The Relationship Between Alcohol and Sexual Agency for Young Women in University

by

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Abstract

A link between binge drinking, negative sexual health outcomes, and sexual victimization among university populations is well established in the research literature (Messman-Moore et al., 2013; PHAC, 2016; Smith et al., 2009). Despite these known risks, young people often hold beliefs that alcohol consumption can enhance or facilitate their sexual experiences, however, less is known about the role of alcohol in young women's consensual sexual experiences. In this qualitative study, I used a feminist perspective to explore young women's perceptions and experiences of the role of alcohol in their sexual agency – the ability to communicate and fulfill their sexual desires and boundaries – and the social norms that influence this relationship. I collected data through interviews with 14 young university women between the ages of 19 and 25 who identified as heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. Participants identified heteronormative sexuality norms that influence the role of alcohol in their sexual agency, namely the prioritization of women's sexual inexperience, female sexual fidelity, and women's attractiveness. Participants perceived that alcohol influenced their sexual agency at an individual and social level. In their individual experiences, participants discussed the dis-inhibitory effects of alcohol as a "tool" to alleviate feelings of shame associated with sexual expression and negative body image. At a social level, participants used alcohol as a means to deflect social stigma associated sexual expression as they could "blame the alcohol" as their motivation for engaging in sexual activity. These findings suggest that young women's motivations for drinking may be linked to sexuality norms that discourage young women's sexual agency, which could be relevant to consider in health promotion and harm reduction efforts.

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Introduction

There is a significant body of literature associating heavy episodic (binge) drinking – consuming four or more drinks in one event (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health [CAMH], 2005) – with a gamut of harms among university populations (Health Canada, 2011; CAMH, 2005; Poole & Dell, 2005). A similar focus on risky outcomes is found in much of sexual health research for this population, which centres on the negative consequences of sexual behaviour, primarily unprotected heterosexual intercourse, unplanned sexual activity, and the sexual victimization of young women (Benson, Gohm & Goss, 2007; LaBrie, Kenney, Migliuri & Lac, 2011; Testa & Livingston, 2009; Testa & Parks, 1996). Research considering both alcohol use and young women's sexuality predominantly examines the role of alcohol in the aforementioned risky sexual behaviours (Certain, Harahan, Saewyc & Fleming, 2009; Roberts & Kennedy, 2006; Schacht, et al., 2010) among young women who engage in heavy episodic drinking (Champion et al., 2004; Palmer, McMahon, Rounsaville & Ball, 2009; Testa and Livingston, 2009).

While this body of literature is crucial to inform public health efforts to reduce unhealthy drinking behaviours and the associated sexual health harms, important sociocultural influences on young women's alcohol use and sexuality may not be fully explored. For instance, Cullen (2012) highlights the highly social nature of young people's drinking as a pleasurable motive for consuming alcohol. The pleasurable aspects of drinking may go beyond the act of consumption and extend to the planning and preparing for drinking events and sharing stories of 'nights out' with friends (Cullen,

2012; Waitt, Jessop & Gorman-Murray, 2011). Alcohol is often described as a 'social lubricant' (George, Gournic & McAfee, 1988) that facilitates social interactions.

While the disinhibitory effect of alcohol is typically viewed as problematic for sexual health decision-making, young women may perceive disinhibition as beneficial for sexual expression (Lindgren et al., 2011). Enhanced sexual expression after consuming alcohol may be a motivator for consumption among young women, particularly given traditional feminine gender roles and female sexuality norms that may discourage women's sexual disinhibition (Gotell, 2008; Measham, 2002; Rudolfsdottir & Morgan, 2009). There is often stigma around women's consumption of alcohol given the associated effects on sexuality, however, alcohol use may also serve as a 'free pass' for women to act outside these traditional notions of female gender and sexuality (Lindgren, Pantalone, Lewis & George, 2009).

Statement of the Problem

Despite a large body of research and public health awareness of the sexual health risks associated with heavy alcohol consumption, high prevalence of heavy episodic drinking and the associated negative sexual health outcomes continue among university populations (Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness, 2012; Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], 2016). Roberts and Kennedy (2006) found that college women's awareness of the sexual risks associated with drinking did not deter their alcohol use. Given the persistence of heavy episodic drinking in university populations (CAMH, 2005; Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness, 2012; PHAC, 2016), further inquiry around the contextual and cultural factors that promote alcohol consumption is warranted. The intention is not to discredit the legitimacy and value of

public health research and efforts addressing the sexual risks associated with heavy episodic drinking among young women. However, the dominant rhetoric of increased sexual vulnerability and risk in the academic literature reflects the historical and social connotations that stigmatize women who consume alcohol (Lindgren, Pantalone, Lewis & George, 2009). The dearth of research considering the influence of broader social structures and influences on young women's alcohol consumption and sexual related behaviours may perpetuate this stigma, and leave a number of important factors unaddressed.

Several authors have identified expectations or beliefs that alcohol enhances sexual encounters as common among young people, and have examined "sexuality-related alcohol expectations" that influence individual drinking behaviours and sexual risk-taking among young people (Bogren, Kirstjanson & Wilsnack, 2007; George & Stoner, 2000; Matthews, Cho, Hughes, Wilsnack, Johnson & Martin, 2013; White, Fleming, Catalano & Bailey, 2009). Further research is needed to better understand how young women perceive alcohol as beneficial for their sexual interactions, and how these expectations influence their drinking behaviours and sexual agency. Aspects of agency and control after consuming alcohol, such as sexual expression, communication, and forwardness, are not typically attributed to young women (Benedet, 2010), yet are expected and encouraged of young men who drink. Further investigation into these factors could inform more effective and comprehensive public health efforts by addressing the social norms that stigmatize and sexualize young women who consume alcohol.

Purpose of the Study

I designed this study with two specific aims. The first aim was to explore young women's interpretations and experiences of alcohol use in relation to positive aspects of their sexuality, with particular attention given to sexual agency. The second aim was to identify the influence of social norms or social processes (such as gender norms, sexualization, sociocultural influences etc.) on the relationship between alcohol use and young women's sexuality and sexual agency. I chose not to explicitly define what constituted 'positive aspects of sexuality' or 'positive sexual experiences' in the study design and recruitment. I used the term 'positive' to refer, in plain language, to aspects of sexuality or sexual experiences that were consensual, enjoyable, pleasurable, beneficial etc. as defined by the participants given the highly subjective and personal nature of sexuality and sexual activity.

Social structures - the systems and institutions that organize society - create social categories that differentiate groups of people (Hancock, 2007; Scott, 2014). Therefore social categories or identity labels including gender, race, sexual orientation etc. can be understood as products of, and imbedded in social structures and social interactions. Social norms and social categories may (dis)advantage people differently, and influence the social meaning or interpretations of young women's experiences with alcohol and sexual agency.

Women's voices articulating their understanding of their gender roles, gender expression, and sexuality are markedly absent from the research literature on alcohol use in university women. Findings from this qualitative study may contribute to the research literature by increasing knowledge about perceived sexual benefits of drinking that may

motivate young women to consume alcohol. Understanding young women's perceived benefits of drinking practices with known sexual health risks is important to inform risk reduction efforts (Goldberg, Halpern-Felsher & Millstein, 2002). In undertaking this study, I aimed to better understand young women's motivations for partaking in behaviours typically deemed risky and uncover positive aspects of women's sexuality facilitated by alcohol use that are important to consider in health promotion efforts to reduce the sexual harms associated with alcohol.

The relationship between alcohol use and negative sexual health outcomes, such as unprotected sex and sexual victimization, has been well documented in the research literature (Benson, Gohm & Goss, 2007; LaBrie, Kenney, Migliuri & Lac, 2011; Testa & Livingston, 2009; Testa & Parks, 1996); whereas the role of alcohol in relation to aspects of women's sexuality such as power, pleasure, desire, agency, control, and assertiveness has received little attention. This study focused on young women's sexual agency and factors that promote their power and capacity for informed sexual decision-making.

In this analysis, I examined the heteronormative and patriarchal social processes pervading the dominant social norms around young women's sexual agency and alcohol consumption. My intent was not to compare different groups of women based on their various identities but rather to examine the ways social norms and processes position young women in social contexts and influence their lived experiences with alcohol and sexual agency. For example, rather than comparing health outcomes by gender differences, I sought to examine the ways dominant social norms, and processes create *gendered* expectations for young women and how these expectations influence their experiences, behaviours, and perceptions. It is important to consider how dominant social

norms, position people differently and create social categories when investigating health behaviours that carry potential for risky or adverse outcomes to avoid generalizing, or pathologizing certain groups. In this study, I tried to challenge the notion that risk behaviours related to alcohol and sexuality are individual, rational choices by examining how these behaviours are shaped by the sociocultural contexts in which they occur.

Definitions and Assumptions

Sexuality. This study is grounded in a social constructionist perspective (described in detail below) of sexuality and sexual health behaviours, which considers the influence of sociocultural, historical, and contextual factors. From this perspective, sexuality is defined holistically as incorporating aspects of sexual behaviour, attraction, desire, sexual expression, and perceptions of the self as a sexual being in relation to the social world. While gender is a distinct construct, sexuality can be gendered and shaped by gender roles.

Sexual Agency. Sexual agency refers to feeling confident in one's sexual identity; being able to express one's sexuality; communicating and fulfilling sexual desires and boundaries; and making informed decisions about sexuality, sexual activity, and sexual health.

Young Women. For the purposes of this study, 'young women', refers to self-identified women between the ages of 18 and 24 who were recruited from a university population.

Alcohol Use/Drinking. Alcohol use or alcohol consumption is used throughout this study to describe an individual's drinking behaviours. A range of alcohol use, in terms of quantity and frequency, was considered in this study. "Drinking" is used to refer

to drinking events, the social practice of consuming alcohol with others recreationally, or used to describe alcohol consumption in a general sense.

Heteronormativity. Heteronormativity refers to the belief that heterosexuality is the taken-for-granted norm, and more natural or preferable than other sexual orientations. For the purposes of this study, heteronormativity is understood as a social structure that privileges heterosexuality and prescribes women's gender role that is defined by women's desirability to men.

Cisgender and Cissexism. Cisgender refers to when one's self-perception and expression of their gender that aligns with their assigned sex at birth. Cissexism is the belief that cisgender people are more natural, legitimate, and preferable to transgender people.

Queer. Queer is used as an umbrella term for people who identify as non-heterosexual and/or non-conforming to traditional gender binary. While historically this term has had derogatory connotations, in recent decades it has been reclaimed by some lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and two-spirit, individuals to express a non-heterosexual and/or non-binary gender identity.

Research Questions

At the outset of this research project, I initially proposed to answer the following questions:

1. What are young women's positive experiences and perceptions of alcohol use in relation to their sexuality and sexual agency?
2. What are the social structures young women identify as influential over the relationship between alcohol use and their sexuality and sexual agency?

My rationale for focusing on young women's *positive* experiences was two-fold. First, as much research has identified the sexual health risks associated with alcohol use for young women, my aim was to gather insights about the participants' perceived benefits of alcohol with respect to their sexual agency, and to identify the ways in which young women perceived themselves to be sexually agent.

Secondly, I purposely did not want to focus on experiences of sexual victimization with respect to the research topic. Research to understand the relationship between alcohol and sexual victimization on university campuses is paramount to inform sexual violence prevention efforts. However, given the limited scope of this study, my inexperience as a researcher, my lack of background as a counsellor/support worker, and the prevalence of sexual assault on campus associated with alcohol consumption, I did not want to risk re-traumatizing participants who may have experienced sexual victimization.

Given the inductive nature of this study, the research questions evolved throughout the data collection and analysis. While I focused the recruitment and interview guides on young women who had positive experiences to share, the participants shared a range of complex experiences and perceptions with respect to the research topic that were sometimes simultaneously positive and negative. Throughout the data collection and analysis, I realized my intended focus on positive experiences was a recruitment strategy, rather than the guiding focus of the study. The data that emerged from the participants' interviews thus answered the following questions:

1. What are young women's experiences and perceptions of the relationship between alcohol use and their sexuality and sexual agency?

2. What are the social norms and processes young women identify as influential over the relationship between alcohol use and their sexuality and sexual agency?

Literature Review

There is a significant body of public health research identifying the drinking culture of university campuses, the high prevalence of binge drinking among university students, and the associated harms (Health Canada Canadian Alcohol and Drug Use Monitoring Survey [CADUMS], 2011; CAMH, 2005; PHAC, 2016). Rates of drinking increase among students who transition into university and college (PHAC, 2016). National survey data in Canada from 2004 indicates that in comparison to the general population of their peers aged 18-24, undergraduate students are more likely to binge drink at least once weekly, and more likely than their peers to report hazardous or harmful drinking patterns (CAMH, 2005).

Research pertaining to the connection between alcohol and sexual health has identified the increased risk for negative sexual health outcomes and increased sexual victimization, as well as commonly held expectations that alcohol enhances sexual encounters among university populations (Bogren, Kirstjanson & Wilsnack, 2007; Klein, Geaghan & Macdonald, 2005; Matthews, Cho, Hughes, Wilsnack, Johnson & Martin, 2015; Roberts & Kennedy, 2006; Schacht, et al., 2010). As this study focused on the relationship between alcohol and sexual agency of young women attending university, the following section outlines the relevant literature pertaining to alcohol, gender, sexual health, and sexuality for this population.

Sex and Gender-Based Trends in Alcohol Use among Young Adults in Canada

Research indicates differing patterns of alcohol use and related outcomes for men and women, which are influenced by complex physiological, behavioural, and sociocultural factors (Green, Perrin & Polen, 2004). These differences result from

differences in the quantity and frequency of alcohol consumption and the associated harms, metabolic processes, and gender-based social norms.

Canadian survey data indicates women are less likely than men to report drinking alcohol and drinking heavily and are more likely to abstain from alcohol (CADUMS, 2011). These differences are consistent among female youth between the ages of 15 and 24, however youth in general are reported to engage in higher risk drinking (CADUMS, 2011). Youth are three times more likely than adults (age 25+) to engage in heavy episodic or binge drinking (consuming five or more standard drinks for males and four or more standard drinks for females in one event) and to experience the associated physical sexual health harms (CADUMS, 2011; CAMH, 2005).

Canadian university students routinely drink heavily (CAMH, 2005). Well over half of Canadian university students report binge drinking in the last year (Poole & Dell, 2005), and the 2004 Canadian Campus Survey indicates that 16.1% of Canadian university students report binge drinking weekly. While young men on campus are almost twice as likely than young women to report weekly binge drinking (20.6% vs. 12.5%) (CAMH, 2005), several studies report that rates of binge drinking among young women are increasing to nearly on par with young men (deVisser & McDonnell, 2012; LaBrie, Kenney, Migliuri & Lac, 2011; Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness, 2012; Poole & Dell, 2005).

Physiological processes. Despite overall lower rates of alcohol consumption and heavy drinking among young women, various physiological factors may render young women more susceptible to the negative physical health effects of alcohol (Green, Perrin & Polen, 2004). Due to body composition, lower body water content, and lower

production of the gastric enzyme dehydrogenase, which metabolizes alcohol, women have higher blood alcohol concentration than men after an equivalent dose of ethanol (Frezza, di Padova, Pozzato, Terpin, Barona & Lieber, 1990).

Gendered drinking practices. Gender – defined as one's sense of maleness/masculinity, femaleness/femininity, neither, or somewhere in between – is often associated with particular social norms, expectations, and roles that may influence health related behaviours (Courtenay, 2000). Sociocultural contexts may dictate expectations, implications, and meanings about substance use that differ for men and women, or various masculinities or femininities (Rudolfsdottir & Morgan, 2009). Measham (2002) suggests a reciprocal relationship between gender identities or roles, and alcohol use. This means that gender roles not only influence how alcohol is consumed, but also that alcohol use can be a means of gender expression or 'doing gender' (p. 351) in particular social contexts.

While individuals are active agents in constructing or 'doing' gender in various ways depending on the social situation, it is important to recognize that gendered practices occur within larger social contexts. These social contexts shape young women's (and men's) behaviours by making certain forms of femininity (or masculinity) more readily available, encouraged, or permitted (Measham, 2002). How alcohol is used may reproduce, reinforce, or reject socially constructed ideals of femininity (Measham, 2002; Simonen, 2012). The types of alcoholic beverages, how and where they are consumed, and behaviour while under the influence of alcohol may be ways to perform one's gender that varies in different social contexts. For instance, the type of alcoholic beverage women consume may have important social cues related to gender identity and

femininity. Drinks such as cocktails, wine, and coolers may signify 'femininity' and are considered more acceptable or attractive for young women, whereas beer and spirits may denote masculinity (de Visser & McDonnell, 2012). De Visser and MacDonnell (2012) found young women avoided drinking 'masculine' beer, particularly in the presence of potential dating prospects, to avoid being perceived as unfeminine.

Cullen (2012) suggests the choice of alcoholic beverage signifies not only gender, but also social class and age. In her study of young women's gendered perceptions of alcohol use in the UK, participants described coolers ('alcopops') and cheap wine as 'bitch piss' indicating that drinking these drinks denoted a lack of sophistication, lower social standing, maturity, and younger age. Participants in a study by Rudolfsdottir and Morgan (2009) deemed particular ways of drinking as unfeminine, as these drinking behaviours resulting in aggressive behaviour, unwanted sexual advances, or overt displays of their own sexuality that would be subject to scrutiny by others. Waitt, Jessop and Gorman-Murray (2011) found that young women's choices of drinking establishments were influenced by sexualized or gendered connotations that varied by drinking context. Participants chose to distance themselves from clubs known for endorsing highly sexualized dancing, and masculine, violent pubs that might bring their feminine respectability into question (Wait, Jessop & Gorman-Murray, 2011).

This is not to imply that all women's drinking practices either reinforce or fail to comply with a ubiquitous, traditional version of femininity, but rather how women drink has different implications for how their gender is interpreted, thus expressing various forms of femininity (Simonen, 2012). Smith, Todavine and Kennedy (2009) found women with both high and low endorsement of traditional feminine gender roles held

similar perceptions of alcohol use in relation to their sexuality, which included; negative impressions of other women who drink; and expectations of diminished sexual inhibitions, enhanced self-confidence, and increased likelihood of engaging in sexual behaviours after drinking (Smith et al., 2009). These social interpretations of young women's drinking are moderated by a variety of factors such as socioeconomic position, race, culture, gender, and sexual orientation (Rudolfsdottir & Morgan, 2009).

De Visser and McDonnell (2012) suggest 'gender double standards' – expectations and norms that differ for men and women – may influence drinking practices. De Visser and McDonnell (2012) found that young men and women could easily identify the gendered stereotypes for drinking, regardless of their agreement or acceptance of traditional gender roles. Findings from survey data by George, Gournic and McAfee (1988) indicate both men and women perceived women who consume alcohol as more aggressive, more sexually available, and less social appealing than women who do not drink. Women may be subject to greater scrutiny when drunk (Cullen, 2012), not due to the act of drinking or volume of alcohol consumed, but in terms of behaviour or public comportment. This is not to suggest that excessive drunkenness is a desirable trait in men, but rather to highlight the discourse of female respectability, particularly in public, that puts intoxicated women in violation of norms around what is acceptable feminine behaviour (de Visser & McDonnell, 2012).

The notion of social expectations of female comportment is supported by other research findings, which indicate that the physical aspects of young male's drinking experiences, such as sexual expression, vomiting, stumbling, fighting, and urination are considered less acceptable for women (Cullen, 2012). Abrahamson (2004), Brooks

(2011) and Rudolfsdottir and Morgan (2009) found young women identified differing gendered perceptions of drunkenness: whereas young men were perceived as able to fully enjoy the freedom from inhibitions while drunk, young women identified the need to maintain vigilant when under the influence of alcohol, to protect their sexual safety (Abrahamson, 2004; Brooks, 2011; Rudolfsdottir & Morgan, 2009). Brooks (2011) found that young women perceived drunken women as responsible for unwanted sexual advances after consuming alcohol as they knowingly opened themselves to risk. Interestingly, young women in this study deemed young men as less responsible than women after consuming alcohol for sexually assertive behaviour that could potentially jeopardize women's sexual safety (Brooks, 2011).

Brooks (2011) and Lyons and Willott (2008) discuss increasing social acceptance of young women's alcohol consumption. The increasing rates of alcohol use among women, closing gender gap between binge drinking, and centrality of drinking and attending bars and pubs in young women's social lives are often framed as a reflection of this increased freedom for women to consume alcohol (Brooks, 2011). Qualitative findings from Brooks (2011), Lyons and Willott (2008) and Abrahamson (2004) suggest that while young women perceive themselves as free to consume alcohol along with their male peers, this freedom has limitations, particularly in relation to maintaining control and appearances of feminine respectability. Despite the rates of heavy episodic drinking among young women increasing and increased acceptance of women's drinking, gendered norms around women's drinking persist (Carr & Szymanski. 2011; Cullen, 2012; deVisser & McDonnell, 2012).

The Link between Young Women's Alcohol Use and Sexuality

Alcohol consumption often precedes young adults' sexual encounters (Smith, Todavine & Kennedy, 2009) and is often central in the sexual scripts and social lives of university students (Davis et al., 2010; PHAC, 2016). Lindgren et al. (2009) found a desire to engage in sexual activity was a motivator to consume alcohol and attend drinking events among college students. Other authors have identified the influence of "sexual enhancement alcohol expectancies" – beliefs that alcohol has positive effects on sexual interactions – on young people's alcohol consumption and sexual behaviours (Bogren, Kirstjanson & Wilsnack, 2007; George & Stoner, 2000; Matthews et al., 2015; White, Fleming, Catalano & Bailey, 2009).

There is a large body of research focused on the role of alcohol in young women's sexual health behaviours and sexual decision-making among university populations (Certain, Harahan, Saewyc & Fleming, 2009; LaBrie, Kenney, Migliuri & Lac, 2011; Roberts & Kennedy, 2006; Schacht, et al., 2010; Testa & Livingston, 2009). This literature largely focuses on binge drinking and subsequent individual risky sexual behaviours among heterosexual partners. Alcohol use is associated with a number of undesired sexual health behaviours and outcomes including greater likelihood of engaging unprotected sex, increased risk of sexually transmitted infections, unplanned pregnancy, and non-consensual sexual encounters (Champion et al., 2004; Roberts & Kennedy, 2006). The association between alcohol and these sexual health risks is most often linked to young women's heavy alcohol consumption and heavy episodic drinking. Young women who drink heavily are less likely to use condoms and are at increased risk for coercive sexual experiences (Certain, Harahan, Saewyc & Fleming, 2009; Roberts & Kennedy, 2006; Schacht, et al., 2010).

The research literature establishes a link between university women's heavy drinking behaviours and increased vulnerability to sexual coercion, attempted sexual assault, and rape (Benson, Gohm & Goss, 2007; LaBrie, Kenney, Migliuri & Lac, 2011; Testa & Livingston, 2009; Testa & Parks, 1996). Among the female undergraduate respondents of the Canadian Campus Survey (2004), 12.5% reported unplanned sexual activity due to drinking, 14.3% reported experiencing alcohol related sexual harassment, 9.3% reported alcohol related sexual assault (CAMH, 2005). American survey data indicate that nearly 50% of all sexual assaults involve alcohol with some reports indicating as many 90% involve alcohol among college populations (Champion et al., 2004). Benson, Gohm and Goss (2007) and Messman-Moore, Ward and DeNardi (2013) report an indirect association between college women's experiences of sexual assault, wherein stronger endorsement of sex-related alcohol expectancies (such as decreased sexual inhibitions, facilitated communication of sexual desires and increased sexual enjoyment) predicted more frequent heavy episodic drinking.

Other authors suggest women with positive sex-related alcohol expectancies drink more, which may render them less able to recognize risks, identify potential assailants, and employ defences to unwanted sexual advances due to impairment (Champion et al., 2004; Palmer, McMahon, Rounsaville & Ball, 2010; Testa and Livingston, 2009). However, the direction or causality between victims' alcohol use and sexual coercion or assault is not established (Champion et al., 2004). Varied and often confounding research findings indicate the relationship between high levels of alcohol consumption and having a history of sexual assault is complex and reciprocal. While women's heavy drinking is a predictor of sexual assault (Palmer et al., 2009), experiencing sexual victimization may

lead to increased alcohol consumption as a coping mechanism for women dealing with the emotional, psychological, and physical repercussions of sexual trauma (Benson, Gohm & Goss, 2007; Carr & Symanski, 2011). Champion et al (2004) suggest that drinking to self-medicate after sexual assault perpetuates a cycle of increased exposure to risk factors for sexual assault, increasing the likelihood of re-victimization.

Carr and Symanski (2011) also raise important questions about the directionality of the relationship between alcohol consumption and women's victimization. Sexual objectification is associated with various mental health risks including depression, eating disorders, sexual dysfunction and anxiety; therefore experiences of sexual victimization may be a precursor to problematic substance use including alcohol (Carr & Symanski, 2011). Testa and Livingston (2009) emphasize the contexts within which women drink heavily as the real risk factor for victimization rather than the amount of alcohol women consume. Potential perpetrators may be more likely to seek out heavily intoxicated women in social drinking settings (LaBrie et al., 2011; Testa & Livingston, 2009).

Social constructions of young women's alcohol use in relation to sexuality. Young women are exposed to a gamut of cultural messages that pair women's sexuality with alcohol use (Carr & Symanski, 2011; George, Gournic & McAfee, 1988). Historically, women's alcohol consumption has had negative and stigmatizing connotations in relation to their sexuality (Smith, Todavine & Kennedy, 2009). Consuming alcohol is often perceived as a social cue signalling sexual availability (George, Gournic & McAfee, 1988). The disinhibiting effects of alcohol are often associated with heightened sexuality and promiscuity, placing women who drink in violation of gender norms that dictate their sexual passivity (Measham, 2002;

Rudolfsdottir & Morgan, 2009). Rudolfsdottir and Morgan (2009) suggest women's alcohol consumption is often deemed risky or inappropriate as effects such as increased sexual desire and overt expressions of sexuality contradict traditional femininity norms. Alcohol consumption may jeopardize women's capacity to uphold dominant social constructions of women's sexuality as controlled, disinterested, and the gatekeepers of sexual activity (Gotell, 2008).

Cultural norms that sexualize women who drink have important implications for women's drinking behaviours, as well as the social interpretation of the known effects and potential consequences of alcohol for women. Women who consume alcohol may align with ideals of attractiveness and sexiness portrayed in the media (Carr & Symanski, 2011), and some sexualized behaviours may be encouraged of intoxicated young women (Benedet, 2010). Yet there are particular social rules that govern women's drinking practices that directly relate to the dominant social constructions of women's sexuality. For example, drunkenness, and high tolerance/capacity for alcohol are typically perceived as masculine traits closely aligned risk taking, physicality, and aggression that characterize traditional male roles (de Visser & McDonnell, 2012). Therefore, drinking heavily or excessively is often not perceived as an acceptable female practice, given notions of femininity that favour respectability, modesty, bodily control, and maternal behaviour (de Visser & McDonnell, 2012).

Several studies indicate that a discourse of feminine 'respectability' is particularly influential over young women's drinking practices (Cullen, 2012; de Visser & McDonnell, 2012). De Visser and MacDonnell (2012) found that young women intentionally aligned their drinking practices and choice of beverage with traditional

notions of femininity even if they personally disagreed with them or did not endorse them. Thus, the social connotations and marketing of women's alcohol consumption may be a powerful motivator in young women's drinking patterns. Not only do these norms shape their actual drinking behaviours, the act of drinking may be a mechanism by which young women express, enact and produce legitimate expressions of femininity and sexuality.

Discourses of sexual vulnerability and individual risk. Rudolfsdottir and Morgan (2009) suggest women's alcohol consumption is generally perceived to increase vulnerability to and perhaps even invite sexual danger. Sociocultural gender roles around femininity place the onus on women to control expressions of their sexuality, and hold them accountable for the desires their bodies evoke in others and the consequences of these desires. Thus, the social discourses around women's alcohol consumption construct women who drink as vulnerable to sexual predation from men, or as victims of their own actions for engaging in practices that put their sexuality on display for the consumption of others (Brooks, 2011).

This discourse of risk and vulnerability associated with women's alcohol consumption has been echoed in the health research literature, evidenced by the predominant focus on women's vulnerability to sexual assault and inhibited sexual decision-making while intoxicated (Champion et al., 2004; LaBrie, Kenney, Migliuri & Lac, 2011; Testa & Livingston, 2009). An example of this discourse is Testa and Livingston's (2009) assertion that education efforts around sexual risk and alcohol for women are largely ineffective because "women fail to recognize their personal vulnerability when drinking and tend to overestimate their ability to handle unwanted

advances" (p. 1363). LaBrie, Kenney, Migliuri and Lac (2011) suggest merely having history of being (hetero)sexually active is a predictor for more frequent and heavier drinking, and experiencing more harms associated with alcohol use among college women. The authors explain this association by the increased personality traits for risk taking and "reckless decision-making" (p. 25) among sexually experienced college women that render them more apt to partake in risky drinking behaviours (LaBrie, Kenney, Migliuri & Lac, 2011). These assertions fail to recognize the larger social norms that influence young women's sexual decision-making and drinking practices as they reduce these behaviours to individual, rational choices.

This dominant discourse of vulnerability and individual risk stigmatizes young women who voluntarily consume alcohol or engage in sexual activity by implying that engaging in deviant behaviour is purely a rational choice. Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe and Thomson (1992) challenge notions of sexual risk taking and young women's 'choice' to engage in risky behaviour. They assert that young women are not merely choosing between risky versus safe sexual behaviours but are also choosing whether or not to counter dominant social norms around female sexuality by articulating their desires and needs (Holland et al., 1992). Tolman, Striepe & Harmon (2003) suggest that failure to acknowledge the link between sociocultural norms, female sexuality, and risk negotiation is potentially dangerous and stigmatizing for young women.

Balancing the discourse. Despite the body of literature and public health efforts highlighting the sexual risks associated with alcohol for young women, rates of heavy episodic drinking among young women are increasing (Carr & Szymanski. 2011; Cullen, 2012; deVisser & McDonnell, 2012). Though the aforementioned risks highlight serious

public health issues, much of the research in this area identifies negative outcomes and potential for risk associated with the increase in young women's heavy drinking, rather than exploring the underlying mechanisms of this trend.

Alcohol consumption is a highly social and often cultural practice that may have many perceived benefits that are absent from the risk-focused discourses around young women's sexuality and alcohol consumption. For instance, very few studies have examined the role of alcohol in consensual sexual experiences or in relation to women's sexual agency. The few studies that have examined the role of alcohol in young women's consensual sexual experiences (Lindgren et al., 2011; Lewis Rees, Logan, Kaysen & Kilmer, 2010) indicate young women's perceive various benefits to alcohol consumption related to their sexual agency and employ protective strategies for mitigating sexual risks.

For instance, Drinking may be a means to alleviate manifestations of self-objectification such as body-surveillance, self-consciousness, and sexual inhibitions, which may inhibit sexual expression (Holzhauer, Zenner & Wulfert, 2016; Rudolfsdottir & Morgan, 2009; Smith, Todavine & Kennedy, 2009). Research findings indicate young women may use alcohol to decrease anxiety and self-consciousness in social situations (Rudolfsdottir & Morgan, 2009). Using alcohol may act as a means to justify young women's actions when they are perceived to be outside of social boundaries of women's sexuality particularly in relation to expression and communication of sexual desire (Lindgren et al., 2009; Rudolfsdottir & Morgan, 2009).

Findings from Lyons and Willott (2008) as well as Benedet (2010) suggest that social perceptions of young women's drinking may be shifting with women's changing social positions. 'Keeping up' with men in terms of quantity of alcohol consumed and

typically masculine drink choices may be perceived as a form of empowerment or a signal of equality for young women (Lyons & Willott, 2008). Simonen (2016) identified generational perceptions of femininity and the social acceptability of drinking behaviours among women in different age groups, and suggests younger women are negotiating different femininities that influence social norms around their alcohol consumption.

In contrast to the bulk of literature highlighting young women's increased sexual vulnerability when drinking, a qualitative study by Lindgren et al. (2009) found that young women felt more able to rebuff unwanted sexual advances after consuming alcohol. They suggest that the dis-inhibitory effects of alcohol, typically conceptualized as a risk factor for victimization, may also enhance women's sexual communication and assertiveness (Lindgren et al., 2009). This notion of women's enhanced agency for sexual communication after consuming alcohol has received little attention in research, but perhaps draws attention to the need for further qualitative inquiry to contextualize young women's drinking experiences in relation to their sexuality. Waitt, Jessop and Gorman-Murray (2011) and Lewis et al (2010) found that young women were aware of sexual risks when drinking, and used specific tactics to deter unwanted sexual advances. Such tactics include staying in groups, avoiding eye contact with men, and having one friend remain sober (Waitt, Jessop & Gorman-Murray, 2011; Lewis et al., 2010).

Highlighting tactics that young women use to mitigate sexual risks associated with alcohol consumption point to two important and unexplored factors that counter the pervasive discourses of vulnerability and risk around women's sexuality and alcohol use. Firstly, employing protective strategies indicates that young women recognize risks and proactively attempt to alleviate these risks suggest their agency while drinking. Secondly,

women's need to employ protective strategies highlights sexual aggression and predatory behaviours of sexual perpetrators, typically men, in drinking settings as the cause of sexual victimization rather than women's alcohol consumption.

Gaps in the Research

'Sexuality' is often used as a proxy term for sexual behaviour in much of the research examining the link between young women's alcohol use in relation to their sexual heath. Sexual health is defined almost exclusively as protection from physical harms associated with sexual activity. This leaves the emotional, pleasurable, relational, and desirable aspects of sexual health and sexual relationships relatively unexplored. Several authors have referred to beliefs about the outcomes or effects of using alcohol as beneficial to sexuality such as facilitating sexual communication, enhancing sexual experiences, or increasing the likelihood of engaging in sexual activity (Benson, Gohm & Goss, 2007; Davis et al., 2010; O'Hare, 1998). However, these factors have largely been examined in relation to sexual risk with little attention given to the potential for perceived sexual health benefits. This is not to suggest that this body of literature has not contributed largely to public health efforts addressing legitimate sexual health and alcohol-related issues. Given the persistence of negative sexual health outcomes associated with alcohol use, it may be beneficial to examine all facets of this relationship to better inform prevention efforts. Factors pertaining to broader conceptualizations of sexuality and sexual health are markedly absent from the research rhetoric. Such factors may include power, agency, sexual identity, and sexual pleasure. Connell (2005) emphasizes the lack of discourse around women's pleasure and desire in sexual health education, which reinforces women as passive 'victims' in their sexual encounters.

Much of the research pertaining to alcohol and sexual risk employ quantitative designs, which leaves many contextual factors unaddressed. Quantitative research is important for the public health surveillance and identifying important risk factors related to alcohol and sexual health risks. However, the influence of factors such as the social nature of young people's drinking (Cullen, 2012), the presence of a 'drinking culture' on university campuses (Roberts & Kennedy, 2006), and gendered norms around drinking (Measham, 2002) are likely not captured by quantitative methods. Qualitative methods to explore the sociocultural components of young women's drinking experiences in relation to their sexuality are needed to inform more effective prevention and health promotion efforts.

The literature examining gender norms around youth drinking typically measures gender using scales that measure participants' acceptance or rejection of traditional notions of femininity and/or masculinity (see deVisser & McDonnell, 2011; Smith, Todavine & Kennedy, 2009). These studies provide some insights about how young women's drinking may be influenced by traditional gender norms, however, such scales merely offer the opportunity to accept or reject traditional ideals of femininity and women's sexuality, and do not gather information on perspectives of multiple, differing femininities. Measuring women's gender performance in this way ignores the experiences of women with non-traditional gender expression and perpetuating oppressive norms around women's gender role.

Further research to garner insights about the gendered nature of young people's drinking practices may inform education and policy efforts targeting binge drinking and the associated harms (de Visser & McDonnell, 2012). Masculinity and femininity are

typically portrayed (falsely) as binary constructs (de Visser & McDonnell, 2012), with specific social prescriptions and stereotypes attached. It is relevant for public health initiatives to examine not only how sociocultural ideas about masculinities and femininities shape drinking practices, but also to examine how drinking may be a tool for enacting and constructing one's gendered identity and sexuality (Cullen, 2012; Rudolfddottir & Morgan, 2009).

Heteronormativity. The research examining the link between alcohol and young women's sexuality is predominant framed in a heterosexual, and cisgendered contexts. This body of research focuses largely on the influence of alcohol on the harms associated with heterosexual intercourse and assumes binary gender expression. The heterosexist (privileging or assuming heterosexuality) and cissexist (privileging or assuming cisgender individuals) assumptions in the research literature leave the experiences of non-heterosexual, and non-gender conforming women and men unexplored.

Higher rates of alcohol and substance use are reported among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) women (Brewster & Tillman, 2012; Eliason, Burke, van Olphen & Howell, 2011; Hughes, 2011), yet little research examines the underlying mechanisms in this association. While differences in sexual risks and the harms associated with alcohol use are reported among groups stratified by sexual orientation, the nuances of sociocultural factors associated with sexual orientation or sexual identity require further investigation.

Assuming congruence between sexual orientation or identity and behaviour essentializes LGBTQ women's identities and can lead to problematic assumptions about their sexual health behaviours and needs. There is a dearth of literature examining the

implications of patriarchal and heterosexist sociocultural norms on female sexuality and gender roles in relation to safer sex practices for LGBTQ women (Power, McNair & Carr, 2009). Further, the exclusion of non-heterosexual women in sexual health discourse leaves non-heterosexual women without the information or social scripts to address their sexual health needs (Power, McNair & Carr, 2009).

Implications of heteronormativity for young women's sexual agency. Payne (2010) posits that heteronormativity is detrimental to young women's sexual agency. Heteronormative social norms prescribe what Tolman (2006) labels 'hegemonic femininity' and Payne (2010) refers to as 'feminine sexuality' centred on the successful management of male attention. This preferred form of femininity associates a woman's social worth with her ability to uphold ideals of feminine respectability. Adhering to the confines of hegemonic femininity requires balancing between being viewed as attractive to men, while appearing sexually restrained, or sexually available only in very specific social contexts. Thus young women are often demeaned for expressing sexual agency, for example by pursuing (multiple) sexual partners, desiring sex or sexual pleasure, freely displaying their bodies, or not aligning their appearance or comportment with the male gaze (Payne, 2010; Tolman, 2006). By demonstrating desire or preparedness for sex, women may perceive themselves in conflict with sociocultural prescriptions of female sexuality and gender that render women subordinate to men (Cook, 2011; Lamb, 2010). Sexual agency is often viewed as a transgression of the constrained gender roles and sexual containment prescribed by heteronormative sociocultural norms and the patriarchal interests they serve (Payne, 2010).

While heteronormativity has negative implications for the sexual agency of women in general, LGBTQ women's experiences may be compounded by rejecting gender and/or sexuality boundaries set by heteronormative social structures. LGBTQ women's identity is often sexualized in ways that differs from heterosexual young women, as simply identifying as queer indicates sexual behaviours that deviate from the patriarchal and heterosexual 'norm' (Ussher & Mooney-Somers, 2000). Little research has examined queer women's experiences of sexual agency. A study by Payne (2010) found lesbian-identified adolescent women's perceptions of sexual activity reflected heteronormative norms around women's sexuality. Examples included the participants' concern for upholding their reputation by limiting sexual activity to the confines of a serious monogamous relationship, and labeling 'bad girls' who had too much sexual experience and acted on sexual desire. Such findings may indicate that although identifying as non-heterosexual seemingly rejects the boundaries of heteronormativity in terms of gender and/or sexuality, queer young women are subject to the same systemic pressures as young women in general that may influence their perceptions of their sexuality.

Theoretical Perspective

Social Constructionism and Feminist Poststructuralism

This study is grounded in a social constructionist perspective, which views 'reality' as a product of social processes and questions the existence of objective, essential 'truths' uncovered in the world (Andrews, 2012). Berger and Luckmann's (1991) interpretation of social constructionism places emphasis on understanding how knowledge is constructed and the processes through which knowledge comes to be significant for society. The 'reality' of the social world is produced through discursive regimes that construct and regulate individuals and social contexts by sanctioning social norms (Davies & Gannon, 2005). Individuals or groups of individuals define reality by trying to make sense of themselves and their relation to the world at large (Andrews, 2012).

The social constructionist theoretical perspective of this study is informed by a feminist standpoint. The theoretical underpinnings of this study align with the goals of both feminist and queer theories to examine the influence of heteronormative and gendered social norms on young women's alcohol use and sexual agency. There are important differences and theoretical incompatibilities between feminist and queer theories that should be noted.

In brief, while feminism challenges sex and gender binaries that oppress women, historically feminist scholarship has excluded the experiences of queer women, and women of colour. Queer theory problematizes all gender and sexuality categories and identities, as they are perceived as political tools for social control. Stein and Plummer (1994) suggest that post structural feminism may provide a bridge between the feminist

and queer theoretical positions by interrogating regulatory social structures and discourses. Post structural feminism aligns with the central tenet of queer theory to decentering heterosexuality by looking beyond comparisons between heterosexual and queer identities and interrogating what Shoene (2006) refers to as the 'system of heteronormativity' (p.295).

Post-structural feminism offers a lens to centre the experiences of women, while providing a framework to interrogate the boundaries of gender and sexuality binaries that oppress women. Weedon (1987) describes the utility of poststructuralism in feminist research as "a way a conceptualizing the relationship between language, social institutions and individual consciousness, which focuses on how power is exercised and on the possibilities for change" (pg. 19). Feminist poststructuralism draws primarily on the work of Foucault among other poststructuralist theorists including Derrida, Kristeva, and Althusser (Weedon, 1987). The focus of a feminist poststructuralist theory is to understand gendered subjectivity that is produced through discourses that construct and regulate gendered individuals and social contexts (Davies & Gannon, 2005).

Feminist poststructuralist theory problematizes the binaries of male/female, man/woman, straight/gay and masculinity/femininity and examines their construction as 'natural' in dominant discourse (Davies & Gannon, 2005). Feminist poststructuralism rejects the notion of an essential female nature, womanhood, or femininity as this notion reinforces socially constructed, false gender binaries that protect the interests of the dominant groups of women and men (Gavey, 1989). This is particularly relevant in this study as I aimed to challenge and explore the various ways gender and sexuality norms affect young women, without assuming a ubiquitous understanding of femininity, gender,

and sexuality among young women who may share an identity label (for example, 'straight' or 'queer').

Feminist poststructuralism provides a means for understanding how power relations are structured through dominant discourses and how they might be challenged (Weedon, 1987). In this study, discourses of heteronormativity that influence young women's sexuality and gender roles are of interest. Language and discourse are the foundation of social constructionist and feminist poststructuralist analyses. Language and discourse are the analytical 'tools' to examine the participants' experiences and perceptions as situated within larger power structures. These concepts are briefly outlined and described for their relevance to this study in the following section.

Language. Language is the primary tool of social constructionism and poststructuralist feminism. It is the means through which the seemingly objective reality is given meaning (DeLamater &Hyde, 1998). From a social constructionist perspective social reality does not occur naturally but rather is constructed by language (Weedon, 1987). The social world and individual experience has no inherent meaning until it is constructed in language and thus is fluid and subjective (Gavey, 1989; DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Weedon, 1987). Different languages and discourses categorize the social world and give it meaning, that is neither fixed nor intrinsic (Weedon, 1987). Language does not simply describe a naturally existing world but rather creates meaning through socially and historically produced discourses (Weedon, 1987).

Through language we create classify events, people, actions and concepts (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Through language, experiences and perceptions of the

people, events, actions and concepts that make up everyday life can be shared with others.

Knowledge is created by the interaction of people in the social world, where frequent discourses and actions become patterns that are easily reproduced. These patterns – referred to as habitualization – become embedded practices in societies or groups that create a general consensus, or body of knowledge that is considered truth (Andrews, 2012). This knowledge becomes institutionalized at the societal level, and thus becomes the taken for granted norms or as Andrews (2012) posits, this knowledge "is institutionalized by society to the extent that future generations experience this type of knowledge as objective' (p.41). Habitualization creates a shared perception of the order of the social world as certain classifications or typifications become expected (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). The sense of this objectivity is reaffirmed and recreated through social norms operationalized by interacting with others and social institutions (Andrews, 2012; DeLamater & Hyde, 1998).

Although the institutionalization of habitualized social practices leads to a shared concept of reality, this does not imply a ubiquitous understanding of the world. While dominant classifications become ingrained for many social practices within society as a whole, knowledge may also be socially constructed in specific groups within society (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). This means there may be conflict between and within groups as to what constitutes knowledge (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Again language provides the means to articulate these conflicts and articulate unique perspectives that can reconstruct, reinforce or resist dominant social norms. This aspect of social constructionism allows for consideration of sociocultural and historical influences on

what is taken as truth or knowledge. Further, social constructionism recognizes the multiple interpretations and understanding of reality as the world is interpreted by individuals and groups of individuals from various social locations and in relation to others.

Discourse. Discourses are a system of statements articulating specific meanings and values, which structure social institutions, particular ways of understanding the world, and individual subjectivities (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987). This draws from the Foucauldian notion that language is always located within discourses (Gavey, 1989). Power relations are structured and reinforced through discourse to protect dominant interests (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987). Dominant discourses are often taken-for-granted as 'natural', thus masking how power operates (Strega, 2005). Of interest in this study, is how heteronormative discourses construct gendered sexual expectations for young women.

Discourse sanctions social norms, which ultimately influence individual subjectivities (Strega, 2005). These norms are sanctioned by what is articulated in language; unsanctioned norms can be revealed through what is silenced or absent from discourse (Hekman, 1990). Meanings of the social world constituted through discourse are culturally, socially and historically specific and thus subject to change over time (Gavey, 1989). Thus these multiple discourses provide competing, conflicting ways of making sense of the world and offer various subjective positions to the individual (Gavey, 1989). However, the individual is not considered passive in formulating their subjective understanding of the world, nor conversely is individual subjectivity a matter of rational 'choice'. Rather the individual is an active agent and a site of contradiction as

their subjective understanding of the world may either reinforce or conflict with the discourses of particular social institutions (Weedon, 1987). The silences and contradictions in discourse are opportunities for resistance to and displacing of hegemonic forces (Hekman, 1990).

Displacing heteronormative discourses. Poststructuralist feminism rejects the notion that gender and sexuality are fixed categories in favour of understanding these concepts as products of discourses intended to regulate human behaviour and interaction (Allen, 2006). At the individual level, this approach regards gender and sexual identities as fluid and relational. In a broader sense, gender and sexuality must also be conceptualized as regulatory social processes imbedded in and intersecting with the dominant social structures and institutions (Stein & Plummer, 1994). Employing a poststructuralist feminist lens in this study means shifting away from the focus on individual behaviours and experiences related to alcohol and sexuality based on identity labels, to a broader analysis of the social processes that influence sexual agency and alcohol use.

The heteronormative and patriarchal social processes shaping the dominant social norms pertaining to women's sexuality and alcohol use are of importance to this research. Discourses of heteronormativity and patriarchy construct boundaries around what qualifies as sexual and gendered normalcy and deviancy. Thus, social power in inequitably distributed based on (non) compliance with the dominant 'taken for granted' norms around gender and sexuality. The inevitability of power relations that position one half of a false binary (maleness, heterosexuality), as dominant over the subordinate half (femaleness, homosexuality) is brought into question (Davies & Gannon, 2005). The

notion of heteronormativity stems from Adrienne Rich's (1980) concept of 'compulsory heterosexuality', which shifted the dialogue from regarding heterosexuality as identity label for sexual orientation to viewing heterosexuality as a regulatory and oppressive institution. Feminist and queer scholarship has since built upon Rich's (1980) 'compulsory heterosexuality' to challenge the heteronormative assumptions that govern social institutions.

Social Constructions Relevant to this Study

Concepts of gender and sexuality are intrinsically tied to the language and discourses we use (Hekman, 1990). In this study, I explored the social norms around women's alcohol use, sexuality, and sexual agency. The discourses participants used to articulate their experiences of alcohol use in relation to their sexuality revealed the sociocultural contexts that shape these factors. The following section briefly outlines the dominant social constructions of women's sexuality and alcohol use as they related to this study.

Social constructions of women's sexuality. A social constructionist perspective of sexuality considers the historical and sociocultural influences that shape how sexuality is understood (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). While in this study, sexuality is considered a fluid and dynamic concept, it is important to recognize the dominant discourses around women's sexuality that influence their everyday experiences. The dominant social constructions of women's sexuality are rooted in discourses of heteronormativity and patriarchy (Fallon, 2002; Teitelman & Loveland-Cherry, 2004), which prescribe gender norms and sexual scripts that silence their sexual desires and needs (Impett, Schooler & Tolman, 2006; Stevens & Hall, 2001).

The sociocultural norms around sex and gender often subjugate women's sexual interests while positioning men's desires as dominant (Rickert et al., 2002), thus impeding women's sense of agency to articulate their sexual health needs and desires. Connell (2005) emphasizes the lack of discourse around women's pleasure and desire in sexual health education, which reinforces women as passive in their sexual encounters. A range of discourses in social policy, medicine, education, religion, employment and many other social institutions construct female sexuality as passive and position women's social role in such a way that protects the interests of men (Weedon, 1987)**.**

Criticism of Social Constructionism

A common criticism of the social constructivist perspective is the denial of objective truths in the real world. By viewing all reality as socially constructed, social constructionism may be perceived as having no means to make inferences if the various interpretations of the world as seen as equally legitimate (Andrews, 2012). If all aspects of understanding the world are equally credible, how do we problematize aspects of the social world or make comparisons? I endeavoured to address this critique by looking at the structural influences on the topic of interest to determine that how power is inequitably distributed, and how these inequities manifest in peoples' lives. For example, the findings do not simply document how sexuality is socially constructed, but examine how discourses of heteronormativity influences young women's sexual agency and alcohol use.

Another point of discussion in the critique of social constructionism is the focus on the world external to the individual (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). For example, these criticisms may apply to sexuality research, as viewing all aspects of sexuality as socially

constructed may be problematic given the biological motivations for sexual behaviour. Berger and Luckmann (1991) suggest conceptualizing sexuality as socially constructed can acknowledge the biological factors that contribute to the underlying sexual motivations. Yet these biological motivations do not explain how one expresses and acts upon their sexuality (the how, what, where, when and with whom) as this is largely influenced by social factors (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). To exemplify this further, Laws and Swartz (1977) highlight how aspects of female sexuality such as birth, sexual anatomy, menarche, age of sexual debut, and fertility are thought of as seemingly objective, biological events, yet have specific meanings and social significance. The social perceptions of these events are not consistent as they vary over time and across place, culture, and context.

Methodology and Methods

Methodology - Critical Discourse Analysis

The methodology guiding this study was critical discourse analysis (CDA) grounded in intersectionality (described below). The overarching aims of CDA are to understand social issues by uncovering how discursive sources of power, hegemony, inequity and bias are constructed, reinforced and transformed by individuals with consideration of the broader sociocultural and historic contexts (McGregor, 2003; van Dijk, 1993). As CDA involves examining how language and discourse construct the social world, this methodology aptly bridges the social constructionist and feminist poststructural theories guiding this study and the qualitative methods for data collection and analysis. CDA entails examining the structured ways of talking that people employ to make sense of themselves in relation their social world (Burck, 2005).

In this CDA, I focused on the language and discourses participants used to articulate their individual experiences with alcohol use and sexual agency and their understanding of the social norms that influence these experiences. I analyzed the relationship between social norms and process and individual agency in relation to the research questions (What are young women's experiences and perceptions of the relationship between alcohol use and their sexuality and sexual agency? What are the social norms and processes young women identify as influential over the relationship between alcohol use and their sexuality and sexual agency?). I examined the participants' language and discourses for the extent to which their experiences and perceptions are shaped by classifications of their social location (i.e. social norms), as

well as their personal agency. CDA provided a means to explore emergent themes and discourses from the participant narratives related to the research questions.

Practical application of CDA. Although there is no specific protocol or unified methodological process for conducting a discourse analysis (Gavey, 1989; McGregor, 2003; van Dijk, 1993) several authors have recommended broad tools and strategies as a guide to analyzing text and talk. The ubiquitous aim of a discourse analysis is to examine the selected texts with the intention of identifying discursive matters of meaning, contradictions and inconsistencies (Gavey, 1989). I relied on strategies suggested by Burck (2005) and Gillen and Peterson (2005) to conduct this CDA. Burck (2005) describes a three-step process for analyzing discourse or talk after selecting portions of text relevant to the research questions. The initial step involved examining how language is operationalized to construct concepts, events and information. The second step was to look at the variability of meaning associated with these concepts by uncovering inconsistencies and similarities between discourses and their underlying assumptions (Burck, 2005). The focus of the third step was the implications of the discourse, that is, what the discourse accomplishes or produces (Burck, 2005). Gillen and Peterson (2005) advise revisiting the following questions throughout discourse analysis: How do participants reveal the multiplicity of positions they occupy, and how do participants acknowledge others and negotiate with them?

Theoretical Application of CDA. It is especially crucial for theory and methods to be closely intertwined in CDA (Gillen & Peterson, 2005). A clear theoretical standpoint is necessary in a CDA to make sense of the complexity of dominance and inequity issues (van Dijk, 1993) such as those of interest to this study including

heteronormativity, gender roles, gendered sexual expectations, and sexual objectification. I was guided by the theoretical work on intersectionality by Dhamoon (2011), Hancock (2007), and Hankivinsky and Cormier (2009) and specifically McCall's (2005) intra-categorical approach to intersectionality as described below.

Through scrutinizing the language and discourses, CDA can serve the interests of feminist scholarship by examining how the specific themes and topics are discussed to privilege some ways of thinking, and discredit or exclude others (Burck, 2005; Van Dijk, 1993). In CDA, the concepts of power and dominance are understood as organized and institutionalized (van Dijk, 1993). Dominant discourses are not simply the constructions of the dominant group of individuals but also reinforced through social institutions such as law, enforcement, media, education etc.

I employed CDA to analyze the discourses and interpretive frameworks the participants use to discuss and make sense of the relationship between alcohol use and their sexuality. I understand the participants' subjectivities as influenced, constructed in alignment with, or resistance to the dominant social institutions and norms. CDA was useful for realizing the poststructural feminist aims of this study by illuminating the ways heteronormative social expectations of women's sexuality stigmatize young women's alcohol consumption and impede their sexual agency.

Van Dijk (1993) suggests that in CDA, power as being 'jointly produced' by dominated and subordinated groups and within institutions. Gavey (1989) highlights the importance of giving careful consideration to the social contexts within which language is spoken and its relationship to power. Women embody and practice their many gender roles and sexualities within a patriarchal and heterosexist social context (Tietelman &

Loveland-Cherry, 2004). Given the socially embedded nature of this research topic, the notion of joint production of power risks individualizing strong (and perhaps oppressive) social forces if not given careful consideration in the analysis. I aimed to approach the notion of 'joint production' of power with caution in this analysis. This analysis required balancing between giving adequate consideration to the participants' experiences of individual agency and resistance as well as influential social norms and processes.

Analytical Framework - Intersectionality

Intersectionality emerged from the scholarship of black feminists in the United States to articulate black women's lived experiences of inequalities based on both race and gender (see Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality was developed to resist to the centrality of white, middle class women's experience in the feminist movement and of black men's experience in anti-racism activism (Christensen & Jensen, 2012). The intent was to further feminist analysis beyond the consideration of sex-based inequalities between men and women to consider differences between groups of women (Ludvig, 2006). Thus intersectionality emerged as a tool for addressing multiple sources of subordination or oppression (Denis, 2008; Weston, 2010).

Intersectionality examines the implications of multiple categories of difference in peoples' everyday lives (Ludvig, 2006). Categories of difference (referred to throughout this study as 'social categories' or 'social locations') such as sex, gender, race, class, ethnicity etc. are typically based on binary oppositions to create classification systems that construct peoples' individual identities and social position. These classifications are not impartial labels, but rather a way to ascribe meaning to differences, thus structuring power relations and the resulting inequalities (Derrida, 1979). The characteristics,

meanings, and implications of social categories can vary as a result of each other, and are context-dependent (Schulz & Mullings, 2006). As such, classifications foster identities by creating positive insider perceptions of self by belonging to a particular category, and alternatively can 'other' those who fall outside of the dominant categories (Ludvig, 2006).

Intersectional theory is useful for exploring power relationships and institutions and the individual (micro) level and the societal (macro) level (Christensen & Jensen, 2012). In other words, at the individual level, intersectionality examines how classifications create perceptions of self or identity, and at the societal level, how people are advantaged or disadvantaged based on their position within these systems of classification (Ludvig, 2006). Therefore, the aim of intersectional analysis is to examine how various power structures, and the individuals positioned within them, intersect in multiple social categories such as gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality etc. (Christensen & Jensen, 2012). In the context of this study this meant examining the ways young women's gender and sexual identities interact with dominant gendered and (hetero)sexualized social norms to influence the relationship between drinking and sexual agency.

A key notion of intersectionality is that social categories are mutually constitutive and non-additive (Christensen & Jensen, 2012; McCall, 2005; Taylor, 2010). Oppression (or conversely, privilege) is not the sum of one's various identities, but rather the result of complex relationships and interactions between identities (Denis, 2008; Taylor, 2010). It is imperative to recognize that all facets of identity or social locations are not equivalent, and do not intersect at all times or in all contexts (Weston, 2010).

The practical application of these key concepts of intersectionality, requires considering the intersections of social categories at individual and structural or social levels, as well as their interactive relationship, in the analysis. In this study, I applied this concept by looking at individual agency - specifically sexual agency - in relation to participants' gender and sexual identities as embedded within a system of sociocultural influences around women's sexuality and alcohol use. The concept of mutual constitution provided a framework for this CDA to conceptualize Van Dijk's (1993) joint production that gives adequate consideration to both individual and structural forces. In this intersectional analysis, I explored the joint construction of social categories and how they are embodied, reinforced, and resisted in the participants' experiences of alcohol and sexuality (Taylor, 2010).

Methodological challenges of an intersectional analysis. Christensen and Jensen (2012) highlight the importance of clarifying an approach to analyzing social categories that reflects of the nature of the research question. In this study, it was important to consider the potential for an intersectional analysis to contradict a social constructionist approach to young women's drinking in relation to their sexuality. In other words, while the use of categories provides a useful means to examine multiple influences related to the research questions, a social constructionist perspective problematizes the validity of constructs such as gender and sexuality. There is a risk of pathologizing or excluding the experiences of participants should the categories of interest be essentialized, by assuming a shared understanding by virtue of sharing identity labels (e.g. woman, white, queer, etc.).

I aimed to employ an intersectional analysis that considered the ways women may be differently advantaged or disadvantaged by intersecting social locations including but not limited to; gender, and sexual orientation (Taylor, 2010). I primarily analyzed intersections of gender and sexuality on young women's experiences of sexual agency and alcohol use sexuality at the social level, which entailed regarding these categories as social processes that regulate young women's lived experience. While taking a social constructivist stance meant interrogating the boundaries of social categories, it was important I recognize the inevitability of social categories or identity labels. Social categories and identity labels have social meaning and structure power relations that are constantly being renegotiated and reconstituted. Though my intention was to problematize and challenge these categories, their existence and manifestations in peoples' lives cannot be denied (Ludvig, 2006). Social categories must be provisionally adopted for an intersectional analysis to examine their influence on the peoples' lived experience.

Both CDA and intersectionality operate from the assumption that, as articulated by McGregor (2003), "words are never neutral"; language always carries meaning as it constructs the social world (Burck, 2005;Christensen & Jensen, 2012; Weston, 2010). Van Dijk (1993) asserts further that a critical discourse analyst's political position is never neutral, nor should it be, as preferably the researcher should be in solidarity with the participants' oppression. In order to provide an insightful analysis, it is crucial for the analyst to have a strong historical understanding of the topic (Gillen & Peterson, 2005). As the idyllic goal of a CDA is to incite social and political change, the analyst should take a clearly articulated and specific socio-political stance (van Dijk, 1993). 'Spelling

out' and reflecting on my own position was crucial throughout conducting on CDA as I can then acknowledge my co-production of the data and defining the politicized, contextual nature of my own subjective position that inescapably shapes my analysis.

Reflections on my Subjective Position. Embarking on this Master's thesis, its topic, design, and execution, I acknowledge my alignment with feminist politics. I am able to formally articulate my feminist values through the academic discourses I engage with in my post-secondary education. These feminist values, however, were instilled in me by my parents and have become pivotal in how I engage with the social world. My worldview and socio-political ideals stem from my parents' ideologies that they inherently socialized in me, and my siblings. I was raised believing that I had the power to achieve and attain all that I aspired without consideration of my gender or gender norms. The discussion of this power was never because I was a girl, in spite of being a girl, or that I was equal to boys. Achievement and independence was just expected of me. Although this instilled a sense of power and confidence in me, I in many ways grew up oblivious to the gendered social norms that limit women's power that were contrary my sense of myself in relation to the world. Particularly growing up in a predominantly white suburban neighbourhood, I was very unaware of my privilege growing up not knowing or perceiving boundaries due to the social location I occupied.

As I grew up, I found my worldview and view of myself in the world to contrast starkly with that of my peers and the influence of social norms became more apparent. For my female friends, their gender role, sexuality, and manifestations of both were pivotal to their identity. Some of my friends and peers perceived what they could do, say, or achieve as limited by norms around gender and sexuality that I had never considered.

This is not to say that I did not internalize aspects of femininity, nor that I did not embody or aspire to many feminine ideals. I continue to align with many dominant norms of femininity, however I always have a sense of discomfort with many aspects of femininity and womanhood with which I was confronted. I have often downplayed my sexuality, felt insecure about my body, and withheld opinions in order to adhere to the social expectations of how women should behave.

As an educated young woman, from a privileged, white, middle class background, with a tangible and articulated sense of power, I have many times found myself feeling disempowered, pressured, coerced, and unable to voice my inner thoughts in the context of relationships with others. This is not only *despite* my education and privilege but also *because* of these factors to some degree. In studying sexual health, health equity, social justice, and feminist, anti-oppressive and queer theories, I have come to understand, critique and challenge the oppressive patriarchy and heterosexism that governs my social world. I continue to derive a sense of power in doing so, however I have come to realize the coercion and oppression I have experienced particularly in my dating relationships with men. At times, these realizations have been painful, difficult and infuriating to process and come to terms with. I acknowledge that my experiences, my political ideology and my staunchly feminist views that guide me in my thesis work (as they do in all things). I also recognize the potential for doing harm to participants in my study by critically examining their own experiences with these oppressive forces. In this study, I strive to recognize the participants as knowledge holders, value their experiences, and represent their stories respectfully.

I have lived experience with the topic of this research study. Alcohol has been a pivotal feature of my social life, and relationships since my teenage years. My feminist beliefs and academic study of feminist and sexuality issues have ingrained in me a critical view of the world that leaves me grappling with my sexuality. While my eyes are open to the powerful, regulatory social norms that make it difficult to express my sexuality, I have only ever felt safe to resist them in the realm of academia. These social forces govern my daily life, and my relationships with men, other women, and myself. I am passionate about breaking apart the dominant discourses that simultaneously sexualize women and impeding our agency to express this sexuality. Yet, in my daily life, I often find myself fearful of social stigma should I speak up too often, be too sexually outspoken, or step too far outside the male gaze in terms of my appearance or deportment.

I have often used alcohol to mitigated these fears, and provide me with a sense of relaxation and lower my inhibitions to communicate sexual desire and alleviate my insecurities around my body image. As I approach this topic through my thesis work, I acknowledge the role alcohol has played in facilitating my sexual experiences, and increasing my sexual agency. While these may not be shared with participants in this study, I am eager to understand how other women have negotiated the sexualization of women who consume alcohol and the confines of social norms that inhibit our ownership and expression of our sexuality.

Operationalizing an intersectional analysis. Given the intent to explore how relational and reinforcing social categories are experienced, the first step of an intersectional analysis is to identify and name the categories of interest to the study

(Taylor, 2010). An important consideration in the process of identifying categories is selecting the appropriate number of categories to incorporate. Christensen and Jensen (2012) suggest a balance between incorporating enough categories to justify an intersectional approach, while ensuring that the analysis is manageable. Categories must be strategically selected based on their relevance to the research question.

Given the research topic, social categories and structures related to gender and sexuality are the primary focus of this analysis. Research indicates other factors including university student status; social class, culture, and race as pertinent to young women's alcohol use and sexual agency (Rudolfsdottir & Morgan, 2009; Smith, Todavine & Kennedy, 2009). Some categories not previously considered emerged in the data as pivotal in the participants' experiences with the topic of interest. When feasible these emergent categories were included in the analysis, however the discussion of their relevance is somewhat limited due to the narrow scope of this exploratory study.

I relied on the work of McCall (2005), Dhamoon (2008), Hancock (2007), and Hankivinsky (2012) to employ an intersectional analysis that is compatible with the social constructionist theoretical underpinnings of this research project. Dhamoon (2008) refers to four aspects of social life that are explored in an intersectional analysis, which can be examined distinctly or in combination: identities of individuals or social groups (e.g. young women); categories of difference (e.g. gender, race, sexuality etc.); processes of differentiation (e.g. gendering, racialization, sexualization etc.); and systems of domination (e.g. patriarchy, racism, sexism etc.). McCall (2005) offers three approaches to intersectional analysis: inter-categorical, intra-categorical, and anti-categorical. The inter-categorical approach explores the intersections *between* existing social categories to

describe the relationships that produce inequalities (McCall, 2005). An intra-categorical analysis offers a critical stance toward the boundaries of existing categories as it examines intersections of difference *within* existing categories (McCall, 2005). Fixed categories are deconstructed in an anti-categorical approach as they are viewed as over-simplifications of the complex and fluid intersections of social categories that produce inequalities (McCall, 2005).

I examined Dhamoon's four aspects of social life as they relate to this study using McCall's (2005) intra-categorical and anti-categorical approaches to address the research questions. The intra-categorical allowed me to examine the complexity, diversity of the lived experiences and perspectives of a particular social group – young women in university – with multiple categories "in a particular social setting or ideological construction, or both" (McCall 2005, p. 1780). The categories of gender and sexuality are central to this study and the challenge was analyzing these categories in a manner that aligned with a social constructionist theoretical perspective that these are fluid concepts shaped by historical, contextual, and sociocultural factors. I focused the analysis on how the participants' experiences of alcohol and sexual agency were influenced by their intersecting identities at the individual level, as well how they were positioned relation to intersecting social structures and norms. The power structures and categories I examined in this study are understood as relational. This allowed for a dynamic understanding of how power structures, and individuals' social positioning intersect and mutually constitute each other (Christensen & Jensen, 2012). For example, this means considering the social processes of gendering or gender performance rather than gender labels (Christensen & Jensen, 2012).

The intra-categorical approach interrogates the parameters of categories and the processes by which the parameters are constructed (McCall, 2005). Employing aspects of the intra-categorical approach in this study helped me to capture the diversity of participants' experiences and identities within particular categories to avoid essentializing the categories of interest. This was particularly useful for describing the experiences of those "whose identity crosses the boundaries of traditionally constructed groups" (Dill, 2002, p.5). In this study, I used an intra-categorical analysis to explore the variances in participants' experiences of their gender, sexuality, and alcohol use.

An anti-categorical approach offered me a perspective from which to critique rigid or traditional classifications of gender and sexuality that may exclude the range of experiences, identities, and social locations (McCall, 2005). This helped me examine categories in the analysis in a way that did not simplify complex social processes that structure and reproduce inequalities (McCall, 2005). Thus, for the purposes of this research, the anti-categorical approach was useful to capture the complex manifestations of gender and sexuality at the individual and social levels.

Much of the literature examining young women's alcohol consumption and sexuality focuses on sexual risk in a heterosexual context, or the incongruence between drinking and traditional notions of femininity. Therefore, the anti-categorical approach helped to achieve the feminist and queer theoretical goals of this study to decenter discourses of heteronormativity. From a health promotion perspective, failure to address the experiences of women that do not align with heteronormative assumptions about gender, sexuality, and alcohol consumption may leave the needs of many unaddressed. Using and anti-categorical approach means challenging the analytical categories that

structure inequity or exclusion with the intention of informing inclusive health promotion efforts and research.

An anti-categorical approach focuses on deconstructing social categories, which has important implications for addressing inequalities and oppression stemming from relationships based on gender, sexuality, race etc. Yet for the practical application of this intersectional analysis as well as a function of operating in the social world, it is important to acknowledge the inevitability of systems of classification. It is likely impossible to fully reject the confines of categorization, as language is the means by which we construct the reality of our social world (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). As power relations shift over time and space, categories become reconstituted, as do their definitions, and the meanings ascribed to them (McCall, 2005). Therefore, despite its utility for capturing the complexity and fluidity of the concepts integral to this study, the anti-categorical approach has some methodological limitations. Complete rejection of all categories may not be realistically feasible or always desirable. Identifying with a particular social group can provide a place from which to articulate oppression or inequity (Strega, 2005).

Dhamoon (2008) posits that an intersectional analysis must go beyond describing intersections and examine what the intersections reveal about power. To operationalize this examination of power, I reflected on questions pertaining to 'privilege, deprivation, discrimination, and aspiration', which Hankivinsky and Cormier (2009, p.6) suggest are useful for understanding the participants' experiences more fully. I reflected on how the participants identified themselves, whose interests they perceived were reflected in

dominant social structures, how they constructed themselves in relation these social structures, and how they perceived they were represented by these social structures.

Methods –Individual Interviews

I gathered young women's perspectives and experiences of alcohol use in relation to their sexuality and sexual agency through semi-structured qualitative individual interviews. I used a semi-structured interview format with an open-ended interview guide (see Appendix 1) of questions pertaining to the research questions. The interview guide defined the general topics of discussion while allowing the participant to elaborate and diverge on the topics to reflect their perceptions and experiences.

Individual interviews are useful for gathering information about a focused topic centred on the participants' experiences and knowledge. Hesse-Beiber and Leavy (2011) highlight in-depth interviews as a powerful tool for uncovering subjugated knowledge. I explored some aspects of women's sexuality and alcohol use not typically represented in dominant discourses of society or in academic scholarship. Employing in-depth interviews helped me access information about the role of alcohol in women's sexual agency grounded in the participants' lived experience.

Women's experiences of their sexuality and alcohol use may be highly personal, and stigmatized in certain social situations. My intention was to create a 'safe space' for the participants to participate in this study. I shared some characteristics with the participants as I am a researcher is who is also a student, female, relatively close in age to the participants, who has personal experience with the topic of interest, which may have helped to create a comfortable setting for the data collection. Using individual interviews to collect the data helped protect the participants' confidentiality and offered a private

setting to share information that may be sensitive. I conducted 12 one-on-one interviews participants and one small focus group with two participants who were friends and specifically requested to do the interview together. Although this group interview likely generated data that was mutually constituted through a group discussion, I believed it was paramount to ensure the participants could share the type of information they were comfortable sharing in setting of their choosing. Interviews ranged from fifty minutes to two hours in duration.

Following each interview, I emailed each participant with a copy of her transcript with all personal or identifying information redacted. I offered the participants the opportunity to 'member-check' their interview transcript. 'Member-checking' involves providing participants with an opportunity to review their transcript and revise or delete any information they were not comfortable sharing, and/or add information they thought relevant or important. Eight participants opted to member-check their transcripts, two provided some additional insights to their initial comments in their interview, and two requested sections of their interview to be removed from the analysis.

The theoretical and methodological foundations of this study centre on the importance of language and discourse. The semi-structured, open-ended interview format helped me gather rich data from the participants' narratives that contextualize the experiences of young women. Through individual interviews, I aimed to identify the discourses young women use to describe their subjective experiences around sexual agency and alcohol use. These discourses uncovered the way the participants make sense of themselves in relation to the world that shapes their identity how various facets of identity interact (Ludvig, 2006; Christensen & Jensen, 2012; Weston, 2010).

I began the analysis of the participant interviews by coding the verbatim transcripts inductively using NVivo software. For the first three transcripts, I developed a preliminary coding structure based on the interview guide that separated the data into the following categories: participants' drinking behaviours, their perceived norms around alcohol use, their perceptions of sexuality and sexuality norms in general, and their personal experiences of alcohol and sexuality and sexual agency. As common themes emerged among these categories, I developed codes to label each theme and related sub-codes in subsequent transcripts to the point of 'saturation' when no new overarching themes emerged.

To begin to identify the prominent discourses in the themes, I reflected on the critical discourse methodology, specifically the process outlined by Burck (2005). This process involved examining the language – specific words and phrases – participants used to describe their experiences, behaviours, events, feelings, and perceptions regarding alcohol and sexual agency. I then examined inconsistencies, variations, and commonalities within each transcript and between transcripts to make meaning of the participants' stories. As I identified the common discourses, I applied an intersectionality lens to examine how the discourses connected to broader social constructions and social norms. I reflect on what these discourses achieved, how individuals were positioned, whose interests where reflected, and who and what were prioritized or excluded in the discourses.

Participants

As my intention was to examine the role of alcohol in relation to sexual agency, I purposely recruited participants who felt positively about their sexuality in general, had

consumed alcohol on at least one occasion, and had positive sexual experiences while drinking at least once in the past.

I aimed to capture the voices of a diverse group of women in terms of gender expression and sexual orientation as non-heterosexual and non-gender conforming women are typically under-represented in research pertaining to alcohol and sexuality (Ripley, 2011) and to capture a broad range of perspectives related to the topic of interest (Litosseliti, 2003). Recruitment materials (described below) clearly stated that the study was open to all self-identified women of any sexual orientation.

A sample of 14 self-identified women who were university students, ages 18 to 25, volunteered to participate in this study. Twelve participants were Caucasian and two were Latina. All participants identified as female and were cisgender. Six participants identified as heterosexual or 'straight', three participants identified as lesbian or gay, two participants identified as queer, one participant identified as bisexual, and two participants did not label their sexual orientation but indicated they had been in relationships with men and women.

As this analysis specifically focused on the intersections of sexuality and gender other categories commonly used to stratify sexual health data (such as race, education, socioeconomic status, family structure etc.) were not controlled. Participants reported some additional categories that likely influenced their experiences including: diverse family structures, religious backgrounds, growing up in rural or urban communities, and cultural background.

Including the voices of queer women. Recruiting participants diverse in terms of gender expression and/or sexual orientation had important implications for this study, as

it is situated in a critical paradigm. In terms of theoretical implications, a diverse sample aligns with a social constructionist and post structural feminist goals of this study intended to challenge the heteronormativity often reflected in sexuality research. While adhering to this social constructionist understanding of sexuality and gender as shaped by the sociocultural and historical contexts, it is important to note that the inclusion of queer women was not to illustrate the fluidity or non-conformity as a 'deviation' from heterosexuality.

Drawing comparisons between the experiences of heterosexual and non-heterosexual identified participants would entrench a heteronormative lens on this study by juxtaposing queer participants in contrast to the 'norm' of heterosexual participants. As the primary interest of this research was young women's sexual agency, I believe it was imperative to move beyond comparisons based on identity labels and examine the influence of heteronormativity as an institution that influences young women's agency and participants' varied the experiences of operating within heteronormative social norms and processes.

Methodologically, it was important to incorporate the voices of women who may be differently positioned and thus (dis)advantaged within the social structures of interest in this intersectional analysis. Walby, Armstrong and Strid (2012) suggest that focusing solely on the 'disadvantaged' in an intersectional analysis conceals the role of 'powerful' in creating inequities. In this study, a diverse sample may provide a broader picture of the role of heteronormativity and cissexism on the topic of interest by including the voices of women who are differently positioned within these structures.

With respect to any potential practical applications of this research, it can be noted that health promotion or public health messaging often addresses women's needs as a ubiquitous group. Research examining the diversity within this group may provide more comprehensive information to better tailor messages pertaining to young women's sexual health and alcohol consumption.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through on-campus advertisements. Recruitment posters (see Appendix 2) with information about the study and my contact information were displayed in various locations across the University of Victoria campus and with permission, circulated via email by University of Victoria affiliated departments and organizations, which included the Centre for Addictions Research of British Columbia, UVSS Women's Centre, and UVic Pride. Recruitment postcards were distributed in HLTH 251 Healthy Sexuality class, following the final exam for students in the Fall 2012 semester.

Potential participants made initial contact with me via email and all subsequent communication was via email. I provided interested participants provided with details about the study, requirements for participation, and the informed consent procedures. I provided participants with copies of the consent form and interview questions prior to the data collection interview.

Ethical Considerations

The University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board (see Ethics Certificate – Appendix 3) granted ethical approval for this research. All procedures related to free and informed consent, data storage, protecting confidentiality and anonymity were

observed throughout this study (see Participant Consent Form – Appendix 4). Prior to volunteering, I informed all participants of their role and rights as a participant and any potential risks or benefits associated with participation. Participants were aware that their participation was completely voluntary therefore, they could refrain from answering any questions they were not comfortable answering, end their interview or withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason without consequence of any kind. I acquired the participants' consent to be audio recorded. I provided participants with a ten-dollar gift card as compensation for their time.

I asked participants to reflect on, and discuss their past experiences of voluntarily using alcohol and how drinking positively influences their sexuality and/or sexual experiences. Despite my intention to discuss the positive role of alcohol in relation to aspects of sexuality including sexual agency, I recognized the possibility that participants may have had negative experiences related to alcohol use and sexuality in the past, which may be triggered by participating in this study. Intentionally sampling young women who have had positive experiences alcohol use with sexual agency cannot ensure that participants will not have past experiences that could be embarrassing, emotional, or traumatic. I prefaced each interview with a discussion of creating a 'safe space' in which the participant and the knowledge they share are treated with respect and confidentiality. Contact information for counselling/social services was on hand for referral of participants, should they deem additional support resources necessary. None of the participants requested the information about the counselling services from me, and to my knowledge no participants accessed the counselling services as a result of taking part in

the study. It is possible that participating in this study provided some personal benefit to the participants by providing opportunity to reflect upon and discuss their experiences.

I took all measures possible to protect the participants' confidentiality. I asked participants for their input on an acceptably private and comfortable location for the interviews. I conducted 11 one-on-one interviews, and the one focus group with two participants in person in private study rooms in the University of Victoria library or in office space in the School of Public Health and Social Policy, depending on the participants' preferences. One participant elected to conduct the interview via Skype, as she preferred to be in her home during the interview.

All information given throughout the interviews was kept in confidence as only my supervisors and I had access to the research materials, i.e. audio recorded interviews, transcripts, field notes, and signed consent forms. All identifying information disclosed in the participant interviews such as names, places, or other personal characteristics and circumstances was omitted or coded in the transcripts and I used pseudonyms for the participants' names. The data was securely stored in a locked storage facility to which only the supervisory committee and I had access. All electronic data was kept on a password-protected computer and word processed in password-protected Microsoft Word documents. The research materials will be kept for a maximum period of five years after which they will be destroyed.

Findings

I begin this chapter with descriptive data related to the participants' alcohol consumption, their perceived social norms around drinking, the participants' personal understanding of sexuality, and their perceptions of the social norms around young women's sexuality. While this information may not directly pertain to the research questions, the information regarding the participants' alcohol consumption is useful for understanding the context of their experiences.

Following this descriptive data, I explore the intersections of gender and sexuality within the participants' perceptions of and experiences with alcohol consumption. The following sections of this chapter address the role of alcohol in the participants' experiences of sexuality and sexual agency and delineate the social processes and social norms that influence this relationship. Many of these social processes are discussed throughout the findings as they are embedded in the participants' experiences and perceptions.

The open-ended and semi-structured nature of the interviews elicited extensive data on many factors that influence the participants' sexual agency, drinking behaviours, and perceptions of sexuality. The findings presented below focus on the intersections of gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation among participants' experiences related to drinking, sexuality, and sexual agency. Other 'categories of difference', such as religious affiliation, family structure, and cultural identity emerged as relevant to participants' experiences – albeit with limited data given the small sample size. When appropriate, I explored these other categories as pertained to specific participants and their experiences.

In addition to alcohol, participants identified several of the following as influential over their sexual agency and/or alcohol consumption: family attitudes and values about sexuality and alcohol, education about sexuality and gender (particularly at a university level), dialogue about sex and sexuality in friend or peer groups, romantic and/or sexual relationship status, personal traits such as confidence and assertiveness, and experiences of anxiety and depression. As the participants discussed these factors broadly with respect to drinking and sexuality, the semi-structured interview format produced some data that did not pertain to the research questions. I explore these identified influences in the following chapter only when the data relevant to the research questions, and where adequate data were available.

The participants identified several social processes or social norms as important in the relationship between alcohol use and their sexuality and sexual agency. These social processes include: sociocultural ideas of femininity and the female body; gendered norms pertaining to young women's sexuality and sexual expression; social norms about female sexual fidelity and the social meaning of monogamous and casual relationships; and heteronormative assumptions that construct women's sexuality as intended for a male audience. Some participants named these influences directly, whereas others referred to them indirectly through their stories, language and/or phrasing, and descriptions of their experiences.

Participants' Alcohol Consumption

At the start of each interview, following introductions, I asked participants to describe how they typically consumed alcohol with the following opened ended question: "if at all, can you tell me how you typically drink?" I intentionally asked questions about

alcohol consumption at the start of the interview to establish rapport with participants on a more 'neutral' or less intensely personal topic prior to discussing sexuality. Participants described their personal drinking behaviours including their preferred type of alcoholic beverages, how often they drank, the amount of alcohol consumed on a typical occasion, factors influencing their alcohol consumption and the type of environments in which they consumed alcohol; all of which varied between participants.

Two participants described themselves as light and infrequent drinkers and reported typically consuming one or two drinks on a given occasion, and drinking once or twice a month. Two participants described drinking heavily to the point of intoxication two or three nights per week over the weekend and the occasional drink throughout the week. Ten participants described having one or two drinks such as wine or beer throughout the week and typically drinking more heavily once over the weekend in a social setting. Some participants described drinking more than four standard drinks during weekend drinking events, whereas others did not specify the specific amount of alcohol consumed, but indicated they typically became drunk.

With the exception of one participant who drank exclusively wine, all participants indicated they drank a variety of alcoholic beverages including mixed drinks or cocktails, cider, and wine, and five participants included beer in their list of preferred drinks. All participants associated 'hard alcohol' or spirits, specifically vodka, with occasions when heavier drinking was expected. Participants indicated they consumed hard alcohol on occasions when they intended to become drunk. Some participants associated hard alcohol with being younger or times in their life when they "partied" more. Many

participants reported they do not drink hard liquor "anymore" as it led to problematic outcomes or "mistakes" as a result of drinking.

Norms Around Alcohol Consumption

I asked participants to describe their perceptions of the norms around alcohol use among their peers in general, and how, if at all, these norms impacted them personally. Three prominent themes emerged pertaining to the participants' perceptions of norms around alcohol consumption: heavy drinking is the norm, drinking is a "social thing" (i.e. drinking is an inherently social activity), and the party culture of living on campus and being in 'first-year' university.

Heavy drinking is the norm and absent discourses of risk. Of the 14 participants, 11 described regularly drinking with the intention of becoming intoxicated. These participants' descriptions of their typical drinking occasions indicate a discrepancy between their perceptions of heavy drinking or intoxication and the clinical definition of heavy episodic or binge drinking, which for women is defined as consuming three or more standard drinks on one occasion (Butt, P., Beirness, Gliksman, Paradis, & Stockwell, 2011). For example, Jillian described her alcohol consumption as on the "verge" of binge drinking, she also indicated she regularly blacks out while drinking. Callie reported consuming less alcohol than when she was younger, but indicated that she still drinks five or more standard drinks on typical night out with friends: "So typically when I go out usually I drink like a bottle of wine before I go out, just like a 750ml, um, and then to like a bar or something and have a few drinks there." The two participants who reported being 'light' drinkers noted that they drank considerably less than their friends and peers who often drank to the point of intoxication. All participants considered

heavy drinking to be commonplace among their peer groups. These findings suggest a lack of awareness of or concern with standard drink sizes and definitions of heavy drinking.

Discourses of personal risk due to physical harm or health concerns associated with heavy alcohol consumption were absent from the participants' dialogue about their drinking experiences. This may indicate that young women in university may not be fully aware of or concerned with the potential harms associated with alcohol use, and/or these risks may not deter young women from consuming alcohol heavily. Young women's motivations for consuming alcohol may be perceived to outweigh the potential risks. The little discourse around the risks associated with heavy drinking pertained primarily to the increased vulnerability of young women in drinking environments, which is discussed further in a subsequent section.

Drinking is a "social thing". While participants varied in terms of their drink preferences, and the frequency and quantity of their alcohol consumption, all participants described drinking as a 'social thing': an activity done with peers or partners. Olivia indicated that drinking is "a way to enjoy the company of other people, and enjoy a few beverages." Participants described drinking "with friends" in various settings, with some preferring to drink at home, one-on-one with friends or partners, while others preferred drinking at parties with larger groups of people, and going out to pubs or clubs.

Most participants expressed similar beliefs that drinking is an exclusively social activity intended to enhance social encounters.

> It's [drinking] always been a social thing. Absolutely. I've never been one to just you know, go home and crack open a beer even. None of that. Always with

> people and always um, either with the intent of going out or already out at a bar or club. (Serena)

Participants described drinking socially as generally enjoyable and relaxing, and they expressed beliefs that alcohol facilitates communication.

Participants who drank infrequently reported experiencing social pressure to drink as their peers took note when they were not drinking and encouraged them to consume alcohol in social settings. Stevie reported changing friend groups early in her university experiences and intentionally seeking out friends who "don't mind" when she chooses not to drink. Allie expressed frustration about her friends' concern about whether she was drinking and how much alcohol she consumed at parties. She perceived that her choice to abstain from drinking interrupted her friends' party atmosphere, as they considered drinking alcohol as synonymous with having fun. These findings highlight how alcohol consumption is an embedded social and/or cultural practice or considered an essential element in recreational social interaction among young people in university. The findings further suggest that abstaining from alcohol in drinking settings may disrupt social norms that link alcohol to social events or gatherings.

The "party culture" of first year university. All participants associated drinking more heavily, more frequently, and consuming hard liquor or spirits, with being younger and/or in their first year(s) of university, particularly participants who were living in on-campus housing (referred to as residence or 'res' by participants) during that time.

The two youngest participants at age 19, Kaylen and Jillian, were friends and requested to participate in the study in a joint interview. Both were in their first year of

university and living in residence. They reported consistently drinking more heavily and more often (two to three times a week) than other participants and indicated that their drinking had increased since coming to university. Kaylen said she typically drinks heavily to become intoxicated on two or three nights of the weekend: “But since school started, yeah, [I drink] every weekend Friday, Saturday, and sometimes Thursday.” Jillian also reported drinking heavily every weekend, stating: “Like [I drink on] Friday, Saturday. I wouldn’t call it binge [drinking] but it’s like, on the verge. And maybe like one or two [drinks] during the week depends on stress.” Jillian discussed how her stress levels influenced her drinking since coming to university. As it is a time of transition, it is likely that the first year of university produces a number of potential stressors, such as living away from home for the first time, new social and living environments, and a heavier academic workload. It is possible that increased alcohol use evident during this period could, to some degree, be a means of coping with the stressors and life changes that occur during the first year of university.

Kaylen and Jillian discussed routinely drinking to the point of blacking out since coming to live in residence. Jillian stated, “I think since I’ve been here [at university, living in residence], it’s [drinking alcohol] been, a lot more […], I'm always getting blackout [drunk].” Neither Jillian nor Kaylen perceived that they drank to excess, despite often blacking out while drinking, as they believed their alcohol consumption was on par with their friends and peers. These findings suggest that binge drinking is common, frequent, and perceived as routine among students in their first year of university living in residence.

Older participants in the study further support this assertion as they reported

drinking more often and more heavily during their first year and described residence as a 'party culture'. One of the older participants at age 24, Serena indicated she had similar drinking patterns to Jillian and Kaylen when she was in first year: "Yeah, um, but definitely in first year it [drinking occasions] was two days a week, I was drunk two days a week." Callie described partying as part of living in residence and the influence of her peer group when in her first year of university:

> When I first got to university when it [drinking] was much more like, first year and I lived on res here at UVic it's very like, party atmosphere all the time and my particular group of friends were very rowdy. So we would drink like all the time, and hard liquor and much more often and you'd go out and stuff like that. (Callie)

Callie and other participants described living without parental supervision for the first time and how it influenced their exploration of heavy drinking in the early years of university, particularly the first year living in residence.

Twelve participants were age 21 to 25, and no longer in their first year of university. Within this group, 10 indicated that they drink considerably less in terms of the quantity of alcohol consumed and frequency of drinking occasions than when they were younger and/or in their first year of university. For instance, Maddie indicated that her drinking habits have changed since her first year of university: "I don't really drink that often anymore. I used to a lot in first year. I drank all the time. And that was only vodka."

In general, participants reported drinking less as they got older. For some, drinking had lost its novelty over time, some had learned from past negative experiences of drinking too heavily, and others noted that an increased focus on academics after first

year left less time and energy for drinking. Several participants described how partying "got old" and less exciting, such as Diana, who indicated she grew tired of the "party scene." She reported that she started drinking early in her teen years: "I partied a lot when I was younger and then I hit like, 20 and I was like huh, I'm a little bored of all of this." Olivia, age 25, described gaining an understanding of her alcohol tolerance over time and learning from past mistakes she made after drinking too heavily, which influenced her to drink less.

> I've definitely learned my limits [Laughs] and that's a big reason why I stopped drinking like harder liquors because I just had too many nights where I made too many mistakes […] so I've reined it in a lot and I think I make healthier choices now. (Olivia)

Allie, age 22, reported being a light and infrequent drinker but indicated that she drank more heavily when she was younger before becoming invested in her studies:

> I would say probably [I drink] like every couple months, maybe like once a month if I'm rounding up so…that's probably changed a bit as I've gotten older. I used to probably drink more when I was 19 and then ah, just as I've gotten more I guess invested in school I just don't have the time! [Laughs]. (Allie)

Participants considered the first year of university as a time for exploring the novelty of drinking in a social context where heavy drinking was the norm. While the majority of older participants described drinking less often than when they were in residence and/or first year, their comments suggest that on the less frequent occasions when they did drink, getting drunk was still typical for them.

Most participants' accounts of their experiences of becoming intoxicated suggest

that heavy alcohol consumption continued as a normal aspect of social life in later years of university, however, the social expectation to remain somewhat in control when drinking increased. Older participants perceived they were in control of their drinking and could anticipate the effects of alcohol on their physical and mental faculties. With the exception of the two self-identified 'light drinkers', participants only perceived drinking to be problematic if they drank to the point of needing to be "taken care of" by having a friend care for them if they were vomiting, stumbling or falling, or being unable to manage in a social setting as a result of drinking heavily. In the following quotation Kate, aged 22, indicated that she almost weekly gets intoxicated with peers and perceived she was able to gauge her level of intoxication.

> I live and work in residence so it's very much a party culture and, like, with my teammates we hang out and party and drink and stuff. Usually like once a week once every other week or so…I'm 22 now so I'm kind of like, at the point in my drinking career where my goal is not to like get shitfaced every week and, like, be hung over all day Sunday and all that. And so, yeah I'm kind of somewhere between casually drinking um, like, I'm always down to like go to bar with friends and having a few drinks and getting controllably drunk. Like, I don't like the idea of someone having to take care of me. (Kate)

Kate considered getting "controllably drunk" – remaining somewhat in control of her mental and physical faculties while drinking– as acceptable provided it did not disrupt others' night out or interfere with her studies by being hung over the next day. These findings suggest that participants perceived the social harms of appearing too intoxicated or interfering with friends' night out by needing supervision when too intoxicated as the

benchmark for problematic drinking. It is possible that the party culture of 'first year' may create a high threshold of social acceptability for many of the effects of heavy drinking among young women in university. This may carry over into later years of university as heavy drinking is still commonplace, however young women may feel that they have gained enough experience that they perceive a sense of control or ability to manage their drunkenness.

The "Double Standards" of Social Constructions of Women's Sexuality

To better understand the social context of the participants' experiences, near the beginning of each interview I asked participants to identify social norms and expectations around women's sexuality that influenced their perceptions and expression of sexuality, sexual decision-making, and sexual agency. Participants identified norms about women's sexuality such as: notions that women should be relatively sexually inexperienced, stigma around women expressing interest in or desire for sex, a link between women's social value and their sexual desirability/attractiveness, the idealization of female sexual fidelity, and prioritization of monogamous relationships for women.

I asked participants to describe how, if at all, the social expectations influenced their experiences and perceptions related to alcohol, sexuality and sexual agency. Many participants referred to "expectations," "stigma," "double standards," or "stereotypes" around women's sexuality and alcohol consumption, and often drew comparisons to the social expectations for young men. Throughout the data pertaining to the relationship between alcohol and sexuality/sexual agency, discourses of "double standards" or "double-edged swords" for young women emerged. These concepts related to how the participants navigated contradicting social norms that prioritize both young women's

sexual desirability and traditional gendered expectations about women's sexually reservation. The following sections describe the participants' experiences and perceptions navigating the intersections of social expectations around sexuality and gender for young women in drinking contexts.

Several participants who identified as queer, bisexual, and lesbian referred to stereotype commonly held by their heterosexual peers that queer women were, as Kate described, "down for anything", which referred to being open to any sort of sexual activity involving people of all genders. These participants described how heterosexual male peers in particular held ideas about sexuality wherein women's sexual expression is considered for a male audience, regardless of their sexual orientation. Emma described this expectation in the following statement:

> I think it's expected that gay girls are more open-minded for everything. Or like [do] this ménage a trois thing, and 'cause they say 'oh she will kiss a girl so you will kiss a girl and a boy' and it's not the way that it actually is. (Emma)

This highlights the influence of heteronormative assumptions in the participants' social contexts, particularly their interactions with their male peers. Queer, bisexual, and lesbian participants identified that male peers assumed queer women were sexually permissive and open to the participation of men in their sexual encounters. This stereotype is further explored in the context of the participants' experiences with alcohol and sexual agency in subsequent sections.

How Drinking is "Doing Gender" and the Scrutiny of Women who Drink: Gendering and Sexualization of Alcohol Use

I asked participants about their perceptions of the norms around drinking,

specifically for young women. Most participants described gendered and/or sexualized aspects of alcohol consumption. Participants discussed how social expectations around gender and sexuality influenced their drinking behaviours and how they, and their peers, interpreted and ascribed meaning to these drinking behaviours. All participants perceived an inherent relationship between alcohol and sexuality as alcohol often preceded sexual encounters and drinking altered expectations of and about sexual encounters. Participants ascribed gendered or sexualized connotations to different types of alcoholic beverages and drinking establishments, the physical effects of alcohol or displays of drunkenness, and norms around alcohol consumption.

'Girlie Drinks' and the gendered meaning of alcoholic beverages. The participants described how different types of alcoholic beverages are interpreted as inherently feminine or masculine, which point to the gendered connotations associated with drink choice. Participants indicated that 'mixed drinks' or cocktails made with vodka or rum, cider, and wine typically signify femininity as opposed to beer or other spirits such as whiskey. Participants described 'girlie drinks' with adjectives associated with traditional feminine qualities such as 'little', 'sweet' and 'fancy.' Tara noted that her peers would comment on both young men and young women's drink choices that did not align with their gender identity:

> [Women] tend to be stereotyped as drinking like really kind of sweet, you know 'girly drinks' um, mixed with like juices and stuff and I've noticed, if girls will order kind of like a drier, bitter, more 'manly drink', then people will comment on it… and vice versa if a guy orders like a girlie drink then, people will comment on that. (Tara)

Allie did not personally subscribe to the gendered connotations of certain alcoholic drinks but identified the common perception that "there's some drinks that are like inherently female. Like, oh, like girls drinking wine and ciders". Allie suggested that gendered connotations for alcoholic drinks may be influenced by how alcohol is marketed to women and stated particular drinks have "their own niche market." Allie pointed to how drink choices can endorse and reinforce gendered assumptions in social contexts as a reflection of the how the alcohol industry targets men and women with gendered advertisement.

While half of the participants indicated that they drank and enjoyed beer on occasion, some noted that their peers associated drinking beer with masculinity. These comments suggest drink choice can be a means of practicing gender, and thus reinforcing, or challenging gender stereotypes. Kate discussed how others perceive her choice of beer to conflict with her gender identity:

> I've gotten like a lot of um, comments from, from guys […] and when people see me drinking beer they think, that it's really weird for a girl to drink beer. And like even my own father has said, like 'women don't like beer, women don't like the taste of beer, women can't appreciate beer' and stuff like that so I think it's an expectation that you'll always go for the fruity little drinks and martinis and fancy things. Um, which like, is kind of annoying. (Kate)

Kate expressed resistance to her father's suggestion that beer is exclusively masculine and not available to women. Kate, who also identified as a lesbian, indicated that her choice of beer not only suggested masculinity to her peers, but was also served as a signifier of non-heterosexuality. She articulated how male friends or male peers

interpreted her choice of beer:

> I like beer. It tastes good […] it's like the guys start to see me as like a bro. Like, I'm not your bro. I don't want to be your bro […] Um, so it's like if I'm drinking a beer I'm either a bro or a lesbian. And obviously the latter is true. (Kate)

Kate's comments suggest her peers erroneously conflated gender expression and sexual orientation. Her peers perceived gender expression – as expressed by drinking beer - to indicate non-heterosexuality. This suggests social perceptions that associate feminine gender expression and young women's heterosexual orientation. Kate challenged the masculine interpretation beer consumption, which her peers deemed to make on par with her male friends. Kate expressed frustration toward her male friends' gendered assumptions about her identity as they distinguished her from other female women and they perceived her as 'a bro' when she drank beer. Kate's comments suggest her desire to determine her own identity and her rejection of imposed gendered assumptions of her identity when drinking beer.

"Sloppy" or "Slutty": Perceptions and expectations of women who consume alcohol. Participants identified a double standard in the social expectations of men versus women who drink; while heavy drinking and drunkenness are the norm, especially in early university years, young women are still expected to drink more moderately than young men. Tara explained that: "it's just such a negative thing when a woman gets too drunk whereas when a man gets too drunk it's like, oh, ha ha! He'll be hung over in the morning; it's not like a character flaw." Participants perceived that young women were judged more harshly than their male peers for displaying physical signs of intoxication. They described how young women who appeared to be 'sloppy' or vomiting were

belittled, or were in need of being "taken care of". Allie described: "when a girl gets really drunk uh, she is so sloppy, and she's so annoying and all these things, and if a guy gets really drunk, oh, ha ha! He's just like, a crazy party animal." The participants identified a gender bias in the social acceptability of drunkenness, which suggests overt drunkenness may be perceived to jeopardize feminine identities more so than masculine identities.

Participants reported that the negative connotations associated with young women who are drunk often related to norms about female sexuality. Participants' discourse reflected common social constructions that depict young women who drink to the point of intoxication as more sexually expressive or promiscuous, which may contradict dominant norms around young women's sexual respectability (Livingston et al., 2010; Young, McCabe & Boyd, 2007). Participants claimed that young women who drink are perceived to become 'easy' and more likely to 'put out' and that this increased sexual expression when drinking is typically considered problematic. They believed that young women who expressed their sexuality by the way they dressed or behaved when drunk, risked being referred to as 'sluts', 'slutty', or 'whores' by other young women and men.

While she personally rejected the perception of young women who drink as 'slutty', Maddie clearly articulated the social rules for young women who drink: "You know - don't get too drunk because then you're sloppy and you'll become slutty. Don't have sex when you're drunk 'cause then you're definitely a slut." Maddie's comments, similar to those of other participants, highlight a commonly held notion by their peers that women's intoxication is associated with sexual promiscuity. This discourse highlighted the negative sexual connotations associated with women's intoxication.

Absent from this discourse was any discussion of young women's ability to consent to sex when intoxicated.

Some participants actively rejected notions that young women displaying their sexuality were problematic. For instance, Maddie and Callie openly discussed their physical desires when describing their sexual experiences when drinking, and explicitly named social expectations around women's sexuality that discouraged dialogue of women's sexual pleasure. Others internalized derogatory discourses around women's sexuality and described their own past behaviours when drinking as 'slutty.' One such example is Tara, who referred to her "slutty phase" during her early years of university, when she partied with friends and sought out sexual relationships with various short-term partners. Some participants reinforced discourses of women as being problematically sexual when drinking, while distinguishing themselves from 'other' women who were dressed provocatively or behaved sexually when drinking. Stevie criticized other women who "put out," and suggested young women are signalling their sexual availability or vulnerability by drinking and/or through what they are wearing in club contexts:

> Guys go for them because they will put out because they're drinking or like back to the way they dress. […] I don't know if, like, the girls know they're putting that message out there, but it definitely, like, going out [to clubs] you can see when the guys are going for the prey. (Stevie)

Stevie's comments demonstrate heteronormative notions of sexuality, wherein she assumed young women's sexual expression (in this instance clothing choices or dancing) was intended to garner men's attention. Further, the language she used to describe men's sexual advances suggest she perceived young men as somewhat predatory or sexually

dominant as she described young women as putting themselves out as "prey" for young men's consumption. Stevie contrasted her perception of advances from men in clubs compared to pubs: "Like, I don't think of a guy trying to get in my pants at a bar […] You're just casually sitting there with a couple of people versus I'm dancing my ass off and you're [men are] going to take advantage of that." She problematizes women's sexual expression and implies that women are responsible for managing the reactions their bodies provoke in men.

Olivia described her perceptions of how women are at risk for making "mistakes" when they have sex while drinking, and she identified a double standard for young men versus young women in how these "mistakes" are perceived by others.

> I guess, talking about the drinking culture too, and this expectation or this idea that women are more sort of held more accountable for the mistakes that they make, and that goes along for sexual risks as well, I think…When things go wrong for young women it's…she takes more of the blame for it than a male who may be just as responsible […] (Olivia)

Olivia perceived that young women are expected to understand and avoid the potential risks and consequences of drinking with respect to undesirable sexual outcomes.

The "threat" of women who drink: The social importance of monogamy and expectations of female sexual fidelity. Although only three participants explicitly named monogamy, all participants discussed the influence of monogamous relationships in relation to social expectations for young women's alcohol consumption and sexual agency. Participants identified how prioritization of female sexual fidelity created

boundaries for women in drinking contexts, which positioned single women and women in relationships differently.

Participants described a conflict between social perceptions of women who drink and the expectations of monogamous relationships. Maddie believed that social perceptions depicting women who drink as more sexually available conflicted with the expectations for women in relationships in drinking contexts: "I mean there's expectations around you [when in a relationship] when you're drunk because, because people think that like, women are more loose when they're drunk." Maddie implied that young women in relationships are more intensely scrutinized for drinking heavily, due to the connotations that alcohol enhances women's sexual expression and therefore infidelity. Stevie discussed how her male friend worried that his girlfriend's drinking would signal sexual availability to other men:

> He stresses when he's away 'cause he doesn't know how she's handling her liquor or how she's going out that night, or what message she's showing to other guys, so I think it could, it could stress for sure a couple. Like it did my [past] relationship. (Stevie)

Participants described commonly understood concerns and expectations of women who drink or participate in drinking environments while in monogamous relationships. These findings indicate that social expectations for women in drinking contexts are centered on beliefs that women are more sexually available when drinking, women's sexual expression is intended for men, and women in relationships are judged by whether they can uphold ideals about women's sexual fidelity to their partners. This highlights the

social importance of monogamy and how this priority influences the social perceptions of women who drink.

Most participants reported drinking less when they were in monogamous, heterosexual relationships versus when they were single, or noted similar changes in drinking behaviours in their friends who were in relationships. Some participants attributed this to going out less and spending more time with their partners at home or in casual drinking settings when they were in relationships. Other participants indicated their partners perceived their drinking or partying as problematic or potentially threatening to their relationships. Allie said, "I've had ex boyfriends be like, oh, I don't like it when you get too drunk or whatever," and attributed this concern to the social standard that physical displays of drunkenness are considered undesirable for women. She described a "double-edged sword" for women regarding consumption of alcohol:

> We want [women] to drink but we also don't want them to get drunk. That's sort of like that weird, like, gray zone where we want women to get to a certain place of drunk and then after that it's 'oh they're sloppy.' (Allie)

Other participants also described boyfriends who were 'protective' and concerned with how much alcohol their girlfriends were consumed. This could be attributed to the social construction of women who drink as being sexually available or vulnerable, which is considered problematic for young women in relationships. Claire described drinking more when she was single, and referred to a female friend as her "drinking buddy" who now drank less in terms of "frequency and intensity" because she was in a relationship. Claire suggested that her friend's boyfriend's protectiveness and jealousy influenced her friend's drinking: "Um, yeah, part of that, like, he's just sort of, like, looking out for her.

And a bit that he's, like, overly protective or jealous- that kind of curbs or, like, derails our drinking." These findings point to the influence of monogamous partners, and the expectations of being in a relationship, on young women's drinking behaviours.

Callie perceived that her friends/peers scrutinized her behaviour in drinking contexts, particularly as a single woman. She believed her behaviour was interpreted as inappropriately sexual when it was perceived to be threatening to others women's monogamous relationships:

> I've been drunk and I've chatted with a guy friend of mine who's in a relationship and it's literally just a regular old conversation but suddenly you know, I'm slutting it up, and talking to somebody's boyfriend. (Callie)

Diana also reported that young men in relationships often perceive their girlfriends' drinking, and the influence of other women who are single, as threatening to their monogamous relationships:

> I've found it's really with guys who are attached who see it [girlfriends' drinking] as a threat to their relationship, where they're, like, 'oh, you're going to go out with so-and-so and see how much fun that she's having and, like, sleeping with guys and getting drunk,' and […] where it's like, 'oh, god, is this girl who's single having more fun than my girlfriend who's in a relationship?' (Diana)

Callie and Diana's comments suggest that single young women who are drinking are deemed inherently sexual, which challenges or contradicts social expectations that prioritize monogamous relationships and female sexual fidelity.

In a similar observation, Maddie stated that some of her friends' boyfriends were opposed to their drinking. She expressed her frustration that fears of women's sexual

expression challenging the rules of monogamy could cause male partners to police young women's drinking:

> A lot of my friend's boyfriends don't want them to ever get drunk […] and it's like, well, why? Well, you know, 'he thinks that if I drink then I'll get into bad situations.' I'm like, well, like, 'why does he think that? What evidence does he have for that? Have you ever cheated on him? Have you ever seemed like you cheated on him? Have you ever flirted with somebody else in front of him?' And like, not even, these shouldn't be reasons still, you know? There is no reason. (Maddie)

As she discussed the issue, Maddie seemed to work through her own assumptions about monogamy; first rationalizing a boyfriend policing his girlfriend's drinking if he suspected infidelity, and then dismissing fears of cheating as a valid cause for concern. The evolution of Maddie's statement on this topic is an interesting example of a young woman's efforts to actively resist engrained norms about monogamy, and reconstruct her values around sexuality.

Participants noted that being in a monogamous relationship impacted how their peers interpreted their sexual expression while drinking due to notions that women who drink are more sexually. Contrary to the scrutiny of women in drinking contexts based on ideals of female fidelity described above, some participants indicated that if their (male) partner was present at a drinking event, their peers considered their sexual expression more socially acceptable. Allie described being exempt from judgment from peers around drinking and having sex because she was in a relationship, provided her partner was present, and is the assumed recipient of her sexual attention. She described a dichotomy

in which she experienced pressure among her peers to drink and have sex, but was aware of the stigma associated with being a young woman and having sex when drinking:

> I think also because I'm in a relationship, I don't have to deal with those social perceptions…I felt, like, a lot of pressure both from men and women to drink and then have sex and I think that, I guess, being in a relationship gives you a pass, like, they can't really say anything [negative]. (Allie)

Emma expressed similar thoughts about how monogamous relationships serve to help deflect some of the judgement or comments from peers when she drinks, with respect to how drunk she gets or if she engages in sexual activity. She discussed how being in a relationship could shield women who are drinking from the stigma associated with those behaviours:

> I think when you are in a relationship, if you are with your partner, people don't care about what you're drinking because they know you will have someone with you, but if a girl is alone, I think they would think she would get out of [control] or go somewhere with anyone, so they would judge her more. (Emma)

This alludes to the perception that women who are in monogamous relationships and are sexually expressive when drinking do not violate social norms around women's respectability, as their sexual expression is seen as being intended exclusively for the pleasure of their (male) partners. This reinforces the idea that women's sexuality is relational (to men) and as such, is subject to boundaries imposed by notions of female sexual fidelity.

Three participants described feeling "safer" in drinking if they were in a monogamous relationship. These participants identified the social perceptions that single

women who drink and have casual sex are thought of as "vulnerable," and make "poor choices." Olivia explained how she feels more protected from making mistakes with respect to her drinking and/or sexual behaviours, and less judged by her peers for engaging in these behaviours, because she is in a relationship:

> Going back to the relationship, is, I feel like I'm less at risk for making mistakes because I have a really safe sort of situation so I don't feel like I feel those expectations as much. (Olivia)

Stevie described an experience where female friends were helping her dress to go to a club in clothing that she normally would not wear. She emphasized that she feels safer when she does dress in more revealing clothing because she is in a relationship and thus her appearance is exclusively "for him." She distanced herself from her friends who liked dressing in that way by referring to being only temporarily "one of them," in reference to girls who typically dress sexually at clubs:

> …They put me into like a dress, and I don't normally wear that, and so I felt almost like compelled to be one of them because they'd done it, they know what it's like, they can have a good time, and because I had a boyfriend, I felt more like, safe in that situation so I knew it was more for him to dress that way than it was for another guy to come and hit on me. (Stevie)

This implies that young women's displays of sexuality (in this instance, more revealing clothing choices) may be perceived as safer and more acceptable if they are intended for a monogamous (male) partner. The context of monogamy may provide a socially acceptable space for young women to express their sexuality, given that their (male) partner is present.

This suggests that, at a broader social level, young women's sexuality may be interpreted through a monogamy lens, which interprets their sexuality or sexual behaviour in regards to whom it is perceived to be directed. Provided that young women's sexual expression is relational - intended for a partner, and in particular a monogamous male partner – it is deemed less risky and more socially permissible.

Resisting standards of monogamy in drinking contexts. Four participants, three who identified as queer, purposely challenged monogamy as the norm. They critiqued the social emphasis on monogamy as a standard and described their experiences of social pressure to act within the boundaries of monogamous relationships when in drinking contexts. For example, Callie communicated that for her, sex outside of a relationship, particularly in a drinking context, may not carry negative meaning: "Sometimes sex is just sex. Like if someone cheated on me and it was just one drunken night or something, it wouldn't be like the end […] of the relationship." This illustrates how Callie challenges the common perception that sex signifies connection to a partner and highlights how alcohol can mediate or alter the meaning of a sexual encounter with respect to monogamy.

Julia recalled an experience of being at a party and being interested in pursuing someone who was not her current partner: "I would like to be with this other guy but I couldn't because people would say, 'but you're with him [her boyfriend]' […] and they would judge me." Kate described being at a queer dance and the commentary she received from peers for kissing her current girlfriend, who had been in an open relationship at the time. "We just, like, started making out on the dance floor, and she had a partner at the time but they were in an open relationship, but a lot of people had an

input on the fact that we were making out on the dance floor." This highlights the pervasiveness of monogamy as a social process within drinking contexts, as Kate received judgment from her peers, regardless of the fact that Kate, her partner, and perhaps others in this context, endorsed a mutually agreed-upon, non-monogamous relationship arrangement.

Alcohol as a signifier of sexual interest and absent discourses of consent. A connection between alcohol consumption and/or drinking contexts and expectations of increased sexual expression emerged as a theme. Some participants indicated that consuming alcohol altered their expectations about their own sexual encounters, whereas others identified expectations of increased likelihood for sexual expression/activity in drinking contexts.

Participants identified a general social perception that sexual encounters are more likely to occur in drinking contexts or at events where alcohol is being consumed, particularly when alcohol is consumed heavily. Most participants indicated that drinking prior to engaging in sexual activity was common among participants and their peer groups. Some participants suggested that by consuming alcohol they were signifying expectations of or intent to engage in sexual activity. For instance Diana described how inhibitions are lowered and there are expectations of sex even prior to consuming alcohol when there is an intention to go out drinking: "I think before you even started drinking you lower your um, inhibitions right before you even start drinking. It's like okay, I'm going to go out and I'm going to do something crazy." Kaylen described how drinking heavily and having sex are associated in her mind: "If I'm in the mood to get really drunk then I'm probably also…in the mood to like have sex with somebody." Stevie referred to

a connection between the amount of alcohol consumed and expectations around sex activity. She suggested that intentions or expectations can differ based on how much alcohol is consumed, depending on the drinking context: “Like, if you’re planning to drink eight beers versus one beer, your intentions about it [having sex] are a bit different.” This suggests that Stevie perceived that consuming alcohol heavily could signify an intention to engage in sexual activity.

Discourse about consent was markedly absent from the participants’ dialogue about their expectations that sexual expression and/or activity are increased when drinking or in drinking contexts. Particularly in the case of Stevie, who suggested drinking may signify a person’s intent to have sex, this perceptions could indicate a lack of awareness of or concern with a person’s inability to provide consent when under the influence of alcohol (Criminal Code, 1985).

Clubs and pubs: The influence of drinking context on social norms around sexual expression. Participants compared how social norms around sexual expression differed in different types of drinking establishments, specifically nightclubs (“clubs”), pubs, and house parties. It is relevant within the context of this section to note that most participants referred to nightclubs and pubs in general. Thus, findings do not address the context and culture of queer spaces or drinking environments created for and by LGBTQ communities, in which many of the social processes discussed in the following section may be (re)constructed, challenged, and/or endorsed differently.

Four participants expressed a personal preference for the more casual settings of pubs and house parties, such as Emma, who indicated that she prefers drinking environments that facilitate social interaction: “I prefer [to drink] at friends’ houses, or at

my place, and I don't like go out too much […] 'cause I prefer to talk instead of just dancing". Stevie also expressed a preference for pubs, which she perceived as quieter, safer drinking environments where people are typically less drunk: "I'd rather feel like I'm safe in a bar, where I have just my drink at the table with my friends and you can more communicate with each other and hear each other." Stevie contrasted this to her perception of clubs where people behaved differently: "I feel like a lot of time at clubs people are belligerent." This highlights the perception that clubs are distinct from other social environments, as they are less conducive to conversation with others and with stronger social pressure to drink more, resulting in a greater likelihood of higher, and perhaps riskier, levels of intoxication.

All participants referenced clubs, 'clubbing' or 'going out dancing' as sexualized atmospheres in comparison to pubs or parties. Participants identified different expectations and protocol for social behaviour and sexual expression in clubs. When describing a typical club environment including the visual displays of sexuality in clubs such as kissing, and touching or sexualized dancing with others, Kate plainly said that clubs are "all about sex and people making out and dancing".

Eight participants (Callie, Maddie, Serena, Diana, Tara, Kate, Emma, and Claire) indicated that they went to clubs on occasion or had enjoyed clubs when they were younger. Some participants described 'going clubbing' as an opportunity to dress up, bond with female friends, and enjoy the sexual freedom of a club environment. Claire described how she is more likely to express her sexuality or be receptive to sexual advances in a club setting in comparison to a pub:

If I went dancing or something I would probably be more open to it [expressing

> sexuality or sexual advances from others] but then that's also because there's more people there. If we're going out for beer with friends or something might be like less so…it would be less likely happen just because you're not anywhere like where sexuality is expressed much, like at your standard pub. (Claire)

This indicates how young women (and men) may perceive clubs as spaces where sexual expression is considered more socially acceptable than in other drinking environments.

Findings about drinking establishments highlight how the context of the drinking environment can alter perceptions of behaviour and intentions around sexuality. Participants constructed young men and women in clubs as being more sexually interested, whereas people drinking in pubs were seen as having less sexual intentions.

Limited sexual freedom: "Policing" of women's sexuality and gender in clubs. Discourses of heteronormativity and the related gendered expectations for sexual expression permeated the participants' discussion of clubs as a drinking environment. These constructions often deemed women's sexual expression as intended for a male audience, and a space where men's sexual interest is at the forefront. All participants shared stories of interacting with heteronormative constructions of women's sexuality in club environments, however the intersections of sexuality, sexual orientation, and gender manifested in their experiences in varying ways.

Participants shared varying perceptions and opinions on the social constructions of young women's sexual expression in clubs. Some participants showed distain or dislike of the sexualized nature of clubs as a drinking environment. Participants referenced clubs as a particular 'scene' and some distinguished themselves from the 'type' of people who frequented clubs, as evidenced in Stevie's statement: "I'm not like a

club person, I've done it and it's not my scene. I'd rather not." Other participants shared similar stories distinguishing themselves from young women who overtly expressed their sexuality in clubs. Allie indicated that she avoided going to clubs due to the social expectations of hyper-sexualized behaviour: "I also avoid the club. So I feel like those [stereotypes] are really rampant there, where it's like, oh, a meat market". About half of the participants shared this stance on clubs, which may imply negative attitudes toward people who participate in club environments that are purposely sexual in nature. This may suggest that there is some stigma attached to intentionally seeking out or enjoying contexts where overt sexual expression is normalized, and some participants perceived appearing sexually reserved as more socially acceptable for young women.

Some participants enjoyed occasionally partaking in a club atmosphere, but acknowledged that while there was some freedom to express their sexuality in that context, it was not entirely without social recourse. All participants acknowledged the potential for young women to be labeled in derogatory terms, should their sexual expression be too overt. Kate described how she felt caught between partaking in the sexual freedom the club atmosphere provided, and negotiating the social pressure to uphold ideals around young women's respectability, which was tied to appearing sexually reserved. Below, Kate discussed past club experiences and how she enjoyed expressing her sexuality and engaging in sexual encounters, but that she was also aware of the stigma attached to publicly displaying sexual interest through dancing provocatively or kissing:

> …Back in my clubbing days, um, I used to love going and like making out with someone on the dance floor and just like meeting a random person and not even

> knowing their name and a lot of people see that as like, dirty and slutty […] (Kate)

She expressed frustration at how young women are judged for behaving sexually in clubs, as they are known to be sexualized atmospheres, and went on to discuss the powerful gendered expectations of women as sexually reserved in terms of the social meaning of young women's behaviour in clubs:

> And there's a lot of policing of other people doing that, at the club. Like oh like that girl's such a skank because her skirt is so high up you can see her ass 'cause he's grabbing like he's pulling up her skirt or whatever, you know it's a lot of like people think that. Like, you're at a club! Like…it's all about sex and people making out and dancing! (Kate)

Kate's comments highlight the intersection of heteronormative assumptions around women's sexuality and gender roles that simultaneously encourage and stigmatize young women for participating in a sexualized club environment. Young women in club environments may be caught between aligning with cultural messages that promote young women appearing sexually available (to men), while also upholding ideals about femininity that depict women as sexually reserved. These findings construct clubs as a space where young women can reinforce and/or resist dominant heteronormative assumptions and traditional notions of women's sexuality, sometimes simultaneously.

Some participants reinforced heteronormative assumptions as they viewed women who displayed their bodies in a provocative manner (through dress or dancing) as seeking attention from men. Some participants acknowledged how this manifested in their own experiences. For instance, Tara discussed an experience of getting dressed up to go to a

club and feeling validated when her date commented on her appearance, and noted that she enjoyed the attention from men in clubs. Others described young women who participated in club environments as attention seeking, a perception that deterred their own participation in these types of drinking establishments. For example, Stevie distanced herself from young women who dressed in a sexualized manner in clubs, signalling their sexual availability:

> I feel like when you're in a club scene, girls want to wear the short skirts and the skimpy tops because they feel like that will attract guys, and when they're drunk they're okay with that because they're not as nervous. But it can also be really unsafe because someone could totally advantage of the situation noticing that the girl is, her butt's hanging out, and her rack is out there. (Stevie)

Stevie's comments reflect and reinforce dominant social constructions of sexuality that depict women as sexually vulnerable when drinking and men as inherently sexually interested, or even predatory, towards women when they are drinking.

Kate and Stevie's comments indicated that young women policed or stigmatized other young women for appearing too sexually available in clubs. Diana believed young men condoned young women's sexual expression provided they were the intended target of the young women's attention or advances:

> I never saw it as single guys looking at the young wild and free single girl negatively…the only time I've ever found where like they'll be mad about it or see it negatively is if you don't sleep with them because they see it as like a huge flaw in themselves. (Diana)

While men's experiences of sexual agency and alcohol were not the focus in this

research, Diana's comments point to gendered expectations around sexuality that construct men as being sexually interested and forward. Diana alluded that young men may become angered or upset by women who reject their sexual advances, which suggests Diana perceived that young men feel entitled to young women's sexual expression.

Participants who reported experiences in club environments acknowledged that sexual expression was commonplace and accepted in a club setting, the social meaning of young women's sexual expression in this context was not always positive, which influenced their behaviour in varying ways.

"Doing it for the guys": heterosexual norms, sexual orientation, and the meaning same-sex behaviour in drinking contexts. Many participants identified the dominance of heteronormative and gendered ideas about young men and women's sexuality in club settings; however, participants positioned themselves differently within that context, particularly the self-identified queer participants. Nearly all participants discussed the topic of young women engaging in same-sex sexual behaviour/expression in club settings. This theme provided an example of how sexual orientation intersected with heteronormative boundaries and gendered sexual expectations in this drinking context. Heterosexual, queer, and lesbian participants negotiated these boundaries and expectations in differing ways.

Callie, who identified as queer, expressed her frustration that heterosexual young men interpreted her same-sex sexual expression in a club environment as a performance or display for their enjoyment:

> … If I'm at a club with like a girl that I'm with, um and like we're drinking or hooking up or whatever, it's such like a spectator sport, especially for like the guys around […] when it has nothing to do with them. Like that entitlement that some men feel where it's every form of sexuality is just for them. (Callie)

This observation highlights how heteronormative notions about sexuality position men's sexual interest as dominant, as even same-sex relationships are interpreted as being for the pleasure of men in a club setting.

While Callie expressed frustration that the heteronormative assumptions in club environments undermined her sexual identity, many participants reported that it was common for heterosexual young women to kiss each other on nights out drinking in clubs, typically in the presence of young men. Some heterosexual participants reported kissing female friends after drinking, whereas others discussed how 'other girls' did this for male attention because same-sex behaviour between women was deemed as arousing for heterosexual young men. Diana, who identified as heterosexual, indicated that while in some ways she and her female friends were "doing it for the guys," she and her girlfriends also enjoyed the experience of exploring their sexuality together when drinking. She stated: "sexuality is a lot blurrier for girls" and expressed the idea that women who identified as heterosexual were not held as rigidly to the parameters of their sexual orientation in comparison to young men. This suggests that heterosexual women who engage in same-sex behaviour after drinking may be simultaneously reinforcing male-centered sexual norms as well as testing the boundaries of their own sexual orientation. On one hand, girls kissing other girls can be perceived as a male fantasy. On

the other hand, young women may enjoy the sexual freedom in certain drinking contexts to push the boundaries of normalized heterosexual behaviour.

While some heterosexual participants described being granted some fluidity in certain drinking contexts, Kate perceived that she was held more strictly to the expectations of her lesbian identity when in drinking contexts with her heterosexual friends. She described her heterosexual friends as "policing" her behaviour when drunk and shared the following:

> I get a lot of 'oh Kate! You can't flirt with that guy because you're a lesbian!' […] There's this expectation that if I'm like flirting with someone or making out with someone, that it has to be a specific gender. (Kate)

She described how female friends of hers "do the whole get drunk make out with each other thing even though they identify as straight […] and they get so excited about it or they'll make out in front of the guys." Kate, however, said that she was excluded from this behaviour, which she interpreted to mean her friends would perceive her participation as a disruption of their same-sex kissing as a performance for a male audience: "I think that like because I'm already gay, like straight girls like it kind of defeats the purpose; if a straight girl hits on a lesbian then that threatens their sexuality". This reveals how heterosexual norms may position queer young women differently than heterosexual women in drinking contexts, if their sexual orientation is known. Hetero-normative assumptions may offer heterosexual women some sexual fluidity, but may deny this fluidity to queer or lesbian women, as their sexual expression is not perceived as relational to men's sexual interest. These findings suggest that the assumption of

women's sexual expression as intended for a male gaze impede queer women's ownership of their sexual experiences in the same setting.

With respect to discussing the power dynamics of heteronormative notions of sexuality, Callie discussed heterosexual men as often dominant in drinking contexts, which led her to be guarded about her sexual expression as a as queer or pansexual identified woman. She described alcohol as useful for "letting my guard down. Like especially around like straight men. Just because I've been there before, they're not always the nicest to deal with when you're drunk." Callie suggests that she is more open with her non-heterosexual expression after drinking in the presence of heterosexual men. While Callie indicated that men's sexual forwardness or dominance made her uncomfortable, and that alcohol gave her more "patience to deal with them [straight men]." This perhaps indicated that she felt less defensive or more tolerant toward when interacting with straight men she perceived to display sexual entitlement. I prompted her to discuss her perceptions of heterosexual men in drinking contexts further, as she was the only participant to identify straight men specifically, whereas all other participants referred to men in general.

> I don't know what is, it's like girls go through puberty and suddenly every asshole in the world like pops up to like tell you what they'd like to do to you in a dark room […] like people would cat call or just say like inappropriate things, and so like, it has given me like a negative judgmental, I don't know, perspective to some straight men. Like, they're not all bad. Um, yeah I don't know, alcohol makes it a little easier to deal with them sometimes […] yeah, that entitlement I find sometimes hard to deal with. (Callie)

Callie described her perceptions of interacting with male sexual entitlement in club settings and experiences of sexual harassment in the form of unwanted sexual comments. Here she generalizes the gendered norms around male/masculine sexual aggression specifically to straight men, her perceptions may influenced by the specific context of a (hetero)sexualized club atmosphere. Other participants referred to men's sexual forwardness or even sexually predatory behaviour in drinking contexts. Most framed this discussion in a discourse of young women's sexual vulnerability, and perceived men's sexual forwardness as inevitable. Unlike most other participants, Callie problematized men who behave in sexually dominant or predatory ways, rather than viewing this behaviour as inevitable. Further, she suggested that she relies on alcohol as a means of coping or tolerating some young men's behaviour in heteronormative social contexts where she perceived men's dominance is normalized.

The Relationship Between Alcohol and Sexual Agency

As the term sexual agency may not be widely used or understood, I asked participants to discuss aspects of their sexuality or sexual experiences they believed to be important to them or they felt positively about. Although the interview questions were framed around the participants' positive perceptions and experiences, participants reported a range of experiences and perceptions pertaining to the role of alcohol in their sexuality and sexual agency. I informed participants before and during the interviews that they were encouraged to share only information they felt comfortable sharing, and that negative experiences were relevant. Participants discussed learning from their past negative experiences or perceptions, or framed them as important life experiences that helped them negotiate their sexuality later in life. Many participants described the

influence or effects of alcohol on their sexual agency as positive, but acknowledged their motivations for consuming alcohol to enhance sexual agency as potentially negative or problematic.

Participants discussed the role of alcohol in many aspects of their sexuality and sexual agency, including: sexual desire, physical sexual response, ability to communicate about sex with friends and/or sexual partners, sexual confidence, body image, feelings of intimacy or connection to partners, sense of control, assertiveness, and lowered inhibitions.

Alcohol Use and Discourses of Shame and Blame. The relationship between alcohol, sexual agency, and shame emerged as consistent discourse in the data. Participants described feelings of shame about their physical appearance and expressing their sexuality or interest in sex, which impacted their sexual agency. These feelings of shame stemmed from the influence of cultural ideals of women's bodies and beauty, and the social expectations of women's sexuality that discourage young women's sexual agency. When discussing the role of alcohol in their sexual agency, participants described using alcohol in their individual experiences and social contexts.

In the context of their individual experiences, participants discussed how alcohol enhanced some aspects their sexual agency, and helped alleviate feelings of shame. The participants' feelings of shame were two-fold. While they used alcohol to assuage shame and deflect social stigma associated with expressing their sexuality, they also recognized shame associated with 'giving in' to these social expectations. Serena described this perception below when she elaborated on an earlier statement she had made about drinking to overcome feelings of shame about her body and expressing her sexual desire:

> I think that people who um, who do feel that need to drink before they have sex… I think there is shame associated with that as well because it's shameful to fall for the societal expectations of the female body. It's shameful to be sucked into that, and to be made to believe that you are not enough […] You feel a loss of power when you feel like you're being so influenced by this even if you don't want to be that you feel the need to drink before having sex. (Serena)

Serena's statement suggests the influence of duelling social pressures on young women: alignment with ideals about women's bodies and traditional notions of sexuality, and rejection of the sexualization of women in media messages that should be expected of women in today's society. While participants described the effect of alcohol in alleviating feelings of shame or inadequacy as being beneficial, they also indicated that using alcohol in this manner was problematic.

In social circumstances or interactions with sexual partners, alcohol acted as a shield against the social stigma attached to young women's sexual agency as they could "blame the alcohol" for their actions.

"Blame it on the alcohol": using alcohol to deflect social stigma around female sexual agency. Participants described using alcohol as a scapegoat for expressing sexual desire and engaging in sexual activity. By consuming alcohol, participants felt they were able to sidestep the blame, shame, and judgment from others associated with these actions. The 'blame it on the alcohol' discourse emerged in participants' discussions of situations in which they displayed sexual agency by communicating their interest in sex with partners, or when peers/friends were aware of their sexual pursuits. This discourse

suggests the social constructions of women's sexuality that inhibit their sexual expression may motivate or encourage young women's alcohol consumption.

Participants described using alcohol in situations when they were hesitant to display sexual agency due to possible social repercussions for appearing sexually interested. Julia said she preferred to drink during her sexual encounters because she would have a "good excuse" for expressing her interest in sex. She indicated if she was drunk, she could take credit for initiating sex, but had the option to blame the alcohol for her sexual forwardness if her partner was not receptive: "And if it's okay [with your partner] it's you talking, but if not, it was the drink." Emma suggested that alcohol was a free pass to explore sexual boundaries with partners, that it allowed her to "do things that we maybe would be ashamed of if we weren't drunk," because if she was intoxicated at the time, her sexual partner would not judge her for being sexually aggressive or adventurous. These findings point to Julia and Emma's feelings of shame or embarrassment with expressing sexual desire. Julia and Emma suggest they may not be deemed responsible for their sexual expression if they were drinking. Diana described how alcohol provided only a temporary free pass to avoid any internalized feelings of shame: "It's not as if it [alcohol] cures any of these emotions about self-consciousness or social stigma or anything like that. If anything, they're back doubly the next morning."

Participants referred to how drinking enabled them to avoid judgement from their peers for engaging in sex or expressing their sexuality. Allie referenced the social stigma associated with behaving sexually and identified drinking alcohol as a "convenient excuse for exploring my sexuality." She described how, when drinking in her teen years, she was able to engage in sexual activity without social consequences, "because if I've

been drinking it doesn't matter; my actions no longer are tied to me." These findings suggest the participants had experienced social pressure to uphold ideals about female sexual reservation and deny ownership in their sexual interest, sexual expression, or sexual encounters. Kate noted similar experiences; when drinking she had "an excuse to hit on people" she was interested in because she could blame her forwardness on being intoxicated, rather than assuming responsibility for expressing her sexual interest.

Diana described how alcohol helped her forget about the "social stigmas of what you're doing" when drinking and having sex. This suggests there is stigma attached to certain contexts for drinking and/or sexual behaviour for young women. In this instance, Diana recognized "social stigma" for women who have sex while drunk, particularly if they are not in a committed relationship with their sexual partner. She went on to identify social values around women's sexuality, which emphasize being sexually inexperienced and prioritizing relationships, as being influential over how she felt about her own sexual experiences:

> As much as we know that we have positive experiences having sex, we still have that like 'oh, but I didn't save myself for marriage' or 'oh, I'm having sex with a guy I don't really know'. Yeah, so I think um, sometimes alcohol can kind of help you forget about those a little bit too. (Diana).

Maddie explicitly labeled the shame associated with having sex with multiple partners over a number of nights out drinking. She described how when discussing her sexual encounters with members of her social circle, she felt it was imperative to acknowledge that she ought to feel ashamed of having sex while drunk with three friends

in her social circle on separate occasions. Although she enjoyed the encounters, she felt unable to express her sense of enjoyment to her friends for fear of judgment:

> I have to play the part, I can't tell the story like' yeah, yeah I slept these three guys' because I know who I'm telling is going to react to that. […] I had a lot of fun, and I'm really happy I slept with all three of those guys, 'cause they're all attractive and I wanted to sleep with all three of them. But I can't tell that without saying, without being, like, acknowledging the fact that as a woman I should feel ashamed. I have to acknowledge that. (Maddie)

Jillian and Kaylen discussed how young women risk being labeled a 'slut' for having sex with multiple partners, particularly if these sexual encounters take place after drinking. They expressed frustration in having to deal with the negative connotations for having sex while drunk even when they may have enjoyed the encounter:

> … Again with the judgment, if you're like 'I've had sex with 15 guys,' girls are like 'you're a slut' and talk about you. When at the same time, you just did it because it was fun […] sometimes you just get drunk and have sex. I feel like, like I wish we didn't have to think about like how many people [I've had sex with]. See like, even [saying] that makes me feel like I sound slutty. (Kaylen)

These findings suggest that traditional values around sexuality persist in influencing the social expectations for women with respect to sexual activity and alcohol consumption. Young women may continue to experience social pressure to uphold values such as waiting until marriage to have sex, limiting sex to the context of relationships, or being sexually inexperienced. These findings further suggest that alcohol may be used to inhibit one's internalized feelings of shame for acting outside of social expectations for

young women, or as a means of sidestepping shame or judgement from peers.

The various ways participants internalized gendered social expectations and norms around women's sexuality and how these expectations and norms shaped the role of alcohol in the participants' sexual agency are explored further in subsequent sections.

Alcohol as a "tool" in experiences of sexual agency. The following sections describe the emergent themes related to the role of alcohol in the participants' individual experiences of sexuality and sexual agency. These findings pertain to the participants' perceptions of how the physiological effects of alcohol acted as a "tool" in their sexual encounters to alleviate internalized feelings of shame or self-consciousness due to gendered norms about sexuality that prioritize women's appearance and discourage women's sexual agency.

Alcohol and sexual desire. Five participants discussed experiencing greater sexual desire after consuming alcohol as it heightened their senses, and increased their interest in trying new things with sexual partners. All but one participant discussed feeling more "open" or "free" to explore different sexual acts when drinking.

Olivia identified being more interested in sex with her partner after drinking and stated, "I want it more [after drinking]…the act. And I try - I am really open to trying new things that I wouldn't try if I hadn't been drinking." Stevie reported experiencing similar effects on her interest in engaging in sexual activity when drinking and said, "I think I'm hornier [when I drink]. I don't know if there's actually is a reason for that but when I'm drinking I feel like more compelled to have sex and to try things that I normally wouldn't bring up." Callie described how alcohol made her more interested in sex, and described alcohol as a tool to "loosen up" and initiate sexual encounters with

women and men in whom she is interested. Kate described herself as already "sexually adventurous" but when drinking she felt this was "amped up a bit." Claire discussed how alcohol influenced her sexual decision-making, as it heightened her senses in general, including feelings of attraction if they were present:

> Drinking really makes me kind of like more emotional in general, so, so any emotion whatever it is will be heighted a bit […] like if I'm feeling really attracted to someone that will be intensified too. So that's definitely, definitely played a role in decision making with regards to alcohol and sexuality. (Claire)

These comments highlight a common perception and expectation among the participants that alcohol enhances aspects of sexual response related to their interest in sex, and their ability or willingness to communicate their desires or try new things sexually.

Emma described being "more true to [her]self" in her sexual relationships after drinking, as she felt more able to openly discuss her sexual desires and interests with her partner. Other participants shared similar experiences of being less shy about asking for what they want or need during sexual encounters to be aroused or feel comfortable. These findings suggest that young women may experience challenges articulating their sexual needs and boundaries, and may use alcohol as a means to enhance sexual agency, such as fulfilling their own sexual desires and negotiating these desires with partners.

In their joint interview, Kaylen and Jillian referred to enjoying the "attraction… and the whole social interaction" with potential new partners. Jillian discussed being more interested in sex after drinking and enjoyed "the chase" with new partners. Kaylen jokingly commented, "we're boys and like the chase," which suggests she recognized being sexually forward as a typically masculine trait. This highlights how gendered

norms around sexuality render some aspects of sexual agency, such as pursuing partners or initiating sex, as more acceptable or expected in young men than young women.

Alcohol decreases inhibitions. All participants referred to the effect of alcohol on their inhibitions; they all felt that drinking made them feel freer to approach potential partners, initiate sexual encounters, and verbalize their desires or needs during sex with current partners.

> I just let go of inhibitions because otherwise they're really, really, really bad sometimes. And yeah they, they really get in the way especially if I really like the person and if I find them really attractive… Yeah cause there's like the pressure. (Tara)

Like most other participants, Tara clearly identified an expectation that alcohol would lower her sexual inhibitions and reported intentionally consuming alcohol prior to sexual encounters due to this expectation. This may point to young women's expectations of lowered sexual inhibitions after drinking as a motivator for drinking prior to sexual encounters.

Almost all participants reported that alcohol enabled them to 'think less' about daily obligations and stressors, which inhibited sexual enjoyment and 'being present' during sexual encounters. Additionally, participants indicated they were less concerned about rejection from potential partners or 'overthinking' in the moment when they were drinking. Olivia described sex as a 'cognitive thing' for herself and women in general. She further describes the effects of alcohol, saying:

> "I find with alcohol it kind of shuts those cognitive processes down a little bit so I don't feel so distracted and I feel like I can lose myself in it a little bit more, and that's…can be a positive thing sometimes." (Olivia)

Participants' comments suggest that experiencing challenges with sexual expression, and the subsequent use of alcohol to promote sexual dis-inhibition, are common among young women. Like Olivia, many participants referred to the effects of alcohol as a "positive thing" or a benefit for expressing sexuality, however, they perceived young women's reliance on alcohol to display sexual agency as problematic. The participants' comments point to the inhibiting influence of cognitive or mental preoccupation on young women's sexual responsiveness.

Two participants reported particularly heightened sexual dis-inhibition when drinking a specific type of alcoholic drink. Emma reported that she typically felt aroused after drinking tequila and that it made her "feel free sexually" in comparison to other types of drinks. Kate discussed feeling embarrassed by her sexual forwardness after drinking vodka in particular:

> I stopped drinking vodka when I was, I think, 18 because I realized that even one drink makes me incredibly turned on. […] Yeah it's like - and you hit on everyone and it's embarrassing, even if I'm not remotely attracted to them. I'm hitting on them and it's not good. So, I guess like, and that's like more of a negative thing but like in the way that I'm aware of the way that alcohol is influencing my sexuality. (Kate)

These findings highlight how participants found themselves in contradiction of traditional notions of feminine sexuality that construct women as sexually reserved, as both Emma

and Kate described themselves as sexually forward or even aggressive when drinking. This suggests how the dis-inhibitory effects of alcohol can have both positive and negative consequences for women's sexual agency and sexual expression.

While many participants perceived that lowered inhibitions facilitate aspects of sexual agency related to confidence and communication about sex, they also recognized the limitations or potential risks of becoming too disinhibited due to drinking. For instance, Kate described how vodka lowered her inhibitions to the point where she did not feel in control of her sexual expression and perceived this loss of control to have social risks, including embarrassment for being too sexually aggressive. Kate and Emma's concern over appearing sexually forward when drinking further illustrates the gendered social expectations for sexual expression, as earlier findings presented earlier indicated the participants perceived young men being sexually forward and "hitting on" women in drinking contexts to be the norm.

Alcohol and intimacy. In the context of relationships, participants associated alcohol with enhanced feelings of intimacy, connection, and closeness to their romantic partners. Olivia described drinking with her partner as a bonding experience: "at the beginning of our relationship was just going out for beers and having beers and chatting and that's how we got to know each other. So drinking, I think we influence each other a lot in that." Diana described similar experiences of drinking with her partner early in their relationship to "deal with the awkwardness," as she perceived alcohol facilitated conversation and helped her and her partner get better acquainted. Kate described red wine as a "truth serum" and indicated that although she and her partner had good communication to begin with, "when we are drinking, like I guess we just get more open

and like lovey and feelingsy and stuff like that and braver as well." These findings indicate young women may expect alcohol to enhance emotions and intimacy with romantic partners. Participants who discussed drinking in the context of relationships referred to drinking as a 'given' on dates with partners, which indicates an association between drinking and sexual or romantic occasions.

Alcohol and performance anxiety. Two participants, Claire and Callie, identified lowered expectations around sexual performance after consuming alcohol. Claire appreciated how expectations around sexual performance were diminished after drinking:

> That's one thing that I really like [about drinking] … a lowering of expectations around sexuality with partners. It's like we know that neither of us is going to be perfect right now so just whatever. Let's just have fun. So I've really like had fun with that honestly before, like just the fact there is less pressure to perform. (Claire)

Callie shared similar expectations pertaining to sexual performance, particularly when both partners had been drinking:

> If I'm drinking and I'm with someone who's also drinking, I can pretty much assume that sex is probably not going to be as good as it would have been if we weren't drinking. […] Like, if I take someone home for like a one night stand, or whatever, it's not, I know it's not going to be like the most amazing sex I've ever had in my life but it's just kind of like, I'm there, like I'm 22, I might as well have some fun once in awhile, even if it's not like amazing sex. (Callie)

Both participants described sexual encounters as more "fun" after drinking, as pressure to perform well sexually was lessened. These comments highlight participants' beliefs that

alcohol creates a more relaxed context for sexual encounters due to less focus or concern with sexual performance. Their comments also suggest that, for these reasons, young women may find sexual encounters more enjoyable when drinking, despite diminished sexual pleasure and depressed physical response due to alcohol consumption.

Alcohol and sexual assertiveness. Participants reported being more verbally assertive about their sexual desire or sexual interest when drinking, and described feeling more 'bold,' 'flirtatious,' or forward. Maddie described her increased assertiveness with potential partners, stating, "I'm like a different person sexually, because it's like I will like chase after anybody drunk." Kate described being more willing to express what she likes or wants during a sexual encounter with her girlfriend when drinking:

> I'm a lot more, like, bolder when I'm drinking so I'm more likely to tell someone, like, what I want […] I guess, like, my situation is kind of unique because the only people that I've ever slept with were people that I was, like, in a relationship with so you have that level of trust, but yeah in general, like, even with them, I'm much less shy about this is what I want, this is what I want to do with you, and stuff like that. (Kate)

In addition to describing being more assertive about sexual desire, four participants also discussed feeling more aggressive and direct when rejecting unwanted sexual advances when drunk. This finding is in contrast to other participants' experiences, and the broader social discourse around young women's sexual vulnerability in drinking contexts.

When discussing the notion of young women's sexual vulnerability when drinking, Kaylen described it as "such bullshit," and further elaborated, "I'm a woman, I

know when I'm drunk what I'm doing, and what I want, and if I don't want it then, like, I'm not going to do it." Kaylen's comments highlight her personal sense of being sexually agent and assertive when drinking. She rejects notions of sexual vulnerability when drinking and appears not to consider her sexual decision-making or capacity to consent to be altered by consuming alcohol.

Jillian, who participated in the same interview, expressed how she too was able to say no to partners when drinking: "I've been like really drunk and just been, like, honestly, like, 'NO!'" In the same interview, Jillian uses language associated with masculinity and aggression to describe her capacity to turn down propositions from men: "Yeah, I feel like I have more balls when I'm drinking…like, I'll fight you. I won't fight you when I'm sober because I don't know how to fight, but when I'm drunk and I'm mad, I'll try! [laughs]." This suggests that Jillian may not perceive articulating sexual boundaries to be a common trait among young women.

Stevie also linked confidence with her ability to be assertive about unwanted sexual advances after consuming alcohol:

> Like, you have to be able to confidently say no to somebody, and […] convey the message of what you want, versus what you don't want…but I feel like at a younger age it's harder to have that confidence. So, like, the alcohol can almost be, like, the 'liquid confidence' like they call it. (Stevie)

Stevie associated age and confidence, suggesting that younger women are less likely to feel sexually confident, and thus rely on alcohol to help them be more assertive about their sexual interest. The participants' experiences suggest that some young women may struggle with the confidence to both initiate sex as well as turn down unwanted sexual

advances when sober. This may be linked to social norms that simultaneously denigrate women who display sexual agency, while placing value on women's sexual desirability. Young women may feel hesitant to express sexual desire for fear of appearing too sexually experienced, while simultaneously feeling pressured to accept sexual advances as validation of their sexual desirability. These findings indicate that younger women, in particular, may be motivated to consume alcohol due to expectations of being able to more assertively express their sexual interest, or lack thereof, with partners.

'The Line': the effect of alcohol quantity on physical response and sexual enjoyment. Seven participants noted that any perceived positive effects of alcohol on physical response or general enjoyment of a sexual experience were limited to moderate alcohol consumption. When discussing the effects of alcohol on sexual encounters, Claire referred to how alcohol enhanced physical effects when consumed in moderation stating that "there's just physically like more blood flow, and just […] it's in moderation only. Like, if it's too much like nothing really works [laughs]."

Participants described a 'line' in terms of the quantity of alcohol they consumed, and once they had crossed that line they no longer experienced the benefits of lowered inhibitions or enhanced emotional and physical responses. Tara described how heavy alcohol consumption inhibited her ability to have an orgasm: "if I'm really, really, really drunk, sometimes (laughs), this is getting super personal, sometimes I can't get off […] for like sex there's like that point where it's still fun. I can still get off." Although many participants associated heavier drinking with greater expectations of sexual activity, these findings reveal that young women may expect moderate alcohol consumption to more positively influence their sexual agency in comparison to drinking heavily. Interestingly,

only older participants made the observation that the benefits of alcohol on sexual agency were limited to moderate alcohol consumption. This could suggest that young women who have more experience with sexual activity when drinking have a more nuanced understanding and expectation of alcohol consumption on their sexual response than their younger counterparts.

Drinking for Body "Confidence": Body Shame, Alcohol Use, and Sexual Agency

Sociocultural ideals about female bodies and beauty emerged as a prominent theme in the participants' stories about their experiences with alcohol and sexual agency. The participants' comparisons of their bodies to ideals of female physical perfection were linked to their sexual agency. They perceived that internalized judgments about female bodies influenced young women's motivations for engaging in sexual activity and drinking prior to their sexual encounters.

With respect to their body image/body shame, participants described alcohol as means to increased "confidence", which they perceived as a benefit or 'positive aspect' of consuming alcohol during their sexual encounters. Although participants framed the discussion around confidence, most did not describe how alcohol enhanced already positive feelings about their bodies, sexuality, or sexual agency. Rather, they indicated that alcohol alleviated their negative feelings: poor body image, lack of self-confidence, and feelings of worthiness related to their perceived sexual appeal. The participants' reliance on alcohol for this purpose suggests that young women may be motivated to consume alcohol before sexual encounters because they experience challenges with expressing desire or interest in sex, and want to feel less encumbered by their insecurities.

For instance, Serena described relying on alcohol to escape her internal dialogue about not measuring up to standards of female perfection:

> I think there are some women who are better than others at ignoring the, the um, the construct of female perfection, or female physical perfection, or otherwise they just have a different way of quieting it [with] something other than alcohol, I don't know, because that's what I use. (Serena)

Serena discussed how some women internalize cultural standards of attractiveness more than others, and identified alcohol as a means of coping with feelings of inadequacy. Other participants shared similar experiences of drinking prior to sexual encounters to overcome internalized judgments about their bodies. These findings highlight the pervasive influence of cultural standards of beauty on young women's body shame, which in turn is linked to their sexual agency and alcohol consumption.

Kate described being less concerned or aware of her body if she has been drinking, which enables her to focus on her and her girlfriend's pleasure during sex:

> It's easy to be kind of like body shy even with someone that knows your body as well you know your own body, um, but like, yeah, like I just have less inhibitions when I'm drinking and it's like I'm not worrying about like, like the sounds that my body is making or how I look. (Kate)

Serena perceived alcohol as essential when having sex in order to ignore her intense feelings of body shame: "Um, for a long time I convinced myself that I couldn't have sex unless I was drunk and I don't mean like you know, a couple drinks I mean I needed to be drunk." Serena felt ashamed to express interest in sex as she her perceived that her body type was "not conducive to having sex." She further explained this association by adding,

"you feel like because of your body you shouldn't be allowed to want sex or to have it but you do." This suggests a link between cultural ideals of women's bodies and the social expectations around sexual expression, as cultural ideals of attractiveness position some bodies as more sexually valuable or sexually appropriate than others.

Other participants shared similar perspectives, which may also support the assertion that sexual expression is more or less socially acceptable for women depending on the appearance of their bodies. Callie acknowledged this relationship between body image, alcohol and sexual agency and the idea that only certain body types are perceived as sexual, but went on to indicate that she actively rejects those ideals:

> Even if I did think my body was good, there could always be something else wrong with it as well so it seemed like until you have the perfect body you shouldn't be sharing it with anyone, which is um…crap because uh, like it's never going to be perfect. (Callie)

Callie was one of only two participants who described feeling confident during sex. The language she used when describing this confidence suggested an acknowledgement that her body did not align with cultural standards for women's attractiveness. For instance, she did not describe feelings of pride about her body, but rather: "I feel confident when I have sex with someone, like, I don't feel ashamed of my body," suggesting she is aware that she might be expected to feel shame about her appearance. Callie went on to express her refusal to conform to these ideals: "I'm not going to spend three hours at the gym every day just to get laid." Diana, the one other participant who described herself as confident about her body, associated feeling attractive with her more pleasurable sexual experiences, in comparison to her friends who struggled with body shame:

> Especially when I was younger I felt um, I always felt like I was especially attractive, right? And guys treated me as if I was, right? So, I think that was a huge difference and especially with my friends that didn't feel that they were [attractive], it was a totally different experience I think, um, with like how they felt about their experiences with dating and sex. (Diana)

Callie and Diana both acknowledged the power of ideals of attractiveness on their sexual experiences. Both discussed how they positioned themselves in relation to cultural standards of beauty, and how this positioning impacted their confidence, sexual experiences, and sexual agency.

Callie suggested that she resisted cultural body ideals, and chose to distance herself from these constructs and shift her focus to her own personal enjoyment and pleasure during sexual encounters. In contrast, Diana felt she had positive sexual experiences because she was more confident and was considered conventionally attractive by young men. These findings offer insights about the power of physical beauty ideals in shaping young women's experiences with their sexuality.

Nearly all participants shared perceptions of how the dis-inhibitory effects of alcohol helped them to deal with internalized shame related to cultural ideals of female attractiveness, and value placed on women's sexual desirability. Participants discussed being pre-occupied with their appearance, which negatively impacted their sexual agency by inhibiting their ability to enjoy a sexual encounter. Diana provided an example of this perception:

> Yeah, it [drinking] always affects confidence, right? Just yeah, definitely confidence, and I think that's why *so* many girls could say that they have positive

> experiences with alcohol and sex. Um, I've got a friend who's…she's a little bit overweight and she's really self-conscious about her body and she, of all people, has just the best things to say about some drunk one night stand she's had […] you feel super confident [when drinking], you're not thinking about it, you know she's had better experience with one night stands than she's had with intimate moments with her boyfriend and that's a confidence thing right? (Diana)

While Diana described young women's "positive experiences with alcohol and sex," her example of a friend who drinks to overcome a lack of confidence indicates that in some cases, alcohol is used to overcome negative feelings. By noting that her friend, "of all people," had positive experiences with drunken one-night stands, Diana suggested that there is a link between a woman's body image and her sexual agency, in terms of expressing her sexual desire, and her enjoyment of sexual encounters. Diana's example highlights how young women perceive alcohol as providing a gateway to positive experiences by diminishing feelings of self-consciousness, which can impair their ability to derive pleasure from sexual encounters.

Serena described similar experiences of relying on alcohol to manage self-deprecating thoughts or feelings of unworthiness that inhibit her ability to connect with potential partners who show interest. Serena perceived that alcohol was essential to "switch [her] thinking", to enable her to accept compliments and believe partners are genuinely interested in her.

While participants described the alleviation of shame as a positive effect of alcohol, they acknowledged that young women's reliance on alcohol for this purpose was negative or 'unhealthy'. While they recognized the relationship between body shame and

alcohol consumption as problematic, this knowledge did not deter many of the study participants from continuing to consume alcohol prior to sexual encounters. These findings suggest an important connection between cultural messages about women's bodies and young women's alcohol consumption prior to, and in the context of, their sexual encounters.

Alcohol and "sexual value". Participants used language about 'worthiness' and discussed needing 'validation' of their attractiveness to convey how the perception of their sexual desirability influenced their sexual experiences. Participants discussed how young women in general may have sex or even acquiesce to sexual experiences with partners in order to validate their attractiveness or justify their 'sexual value.' Some participants described their own experiences of seeking out or acquiescing to sexual experiences, not for their own sexual pleasure or emotional fulfillment, but rather because they felt that being sexually desirable, particularly to men, was a form of social power. Tara described drinking before having sex with a previous partner because she was seeking male attention and validation rather than sexual fulfillment:

> I was definitely really, really drunk and I feel like it was in part, I wasn't really sexually attracted to him either. So that was a factor maybe more, me trying to find him attractive as opposed to feeling self-conscious about myself […] and at least somebody was into me. (Tara)

Tara's statement suggests that she prioritized attention from men as an indicator of her value or self-worth. Likewise, Diana suggested that young women's motivations for engaging in sexual activity are linked to perceptions of attractiveness. She suggested that some young women have sex to 'justify' their sense of worth or attractiveness rather than

to seek out their own pleasure:

> I feel like there's times where you have sex to feel attractive, right? People have sex to feel wanted sometimes […] I feel like I had a lot of times where that didn't come into play as much so I didn't put as much weight on a sexual experience because it's like, I'm just going to have fun, this is fun. Like, I didn't do it to justify anything. (Diana)

Stevie perceived that young women often go out drinking, and dress in sexualized clothing to solicit attention from young men as a 'confidence boost'. She suggested that young women who go home with someone after a night out are often looking for validation of their attractiveness.

> So I think a lot of the time when girls go out in bigger groups that is almost what they are going for, to get the attention. Because I know a few people who do that, like on a regular basis just to validate that they're attractive I guess […] I think the girls definitely do it for a confidence boost but also just to validate the guy will pick them up or whatever […] I don't think it's healthy but I definitely think girls do it. (Stevie)

These findings indicate a strong connection between cultural messages that prioritize young women's attractiveness to others (particularly men), and young women's motivations for engaging in sexual activity. Young women may interpret sexual interest from men or sexual encounters as a signifier of sexual worth or attractiveness.

While many participants indirectly referred to the power of women's sexual desirability to others, two participants named power explicitly. Kate described how when she was younger she was motivated to have sex to feel "sexually valuable" to others.

Serena discussed sexual desirability as "power," but described this power as not being something one inherently possessed. She indicated that if someone expressed interest in having sex, "that was them giving me power," as being seen as desirable was tied to young women's sense of value.

Serena further elaborated on the perception that personal value was tied to gaining the sexual interest of men. In her experience, the social importance placed on being sexually desirable resulted in accepting sexual advances from people in whom she may not have been interested. After gaining more sexual experience, Serena described being able to turn down sexual advances, which she perceived as a more genuine form of power:

> When you want to say no you're kind of saying I don't need the power you are giving me, I can find my own. Or get it from somebody I want to get it from […] I have a better sense of what I want and how I want to be treated because I didn't have that in the beginning I just kind of was like 'you want me? Cool. Let's do that'. And now I'm kind of feel like I'm allowed to be more selective. (Serena)

Both Kate and Serena discussed being influenced by cultural notions that their value was tied to their sexual attractiveness to others, particularly when they were younger. These findings suggest young women may view sexual encounters as a measure of their sexual value or attractiveness. This belief may impact their sexual agency, compelling them to seek out validation from others, rather than pursuing their own sexual desires or fulfillment. Kate and Serena, as well as other participants, went on to discuss how they gained a better understanding of their sexual desires and boundaries as they aged, which shifted their perceptions of sexual value. This suggests that sexual experience over time

may provide young women with an internalized sense of value. This knowledge may eventually allow them to position themselves differently in relation to norms that suggest their sexual value is derived from others' perceptions of their bodies

Summary of the Findings

The findings presented above report on the participants' personal drinking behaviours and the norms participants identified around alcohol consumption during their university years. All described drinking as an inherently social practice and identified heavy drinking as the norm in the university setting, particularly during the first year of university and among those living on campus. Although older participants reported drinking less in terms of frequency and quantity in their later years of university, heavy drinking on nights out remained the norm. There was a prominent discourse that drinking heavily was the norm, and there was little to no dialogue of risk associated with regular binge drinking. This could suggest that heavy drinking is normalized in the early years of university life, which may carryover into later years of university.

Participants identified commonly understood norms around young women's gender and sexuality including: notions of women's sexual reservation and inexperience, the link between cultural ideals of female attractiveness and women's social and sexual value, idealization of female sexual fidelity, the prioritization of monogamous relationships for women, heteronormative assumptions in drinking environments, and stereotypes around queer women's sexual permissiveness. Participants identified how these norms were reflected in social perceptions about young women's alcohol consumption and sexual expression, (re)negotiated in drinking contexts, and influenced the role of alcohol in participants' sexual agency.

The findings revealed how many aspects of the drinking culture were gendered and sexualized. In general, participants identified clear expectations that drinking, and drinking contexts were associated with greater likelihood of sexual expression and sexual activity. Markedly absent from was any discourse around consent under the influence of alcohol.

Some drinking practices, such as the type of beverage, were a means of enacting gender, and participants' identified gendered double standards in which women were more heavily scrutinized and held more accountable for their actions when drinking. While clubs were considered sexualized drinking environments, participants indicated women contended with norms that simultaneously prioritized women's sexual attractiveness and female sexual respectability.

Participants navigated social norms around gender and sexuality in drinking contexts that constructed women who drink as sexually available and emphasized female sexual fidelity and heteronormative perspectives of sexuality in which women's sexual expression is intended for male recipients. These norms created social boundaries in drinking contexts that impacted women differently based on aspects of their identity – in particular sexual orientation and relationship status.

The findings reveal the participants' common perceptions that alcohol enhances aspects of their sexuality and sexual agency. The participants' discourses around the role of alcohol in their sexuality constructed alcohol as a tool for enhancing their sexual agency, and a means to deflect the social stigma associated with appearing sexually agent. Although participants viewed the influence of alcohol on their sexual agency positively, they recognized they used alcohol to deal with internalized feelings of shame

stemming from sociocultural ideals about women's bodies and sexuality that discourage their sexual agency. The findings point to how gendered norms around sexuality that discourage young women's sexual agency are linked to their motivations for alcohol consumption.

Limitations

There are several limitations to note when interpreting the findings of this study. While this is an intra-categorical intersectional analysis, there were relatively few categories of difference to analyze, as there was little diversity among the women with respect to respect to age, racialization, and education level. It is important to note that all participants were cisgender and thus the participants were homogenous with respect to gender identity.

All participants were between the ages of 19 to 25, as I purposely recruited young women. Limiting the sample in terms of age undoubtedly influenced the data offering only young women's perspectives. Age and life experience likely have important implications for women's experiences and perceptions of alcohol and sexuality, which are not captured. Norms around drinking and sexuality change throughout women's lives (Simonen, 2012), and social expectations of women with respect to alcohol consumption and sexual expression may vary across age groups.

There was little racial diversity among the 14 participants; 12 were Caucasian and Canadian and two were Latina from South America. The Latina participants offered some information about cultural norms around sexual expression that differed somewhat in their native country in comparison to their experiences in Canada. Overall they shared similar perspectives to the Canadian participants about the social constructions of

drinking and sexuality. As the Latina participants did not describe how their cultural, racial, or ethnic identity impacted their experiences with the research topic, I did not feel comfortable making inferences about the intersections of their racialized identity given the small sample size. There is growing body of research literature examining how racialization impacts the lived experiences and differently (dis)advantages the social context for women of colour, Indigenous women, and women from non-European ethnic or cultural groups. Women of colour and Indigenous women's experiences with the research topic and that various ways racialized identities intersect with gender and sexuality are not reflected in this study.

All participants were students at the University of Victoria; 12 were completing undergraduate programs and two were pursuing graduate studies. This renders the sample relatively homogenous in terms of their education level, as all would have completed secondary school or an equivalent. Education level may indicate some exposure to information around alcohol and sexuality, which could impact the participants' perceptions and understanding of the research topic.

A self-selection or volunteer bias is important to note when interpreting the findings. Sexuality and drinking are potentially quite personal and/or sensitive topics to discuss which suggests a level of comfort or familiarity with these topics among the participants who volunteered to take part. The findings are likely biased to reflect the experiences of young women who are comfortable with discussing sexuality and drinking and have reflected on these subjects. The recruitment strategy and lack of anonymity in the data collection method likely discouraged participation by young women who are less comfortable talking about these topics. Young women who may be less comfortable with

discussing these topics may offer important insights about the relationship between alcohol and sexuality that are not included in this study.

My recruitment strategy focused on young women's "positive" experiences of sexuality and drinking was intentional. Given the scope of this study, my inexperience as a researcher, my lack of background as a counsellor/support worker, and the prevalence of sexual assault on campus associated with alcohol consumption, I did not want to risk re-traumatizing young women who may have experienced sexual victimization. The experiences and perceptions of the role of alcohol in sexual agency among women who have experienced sexual assault are extremely important and relevant to this area of research, however, they were not included in this study. As such, this study cannot fully capture the scope of the role of alcohol in young women's experiences of sexuality/agency in this population, and does not discuss sexual victimization. Further, women who may have negative perceptions of sexuality and alcohol consumption in general likely did not elect to participate. Again, these women would offer different perspectives not assessed in this research.

I acknowledge that my use of post-structural feminism to guide the data analysis is just one of many lenses or analytic frameworks relevant to this topic. Such frameworks include sex-positive frameworks, a decolonizing lens, and other feminist and queer theories that could potentially offer insights not captured in this study.

Discussion

The following discussion interprets the findings about young women's perceptions of the influence of alcohol on their sexuality and how they perceive alcohol to influence the relationship between sexual agency and young women's sexuality and gender. These findings provide a deeper understand of young women's motivations for consuming alcohol and how their ability to enact sexual agency are influenced by the dominant social norms in drinking contexts. I analyzed how the participants experienced many of the well-known physiological effects of alcohol – such as lowered inhibitions, increased assertiveness and confidence, and relaxation – in relation to social constructions of gender, sexuality and sexual orientation.

Alcohol to Mitigate Discourses of Shame and Social Constructions of Women's Sexuality

The findings suggest that young women may rely on the effects of alcohol consumption to help them to mediate the social constructions of women's sexuality and gender that impede their sexual agency and sexual expression. In drinking contexts, participants felt pressure to uphold persisting social constructions of women's sexuality that prioritize women's sexual inexperience and reservation. The findings discussed below suggest young women perceive alcohol to be useful for mitigating social constructions of women's sexuality in two ways: to alleviate internalized negative feelings and protect them from social stigma pertaining to women's sexual expression.

Alcohol use, internalized shame, and individual experiences of sexual agency. In the context of their personal sexual encounters, participants reported using alcohol to overcome reservations and shame about appearing sexual forward. Participants expected

the physiological effects of alcohol to render them better able to articulate their sexual desires and boundaries, initiate sexual encounters, and express their sexuality in general. Participants indicated that many of these perceived 'benefits' of drinking with respect to their sexual agency were limited to moderate alcohol consumption.

Expectations and beliefs that alcohol enhances sexual encounters and intimacy are well documented in sexual health research as "sexuality-related alcohol expectations" or "sexual enhancement expectancies" (Bogren, Kirstjanson & Wilsnack, 2007; George & Stoner, 2000; Matthews, Cho, Hughes, Wilsnack, Johnson & Martin, 2015; White, Fleming, Catalano & Bailey, 2009). Several studies identify the sexuality-related alcohol expectancies as common among young women, and associate these expectancies with specific risk behaviours related to alcohol consumption and sexual activity (such as: heavy episodic drinking, sexual assault, contraceptive and/or condom use, number of sexual partners) (Bogren, et al., 2007; Davis et al., 2010; George & Stoner, 2000; Matthews et al., 2015; Messman-Moore, Ward & DeNardi, 2013; White et al., 2009).

A survey of substance use and sexual risk taking behaviours among young Spanish women ages 19-29 found that young women perceived that alcohol 'removed barriers to have sex' (Castelo-Branco et al., 2014). Findings from the current study provide further context for understanding that many of the 'barriers' to having sex young women perceive stem from social constructions of women's sexuality and gender. While participants believed alcohol had benefits for their sexual agency, they recognized that this was due to social constructions of women's sexuality and gender that discourage their sexual agency. Participants' discourses around their personal experiences of drinking and sexuality constructed alcohol as a 'tool' the often relied on to facilitate

sexual expression and agency. Some even referred to alcohol as an essential precursor to sex as it lowered their inhibitions and self-deprecating thoughts.

Alcohol use and social stigma around young women's sexual agency. The findings from this study highlight the complexities of the social interpretations of women's alcohol consumption as it relates to their sexual agency. Participants described how women's participation in drinking contexts was subject to social sanctions imposed by norms that simultaneously value women's sexual attractiveness to men while demeaning women who appear sexually interested. Participants identified some commonly understood negative social constructions of women's sexual agency. They identified social stigma associated women who expressed their sexuality or sexual interest in drinking contexts, as these women were deemed sexually permissive and sexually experienced. The findings from the current study highlight how social norms that value young women's sexual inexperience influenced how their peers interpreted their alcohol consumption and sexual expression in drinking contexts. Participants indicated that young women who appear too intoxicated or overtly sexually expressive risked being labeled in derogatory terms (ex: "slutty", "easy" etc.) by their peers.

While women's alcohol consumption was somewhat stigmatized due to associations with increased sexual permissiveness, alcohol provided a scapegoat for the social judgment that came with expressing sexual agency. Participants described that they were able to deny their ownership in their displays of sexual agency if they were drinking at the time. Some reported intentionally drinking before sexual encounters as it exonerated them in the sense that they could blame their actions on drinking. Livingston et al. (2012) report similar findings of adolescent women using alcohol to both facilitate

sexual expression and excuse sexual behaviour. Abrahamson (2004) described how young women and men perceived being heavily intoxicated as a "liability-free" zone, where they are not held responsible for their actions when expressing interest in potential dating partners. In keeping with the feminist poststructural aim to critique dominant patriarchal social norms, the findings suggest that disrupting social norms that demean young women's sexual expression could indirectly render young women less reliant on alcohol to evade social stigma and internalized shame associated with sexuality.

Participants in this study felt compelled to use alcohol to disguise their sexual agency due to negative social perceptions of women who appeared sexually experienced. By drinking, they perceived their peers considered their sexual interest to be motivated alcohol use rather than their own sexual desire. Existing research evidence identifies both risks and benefits with young women's sexual experience in late adolescence and young adulthood (Billy, Grady & Sill, 2009; Golden et al., 2016). When discussing sexual encounters with their friends or peers when drinking, participants purposely constructed these experiences as deviant or a mistake. They feared being judged by friends or peers for acknowledging their sexual desire or sexual interest, despite identifying these experiences as important to learn about negotiating their sexual desires and relationships. Research suggests that women who are more sexually experienced have greater skills to negotiate for their own sexual pleasure and safety (Billy, Grady & Sill, 2009; Golden et al., 2016). It is possible that young women who have positive sexual relationships and experiences of sexual agency during adolescence may be better able to navigate the university context in which alcohol and sexuality are often linked. There is growing body of 'sex-positive' scholarship that views sexual activity as a normal and healthy part of

adolescent development (Harden, 2014; Welles, 2005). Sex-positive frameworks and research could support sexual health promotion efforts to foster healthy adolescent sexual experiences that focus on female sexual desire and agency (Harden, 2014; Welles, 2005). Further investigation is likely needed to better understand how to leverage the benefits of earlier sexual experiences while mitigating the risks for young women in university, particularly in drinking contexts.

Gendered drinking contexts. In this study, young women described negotiating contradictory discourses pertaining to women's sexuality, which created challenging social parameters for their behaviour in drinking contexts. While certain drinking contexts, particularly nightclubs, encourage women's sexual expression, those who displayed sexuality too overtly faced social consequences. Kovac and Trussel (2015) reference similar opposing social forces whereas young women may use alcohol or participate in nightclubs to experience some sexual liberation, however this sexual freedom has limitations imposed by traditional notions of women's sexuality. Young women may dress to appear attractive to a male gaze and those who attain this ideal are assigned higher social status or power but are simultaneously subject to stigma and judgment for overt efforts to garner male attention by dressing provocatively or behaving sexually (Lyons and Willett, 2008; Kovac and Trussel, 2015). Participants in this study identified a similar 'double edged sword' for young women's sexual expression in drinking contexts, which Lyons and Willet (2008) attribute to 'heteronormative gendered power dynamics'. The findings from this study suggest young women may be compelled to drink to mitigate competing discourses of women's sexuality that undermine their sexual agency. These findings are supported by other research linking sexual scripts or

gendered sexual norms that proscribe women's sexual experience, leading to increased alcohol consumption among young women (Conley, 2011; Cullen, 2012; Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2015).

Recent research reveals new gendered norms and trends around alcohol consumption emerging and young women are negotiating evolving feminine identities in drinking contexts (Simonen, 2016). Young women in university are drinking more than ever before and catching up to their male peers in terms of alcohol consumption (Thomas, 2012). The findings of the current study reflect this research, as participants reported binge drinking as a normal part of their, and/or their peers' social life. This study and other researchers (Cullen, 2012; DeVisser & McDonnell, 2012; Simonen, 2012) suggest a double standard where young women may experience more stigmatization for engaging in sexualized drinking contexts than young men.

Participants in this study reported heavy drinking as common among young women, but perceived that young women were judged more harshly than their male peers for appearing intoxicated or behaving sexually in drinking contexts. Cullen (2012) produced similar qualitative findings among young women in Britain who reported being ridiculed or viewed more negatively than young men for displaying the physical signs of drunkenness. Cullen (2012) suggests that this double standard for young women's heavy drinking is linked to ideas about 'normative heterosexual femininity' in which women feel pressure to appear and behave within the standards of feminine deportment. The findings from Cullen's (2012) study support this analysis of how traditional ideas about feminine respectability persist and influence the social (un)acceptability of women's intoxication. Gendered social expectations around femininity that emphasize appearing

attractive yet sexually reserved can impede young women's sexual agency and may also discourage their drinking to the point of intoxication.

In general, stigma associated with sexual activity and substance use can exacerbate the health consequences related to these behaviours and impair efforts to prevent these consequences (Poole & Dell, 2004). However, social norms that deter heavy drinking may have a role to play in preventing the harms associated with alcohol, to which young women are more vulnerable (Poole & Dell, 2004; Thomas, 2012). Ironically, while gendered norms may present unfair social consequences for young women in drinking contexts, these may also have a protective factor for young women's health. Women in general are more susceptible to some of the harms associated with alcohol use (PHAC. 2016; Thomas, 2012), and social norms that deter their drinking may have benefits from a harm reduction or health promotion standpoint.

Sexual agency and heteronormative dominance in drinking environments. A major aim of this research was to examine gendered and heteronormative assumptions that permeate young women's experiences of sexual agency and drinking, as well as the research literature on this topic. Much of the existing research on sexuality and alcohol that includes non-heterosexual women has delineated differences in alcohol use and sexual risk behaviours among young women based on sexual orientation. My intention with the current study was not to draw comparisons between heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, and queer participants, or suggest that the simply inclusion of queer women challenges hegemonic social structures. Rather my aim was to contextualize young women's diverse experiences with alcohol and sexual agency in social contexts that differently positioned heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, and queer women. I aimed to build

on existing literature by including heterosexual and queer women's perceptions and experiences of navigating their sexuality in heteronormative drinking and social contexts.

It is well documented in the research literature that non-heterosexual women experience sexual and alcohol-related health disparities in comparison to their heterosexual peers (Saewyc et al., 2007; Stevens & Hall, 2001). Research indicates non-heterosexual or 'sexual minority women' are more likely to consume alcohol, drink heavily, engage in risker sexual behaviours, and experience negative sexual health consequences than heterosexual women (Kerr, Ding, Burke & Ott-Walter, 2015; Matthews et al., 2015). Many of these risky behaviours and negative health outcomes are attributed to exclusion and discrimination queer women often experience in their social contexts and in the resources and services available to them (Condit, Kitaji, Drabble & Trocki, 2011; Saewyc et al., 2007).

In this study, my objective was to balance the discourse of disparity in existing literature by sharing the narratives of queer young women who feel positive about their sexuality and sexual agency. My intention is not to discount the importance of addressing health inequities facing queer women, but rather to provide information about sexually agent queer women that could be leveraged to inform a strengths-based approach for addressing young women's sexual agency.

Three prominent findings emerged in this study revealing how dominant heterosexual norms impact young women's sexual agency in drinking contexts and position women differently based on their sexual orientation. The first finding refers to discussions of heterosexual young women kissing other women in drinking contexts, which emerged during interviews with heterosexual, lesbian, queer and bisexual

participants. Some of the heterosexual participants used the excuse of drunkenness as an opportunity to explore kissing other women, but acknowledged that this act often is indeed intended to garner attention from young men. Many heterosexual participants also referred to this activity as common among their peers, and some discussed it in a derogatory manner as 'other' young women did this for attention from men.

Kovac and Trussel (2014) claim that heterosexual women kissing can reinforce heteronormative notions, as it perceived to fulfill straight male fantasy. Findings from the current study suggest that same-sex dancing or kissing were deemed socially permissible provided they were considered attractive to a male audience and did not violate heterosexual norms. Alcohol may afford heterosexual young women a 'free pass' to act outside heterosexual boundaries without jeopardizing their sexual identity. However, one participant who identified as lesbian perceived she was not afforded the same freedom to act outside the bounds of her sexual identity in drinking contexts. While she felt free to kiss female partners or other lesbian women in drinking contexts, her peers discouraged her from sexual activity with men or heterosexual women. These behaviours went against the heterosexual grain, in which women's sexual expression is constructed as relational to heterosexual young men's sexual interest. Further, she suggested that by kissing heterosexual female friends, she would threaten their sexual identity and undermining their intention to appear sexually attractive to men.

Two other findings emerged that exemplify the influence of heteronormative constructions on lesbian and queer women's identities and sexual agency. Findings pertaining to the queer participants' experiences suggested their same-sex sexual expression was interpreted a 'show' for the pleasure of young men in drinking contexts.

Additionally queer participants identified a commonly social construction of lesbian and queer women's sexuality that implied they were "down for anything" – open to various sexual acts with partners of all genders. The findings point to how heteronormative constructions delegitimize lesbian and queer women's identities and undermine their sexual agency by ignoring their sexual desires and boundaries.

Jackson and Gilbertson (2009) found that young women and men constructed the lesbian sexual expression as 'unreal' or a 'performance' for a male rather than authentic sexual expression. They reveal that high school age youth in New Zealand perceived portrayals of girl-on-girl as intended to bait a male audience, and constructed lesbian identities as 'heteroflexible' as lesbian characters often were depicted in media as engaging in sexual acts with heterosexual women or men (Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009). They suggest that the notion of heteroflexibility is a gendered construction as young men and women identified heteroflexibility among lesbians – but not gay men. While the current study did not include the experiences of men, the findings reveal assumptions of lesbian or queer women's heteroflexibility in heteronormative drinking contexts. This notion has important, and potentially dangerous ramifications for the sexual agency of non-heterosexual women in drinking contexts. At best, the idea that non-heterosexual women are 'down for anything' subjugates queer women's desires and identities and at worst, ignores and denies their sexual boundaries.

These findings reveal common social constructions of lesbian or same sex behaviour within a heterosexual lens. There is some academic literature examining how dominant social constructions of lesbian identities are shaped by the greater visibility of lesbian characters and 'girl on girl' sexualized acts in mainstream media in recent years

(Ciasullo, 2001; Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009; Jenkins, 2005). Some feminist and/or queer authors have critiqued these representations, as lesbian characters are typically constructed within discourses of hegemonic heterosexuality; lesbian characters are constructed as the "hot lesbian" who aligns with heteronormative beauty standards, and "girl-on-girl" sexual acts are often portrayed by heterosexual women aiming to excite a male audience (Ciasullo 2001; Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009). The findings of the current study also suggest that hetero-centric interpretations of lesbian or queer women's identities were common in drinking contexts, and that these interpretations undermined their sexual agency and identities.

Body Image, Alcohol, and Sexual Agency

This study identified the significant influence of cultural standards of beauty and the sexualization of women's bodies on the participants' alcohol consumption and sexual agency. Participants identified a social ideal of women's bodies deemed to be more sexual and thus worthy of displaying interest in sex. These social constructions impacted their perceptions of their bodies during their sexual encounters in varying ways. Some internalized the cultural importance placed on female attractiveness while others sought to actively resist comparing their bodies to these cultural ideals. However, most participants reported using alcohol to alleviate the internalized shame and self-consciousness about their bodies that impaired their ability to enjoy sexual experiences.

These findings support existing research about how 'objectified body consciousness' and 'sexual objectification' undermine young women's sexual agency and influence women's alcohol consumption (Calogero & Thompson, 2009; Carr & Szymanski, 2011; Claudat, Warren & Durett, 2012; Liss, Erchull & Ramsay, 2011;

Manago, Ward, Lemm, Reed & Seabrook, 2014; Steer & Tiggeman, 2008). Objectified body consciousness refers to an internalized preoccupation with cultural ideals of attractiveness, viewing the body as an object for others' pleasure, body surveillance, and linking self-worth to one's appearance (Calogero & Thompson, 2009; Claudat et al., 2012; Liss et al., 2011; Manago et al., 2014; Steer & Tiggeman, 2008;). Sexual objectification generally refers to the sexualization of women's bodies by others or in the media, and the portrayal of women's bodies for the pleasure of others (Carr & Szymanski, 2011). These concepts, as well as body shame, are linked to increased alcohol consumption (Carr & Szymanski, 2011), self-consciousness during sex (Claudat et al., 2012), lower levels of sexual desire and arousal (Steer & Tiggemann, 2008), sexual dissatisfaction (Claudat & Warren, 2014) and diminished sexual assertiveness, i.e. the ability to communicate sexual desires and boundaries (Liss et al., 2011; Manago et al., 2014).

The findings from the current study align with existing research connecting body shame to women's sexual agency and drinking, and point to the powerful influence of cultural body ideals on young women's drinking behaviours and sexual activity. Littleton et al. (2005) found that women's body surveillance – managing and monitoring one's appearance – predicted more frequent alcohol use and increased likelihood of drinking before sex. Holzhauer, Zenner and Wulfert (2016) found that poor body image was linked to heavier alcohol consumption among a sample of young women attending an American university. The current study did not measure or compare frequency of alcohol consumption, however participants considered heavy drinking common among young

women and identified poor body image as one motivation for consuming alcohol to the point of intoxication prior to sexual encounters.

The findings from this research also point to the internalization of social messages that link young women's sexual agency with their perceived sexual attractiveness. Some participants referred to seeking male attention, and engaging in, or acquiescing to, sexual encounters to validate feelings of self-worth. According to Claudat et al. (2013), this is linked to sociocultural messages that sexualize female bodies and reinforce a value system associating physical attractiveness with self-worth. This association has important implications for women's sexual agency and sexual health, as they may compromise their own sexual pleasure or forego safer sex practices if they perceive their value to be tied to others' enjoyment of their bodies. The findings from this study suggest the importance of combating sociocultural messages that sexualize women's bodies as they are linked to young women's alcohol use and sexual agency. Young women internalize these messages and use alcohol to mediate the various ways they impact their personal feelings of sexual worth and social pressure to conform to these ideals of attractiveness.

The current study and past research suggest that femininity ideology in Western societies, particularly prioritizing one's appearance for the sake of others' pleasure and linked to self-worth (Tolman et al. 2006), can impair women's sexual agency and contribute to heavier alcohol consumption. In a survey of heterosexual women in the U.S., Ramsay and Hoyt (2015) found that young women who internalized messages about women's sexual objectification experienced more body shame and sexual pressure, and were less sexually agent. Ramsay and Hoyt (2015) suggest internalized objectification renders young women less able to refuse unwanted sexual advances, and

communicate interest/desire for sex. Some participants in the current study identified accepting sexual advances from which they did not derive sexual fulfillment, as it provided them with a sense of worthiness by being deemed attractive by another person, which supports Ramsay and Hoyt's (2015) assertions about the connection between internalized sexual objectification and sexual agency. It is worth noting that the few 'outlier' participants who expressed feeling confident about their appearance or actively rejected cultural beauty standards, were the only participants who described certain sexually agent behaviours, including confidently rejecting unwanted sexual advances, and prioritizing their own sexual pleasure.

The Social Meaning of Female Sexual Fidelity and Monogamy in Drinking Contexts

The dominance of monogamy as a social norm and social pressure to uphold ideals of female sexual fidelity emerged as a prominent discourse related to the participants' alcohol consumption and sexual agency. These discourses identify monogamy as an important social construction that prioritizes female sexual fidelity. The findings discussed below reveal how in drinking contexts, young women's sexual expression and alcohol consumption is judged on how it challenges or reinforces dominant discourses around monogamy and female sexual fidelity.

Research on alcohol consumption and sexuality in the context of monogamous relationships primarily focuses on individual behaviours related to sexual risk or problematic drinking (Corbin & Fromme, 2002; Littleton et al., 2005; Messman-Moore, Ward & DeNardi, 2013; Musquash et al., 2012). Several studies define monogamy as sexually exclusive partnerships and examine it in relation to sexual behaviours such as condom use, drinking before sexual encounters, and negative sexual health outcomes

including sexual victimization, STI transmission and unintended pregnancy (Corbin & Fromme, 2002; Littleton et al., 2005 Messman-Moore, Ward & DeNardi, 2013; Warr, 2001). The current study contributes to this literature by extending the analysis of monogamy beyond an individual's practice of sexual exclusivity, to examine it as a social construction with implications for young women's sexual agency and alcohol consumption.

The findings from this study explored the social meaning associated with young women in monogamous relationships with respect to how their peers interpreted the participants' sexual agency and drinking behaviours. In drinking contexts such as clubs or parties, participants indicated their sexual expression was deemed socially permissible and less risky if it was for their (male) partners' pleasure or enjoyment. Participants' perceived that in drinking contexts single were perceived as threatening to others' monogamous relationships due to ideas that women who drink are sexually permissive.

At a broader social level, being in a monogamous relationship mitigated judgment or stigma around sexual expression when drinking. In some contexts, monogamous relationships allowed women to display aspects of their sexual agency related to their personal desire or pleasure. Kovac and Trussel (2015) suggest young women's drinking and sexual expression is seen as socially permissible, provided they do not violate conventional constructions of femininity or women's sexuality by appearing too drunk or promiscuous. This assertion is supported in the current study as the findings suggest that women in monogamous (heterosexual) relationships can sometimes sidestep social judgment in drinking contexts. In monogamous relationships, young women's displays of sexuality reinforce conventional heterosexual ideals that young women should value

committed relationships in which their sexuality is for the enjoyment of their (male) partner. This notion was further supported in this study by participants who described being judged for acting outside the boundaries of monogamous relationships when drinking by 'hooking up' when drunk, and by single participants who were deemed more sexual as a result of drinking and thus threatening other women's monogamous relationships. Particularly in club or party settings, participants described self-monitoring or being 'policed' by friends around dancing or appearing provocative, which violates norms around appropriate comportment for women in monogamous relationships.

Some participants discussed feeling safer or protected from social for sexual expression and physical harms of intoxication if their monogamous (male) partner was present. Warr (2001) suggests that heteronormative discourses align female sexuality with love, safety, monogamy, and heterosexuality, whereas sex for women's pleasure/desire is associated with casual sex, risk of disease, and deviance. Participants' perceptions of safety in monogamous relationships may be related to traditional notions of women's gender roles to prioritize love and relationships. Participants perhaps felt safer as their actions were not deemed to violate social standards that prioritize female sexual fidelity as their peers assumed their sexual expression was directed toward their partner.

Young women's drinking practices and/or sexual expression in drinking contexts have social meanings based on whether they uphold and/or resist heteronormative standards that prioritize women's sexual monogamy. Some participants felt pressured to uphold these ideals of monogamy and although other participants challenged or resisted these ideals, they acknowledged their impact on how their behaviour was interpreted by

peers. Other researchers such as Sweeney (2011), and Kovac and Trussel (2015) have identified that club atmospheres in particular perpetuate traditional gendered norms for women that privilege women seeking out singular romantic partners and denigrate women who have multiple sexual partners.

Implications of the Findings and Future Research Directions

In recent years, the prevalence of binge drinking and the associated harms (particularly for young women) on university campuses has received greater focus in research, policy, and health promotion and public health practice (Butt et al., 2011; Certain et al., 2009; Lindgren et al., 2009; Young et al. 2011). The findings from the current study highlight the importance of addressing deeply entrenched sociocultural notions about women's sexuality and femininity in public health efforts to reduce the harms associated with alcohol among young women in university. As it is well-known that alcohol often precedes young people's sexual encounters (Smith, Todavine & Kennedy, 2009), sexual health promotion and education should aim to acknowledge and address young women's motives for alcohol consumption that are tied to social constructions of women's sexuality that hinder sexual agency.

The findings from this study, and future research about this topic, could inform efforts to address the relationship between alcohol and sexual agency among young women. Such efforts require expanding on the individual behaviour-change focus common in health promotion and harm reduction related to alcohol and sexuality, which emphasize individual choices and decision-making about health-related behaviours. While education and information about making healthy choices related to alcohol and sexuality are valuable, the findings from this study indicate that efforts to reduce problematic drinking and promote sexual agency should be broadened to address more 'indirect' sociocultural influences.

Reconstructing social interpretations of women's sexuality is pivotal in addressing the connection between alcohol and sexual agency for young women. This

would involve rewriting entrenched gendered and heterosexualized scripts that render aspects of sexual agency more available to young men than young women. This would involve interrupting social constructions identified by this study, and other researchers, that relate to the objectification of women's bodies, coupled with traditional notions of femininity that value women's sexual inexperience, deters women from communicating their sexual desires and boundaries (Curtin et al. 2011). Further inquiry into health promotion's role, and specific health promotion strategies related to this type of advocacy is warranted.

This study's findings demonstrate how young women use alcohol for its capacity to suppress sexual inhibitions, and as a tool to mediate persisting social stigma associated with women's sexual expression. Health education should specifically identify the relationship between young women's alcohol use and social stigma around women's sexual expression. Such efforts could aim to provide young women with the language and critical lens through which to assess how their drinking, sexuality, and sexual agency are shaped by social expectations of women. Advocacy work could focus broadly on increasing and diversifying positive representations of women who display sexual agency in media and other social institutions. Public health and sexual health initiatives could aim to generate alternative discourses regarding young women's sexuality that positively portrays women's sexually agent behaviours – such as articulating sexual needs and desires.

Positive body image may be a protective factor against overuse of alcohol, particularly among young women who experience positive sexuality- related alcohol expectancies (Holzhauer et al., 2016). The findings from this study could inform specific

education efforts to bolster young women's capacity to critique and resist body-ideal messages, thus enhancing their sexual agency and sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure and safety. Such efforts would likely involve advocating for changes in the way women's bodies are represented and commodified in mainstream media. Further research examining how the social value placed on women's attractiveness contributes to young women's sexual agency and motivations for alcohol consumption is necessary. Such research could inform ways to effectively incorporate advocacy strategies into health promotion efforts aimed at enhancing young women's sexual agency and promoting healthier drinking behaviours.

Further research should address how the complex intersections of social constructions women's sexuality and gender roles can be reconstructed to simultaneously promote young women's sexual agency and moderate drinking. From a harm reduction standpoint, an important finding of this study is the participants' perceptions that the benefits of alcohol for sexual agency were limited to moderate alcohol consumption. This perception could be leveraged to promote the benefits of moderate drinking, particularly when alcohol use precedes young women's sexual encounters.

Matthews et al. (2015) suggest that strategies to reduce riskier alcohol consumption and sexual behaviours should focus on interrupting young women's sexuality-related alcohol expectancies that lead to perceptions that drinking enhances sexual experiences. Efforts to target young women's specific behaviours or beliefs that alcohol enhances sexuality are not without merit as a health promotion strategy. However, findings from the current study suggest that meaningful health promotion efforts to address young women's sexuality-related alcohol expectations should also

consider a the social contexts that influence young women's sexuality and drinking behaviours. Findings from the current study reveal that young women's drinking and sexual agency are complex social practices. Efforts to alter young women's sexuality-related alcohol expectancies should aim to challenge dominant discourses around women's sexuality, particularly those that associated young women's sexual expression and alcohol consumption with sexual permissiveness, which deem many aspects of sexual agency socially inappropriate for young women.

This study provided some exploratory findings about how dominant heteronormative constructions of gender and sexuality intersect with sexual orientation. These findings highlight some commonalities and differences in how heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in this study confront the social norms around sexual agency in drinking contexts. Future health promotion research and practice should aim to further examine how heteronormativity oppresses and polices queer women's sexual expression and sexual agency in drinking contexts. Inclusive and comprehensive health promotion research and practice focused on women's sexual health and alcohol consumption should acknowledge and examine the diversity within this population. Messaging and education should reflect the diverse experiences of women with respect to how the intersections of gender, sexuality and sexual orientation impact young women's sexual agency and alcohol consumption.

Conclusion

Using a poststructural feminist perspective and an intersectional analytic framework, in this CDA, I explored the relationship between alcohol use and sexual agency, and the social norms that influence that relationship for young women in university. Binge drinking and the associated sexual health harms are common among university populations, and recent trends show an increase in heavy drinking among young women (CAMH, 2005; Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness, 2012; Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], 2016). The dis-inhibitory effects of alcohol are associated with negative sexual health outcomes for this population (Benson, Gohm & Goss, 2007; LaBrie, Kenney, Migliuri & Lac, 2011; Testa & Livingston, 2009; Testa & Parks, 1996). In light of this research literature, this study provides important context to understand young women's motivations for alcohol consumption. The findings suggest young women's motivations to drink and drinking practices are tied to social constructions of sexuality and gender that stigmatize women's sexual agency. This study provided insights from young women about how they may rely on the commonly known effects of alcohol to relieve internalized shame and social stigma around their sexual expression.

I gathered information about the participants' experiences and perceptions of the relationship between alcohol and sexual agency through semi-structured one-on-one interviews. I conducted a thematic analysis grounded in CDA methodology to uncover the discourses participants used to construct their experiences of drinking and sexual agency, and examine the language they used to make sense of themselves in relation to dominant social norms around sexuality and gender.

A powerful discourse of shame emerged from the participants' experiences and perceptions of the role of alcohol in their sexual agency. The findings revealed how the participants relied on the known dis-inhibitory effects of alcohol to navigate in gendered social constructions that stigmatize young women's sexual agency and prioritize their sexual inexperience and feminine respectability. In the context of their personal experiences, participants relied on alcohol to quell internalized shame about communicating sexual needs and boundaries. To avoid judgment from peers in their social circles, the findings suggest young women use alcohol to absolve ownership of their sexually agent behaviour, as it is deemed to be motived by drinking. Participants discussed dis-inhibitory effects of alcohol, and the social meaning of drinking as "positive" for their sexual agency. However, they recognized their reliance on alcohol for these benefits was due to negative connotations associated with young women's sexual expression. These findings suggest that efforts to promote healthier drinking practices among young women should address the sociocultural influences that undermine women's sexual agency.

Cultural standards of beauty and the sexualization of women's bodies emerged as another prominent theme in the participants' experiences with the topic of interest. Every participant discussed using alcohol to alleviate their preoccupation with the appearance of their bodies, which impeded their ability to enjoy sexual encounters. Participants used language of 'worthiness', 'value' and 'validation' in their discourses of body shame and sexual objectification. Findings suggest young women may seek out, and even acquiesce to, sexual experiences in drinking contexts to validate their sexual value, which was tied to their perceived attractiveness. These findings point to the strong influence of

sociocultural ideals of women's sexual attractiveness to men on their sexual agency. Advocacy around body positivity and shifting the cultural focus away from women's bodies may have indirect yet positive implications for young women's alcohol use and sexual agency.

The findings suggest that social perceptions and expectations of women's alcohol consumption and sexual agency can vary in different drinking contexts – particularly in nightclubs. In nightclubs, heteronormative assumptions and gendered double standards can intersect with sexual orientation to create boundaries for sexual expression that differed for heterosexual and queer, lesbian, and bisexual young women. Heterosexual women may be afforded some sexual freedom in this context to engage in same-sex sexual behaviours (dancing or kissing) as it is constructed as a performance intended for a male audience.

Exploratory findings from this study suggest that the dominance of heteronormative assumptions that privilege male sexual interest can undermine the sexual agency and sexual identity of lesbian, queer, and bisexual women. Queer and lesbian women's sexual expression with partners or other lesbian women was delegitimized as was deemed to be intended for heterosexual men. Queer and lesbian participants identified how they were held more strictly to the parameters of their sexual identities, as acting outside the bounds of same-sex behaviour was perceived as threatening to the heterosexual identities of their peers.

Given limitations and scope of this study, the findings cannot be generalized more broadly than the context of the participants' experiences. Research on sexual health and alcohol consumption often stratifies health outcomes based on sex or gender, and

generalizes about women's health as a ubiquitous group. This research provided some exploratory data on the diversity among women with respect to the intersections of gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation with this topic by including the voices of heterosexual, queer, lesbian and bisexual participants. In keeping with the feminist poststructuralist and queer theories guiding this inquiry, I aimed to interrogate the boundaries imposed by heteronormative assumptions and the gendered sexual norms. The participants' provided some insights as to how heteronormative assumptions and gendered sexual expectations in drinking contexts can influence the sexual agency of heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual and queer young women in varying ways.

Despite the known health risks, heavy alcohol consumption and the associated sexual health outcomes persist among university populations (Butt et al., 2011; Centre for Addictions Research of British Columbia & Canadian Mental Health Association, BC, 2015; Certain et al., 2009; Lindgren et al., 2009; Young et al. 2011). There is a growing body of literature to suggest the importance of understanding young women's perceived sexuality-related benefits of alcohol consumption to inform health promotion messaging and public health strategies to reduce the harms associated with alcohol use (Goldberg et al., 2002; Holzhauer et al., 2016). Future research could further examine how the perceived benefits of alcohol for sexual agency are influenced by social constructions of women's sexuality and gender. In this study, the dominant social constructions of sexuality and gender influenced the participants' experiences with alcohol and sexual agency in varying ways based on their identities and social locations. Future research could more thoroughly reflect the diversity of women's experiences by examining how various categories of difference and social processes (racialization, colonialism, ageism,

etc.) intersect with gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation to influence the relationship between alcohol and sexual agency for women.

Again, meaningful efforts to decrease problematic drinking and promote sexual agency among young women in university should address the social constructions of women's sexuality and gender. These constructions are largely shaped by hegemonic and heteronormative social processes that undermine young women's sexual agency. This study provides exploratory research about the connection between young women's motivations for alcohol consumption and heteronormative parameters that undermine their sexual agency by predicating the interest of a male audience. Future health promotion research and practice should aim to interrupt, resist, and reconstruct heteronormative constructions of young women's sexuality that influence their alcohol consumption and sexual agency.

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Appendix 1 – Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Preamble:

My Introduction

I am a Master's student in the Social Dimensions of Health Program, at the University of Victoria. My research interests are around women's sexuality and sexual health. My undergraduate degree and research was in Health Promotion at Dalhousie University.

About the Study

Although research has identified important sexual health risks linked to drinking for young women, some studies have shown that young women may find alcohol helpful for some aspects of sexuality. Some of these perceived benefits of drinking include: lowered inhibitions, decreased self-consciousness, being more relaxed, increased sexual pleasure, and finding it easier to talk about sex or sexuality.
The aim of this study is to learn more about these benefits, by talking to young women about the relationship between alcohol and positive aspects of their sexuality. Specifically, I am interested in learning more about young women who feel a sense of sexual 'agency' and the role of alcohol in this agency. Sexual agency refers to feeling confident, strong, powerful, and capable in relation to sexuality. For this study, all aspects of sexuality are relevant, including sexual behaviour, desire, expression, orientation, emotions, pleasure etc.

Your Participation

Informed Consent
Before we start with the interview, I will go through the consent form with you. Your participation is completely voluntary. At any point you can stop the interview and/or withdraw from the study without any penalty or recourse. Also, there is no pressure or obligation to answer any questions you are not comfortable answering. Your identity will remain anonymous in all of the materials coming from this interview. Your name, and any other information will be removed or changed in the interview transcript, final thesis, and any reports or articles written from it. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript before it is used in the data analysis, to change, remove, or add any information that you wish.

Safe Space

As outlined in the consent form, the discussion in this interview will be around your experiences with alcohol use and its relationship to your sexuality. These two main topics, drinking and sexuality, are different for everyone and could be very personal to you. I aim to make sure that you are comfortable throughout the interview, and to make this a safe space for discussion. To do so, I will ensure that you, and the information you

share are treated respectfully. In a qualitative study, the 'data' are the information that you share therefore you are considered the knowledge holder or expert on this topic. Everyone's experiences with this topic will be different so there are no right or wrong answers. You are encouraged to share only information you feel comfortable talking about. Should a topic be difficult to discuss we can pause or stop at any time. If you become emotional, and feel you need some additional support, I have a list of support resources here for you from the Counselling Services at UVic. If you have any questions at any point throughout the interview or afterward, please do not hesitate to ask me. Also, if you think there is anything else that you would like to discuss that you think is important for this topic, please let me know.

Questions

Alcohol Use:

The first few questions I have are around drinking. There is a broad range of ways that different people drink alcohol. Whether it is the number of drinks we have, the types of drinks we consume, or how often we drink. (For example, some drink heavily, others abstain entirely, some fall somewhere in between, and for many it can vary from situation to situation.)

Can you tell me about how you typically drink alcohol?
Probes:
What do you usually drink?
Where do you drink?
How often do you drink?
Do you drink with other people? With whom?

What, if anything, influences how you drink alcohol?
Probes:
How you feel?
Situations?
People? Friends, peers, family
Time of year?
Locations?
Social expectations refer to the informal rules, norms, or beliefs held by society that can influence how people behave and think. There are sometimes different social expectations for different groups of people.

From your perspective, if any, what are the social expectations around drinking alcohol for young women?
Probes:
If at all, how do these expectations affect your perceptions or experiences of drinking?
From your perspective, if at all how might these expectations be the same different for:
Young men?
Other women? For example at different stages in life or different groups of women.

Older or younger women?
Single women vs. women in relationships
Students or non-students?
Racialized women
Geographic location (for example, rural vs. urban)
Socioeconomic status
Job/profession
From your perspective – do find your experiences/perception compare to others?
If any, are there other characteristics about yourself (facets of your identity) that influence how you drink?
Or affect the social expectations of drinking for YOU?
Sexuality:
The next few questions are more to do with sexuality, and as I mentioned earlier, for this study, any and all aspects of sexuality are relevant. So this could include, sexual orientation, sexual activity, desire, the emotional aspects of sexuality, communication, sexual expression, pleasure, and so on.

Sexuality:

If anything, what comes to your mind when thinking about, or describing sexuality- either your own sexuality, or young women's in general?
If any, which aspects of sexuality do you think are important for yourself or young women?
Having sexual experience or having sex
Sexual orientation
Partners/Dating
Expressing sexuality
Emotions

If any, are there aspects of your sexuality do you feel positively about?
Probes:
Are there aspects of your sexuality that you are comfortable with, or feel confident about?
What, if any, are the aspects of sexuality that are enjoyable for you?
If any, which aspects of sexuality are important to you or for young women?

If any, what influences the aspects of sexuality about which you identified feeling positively?
Probes:
These influences might be personal, social, societal, or otherwise
Who, if anyone, influences your positive perceptions or experiences of your sexuality?
Family
Friends or Peers
Role Models
Which, if any, situations affect your perceptions or experiences of your sexuality?
Social

Places/locations
We talked earlier about social expectations or societal beliefs around drinking for young women. This next question is around the same ideas but for young women's sexuality.

If any, what do you think are the societal views or social expectations that influence the positive aspects of sexuality?
From your perspective, if at all how might these expectations be the same different for:
Young men?
Other women? For example at different stages in life or different groups of women.
Older or younger women?
Single women vs. women in relationships
Students or non-students?
Racialized women
Geographic location (for example, rural vs. urban)
Socioeconomic status
Job/profession
From your perspective – do find your experiences/perception compare to others?
If any, are there other characteristics about yourself (facets of your identity) that influence how you drink?
Or affect the social expectations of drinking for YOU?
Sexuality and Alcohol:
Alcohol can affect people quite differently, and in a range of ways. In relation to sexuality, alcohol may also affect sexual behaviours, feelings, expectations, communication, desires etc.

<u>Sexuality & Alcohol:</u>

From your perspective – does alcohol influence your sexuality in way? If so, how?
Probes:
How, if at all, does alcohol affect the aspects of your sexuality that you feel positive about?
are comfortable with?
feel confident about?
find enjoyable?
Can you tell me more about the specific aspects of your sexuality that are affected, or not, by drinking?
Sexual behaviours
Sexual desire
Expectations about sex or your sexuality
Emotions related to sexuality
Decisions about sex or your sexuality

What, if any, specific aspects of drinking affect the positive aspects of your sexuality?
How much you drink?
Where you are drinking?
What type of drink?

Who you are drinking with?
We talked earlier about the social expectations around drinking alcohol for women, and how these may or may not be different for various groups of women, or for young men. (Review some of the expectations or differences discussed in question 3).

What, if any, are the social expectations for young women in relation to their sexuality when drinking?
Probes:
If at all, how do you these expectations affect your perceptions and experiences of your sexuality and drinking?
From your perspective, if at all how might these expectations be the same different for:
Young men?
Other women? For example at different stages in life or different groups of women.
Older or younger women?
Single women vs. women in relationships
Students or non-students?
Racialized women
Geographic location (for example, rural vs. urban)
Socioeconomic status
Job/profession
From your perspective – do find your experiences/perception compare to others?
If any, are there other characteristics about yourself (facets of your identity) that influence how you drink?
Or affect the social expectations of drinking for YOU?

Is there anything you would like to add, or anything we did not discuss that you think is important to talk about related to drinking and the positive aspects of your sexuality, or young women's sexuality in general?

Do you have any questions or comments you would like to talk about before we end the interview?
Thank you very much for taking the time to talk about this important topic with me today. Your contribution to the research is invaluable.

Appendix 2 – Recruitment Poster

Are you a woman who feels confident and informed about her sexuality?

Have you consumed alcohol on more than one occasion?

Are you a university student, between the ages of 19 and 25?

Have you had positive sexual experiences while drinking at least once in the past?

If YES to all of the above, I would like to talk to you, about your experiences for a graduate student research study.

Volunteers will be interviewed one-on-one about their experiences drinking alcohol and how it affects their sexuality. This study is open to all self-identified women of any sexual identity.

If you are interested in taking part in this study, please contact Erin at ecusack@uvic.ca.

Research Study ecusack@uvic.ca	Research Study ecusack@uvic.ca	Research Study ecusack@uvic.ca	Research Study ecusack@uvic.ca	Research Study ecusack@uvic.ca	Research Study ecusack@uvic.ca	Research Study ecusack@uvic.ca	Research Study ecusack@uvic.ca	Research Study ecusack@uvic.ca	Research Study ecusack@uvic.ca

Appendix 3 – Ethics Certificate

University of Victoria

Human Research Ethics Board
Office of Research Services
Administrative Services Building
PO Box 1700 STN CSC
Victoria British Columbia V8W 2Y2 Canada
Tel 250-472-4545, Fax 250-721-8960
Email ethics@uvic.ca Web www.research.uvic.ca

Certificate of Renewed Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:	**Erin Cusack**	**ETHICS PROTOCOL NUMBER** Minimal Risk - Board members	**13-245**
UVic STATUS:	**Master's Student**	ORIGINAL APPROVAL DATE:	22-Jul-13
UVic DEPARTMENT:	**SDH**	RENEWED ON:	20-Jun-14
SUPERVISOR:	**Dr. Charlotte Reading; Dr. Bernie Pauly**	APPROVAL EXPIRY DATE:	21-Jul-15

PROJECT TITLE: **The Role of Alcohol in Young Women's Experiences of their Sexuality**

RESEARCH TEAM MEMBERS: None

DECLARED PROJECT FUNDING: **None**

CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL

This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the protocol.

Modifications
To make any changes to the approved research procedures in your study, please submit a "Request for Modification" form. You must receive ethics approval before proceeding with your modified protocol.

Renewals
Your ethics approval must be current for the period during which you are recruiting participants or collecting data. To renew your protocol, please submit a "Request for Renewal" form before the expiry date on your certificate. You will be sent an emailed reminder prompting you to renew your protocol about six weeks before your expiry date.

Project Closures
When you have completed all data collection activities and will have no further contact with participants, please notify the Human Research Ethics Board by submitting a "Notice of Project Completion" form.

Certification

This certifies that the UVic Human Research Ethics Board has examined this research protocol and concluded that, in all respects, the proposed research meets the appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Participants.

Rachael Scarth

Dr. Rachael Scarth
Associate Vice-President Research Operations

Certificate Issued On: 20-Jun-14

13-245 Cusack, Erin

Appendix 4 – Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research project called "The Role of Alcohol in Young Women's Sexual Agency".

My name is Erin Cusack. I am a graduate student at the University of Victoria in the Social Dimensions of Health Master's Program, and the researcher conducting this study. You may contact me if you have questions by email: ecusack@uvic.ca or by phone: (250)-857-5425.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research to complete my Master's degree. Two supervisors, Dr. Charlotte Reading, School of Public Health and Social Policy in the Faculty of Human and Social Development (HSD), and Dr. Bernie Pauly, School of Nursing, HSD are advising me. You may contact Dr. Charlotte Reading by email: reading@uvic.ca or by phone: (250) 472-5451 and Dr. Bernie Pauly by email: bpauly@uvic.ca or by phone: 250-472-5915.

About the Project

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to learn about young women's experiences with alcohol use and the ways drinking affects their sexuality – such as feelings about their sexuality, sexual activity, talking about sex, sexual orientation, desires etc. Specifically, this study is looking at the positive aspects of sexuality and how alcohol affects them, from the perspective of young women.

Importance of the Research

Young women, in particular university students, often drink alcohol heavily, which is linked to many sexual health risks. A few studies have shown that young women may find alcohol helpful in expressing their sexuality. This study aims to explore the perceived sexual-related benefits of consuming alcohol to better understand young women's motivations for drinking. The findings from this study may uncover aspects of young women's sexuality that could be promoted through healthier alternatives to drinking or drinking in moderation.

Participants Selection

You are being asked to participate in this study because you meet the following criteria:

You identify as a woman or female.

You feel confident, and informed about your sexuality.

You are between 19 and 25 years old.

You are a university or college student.

You have consumed alcohol in the past, on more than one occasion.

You have had positive sexual experiences while drinking at least once in the past?

Including young women who meet these requirements is important for this study because, the aim is to understand the role of alcohol in young women's sexuality, from their perspective.

A key topic of this study is sexual agency. Sexual agency refers to feeling confident, strong, powerful, and capable in relation to your sexuality. Therefore, I am especially interested in talking to young women who feel strong, confident, and informed about their sexuality, particularly when they are drinking.

What is Involved

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include taking part in an individual interview with the researcher (~1 to 2 hours). The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed (typed up word-for-word) for analysis.

In the interview, you will be asked about your experiences with alcohol use and your perceptions of how drinking affects your sexuality in a positive way. You will also be asked about how social messages from media, friends, family, school, etc. influence your perceptions and behaviours. A copy of the interview questions will be provided to you before taking part in the study.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study must be completely voluntary. If you decide to take part, you can refuse to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable, and you can withdraw at any time without consequences or explanation.

If you do withdraw from the study, the information you provided will be removed from the study, unless you give permission for it to be used. You can opt to remove all data, or if the interview has already started, you can choose to let the information you provided be used in the analysis.

Inconvenience

Participation in this study may cause you some inconvenience, as it will require a time commitment of approximately one-to-two hours and perhaps travel to the interview location (to be decided by you and the researcher). However, efforts will be made find a time and location of the interview that is most convenient to you.

Risks

There are no known physical risks of participating in this study. As the topic of sexuality is very personal however, there is a possibility you may become embarrassed or emotional during the interview.

In order to reduce these risks, I aim to make the interview a 'safe space' for discussion. A 'safe space' means that we will meet in a location that is comfortable, convenient, and private for you. You, and all of the information you share, will be treated respectfully throughout the research process. In qualitative research, the information you share is the 'data'. Therefore you, as a participant, are viewed as being the most knowledgeable about the research topic as you have direct experience with it. I aim to create a supportive, non-judgemental environment to discuss your experiences. If at any time you wish to change the subject, decline to answer a question, you may do so, without explanation.

Should you become emotional, embarrassed, or distressed in any way throughout the interview, you may stop at any time. If you feel you need further support, I will have contact information of support services available to you. As you are a student at the University of Victoria, counselling is available to you though Counselling Services, located on the second floor on the University Centre, at no charge. More information about Counselling Services is on their website at http://www.coun.uvic.ca/ and their phone number is 250-721-8341 should you wish to access these services.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

As your participation consists of an interview with the researcher your identity will not be completely anonymous – because the researcher will know who you are. However, your confidentiality will be protected in a number of ways. Firstly, the location of the interview will be private, and the nature of our meeting will not be made known to others. For example, should I need to consult administrative staff to book the space for the interview, they will not know your name, or that you are participating in a research study during the time that we are using the space.

Your name, and all other identifying information will be removed, or changed in the interview transcript, the thesis write up, and any presentations or papers written about this research study.

Reviewing Your Interview Transcript

I will provide you with a copy of the transcript of your interview. You have the option to review your transcript. Reviewing your transcript gives you a chance to delete, change, or add any comments as you see fit. Two weeks after you have received your transcript, I will follow up with you to see if you have any comments or feedback to include. You are not obligated to review the transcript or respond at follow up. If you do not respond at follow up, it is implied that you do not wish to review your transcript or provide feedback.

Compensation

You will be provided a $10.00 gift card to the UVic Bookstore for participating in this study.

Data Storage and Disposal

All data records such as audio recordings, consent forms, and transcripts will be kept in a locked cabinet to which only I, the researcher, and my supervisors will have access. Electronic data, such as computer files of the transcripts, will be kept on a password protected hard drive on my personal computer in my home. The data will be kept for no longer than five years, as that is the maximum duration of a Master's degree. After maximum of five years the data will be destroyed (i.e., paper documents will be shredded and discarded; electronic documents will be permanently deleted).

How the Research Findings will be used

The findings of this interview, and interviews with other participants will be combined and used in my Master's thesis. The findings may also be used in conference presentations, and for articles submitted to academic journals for publication.

Questions or Concerns

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact me, the researcher with the contact information provided at the top of page 1, or, the Human Research Ethics Office, University of Victoria, (250) 472-4545 ethics@uvic.ca.