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Dilemmas of belonging: Young Muslim women in the Danish youth alcohol culture

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Abstract

Aim: Focusing on drinking and partying among young Muslim women in Denmark, our aim was to examine how the drinking practices of young Muslim women are influenced by belonging, understood as sentiments of (national) belonging as well as the broader (politicised) discourse on Muslims in Denmark. **Methods and data:** Based on 32 qualitative in-depth interviews with young Muslim women, this paper explores their drinking practices as situated in a national youth culture highly influenced by alcohol intoxication. We draw on Nira Yuval-Davies' (2006) distinction between belonging (as emotional attachment) and the politics of belonging. **Findings:** We found that the young women attempt to avoid negative comments based on stereotypes of Muslims and their drinking, by toning down being a Muslim. In addition, we showed how the difficulties of drinking alcohol while being both Muslim and Danish leads to several of the young women experiencing an 'identity crisis'. Lastly, we found that a way for the studied women to reconcile Muslim and Danish identities is through faith, namely through actively choosing what kind of Muslim they want to be. **Conclusion:** Being part of a national youth culture of alcohol intoxication is inevitably dilemma-filled for the study's participants and they are challenged in their belonging. We argue that these dilemmas do not stand alone, but rather point to the broader predicaments of these women in Danish society.

Keywords

alcohol, belonging, Denmark, young muslim women, youth

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Whereas qualitative research on drinking among young people is extensive, the literature is somewhat tilted towards dealing with the situation of white middle-class young people. Ethnic minority youth, for instance, take a more marginal position (for exceptions, see Douglass et al., 2022; Kosnick, 2018; Valentine et al., 2010). Consequently, youth alcohol studies have mainly studied and explained the lives of white middle-class youth, not all youth. In an attempt to contribute to the redressing of this circumstance, our focus in this article is on youthful drinking and partying among young Muslim women in Denmark.

Much similar to other Western countries, such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand, drinking alcohol is an unambiguous part of life, and particularly youth life, in Denmark. Despite a global trend where young people's drinking has been in decline since the early 2000s (Kraus et al., 2020; Pennay et al., 2015), even in Denmark (Frank et al., 2020), alcohol use is still a widespread Danish social activity among young people. Danish youth drinking is strongly related to processes of inclusion and exclusion (Herold & Kolind, 2022). Generally, drinking in Denmark is both accepted and expected, and it is legitimate to drink in many different social contexts (Elmeland, 1996; Grønkjær et al., 2011). Denmark has, therefore, also been described as a 'wet' alcohol culture, characterised by high per-capita consumption and more liberal drinking norms, including drinking to intoxication, contrary to 'dry' alcohol cultures characterised by low per-capita consumption (Room & Mäkelä, 2000). Danish adolescents have also, for a long time, had one of the highest consumption rates in Europe (Krauss et al., 2016). 92% of young Danes aged 18–24 years drink alcohol and often to intoxication (Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2015: Tholstrup et al., 2019). Alcohol use and intoxication are thus widely accepted and it takes up a valued and central position at parties and pre-parties alike and across gender identifications (Herold & Hunt, 2020). Partying and alcohol intoxication thus inhabit a large proportion of young people's time, attention and interests and are an (almost) inevitable part of youth life in Denmark (Andrade & Järvinen, 2021). Therefore, researchers have also emphasised that the cultural norm of drinking to intoxication in Denmark puts a certain pressure to drink on young people who participate in parties (Grønkjær et al., 2011; Østergaard et al., 2018). However, this pressure to drink is not (solely) about 'group' or 'peer pressure' where some youngsters almost force the hand of others to drink. Rather, the alcohol intake of Danish youngsters is first and foremost about community and about finding ways to participate and contribute to this community (Frank et al., 2021). In Denmark, as has been reported in most cultures, alcohol consumption is a social act that, through reciprocity, facilitates the development and maintenance of social bonds (Douglas, 1987; Thurnell-Read, 2012; Tutenges & Sandbjerg, 2013), and contributes to the creation of identities and engendering 'community' (e.g., Chatterton & Hollands, 2002). In other words, alcohol consumption among young people is (also) about friendship, sociality and identity formation (cf. MacLean, 2016; Thurnell-Read, 2016). Belonging and drinking are tied together, as drinking is a way to consolidate in-group solidarity (Thurnell-Read, 2016) and enable processes of both social inclusion and social exclusion (Bærndt & Kolind, 2021; Herold & Kolind, 2022). Consequently, abstainers and light drinkers are minority trajectories in Denmark (Andrade & Järvinen, 2021; Frank et al., 2020). Danish population surveys among young ethnic Danes (aged 18–24 years) found that only 8% can be defined as non-drinkers based on alcohol use in the past year (Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2015). This is, however, very different if we look at ethnic minority youth. Among young Danish Muslims, approximately 70% are non-drinkers (Gundelach & Järvinen, 2006). In addition, studies from other Nordic countries have shown that young Muslim women particularly

have significantly lower levels of consumption of both drugs and alcohol than young people with ethnic majority backgrounds (Bergengen & Larsen, 2008; Johnson & Svensson, 2021; Øia, 2013; Skrowny, 2005).

Alcohol consumption is considered *haram* (i.e., forbidden) in the Koran. Even though there is variety in the interpretation of this proscription and the strictness to be upheld, most Muslims would agree that alcohol is forbidden in the Koran (Michalak & Trocki, 2006). Alcohol, thus, is not regarded compatible with being a faithful Muslim, and, therefore, the view of alcohol consumption among Muslims is generally quite critical – with among Muslims in Denmark (Mirdal, 2006). Abstaining is, for many Muslims, so tied to Islam that the drinking of alcohol can generate doubt about your Muslim identity and belonging to a Muslim community, for both the individual and their surroundings (Bradby, 2007; Valentine et al., 2010). Regarding gender differences, Hannah Bradby (2007) shows that even though the religious proscriptions concerning alcohol are formally gender blind, concerns about reputation and future marriage options mean that women's behaviour is considerably more contained and controlled than men's. Therefore, Muslim women in particular risk becoming the focus of malicious gossip, becoming excluded from certain Muslim communities or subjected to stricter social control (Bradby, 2007; Kosnick, 2018; Waltorp, 2015). As the first author has also shown elsewhere (Bærndt & Kolind, 2021), the youth culture of drinking in Denmark has the potential to actualise gender inequality (within their families) for those young Muslim women who wish to participate. The potentiality for conflicts in this regard increases the level of secrecy and dishonesty and, ultimately, this contributes negatively to the young women's feelings of belonging to an ethno-religious community. The focus in the first author's previous work was on the processes of exclusion in a party context and emphasised how the young women risked standing outside of both mainstream youth culture and their religious community. In this article instead, our aim is to explore further the intricate feelings of belonging as they are shaped within a party context.

As we have illustrated, belonging is very much intertwined with alcohol consumption, and individuals can use alcohol or abstinence as a clear identity marker in their social life. Here, we would like to emphasise the relationship between drinking and a broader national community (Grønkjær et al., 2011). We will explore how young Muslim women in Denmark are challenged in their sense of belonging between being Danish and being Muslim within a party context. We will do so on the basis that the degree of acceptance of drinking and expectation to drink in Denmark reveals the existence of a national identity that is interwoven with alcohol. As such, the (heavy) consumption of alcohol is tied to being Danish and a way to 'do' your Danishness is to drink (Grønkjær et al., 2011; Simonsen, 2017). This means that your identity as a Dane (and your ability to have fun) is questioned if you do *not* drink. The relationship between drinking and being Danish adds a certain expectation to young people's conduct, especially young people with connections and relations to other cultures, religions or countries, as most ethnic minority youth have. Muslim minority youth can thus be caught in-between two different sets of expectations, norms and values: to be Danish is to drink; to be Muslim is to be abstinent. In this article, we explore how 32 young Muslim women have different ways of finding their place within Danish youth alcohol culture and manoeuvring the very different sets of expectations.

In the following, we will first provide a background section on Muslims in the Danish public discourse. We then provide an analytical framework of belonging and a section about our data and methods. Lastly, we analyse the narratives of the young women through three sections that delve into the relationship between drinking and belonging, before concluding the article.

Background: How Muslims became 'the other' in Denmark

Out of the Danish population of about 5.5 million people, 825,080 people are immigrants or are descendants of immigrants, which corresponds to about 14% of the Danish population (integrationsbarometer.dk). An estimate of the number of Muslims in Denmark is 306,000 or about 5.3% of the Danish population (Jacobsen, 2022). The public discourse on Islam and Muslims has changed in recent decades, and today Islam and being Muslim have, in many ways, become the opposite of being Danish. Rather than being two compatible aspects of identity, they seem to either clash or be placed within a hierarchy where Muslims need to 'be relaxed' or 'not make a fuss' in order to be accepted as part of society (Gilliam, 2022).

Since the first groups of Muslim immigrants, the so called 'guest workers', from primarily Turkey, Pakistan and the former Yugoslavia, arrived in Denmark in the 1960s, the discourse on Islam has shifted: from being a (neutral) aspect of immigrants' culture to being a (cultural) barrier to the immigrants' integration into Danish society. Immigrants were generally not defined in terms of their religion, but as 'foreign workers' who were temporarily in the country because of a labour shortage (Gilliam, 2022). Over time, however, many settled in Denmark with their families rather than return to their countries of origin. When new groups of refugees from Bosnia, Lebanon and Somalia arrived in the 1980s and 1990s, Islam began to be mentioned as a source of the immigrants' social problems and 'foreign culture' (Mørck, 1998). Immigration has, in this way, transformed from being a labour issue into being a cultural/religious issue, and immigrants who were originally characterised through class (as workers) have turned into a cultural category (as Muslims) (Yilmaz, 2015).

Two events in particular contributed to the change in discourse regarding immigrants in Denmark: the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and the Danish 'Cartoon Crisis' (2005–2006). Since 9/11, the American 'war on terror' quickly became a worldwide effort, especially since other terror attacks were carried out in Paris, London and Berlin as well as in Copenhagen in Denmark. The 'Cartoon Crisis' began with the publishing of 12 cartoons of the prophet Muhammed in a Danish newspaper, which initiated a domestic political debate about the relationship between freedom of speech and the consideration of religious minorities. According to the Koran, it is forbidden to worship false gods and therefore images of the prophet are not allowed. The cartoons were considered an immense offence towards the global Muslim community and escalated into an extensive foreign policy crisis for Denmark, including boycotts, riots and violent attacks in some Muslim countries (Sinclair, 2021). These events have contributed to the fact that, today, Islam in public discourses in Denmark is often portrayed as a dangerous religion and Muslims have come to be a national security threat and a threat to Danish values. Following on from this, the individual Muslim has come to represent not just him- or herself, but Islam as a global religious community (Rytter & Pedersen, 2014; Simonsen, 2016). Thus, the subject of immigrants and criticism aimed towards Muslims are today ubiquitous in public political discourse and Muslims have increasingly become the 'Other' against which Danish national identity is constructed (Yilmaz, 2015). This process of Othering (a concept originally formulated by Spivak (1985)) means that the imagined Danish community is constructed in contrast to the less privileged and less powerful Muslim community. The public discourse in Denmark is thus characterised by an essentialist dichotomy between 'Us and Them', the Danes and the Muslims (Hervik, 2004).

This process of Othering is, however, not 'just' a descriptive or discursive one, it also plays out as very concrete political decisions and actions with concrete implications. For

instance, the rhetoric around 'ghettos' or, rather, the problematisation of neighbourhoods with a concentration of ethnic minorities (particularly with a Muslim background) have taken hold in both the Danish media and in Danish politics. Concentrations of ethnic minorities have become a sign post of lacking social cohesion and are often termed 'parallel societies', i.e., not integrated into the overall Danish society (Fallov & Birk, 2021). Several political strategies have been implemented in order to combat the perceived threat of 'parallel societies', for instance by tearing down social housing in 'ghetto' areas and allocating ethnic minority youth and children in schools and day care services (see also Frandsen & Hansen, 2020).

As we shall see in the analysis, our participants in this study experienced these discursive as well as tangible processes of Othering as infringing on their lives, in the sense that they were confronted with their being different on a daily basis and some even had to move from their homes because of aggressive 'ghetto' politics. Being Muslim is thus problematised in Danish society and is positioned as the diametrical opposite of being Danish.

Furthermore, turning our attention specifically towards young Muslim women, gendered stereotypes and expectations have also increased. For instance, the Muslim headscarf is mostly perceived negatively and as a symbol of a patriarchal and authoritarian family pattern seen as incompatible with Danish values (Degn & Søholm, 2011; Khawaja, 2011). One such Danish value is gender equality. Gender equality is, in the Danish self-understanding, a core value and something that has been fought to obtain and is not compromised. This means that with the increasingly problematising discourse surrounding Muslims, the subjects of gender and sexuality have moved into focus, and criticism of Islam is often oriented towards its lack of gender equality (Yilmaz, 2015). Following from the 'patriarchal family pattern', young Muslim women in Denmark are typically regarded as oppressed (to different degrees), and are expected to be quiet, calm and not allowed to do much, as well as be afraid to do certain things (Rognlien & Kier-Byfield, 2020). They are likely to be seen as diligent and competent in school or at their studies but are rarely expected to take part in social arrangements, particularly parties where alcohol is served.

To sum up, while Muslims in general have become the Other against which Danes can be defined in public discourse, the discourse is also extremely gendered and Muslim women have particular expectations attached to them, especially when they do what is not expected from them – such as being in public spaces or participating in social arrangements or even parties.

Analytical framework

From the literature laid out in the introduction, it is apparent that practices of alcohol consumption include notions of (national/religious) identity and belonging. This was also evident in our data through the accounts of the young Muslim women interviewed. Consequently, practices of alcohol consumption influence how young Muslim women participate in youth life in Denmark more broadly, since these practices have an influence on their possible senses of belonging in everyday life.

For that reason, we here employ belonging as an analytical concept with inspiration from Nira Yuval-Davies (2006), who underscores the interplay and dynamic between belonging and political projects of belonging. Leaning on these aspects of belonging, we are able to analyse the young women's' accounts of the complexities of belonging within the party context; complexities that sometimes embrace, sometimes reject the possibility of being Muslim and being Danish simultaneously.

First, Yuval-Davies (2006) makes an analytical distinction between belonging and the politics of belonging. Whereas belonging 'is about emotional attachment' and the way we feel 'at home' in certain places (see also Jackson, 1995), the politics of belonging is the 'dirty

work of boundary maintenance'. We will begin with the latter.

The boundaries in need of maintenance in this context, are those that separate the world into 'us' and 'them' – for instance, when 'we' have freedom and women's rights whereas 'they' have a dominating patriarchy and suppress women, as we mentioned in the previous section on the othering of Muslims in Denmark. The politics of belonging is thus a dimension of belonging that deals with who is included and who is excluded (Yuval-Davies, 2006; see also Antonsich, 2010). It comprises specific political projects 'aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectivities' (Yuval-Davies, 2006). To construct belonging speaks into Anderson's (1983) view of nation-states and national identity as 'imagined communities'. Furthermore, national identity in the Nordic countries is also informed by an 'imagined sameness' based on the notion that 'people have to feel that they are more or less the same in order to be of equal value' (Gullestad, 2002).

A central theme of the politics of belonging is the question of who belongs and who does not. For instance, what is the minimum requirement for signifying (national) belonging in terms of origin, culture or normative behaviour? (Yuval-Davies, 2006). This is, in Denmark, obvious in the public preoccupation with defining Danishness (Holmberg, 2000), or in the mandatory handshake required at the naturalisation ceremony in order to become a Danish citizen. Critics see this rule as a way to target Muslims (who, for religious reasons, may be reluctant to shake hands across sexes), whereas supporters see it as an inherently Danish thing to do (Oxlund, 2020). Thus, the boundaries of the community of belonging may be maintained and reproduced through the politics of belonging, but it is also challenged and contested by others – and is thus an ongoing dynamic process (Yuval-Davies, 2006).

The politics of belonging thus stand outside the individual, whereas belonging itself happens within the individual. Belonging is about emotional attachment, a personal sense of feeling at home in a place and about feeling safe and secure (Yuval-Davies, 2006; see also Antonsich, 2010 and Jackson, 1995). To belong is not only a question of place or location; it is also about being connected to a group of people and is thus characterised by strong social bonds and is a dynamic process. (Jackson, 1995). One aspect of belonging is, following on from before, about identifications and emotional attachments, and in this way, belonging can be 'an act of self-identification or identification by others' (Yuval-Davies, 2006). Identities and constructions of belonging are, for instance, visible in the stories people tell about themselves and about others. However, belonging 'cannot and should not be seen merely as cognitive stories' because they also 'reflect emotional investments and desire for attachment' (Yuval-Davies, 2006). This desire for attachment also means that once an attachment is threatened and people feel less secure, constructions of belonging become more central. The process of the othering of Muslims in Denmark thus might provide a context where a secure feeling of belonging becomes essential for the wellbeing of our participants.

Methods and data

The analysis at hand is based on interview data from the study 'Young Muslim women and the Danish youth alcohol culture'[1] These data consist of qualitative in-depth interviews with 32 young Muslim women aged 16–34 years (mean age 23 years), conducted between November 2016 and August 2017. The first author carried out both recruitment of and interviews with the young women and they lasted 1–2.5 hours. The participants received a gift card for their participation. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and lastly anonymised before the analysis. The study has been registered to the Danish Data Protection Agency.

In the interviews, our main intention was to explore the young women's experiences with alcohol and parties in a broad sense, but with

the aim of capturing developments and changes over time. Therefore, the interviewer took her inspiration from life-story interviews (Atkinson, 1998) and concentrated in particular on those ‘chapters’ in the participants’ lives where alcohol and parties carried a certain importance. Most interviews, then, began with a focus on the last years of lower secondary school (when the women were aged about 14–15 years), because alcohol (and parties) here was crucial for the feeling of community in school for the first time (Järvinen & Østergaard, 2009). The interviewer then pursued those educational and job-related contexts, where the participants extended their experiences with alcohol and parties. In this way, the interviewer aimed at capturing both the first experiences of partying and/or drinking and how these developed over time for the participants.

The young women came from different parts of Denmark, though mainly from the larger cities and the surrounding areas. The women were recruited through notices on intranet channels at educational institutions, postings in specific youth forums on Facebook and through the first author’s own network from previous recruitment among ethnic minorities. Inclusion criteria for participation in the project included ‘having experiences with alcohol and/or parties’ and ‘having a Muslim background’. Except for one (ethnic Danish convert), all the young women had ethnic minority backgrounds, and two participants had parents with dissimilar origins (Iraqi/Syrian & Iraqi/Lebanese). The participants thus had various ethnic backgrounds (13 ethnicities in total), roughly corresponding to those ethnic groups that are most numerous among Muslims in Danish society (Jacobsen, 2022).

Among the participants, there were children and grandchildren of so-called guest workers, children of refugees and a few who had themselves come to Denmark as refugees. Of the 32 young women, 22 were born in Denmark while the rest had arrived while they were small children. Eight women wore a Muslim headscarf and another three used to wear a headscarf when they were younger but had since chosen to take it off. Seventeen participants were regularly intoxicated at parties, while another three had tried out alcohol on one or more occasions. The last 12 women had never consumed alcohol, but they still participated regularly in parties where other people were intoxicated. The findings do not speak for the Muslim minority in Denmark generally, but instead deal with the views of those young Muslim women who drink alcohol and/or party.

The women were all well-educated; about half of them were studying or had studied at university and the other half studied or had studied a professional bachelor’s degree. For some of the women, it was problematic to show an interest in alcohol and parties and therefore they refrained from ‘liking’ notices on Facebook and they would often not tell others about the project or their participation in it. In the interview situation, though, the young women were eager to talk about their lives and experiences and they found the project and the focus on Muslim women important. The first author, who carried out all interviews, is an ethnic majority Dane, who at the time of the interviews was in her early 30s. Gender, age and the level of education here seemed to contribute to creating a room with openness, where alcohol and parties were less sensitive subjects than, for instance, situations marked by social control. Still, the inherent power imbalance between the participants and the interviewer (Jensen, 2012, p. 116), meant that many women resisted a victimised position in terms of social control and instead accentuated their own agency.

The first author carried out a small pilot project in 2015 that has informed the research questions. Furthermore, the project was exploratory from the outset, which meant having a flexible approach to the interview guide, adjusting it along the way and for each participant. All interviews were transcribed and coded in the text analysis software Nvivo

11. We followed an inductive approach to coding and thus derived our codes from the data. First, the interviews were organised into key themes (main codes). Thereafter, these were reread and organised into subthemes (subcodes). Themes included, for example, intoxication, party participation, identity and belonging.

Results

The following analysis is divided into three sections. First, we investigate how the young women react to negative and stereotypical attitudes concerning their alcohol consumption, by ethnic Danes, and how they may avoid those negative experiences through certain behaviours. Second, we unfold how being part of two different, often contradictory sets of expectations and norms towards alcohol results in a felt 'identity crisis' for many of the participating young women. Third, we investigate how some of the young women succeed in reconciling their Muslim identity with the youth alcohol culture through their more individualised and spiritual ways of believing in Islam.

Common to these three sections is our exploration of the ways in which the young women's experiences with alcohol and parties are unmistakably entangled in feelings and expressions of belonging/un-belonging.

Belonging: Toning down being a Muslim

Many of the interviewed young women would tell stories that circled around the possible reactions from ethnic Danes that might arise, for themselves or other Muslim women, if they were drinking alcohol and/or partying while explicitly expressing their Muslim identity at the same time. These reactions were often articulated with roots in adverse stereotypes, as is evident in Zainab's (25-year-old, Iraqi background, social work student) account of drinking alcohol together with friends at a Friday bar at her educational institution. She explains how another student approaches her and asks her: 'But are you not a Muslim? You are not allowed to drink, are you?' and she continues to explain what these kinds of stereotypes do to her:

> I was like, 'what are you talking about? Why can't I drink?' […]. I was just thinking, what kind of fucked up prejudice is that? Come on, you can see that I am sitting here drinking? Which means that I *can* drink. […]. I hear that occasionally and then I feel like I have to explain and sometimes even defend it. But I like to provide a different picture of how life is for some [Muslims] and I like to discuss and sometimes make people know a bit more.

Zainab reacts strongly to the suggestion that 'she is not allowed to drink', which is in line with the perception of Muslim women subjected to the whims of Muslim men. Although she is enjoying a cosy time with her fellow students and is obviously participating in the drinking culture of Danish youth, she is still confronted with and forced to deal with the stereotypical and negative discourse that surrounds Muslims in Denmark. Thus, this discourse is not constricted to the world of politics but becomes part of how Danes might talk to and approach Muslims in everyday situations, such as a Muslim woman drinking alcohol. Through these stereotypical comments, it is taken for granted that Zainab is doing something wrong. Consequently, she feels obligated to defend the fact that she drinks alcohol and is participating in the drinking culture of Danish youth – or, ultimately, she is defending her belonging there as a fellow Dane.

Like Zainab, a few of our participants took up the discussion about Muslims and alcohol, and in some situations even tried to challenge ethnic Danes' stereotypical views on this. For most of our participants, though, they instead focused on toning down being a Muslim in party contexts, in order to avoid reactions and discussions of that kind. However, their experiences seem to overlap, since the focal point here

is how ethnic Danes find it hard to fathom the combination of Islam and alcohol. Thus, they assume that the young women do not drink, because they are Muslims, or even that they are not allowed to drink. In order to handle these expectations and avoid too many questions and confrontational comments as the one Zainab got, several of our participants explained how they downplayed their Muslim background. For instance, as expressed by Naeemah (16 years old, Palestinian background, lower secondary school):

> I have quite a lot of friends who take off their headscarf at parties because they find it inappropriate to wear a scarf and drink alcohol. Because then you are expressing a religious symbol at the same time as you are doing something that goes against the religion. I am carrying the hand of Fatima, but no one notices because it is not a religious symbol in the same way […]. If people ask me where it is from, I tell them that it is an heirloom.

Naeemah does not wear a headscarf herself but is very aware of the strong connotations people perceive when seeing a headscarf. The scarf is unmistakably Muslim in its visibility and recognisability (Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2014), while the hand of Fatima is less identifiable, at least for non-Muslims. Naeemah emphasises that the feeling of doing something inappropriate is the main reason why her friends take off their scarf. These feelings are fuelled by confrontational comments as the one above. Instead, wearing a discrete Muslim symbol that is easy to explain without mentioning Islam reveals how Naeemah herself inventively avoids too many questions. It seems to be a choice between being required to explain how she reconciles drinking and being Muslim on the one hand and reducing what could identify her as Muslim on the other hand.

Aysel's (32 years old, Afghan background, social work student) accounts are also about navigating being a Muslim while partying and drinking alcohol. She recounts the time where she went to boarding school and she thrived socially and attended parties. When a friend of hers asked her to come to Buddy Holly (a well-known discotheque), she first refused: 'I can't, I am wearing a headscarf?' Her friend suggested that she wear a beanie.

> I said 'yeah, I am going to try that'. And it was cold, so I was wearing a roll neck jumper underneath [and a beanie covering my hair] and I looked like a boy. That was the year I was away from my family and I wanted to try things on my own terms […] I was a bit more of a rebel back then.

Aysel has never touched alcohol, but she enthusiastically explains how her friends were very loyal and ordered fancy but alcohol-free drinks for her. Aysel had an experience of being included and taken seriously by her friends. It was possible for her to positively negotiate her own way of partying because she was at boarding school and thus away from her family, who would not have agreed on the ethics of partying even though she remained abstinent. Like Naeemah, Aysel navigates partying by downplaying her Muslim background, while still not abandoning it.

Zainab, Naeemah and Aysel have different approaches to participating in parties and/or drinking alcohol. Zainab and Naeemah clearly want to be able to participate in the alcohol culture of Danish youth, but where Zainab confronts Danes and their perceptions of Muslim women and goes into discussions about it, Naeemah tones down her Muslim identity. Aysel, on the other hand, wants to be with her friends and party, but without drinking alcohol, and finds a less visible alternative to the head scarf to cover her hair. The approaches by Naeemah and Aysel are followed by several of our participants who wish to avoid being asked too many questions. It is also noteworthy that these approaches are oftentimes mentioned as the approach of our participants' 'friends' rather than themselves (as is the case with

Naeemah), which possibly indicates that it is a normal approach but an approach that is hurtful because they feel they must lie about their ethnic heritage rather than be proud of it. We will explore this further in the next section, where the young women's stories centre on the difficulties of embodying both a Muslim and a Danish identity.

Un-belonging: Identity crisis

Navigating between two worlds – their family and Muslim community on the one hand and their ethnic Danish friends and the alcohol culture of Danish youth on the other hand – without choosing one over the other, but instead actively insisting on belonging to both worlds, often activated feelings of unease and discomfort in the young women. Our participants especially emphasised that this happened when the expectations to them were too diverse or too contradictory. Even though they tried, as we saw above, it was immensely challenging for many of our participants to merge their Muslim identity with a youth identity where drinking and partying was central and linked with being Danish. Both identities were meaningful and important to the participants and part of who they were. This was exactly what was at stake for Rasha (23 years old, Syrian background, nurse student) and for Samina (26 years old, Afghan background, social and health care assistant student):

> Rasha: When I was in tenth grade I was like 'well, I am not a Muslim' because you must be a good Muslim. You must be like this and that, and I was not. I did not feel I was Muslim if I was drinking and partying.
>
> Samina: The older I get, the more sceptical I get about it [Islam]. Well, I always think that I will believe that there is a god. But I am starting to question some things. I do not practise, I drink alcohol, I go out, I have sex outside of marriage, and I have eaten pork. So how much Muslim am I?

This juggling was, for many of the participants, not easy and they struggled to find a proper way of combining them or integrate the two contradictory identities. Rasha continues, for example, to explain how she had a friend, who taught her that: 'even though you make mistakes, you should not say that you are not Muslim. Of course, you are still Muslim, but then you just must look at your mistakes and like work on them. Just because you do things you are not supposed to do, it should not make you less of a Muslim.' What Rasha is taught by her friend is, however, that drinking is a 'mistake', something she is 'not supposed to do'. She is not taught that both sides are part of who she is – belonging to a Muslim community and at the same time being a young Dane in a youth culture where alcohol plays an important part – and that both sides can be practised by her simultaneously. These experiences of a split between aspects of their identity were of such degree that several of the young women spoke of periods of their youth life characterised by a marked 'identity crisis'. Esra (24 years old, Turkish background, social work student), for example, says:

> I have been missing a lot in my earlier life. At one time, I think I even had like an identity crisis. I could not figure out who I was as a person. I sort of lacked someone with whom I could identify.

Similarly, as explained by Ashna (18 years old, Iraqi background, upper secondary school):

> Ashna: I used to [think that I am Danish], but I think I have been told by so many people that I am not Danish, so I am just, I am in the middle of a crisis. I have two cultures that I am merging. Where I say 'well I am Danish and I am also Iraqi' but at the same time, I cannot do that, I feel so torn. I cannot be one thing or the other, but I am both in some way.

Like Esra and Ashna, several of the participants talked about having an identity crisis to

various extents or characterised in different yet similar ways. For instance, the feeling that their Muslim identity and their Danish identity were mutually excluding but at the same time very much embodied in themselves, gave way to feelings of lacking clear or comfortable belonging. This uncertain belonging is central to the experiences of 'identity crisis' and to the lack of wellbeing of these young women. The importance of having someone to identify with was also a common theme among the participants, particularly so while they were in their identity-formative years in upper secondary school.

For some of the participants, for example Amal (21 years old, Palestinian background, medical student), these contradictory norms and values were too hard, and she choose to opt out of the drinking culture of Danish youth altogether:

> I was at an introduction party at school, but as soon as they brought out the beers, I went home. Like, a beer for you, not for me [laughter]. I was not used to it, and I just think it smells so awful [laughter]. It is just a strange place, where I do not fit in.

Similar to Amal, a few of our participants chose to opt out of the Danish culture of alcohol after having participated a few times. Rather than jeopardise their safe and secure Muslim belonging by participating in parties, these young women followed an understanding of alcohol as *haram.* Generally, the stories of those who do not drink indicated a dislike of alcohol because it would change pleasant individuals into unpredictable, dangerous persons, which was in opposition to the women's expectations to Muslim respectability. We thus found a tendency similar to what Valentine et al. (2010) observed: rather than alcohol being like 'social glue' or contributing to young people constructing 'social bonds' (as alcohol usually does in a Danish youth context), it has the 'reverse impact' on Muslims who are abstinent, namely 'generating emotions of disgust and repulsion' (Valentine et al., 2010, p. 12).

Opting out, though, was only relevant for a few participants and here we focus on those young Muslim women who wrestle with integrating their Muslim identity with the youth culture of alcohol. In the next section, therefore, we focus on individual interpretations of Islam as a way to accomplish belonging to both worlds.

Reconciling being a young Muslim woman who parties

For many of the women in the study, going out and drinking alcohol was, as we saw above, often hard to reconcile with their Muslim background. The proscription against alcohol in the Koran is widely accepted in the young women's families. As the first author has described in detail elsewhere, drinking alcohol and partying therefore often created conflicts with parents and since the young women participated anyway, their narratives were also filled with how they lied and kept it secret from their parents (Bærndt & Kolind, 2021). This was not easy for the young women, who also reported having a (heavy) guilty conscience and how this affected their sense of self and their feelings of belonging (Bærndt & Kolind, 2021). Finding a way to be at ease with personifying the identity of a drinking Muslim was a central theme in the narratives. One way the young women dealt with this seemingly unsolvable problem was in their interpretation of their faith and locating their own place in Islam. Abir (18 years old, Palestinian background, upper secondary school student), for example, says:

> I respect my parents' view of life, but I also do not think they can put themselves in my shoes [...]. I just think they would have trouble accepting that I believe in something very different. I think they are still hoping that one day I might progress [laughter] [...]. They will

> always have that hope [that I will become a really good Muslim girl].

By saying that her parents cannot ‘put themselves in my shoes’, Abir refers not only to her believing in a different form of Islam, but also to the fact that her parents did not grow up in Denmark and have not experienced the drinking culture of Danish youth and how this is part of being Danish for young people today. In terms of belief, like Abir, several of the young women emphasised that they had their own individual interpretation of Islam, often insisting on a more spiritual reading of the Koran, and on separating the religious from all the ‘cultural stuff’, including not drinking alcohol. Sahar (19 years old, Afghan background, social and healthcare assistant student) explains it like this:

> I remember that in the beginning I would get a pit in my stomach [when going out drinking], but now I have just figured out that it is not like the orthodoxy of Islam that I believe in or the kind of Muslim that I want to be. […] I believe that in the end, if you can look yourself in the eyes and testify that you have been good towards your neighbour, then you will get to the craziest paradise. It will not be a glass of white wine that decides [whether you get to paradise].

Sahar has found a way to accomplish belonging through her beliefs and the way in which she herself defines her Muslim identity. She no longer has a pit in her stomach when she drinks and parties, because she instead values her self-perception as someone who treats others nicely. Similarly, Samina explains that she approaches both Islam and Danishness as a source of cultural ‘stuff’ from which she can select those aspects that are meaningful to her:

> The good stuff from Islam, I take that to heart and the stuff I do not like, the very traditional stuff, I say bye-bye to that. The same goes for the Danish stuff. I do not eat pork and I have begun drinking a bit […]. I have discovered partying, going out and enjoying myself. Things that are normal here in Denmark but have not been normal to [me].

These young women thus describe the ways in which they are different from their parents’ generation and, in particular, they underscore how they are actively considering and choosing what kind of individual, what kind of Muslim, they want to be. The understanding of Muslim women as someone acted upon, someone subjected to a Muslim patriarchy is actively counteracted in these stories. Furthermore, belonging in these last quotes, becomes less problematised, at least from the perspective of the women, but possibly also from the perspective of ethnic Danish youth. For instance, in this line of reasoning, Gilliam (2022) argues that when Muslim pupils in the Danish primary school are perceived as ‘relaxed’ and being religious ‘without a fuss’, they are more easily accepted. This conditional inclusion is based on almost equating ‘relaxed religiosity’ to being a ‘moderate Muslim’, who practices religion in the same way as the majority of Danes and does not hinder the majority-defined harmony (Gilliam, 2022). What the above narratives do not tell us is whether this reconciling of being Muslim and drinking is perceived or accepted by the young women’s family and Muslim community. It is a way for the young Muslim women to belong to and find their place within the drinking culture of Danish youth, but perhaps it does not provide them with the belonging they strive for in their Muslim community. That discussion goes further than the scope of this article; however, closing our results section, we would like to provide a final example of reconciling a Muslim identity with drinking alcohol that could support this claim. Being Muslim in a way where drinking alcohol is not problematic or endangering feelings of belonging was also expressed in narratives describing the unwritten rules of a private party and the arrangements around it. For instance, as described by Sahar:

> Yes, everybody [at school] drinks, regardless of whether they are Muslims or not. But it is not allowed to take Snapchats or pictures or anything. Because we have an open relationship with each other, because what we do [drink and party] we do together, and it should not get out in public – even though everybody else is doing it too.

This testifies to a form of solidarity among those who participate in the party, as well as a shared frame of reference (Eriksen, 2007). Similar to this last example, Douglass et al. (2022) show how young ethnic minorities in Australia, who have friends where alcohol use is common, describe how their friendship groups are a safe space, providing comfort and no judgement. Privacy, here, is a consideration for those, perhaps young Muslim women in particular, who wish to drink and party discretely and without the awareness or eyes of their Muslim community. The rule of not taking pictures was repeated in several interviews, and were mirrored in the difficulties for these young women of getting acceptance from their family (and Muslim community) to party and drink alcohol (for details, see Bærndt & Kolind, 2021).

Discussion

In this article, we have explored some of the issues that typically arise for young Muslim women who drink alcohol and party in Denmark. Specifically, we have explored national belonging as being entangled in the drinking practices of these women, through an analysis where we underscore both the meaning of belonging as emotional attachment and belonging as part of a (politicised) public discourse. One point of departure for doing so was the very specific circumstances for these young women, in terms of drinking as belonging, because they are both part of a national youth culture highly influenced by drinking and partying and part of a Muslim community, where abstaining is the ideal.

We found that the young women seek to avoid negative comments based on stereotypes of Muslims by toning down their Muslim identity and Muslim markers such as the headscarf. We illustrated how troubles of being both Muslim and Danish pushes several of the young women through an 'identity crisis' and we found that those of the young women, who succeed in reconciling their Muslim and their Danish identities, tend to focus on spirituality rather than doctrine – thus intentionally constructing what kind of Muslim they want to be.

On a more general level, we argued that being a young Muslim woman who drinks alcohol in Denmark is inevitably dilemma-filled. There is no way to avoid these dilemmas, because drinking practices are entangled in the processes of identity formation and national belonging to an extent, where the negative public discourse on Muslims as well as the construction of Danes as the opposite of Muslims seeps into the common conversations of young people who drink and party. Thus, drinking practices become one way of expressing belonging as emotional attachment as well as constructing belonging as a national identity.

When drinking alcohol becomes part of a national identity, it entails that people who question other's drinking behaviour also question their belonging. Furthermore, it would seem that the young women in our study are questioned regardless of their (drinking) choices. If they drink, it is 'oh, do you drink?' and if they do not it is. 'oh, you don't drink?' (see also Koefoed & Simonsen, 2012). As such, there is no solution; it is only dilemma-filled to insist on reconciling a Muslim identity and the drinking of alcohol (and reconciling a Danish identity). It is a particular dilemma in Denmark because of the dominating alcohol youth culture, but that does not mean that there are no other dilemmas. Rather, we argue that there are several dilemmas for these young women and they have certain overlaps to the ones we have identified. For instance, other researchers have found dilemmas that stem from the multiple complicities in which young

Muslims are engaged, such as dividing their loyalty between their families, their religion and the society of which they are a part (Suhr, 2015). In addition, some dilemmas spring from young Muslims women's attempts to challenge restrictive gender norms, through a discursive distinction between 'real' Islam and 'misguided' ethno-cultural traditions (Liebmann & Galal, 2020).

Situating our findings within the literature that deals with young people of immigrant backgrounds in Denmark and the Nordic countries, we see that our results are in line with those of others, who emphasise the existence of (cultural) borders that seem increasingly sharply drawn and almost impossible to transcend (Simonsen, 2018). As such, the movement during the last 30 years has been from a focus on the mixture of identities towards an increasing split between identities. Hyphenated or creolised identities (which were often emphasised in the 1990s), for instance, are the product of a process by which elements of different cultures and ethnicities are blended together and contributed to the creation of new cultures (Eriksen, 1994; Hannerz, 1992). In continuation of this, we find researchers accentuating the hyphen between cultures, meaning you can be both – for instance, when young people are described as Turkish-Danish (Mørck, 1998; 2000). Since then, more researchers have focused on the borders between minority immigrant groups and the Nordic majority. Gullestad (2002), for example, describes the 'invisible fences' (Gullestad, 2002) that become an obstacle to existence between Norwegians and immigrants/Muslims because of the perceived sameness of people of Norwegian descent. Perhaps the invisible fences are becoming more visible and tangible – this seems the case when researchers describe the present as characterised by sharply drawn borders that are impossible to overcome (Simonsen, 2018). Thus, the sharply drawn border is actually in contrast to earlier writings on immigrants and their descendants and testifies to a change in public discourse, such as the othering of Muslims in Danish society, as we described in the beginning.

On this basis, we argue that the lived youth experience of young Muslim women is different from that of young ethnic Danes. The young women we talked to reflected enormously on their own position in society, their feelings of belonging and the ways in which they could possibly participate in the youth culture of alcohol without compromising themselves and their values. They would always be one step ahead, considering calmly what dilemmas might surface in different situations and given different choices. As such, young Muslim women have to continuously negotiate their being and their identity as embodying cultures that are both co-existing and have sharply drawn borders. The dilemmas of the young Muslim women participating in the youth culture of alcohol are thus qualitatively different from that of young ethnic Danes. In this way, a focus on counterintuitive minority groups (such as perceived abstinent Muslims) within a youth culture of drinking, such as the Danish one, expands our knowledge about that culture.

As there are very few studies in this area, we wanted to be exploratory in our approach. Interviews seemed appropriate for this end. Furthermore, using interviews, we were able to take seriously the fact that these young women are often stripped of voice and agency, and provide that to them (to the extent that citations and certain author angles can do that). Using interviews also pointed to the themes the participants found most pressing, including the difficulties of belonging and politicised discussions about Muslims more broadly. In the future, we hope to see more research in this area; for instance, through projects with a more pronounced focus on embodied perspectives on Muslim intoxication and pleasure, and research investigating the internal differences between Muslim women through a focus on their various ethnic and class backgrounds.

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