting with men – not because she could not find women to flirt with when going out, but rather because her female friends opposed her spending time with other women, when they arrived together in a group. To cope with this challenge, Annika prefers to go out with a male friend, who shares her orientation towards women. Unlike Natasja, Annika is interested in long-term commitments with people she meets and flirts with when she goes out. But, just like Natasja, her ways of flirting with other women are read within a heteronormative framework and thus often not taken seriously by other NTE participants. So, while the NTE does enable different forms of intoxicated play with gender and sexuality, "queer" (as opposed to "straight") flirting practices between women are not necessarily taken at face value. Similarly, another young woman, Jo, explains how she does not always feel that flirting with women is accessible in the NTE. Therefore, if she finds herself in a situation in

which there are no women to flirt with, she sometimes flirts with men. She describes her “straight” flirtatious encounters in the following way:

Usually, I just start chatting with men about this or that. Maybe they buy me a drink or four, and want me to go home with them. But I just have to say, “well I am not doing that”. [...]. Sometimes I say I am not interested, sometimes I say I am gay. That usually works effectively... Or they say, “well then we have something in common, because I am also in to girls”. (Jo, f, 21 y/o)

Jo identifies as a lesbian, but as with Natasja, she is expected to be heterosexual, but instead of finding this challenging in the mainstream NTEs, she playfully undermines this expectation, which is embedded in contact between men and women. Here she actively engages in flirting that she is aware is being perceived as infused with heterosexual intentions, but although she mimics the expected behaviour of her as a woman in the NTE, she also undermines the heterosexual meanings that are generally ascribed to contact between men and women in such a space. However, the assumption that she is heterosexual points to how any other engagements are read as playful. It seems that within the mainstream NTE homoerotic flirting, at least between women, becomes invisible and is not taken seriously.

What is playful for Natasja, and to some extent also for Jo, can be painful for others, e.g., Benny who fears consequences, such as losing his job, if he does not follow a heteronormative path when he goes out. In this way, the triad of alcohol use, NTE participation and flirting may offer ways to play with gender borders, and to feel in a carefree manner that flirtatious encounters are simply unfolding naturally. However, in other cases, it brings painful challenges to young adults when they go to bars and clubs, and to some, even when they go home again.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have taken a point of departure in young adults’ narratives about flirting in NTE contexts where alcohol use and intoxication almost always occur in a night out with friends. We have demonstrated the complexities of their experiences with the heteronormative and heterosexual gender norms that are dominant in the NTE. Interestingly, young adults do not exclusively experience heteronormative nightlife spaces as problematic *because* of their sexual identity or (self-)ascribed gender. Rather, heteronormative paths of behaviour in the NTE are problematised by *both* heterosexually oriented youth and queer-oriented youth. Also, they formed a site of gender play in flirting for heterosexual as well as queer-oriented youth. Thorne’s (1993) notion on gender play has enabled us to underline that in spite of their dominance, heteronormative paths of behaviour situated in the NTE are not necessarily fixed or static. Rather, gender borders are produced and negotiated in a variety of ways by the young participants. However, this does not mean that flirting was equally accessible to all youth alike. The young women who practiced queer-oriented flirting often narrated an invisibility in relation to others, i.e., as their flirting was perceived as not being sincere or as “just for fun”, whereas the young men who practiced queer-oriented flirting included reflections on possible stigmatisation in their flirting narratives. In this way, queer flirting was narrated by some of the young men as having possible negative consequences spilling into their everyday lives, whereas some of the young women narrated queer flirting as both playful and strategic, for example in order to avoid male flirting.

We have focused on young adults’ narratives and experiences with flirting in the NTE – defined as an ambiguous and playful way of intoxicated socialising. In contrast, most other studies have focused on “hook ups” and sexual relations in combination with alcohol intoxication, and especially within a health-risk or

problem-oriented perspective, stressing that the combination of sexual relations and alcohol may increase a host of potential problems including sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sexual violence, minority stress, and emotional turmoil, among other things (e.g., Cooper, 2002; Ferris, 1997; Lewis et al., 2013; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2008; Træen & Kvaem, 1996; Træen & Lewin, 1992). Hence our aim has not been to emphasise potential health and social risks and hazards. Interestingly, however, when risks are discussed by our participants, it is not health risks, but risks of stigmatisation that are emphasised, as illustrated in our analysis of queer flirting. The NTE provides a site for intoxicated sexual and romantic pursuits, but depending on what practices researchers focus on the risks may become re-articulated from being a matter of health to a matter of whether or not there is room, or paths, available for youth to explore their gendered and sexual orientations and identities in comfortable ways. With this in mind, it becomes relevant to underline how research on gender and sexuality varies in terms of results depending on what types of romantic or sexual practices we put into focus.

While other studies have also pointed to how specific types of venues provide young adults with different opportunities to enact their sexual and romantic desires (e.g., Bøhling, 2015; Boyd, 2010; Hutton, 2016), within this article, we point to how young adults from various parts of Denmark relate more generally to the mainstream NTE. This has enabled us to take into account the fact that not all young adults have access to a broad variety of clubs, such as alternative nightlife spaces that cater to people on the basis of sexuality. These places are mainly present in the largest cities in Denmark, and therefore not present in many of the places where our young interviewees lived. Our focus has enabled us to demonstrate how young adults of all genders and sexualities venture into the mainstream NTE, and that their experiences vary, but not exclusively as an effect of their sexuality or gender. Rather, young adults across

sexual orientations may (situationally) experience feeling uncomfortable with the binary gender norms and heteronormative flirting imperatives of mainstream NTEs. Our choice in employing the concept of orientations has enabled us to look beyond gender and sexual identity as a marker of difference, and instead to examine the multiple ways in which young adults of different genders and sexual interests may orientate themselves vis-a-vis the different paths of behaviour that their local nightlife may offer or restrict. We have listened to Ahmed's call for a focus on the role of orientation in how we come to research sexuality, and how these orientations are dependent on how we can inhabit a space (Ahmed, 2006). Having done so, we have been sensitive to the non-hegemonic ways of practicing both gender and sexuality in the NTE that the 140 participants in our study have allowed us to focus on. This focus has further been enabled by drawing on Thorne's (1993) micro-level analytical framework through which we were able to grasp how gender norms can be played with in ways that may reproduce, but also challenge and resist gender borders. Inspired by Ahmed (2014), we encourage further research on how specific sexual and romantic doings, such as queer-oriented flirting, may "stick" to certain people in certain situations as a labelling of sexuality or gender identity not only when going out, but also into their everyday lives, and hereby produce risks of stigmatisation for some but not others. In doing so, we highlight the importance of being attentive to the complexities of how sexual orientations can play out, and be played with, within different spaces, rather than looking at experiences of young adults as a result of their identification with certain gendered and sexual categories.

## Notes

1. The alcohol-centred mainstream NTE stands in opposition to more subcultural or alternative nightlife scenes that, e.g., play alternative forms of music and/or cater for specific groups such as

- queer youths (Lennox, Emslie, Sweeting, & Lyons, 2018).
2. The connection between drinking and sexual encounters has been well developed in studies of alcohol disinhibition and alcohol expectancies (See, for example, Goldman & Roehrich, 1991; Steele & Southwick, 1985).
  3. Young adults in the age range 18–25 years have a high level of alcohol consumption compared to the general population in Denmark (Østergaard, Røgeskov, & Rasmussen, 2010). When Danes reach 18 years of age, they are considered adults from a legal standpoint, and are thus allowed to buy all types of alcohol, including heavy spirits, and to enter nightclubs and bars. When young adults in Denmark go out, it includes heavy drinking and most often intoxication (e.g., Demant & Törrönen, 2011; Kolind, Demant, & Hunt, 2013).
  4. The research project runs from 2015–2018, funded by Research Fund Denmark: Social Sciences. ID number: DFF-4003-00035.
  5. For additional research on intoxication and “gender fluidity” see Moloney and Hunt (2011).

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The authors received the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: funded by Research Fund Denmark: Social Sciences. ID number: DFF-4003-00035.

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