**A ‘proper night out’: A practice theory exploration of gendered drinking**

**Abstract**

Drawing on the three-element model of social practice theory and key conceptualisations relating to gender performance, this paper reports on an empirical study of the intersecting practices of drinking alcohol and doing gender. We present data from a 14-month research project to explore the online and offline intoxicated drinking practices of 23 young people in England framed as a ‘proper night out’. The data was analysed with a focus on three elements (the ‘corporeal’, ‘alcohol’ and ‘caring’), and the findings demonstrate how young people collectively practice gender through their intoxicated drinking practices. This operationalisation of practice theory highlights the potential value that a practice theory lens has for exploring gendered social practices and broadening understandings of notions of acceptable and suitable practice performance.

**Key words:** social practice, gender, masculinities, femininities, alcohol, young people, practice theory, drinking practice

**Introduction**

As with the general population, the alcohol consumption patterns of young people differ greatly by geographical location, socio-economic position and gender (NHS Digital, 2020). Despite young people consuming alcohol in a variety of different ways with some abstaining and others drinking only very moderately, intoxicated drinking remains prevalent in European and other high-income countries (WHO, 2018). Although historically, women have been lighter drinkers than men, the latest evidence suggests the alcohol drinking practices of young men and women are more aligned than they have been previously (Slade et al., 2016; Järvinen and Room, 2017).

Internationally, practice theories have been influential in the sociology of consumption with recent attention turning to a range of harmful health practices (eg. Blue et al., 2021) including heavy episodic drinking, consumption above low-risk guidelines and daily drinking (Hennell et al., 2019; Meier et al., 2018). Alongside this development, is growing recognition by policy makers and health practitioners that a sociological understanding is needed, to move beyond thinking about individual actions, motivations and decision-making, to develop an understanding of the formation of preferences, habits and actions in a wider social context (Thom et. al., 2016; Meier et. al., 2018).

There is recognition that a practice framework can contribute to these wider understandings of alcohol consumption (Thurnell-Read, 2018; Hennell et al., 2020), as this perspective takes the action of ‘drinking alcohol’ as a performance of practice rather than being about individual attitudes or decision-making. Additionally, the strong gendered dimension of young people’s drinking is clear (Hennell et al., 2019; de Visser and Smith, 2007; Bailey et al., 2015; Stepney, 2015; Willott and Lyons, 2012). Gender scholars have argued that gender is acted out routinely through the performativity of the everyday and reproduced through the routinised practices of what is deemed appropriate by, and for, men and women (Butler, 1990). Bringing the concept of *practicing gender* (Martin, 2003) together with a practice theory approach to *drinking alcohol* could shed light on some of the complexities and fluidities of young people’s alcohol practices.

Like the approach taken by Blue et al. (2021: p1053), we focus in this study on multiple (inter)connecting practices and aim to provide an empirical contribution of intersecting practices. Thereby developing an understanding of how young people collectively practice gender through their intoxicated drinking practices. The paper begins with an overview of practice theory, followed by key conceptualisations relating to gender performance. We then outline our research design, followed by findings and finish with a discussion of the contributions of this work.

**Intoxicated drinking, practice theory, performance and gender**

Despite a very diverse collection of theories at their heart (including what have been described as first generation practice theorists such as Giddens and Bourdieu), practice theories all represent a shift away from the problematic dualisms of analysis of intentional individual action and analysis of social structures to ‘social practices’ as the primary unit of social enquiry (Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012). If we are to develop our understandings of why (unhealthy) behaviours prevail practice theories can enable us to understand why these practices persist even though individuals may well understand that their actions are considered unhealthy and risky (Hennell et al., 2019).

A common conceptualisation of practice developed by second wave practice theorists (eg. Shove et al., 2012; Blue et al., 2016) is that specific practices are made up of a recognisable relationship, configuration and combination of interconnecting elements - materials (objects and technologies), meanings (engagements and emotions), and competences (practical understandings, embodied knowledge and the physical dispositions and cognitive processes) - which become deeply embedded as routines and habits, as routinised ways of engaging and relating to the social world (Nicolini, 2013; Shove et al., 2012). Thurnell Read (2018), for example demonstrates how changes in the materials, meanings and competencies of real ale consumption have led to a more complex intellectualised form of beer appreciation.

Practice knowledge and know-how is viewed as being either implicit and tacit, or explicit and conscious (Nicolini, 2013). Practices become routinised through a collection of rules and normative views that are understood by the performers of the practice about how to act. Practices should not be looked at in isolation; instead, Shove et al. (2012) encourage the consideration of bundles of practices as a set of (inter)connected practices which are ‘interwoven and held together by habitual temporal resources’ (Meier et al., 2018: p210). In their analysis of energy use, for example, Nicholls and Strengers (2015) use practice theory to illustrate how provisioning a family meal is made up of a bundle of practices: shopping, storing and preparing food, cooking, eating and cleaning up. Bundles of practice come together because of intelligibility (Shove et. al, 2012; Schatzki, 2012). In practice theory terms, intelligibility refers to those aspects or phenomena within a practice that determine what individuals do in relation to what makes sense to them. This sense-making is determined by a range of factors including knowledge, rules, customs, settings, places and materials. Intelligibility then is the normative actions that people perform; those actions that make sense to them to perform at that time and as part of that practice. Studies considering the performances associated with alcohol consumption practices, particularly those referencing intoxication from excessive consumption (Emslie et al., 2012; Thurnell-Read, 2013) have started to show that there are multiple ways of doing alcohol practice-as-performance, because understandings, values, and enactments differ (Warde, 2005).

One key area where understanding and enactments differ is in relation to gendered performance through alcohol. From the perspective that gender is performative (Butler, 1988), gender is acted out routinely through the performativity of the everyday and is reproduced through the routinised practices of what is deemed appropriate by, and for, men and women (Butler, 1990). Gender is always a ‘doing’ and normative gender performances are sticky, repetitive and both conscious and unconscious and taken for granted. The conceptualisation of ‘doing gender’ has the potential to integrate with practice theory (Rouse, 2007), since both theoretical framings are concerned with ‘doings’ and reproduction through performance (Shove at al., 2012; Butler, 1988) with masculinities and femininities continuously (re)produced through and within localised communities of practice (Paechter, 2006). Focusing on multiple practices connecting and interacting (doing gender; drinking alcohol), opens up new ways of thinking about “extensive complexes of practices, continually on the move” (Blue et al., 2021: p1035).

Masculinities have been shown to be numerous, fluid, hierarchical and constructed in opposition to femininity (Dempster, 2011; Connell, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is a culturally specific, idealised form of masculinity that is constructed in relation to subordinate masculinities and femininities (Connell, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity in western cultures is typically characterised by physical toughness, rationality, risk-taking, being the breadwinner and heterosexuality (de Visser and Smith, 2007). Alcohol research has drawn on conceptualisations of masculinities to explore men’s drinking as an enactment of hegemonic masculinities (Campbell, 2000; Thurnell-Read, 2013).

Drinking and getting drunk have long been associated with masculinity and masculine behaviours (Griffin et al., 2013; Willott and Lyons, 2012). Masculinities in the field of alcohol studies have been linked to drinking excessively (particularly beer), alongside efforts to control the intoxicated and embodied effects of excessive alcohol consumption (Willott and Lyons, 2012) characterised by ‘drinking fitness’ (Campbell, 2000). However, configurations of excessive drinking practice vary between different social settings and with different social groups (Connell, 1993); rejecting approved masculine practices in one context can be justified on the basis that doing so enables a practice of masculinity in another.

More recent research has associated the alcohol consumption practices of young men with uncaring behaviours and sexual risk-taking (de Visser and McDonnell, 2012), enacting an embodied masculinity which is both less controlled and less constrained (Thurnell-Read, 2013). Indeed, some young men have been found to celebrate an intoxicated loss of control, such as, vomiting, passing out and fighting (Thurnell-Read, 2013). These performances are linked by notions of ‘celebrated loss of control’ and socially problematic consequences. Using a social practice lens could facilitate an exploration of these different configurations of drinking practice where what is seen to constitute appropriate masculinities is different in different social contexts and over time.

Post-modern constructs of femininity have emerged that construct young white, working class women as the excessive, drunken, out of control ‘other’ (Griffin et al., 2013). Young women who drink to intoxication for example, have been viewed by some as transgressing gender norms for acting in unfeminine or overtly masculine ways around alcohol and consequently ascribed the label ‘ladette’ to capture their perceived societal transgressions (Brown and Gregg, 2012). However, within the night-time environment, intoxication is not only accepted but expected and normalised within young people’s social lives (Mackiewicz, 2015). Paradoxically, normative femininities around heterosexual notions of attractiveness and respectability persist (Griffin et al., 2013). This is in the context of a night-time environment that is not only highly gendered but also sexualised where young women are called upon to enact excessive or hyper-sexual forms of femininity (Griffin et al., 2013; Bailey et al., 2015). The hyper-feminine image is characterised by high heels, low cut tops, fake tan, heavily made-up, drawn on eyebrows, slimness and short skirts all of which is accompanied by drinking to intoxication (Mackiewicz, 2015). The night-time environment is a space where gender competencies shape notions of suitable and acceptable performance (Mackiewicz, 2015).

The focus of this paper is to report on an empirical study of the intersecting practices of doing gender and drinking alcohol, and thereby develop understandings of how young people collectively practice gender through their intoxicated drinking practices.

**Methods**

Qualitative data gathering young people’s narrative accounts and social media content relating to their alcohol consumption practices were collected over a fourteen-month period in 2015/16. This data was collected prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, and therefore does not capture any associated changes in alcohol drinking practices. Three mixed gender friendship groups comprising 23 young people (aged 16 to 21 years) were recruited from low-income neighbourhoods in Northwest England. A snowballing sampling approach was used, where contacts working with young people acted as gate keepers to wider social networks.

This study followed other practice theory research that has adopted a qualitative methodology (McQuoid et al., 2018), and combines group interviews and observations of social media. Social media provided an additional data source exploring how young people performed their drinking practices to wider social networks in an online environment, and represented an alternative performance of the practice to that given in the group interviews (Atkinson et al., 2015). Photographs, internet memes and postings provided an insight into the participants’ experiences of events (Martens, 2012). This type of data is congruent with a social practice theoretical approach enhancing the research context (Martens, 2012) by combining a narrative (from the group interviews) with observations of online practice performance. Social media content from Twitter, Facebook and Instagram including photographs, hashtags, memes and online conversations were collected on a monthly basis from each participant’s individual account to circumvent any algorithms and captured in PDF format. Each PDF was then edited by the researcher to identify material for the study. Additionally, each friendship group participated in three or four group interviews approximately three or four months apart and lasting from 60 to 75 minutes to discuss drinking practices and their social media content relating to alcohol consumption. Interviews were conducted in private spaces convenient to the participants, usually college or workplace and were audio recorded. Transcription followed a conventional approach with minimal cleaning.

Interpretation of the data involved the integration of all source data using NVivo software and analysis of the combined dataset (Nairn and Spotswood, 2015). A labelling frame was developed, which combined practice theory conceptualisations and methodological insights. Following Banks’ (2008) guidance on qualitative visual data analysis, our approach ensured that an internal narrative focusing on content and an external narrative relating to the context in which the image is observed was developed. The analysis presented proceeded through the six stages of Braun & Clarke’s (Braun and Clarke, 2006) principles of thematic analysis and was supported by NVivo data analysis software.

In line with Social Research Association guidelines each participant consented at the start of the study and confirmed their consent at points throughout the research. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of participants. The study was subject to institutional ethical regulation and a full ethical discussion is provided in (Hennell et al., 2020).

**Findings**

The theoretical ideas presented in this paper have led us to analyse the data with a focus on the practices of *doing gender* and *drinking alcohol*. The study findings show that participants engaged in various and different drinking practices, such as alcohol consumption with family or friends or with a meal. However, for all the study participants and on several occasions, they engaged in one particular intoxicated drinking practice, which was constituted by a bundle of practices that came together to form a drinking occasion framed as a ‘proper night out’. The bundle arrangement consisted of six (inter)connected practices: ‘planning’, ‘getting ready’, ‘pre-drinking’, ‘going out’, ‘getting home’ and ‘storytelling’ (Hennell et al., 2020).

This ‘proper night out’ bundle of practices consisted of a complex configuration of the elements of practice, namely the material, meanings and competences of the practice. The materiality included alcohol, the corporeal, spaces, finance and mobile technology. The material elements combined and interconnected with the social and symbolic meanings of social recognition, sociability, caring and group belonging, and also with knowledge and competences that related to the consumption of alcohol and staying safe.

In this section we analyse three of these elements to demonstrate the gendered nature of drinking alcohol: the *corporeal* through ‘getting the right look’ and the embodied experience of intoxication, *alcohol* and ‘drinking the right drink’ and *caring:* doing gender through caregiving.

**The corporeal and getting the right look**

The materiality of the physical body is bound up in this practice through both the intoxication effect and the way in which participants perfect their body and image to get the ‘right’ look for the ‘proper night out’. An integral part of the feminine practice of the ‘proper night out’ for the young women was how they presented themselves both virtually and in real-time to achieve a desired image. This links with other work finding that self-presentation is highly gendered and social media visual imagery presents a managed, polished and posed performance (Atkinson and Sumnall, 2016).

Group messaging apps were routinely used by the young women to discuss potential outfits, hairstyles and overall appearance, enabling them to comment on each other’s possible assemblages. The young women drew on a discourse of an appropriate look for the event. This look was highly gendered, sexualised and feminine in appearance with full make-up, stylised hair, and the wearing of a dress and heels was considered an absolute necessity. Charlotte explains that *‘If we are going into town, it would be like heels, full face of makeup, dress and hair completely like curled – everything*!’. In presenting the ‘right’ look the young women in the study performed a femininity, that has been described as a hyper femininity, a type of ‘over the top’ femininity (Bailey at al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2013). Both the social media and discussion group data show this particular form of femininity is critical to engaging in the ‘proper night out’ and supports the young women in maintaining their femininity whilst drinking.

The finished ‘look’ is shared online with their social networks, and the virtual social network is then invited to appraise the look by ‘liking’ or retweeting and to endorse with positive comments. Social media visual content conveyed knowledge about the practice materials required for the right look which was linked to the practice performance by reinforcing what ‘look’ was acceptable and what was not.

In contrast the male participants in their all-male groups did not describe their ‘proper night out’ preparatory routines in the same ways that the young women did. However, their social media images were of well-groomed, similarly styled young men indicating both preparation and some degree of co-operation or a tacit understanding of what to wear and getting the ‘*right look*’. However, this was narrated as less of a group practice than was the case for the young women.

The lack of shared stories about ‘getting the right look’ from the men suggests that it is in the planning stage of the ‘proper night out’ that decisions are made on what to wear; getting ready is usually a solitary affair unless with female partners or girlfriends. Notably, the male participants do not come together with their male friends until they start pre-drinking. This demonstrates the importance for the young men that they are seen as independent and self-reliant in their preparations but that they were also aware of what constituted the ‘right look’ and were as reluctant as the young women to stray from its performance (Dempster, 2011).

**Alcohol and drinking the right drink**

A ‘proper night’ out is fundamentally connected to intoxication and thus to the consumption of alcohol. The participants described how the practice revolved around alcohol consumption, which was essential for its competent performance. Alcohol consumption could be found in three of the practices that make up the ‘proper night out’ practice bundle; ‘going out’, ‘pre-drinking’ and for some but not all participants in ‘getting ready’.

Participants narrated contradictory discourses about the types of alcohol they drank on a ‘proper night out’*.* Firstly, a discourse of not being particularly concerned about the type of alcohol, was illustrated by Kate, who when asked what she drank, responded with *“anything really”* and Becky, who replied *“give me any”.* Sophie stressed that it was about drinking as much alcohol as possible, and Liam talked about drinking “*cheaper stuff*” enabling greater consumption more, unconstrained by financial limitations. This type of functional drinking as a means to an end is given more importance than taste. For example, Mark explained that the taste of vodka could be hidden by mixing it with something sweet “*I think with vodka it’s got quite a bitter taste where if it’s mixed with lemonade you can’t taste it*”. Finally, Claire and Becky explained that they would just order a mix of shots rather than choosing ones they liked the taste of “*We just like ask them for mixed”*. Claire constitutes the drinking of shots as being important with no necessity for making an active choice of flavour implying the function of becoming intoxicated, overrides taste pleasures.

Despite the narrations of a discourse of ‘*any alcohol will do’*, the relationship between the materiality of alcohol and the practice itself is more nuanced. The materiality of alcohol impacted on the gendered performance and the enactment of the practice. In other words, the type of alcoholic drink, the alcohol brand and the vessel containing the drink were all part of the gendered practice performance. Whilst young people explicitly described in the group interviews drinking ‘any’ type~~s~~ of alcohol, an alternative performance is evident from social media postings. Exclusive, expensive or exotically branded alcoholic drinks associated with style, prosperity and notions of gender featured in the participant’s social media content and narrative accounts, implying that the functional drinking performance is not valued for sharing with their wider social networks.

The discourse of ‘*any alcohol will do’* was also contradicted by the normative gender practice meanings associated with different types of drinks. An example is the discourse of preference for masculine and feminine drinks (de Visser and Smith, 2007; Nicholls, 2016). The young women in the study expressed a preference for wine, cocktails and alcopops, feminising the drinking experience. In contrast the young men in the study expressed a preference for beer and whisky, demonstrating and endorsing elements of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Willott and Lyons, 2012).

The participants offered a rationalised justification for why they drank some drinks but not others based on a like/dislike binary: “*I just don’t like it. It doesn’t taste nice”* (Kate)*.* This contrasts with the discussions outlined previously, when participants described drinking, drinks that they did not necessarily like the taste of, but did so to achieve or maintain intoxication; a further example of function versus value dichotomy described earlier. ‘Taste’ in this context is constituted as justification for young men preferring specific ‘masculine’ types of drinks and young women preferring ‘feminine’ types of drink. In-depth probing questions elicited acknowledgement from two participants that beer drinking was associated more with boys than girls.

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| Amy: | *And I think it’s like a boy/girl thing as well isn’t- it? Like my boyfriend would drink beer cos he knows he is, like, supposed to drink beer.* |
| Researcher: | *So, are you supposed to drink beer then Liam?* |
| Liam: | *I think that’s like a stereotype. I think it’s more a boy drink if you get what I mean. But I think, like, the reason why some people [girls] don’t like it, is it’s what you are used to drinking, as well.* |

Amy offers the justification that beer is something that young men are supposed to drink, and Liam agrees that beer is a ‘*boy drink’*. Liam follows this, however with an immediate justification for why this is the case, constructing preferences for different drinks with familiarity. But he does not question how boys become ‘*used* *to*’ beer and girls do not. These rationales for drinking specific types of alcoholic drinks and not others serve to justify the know-how associated with who drinks which type of drink. These materials are then embedded into the practice which then provides further intelligibility for this gendered practice on future nights out and for new recruits (Sahakian and Wilhite, 2013). Types of alcohol (in the form of girls’ drinks and boys’ drinks) are bound up with meanings of masculine and feminine identity and draw on traditional values of acceptable drinking. Knowledge which is assimilated as more young people are recruited into the practice, sustaining and reproducing the practice and the gendered performance (Shove et al., 2012).

Through further discussions, two of the young women named a limited range of branded lagers that they considered acceptable for women to drink. These drinks would be accessorised to further increase their standing as acceptable materials. For example, a lager such as a Desperado (lager with tequila) or San Miguel drunk from a bottle, topped with a wedge of lime on a summer’s day, were considered acceptable materials for young women. The meanings of why young women only drink lager from a bottle is so embedded and routinized within practice that it is not questioned by the participants. Whilst on the one hand drinking from the bottle was justified in terms of quantity, even when the quantity was comparable the young women expressed a preference for a bottle imbuing it with a meaning beyond the functional. In certain situations, locations and context, drinking lager from a bottle is regarded as acceptable; however, consuming the same drink from an alternative vessel such as a glass makes it unacceptable. The quote from Claire below illustrates this point.

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| Researcher: | *So, if they were same quantities – bottle of San Miguel, small can or a glass?* |
| Claire: | *A bottle. I don’t know why. When it’s like a hot day and you wanna go the beach that’s what I have.* |

By only drinking specific named brands, from a distinct receptacle, in an appropriate space or venue and adding fruit the young women are feminising the beer drinking experience. In this way beer drinking does not negatively affect their feminine competence. In contrast, for these young women, drinking beer on a ‘proper night out’ was not acceptable, and to do so risked being considered unfeminine and represented an unacceptable transgression of the practice rules.

The young men in the study expressed a preference for beer, whisky and other spirits which was further emphasised by online photographs. Images of young men with an alcoholic beverage nearly always displayed pints or bottles of beer, thereby further masculinising the drinking of beer as part of the ‘proper night out’*.* Wine in particular was thought of as being ‘girly’ (Lyons and Willott, 2008; Nicholls, 2016), although some of the male participants mentioned drinking other types of drink (wine and occasionally cocktails) in specific situated practices including an evening out with a woman or at a work event. This is conceptualised as an expression of situational masculinities where appropriate configurations of practice vary in different social settings and with different social groups (Connell, 1993). For example, when they were out with a young woman it was considered acceptable to consume drinks with traditionally feminine associations such as wine.

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| Mark: | *When we [Mark and Emily] go to xxx we’ll get a bottle of wine between two of us.* |

The implication here is that young men are performing situational hegemonic masculinities appropriate to the different social contexts of an all-male group or a mixed group or pairing. In this scenario the young men are trading masculine competence of drinking beer with masculinity gained from being with a young woman and performing a different version of masculinity (de Visser and Smith, 2007).

Another example was workplace nights out where the evening’s hospitality was paid for by the participants’ employer. On these occasions the drinking of beer was traded for the drinking of excessive amounts of free wine. Social media photographs of events show wine and beer being drunk by the young men with group members rehearsing a narrative of wine drinking on these occasions.

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| Jack: | *They [the wine] were all at my end! We had about six bottles of wine.* |

In this example Jack trades masculine competence in drinking beer to masculinity associated with consuming free alcohol and drinking excessively.

The functionality of alcohol in achieving pharmacological intoxication is a requisite component of the material arrangement within the practice entity of the ‘proper night out’*.* Within practice theory a practice can be considered appropriate or fitting if there are enough people routinely performing the practice (Spotswood et al., 2015). Within the ‘proper night out’, young women drinking ‘feminine’ drinks and young men drinking ‘masculine’ drinks has become the ‘right’ way to perform the practice, situating masculinity and femininity as opposites. However, this normative way of doing gender is contradicted by a contextual specificity of appropriate performance of gender such as young women drinking beer on a summer’s day. These alcohol consumption competences become automated and ingrained and are constantly being reproduced with other young people being introduced to this knowledge. Acceptable practice performance requires participants to know which type of drink, glassware and brands are the most appropriate for a given occasion.

**The corporeal and the embodied experience of intoxication**

The embodied experience of intoxication was constitutive of the ‘proper night out’. However, this embodied experience of intoxication was highly gendered. Some of the young men enacted an embodied masculinity through an intoxicated loss of bodily control (Thurnell-Read, 2013) which was narrated as less controlled and less constrained than traditional masculinities associated with heavy drinking (Campbell, 2000). In contrast, the young women in this study enacted a performance of a more’ *controlled loss of contro*l’ (Measham and Brain, 2005 p273). For example, Phoebe constructed a narrative that was constitutive of controlled drinking, by claiming to drink within her intoxication limits and by describing her desired intoxication level as ‘*tipsy*’ even when the amount of alcohol she described drinking significantly exceeded the low-risk limits.

In her storytelling, Phoebe is rehearsing a respectable femininity that distances her intoxicated self from the working-class binge drinker depicted in popular discourses (Stepney, 2015; Griffin et al., 2013). The unacceptable performance of femininity relating to uncontrolled intoxication is conflated by the young women with a particular image of womanhood which was considered unacceptable. Performance of the ‘proper night out’ was a way of practising gender (Butler, 1990), and the tacit rules and embodied understandings prescribed these different intoxicated performances for men and women (Lyons and Willott, 2008) and different ways of performing masculinities and femininities depending on the wider context. For example, the idea of conventional feminine respectability was placed at risk from out-of-control bodily performances, such as failing to walk in high heels, passing out, vomiting or persistent crying. Emily illustrates this, when talking about other young women’s drinking:

*They start dropping like flies. Like “oohh” and crying and domestics and stuff like that. And someone’s kicking off cos she can’t find her shoes.*

Both Emily and Phoebe are cementing the practice norms and embedding themselves in the group by distancing themselves from the unfeminine ‘other’. The excessive drunkenness of the ‘other’ is constituted as unfeminine through making judgements about other women’s behaviour as aggressive (kicking off), and inappropriate dress through a lack of footwear and by framing their own intoxicated drinking practice as ‘tipsy’. Thus, both women align their identities with an acceptable femininity and resist conflation with the ‘other’. The young women also drew upon a generalising discourse that it is ‘other’ young women that act in this manner, demonstrated though this quote from Claire:

*It’s girls I just hate them – they just stress me out. They are either crying or knocking me over. I was on the stairs the other day and this girl fell over and it caused like a dominoes effect, and she was just like a mess. Then she just got up and was laughing and I was “what are you laughing for”? But I am not like that I am not that bad. I probably am but I don’t see myself as being.*

Describing the ‘other’ as ‘messy’, Claire distances herself by saying ‘it’s not me, it’s them’. However, this type of positioning is highly complex as illustrated by Claire’s last sentence. While ridiculing the other’s intoxication there is also recognition that she may (and does) also act in this manner. But in doing so, Claire does not accept that she is the same. There are rules and competences other than drinking which contribute to Claire’s sense of her own acceptable femininity for example getting the ‘right look’ and drinking feminine drinks.

In contrast, and similar to the findings of Thurnell-Read (2013), the young men enacted an embodied performance of masculinity through their intoxicated loss of bodily control. This corporeal experience was celebrated and lauded within friendship groups, as performative of a specific youth masculinity:

*Well I was out last Friday . . . and that ended very badly. I ended up in A&E. I fell down the stairs*. [Laughter] (Andy).

Enjoyment of this loss of control is expressed through the retelling of the story, and the reliving of the experience (frequently on social media), which then becomes both pleasurable and frequently humorous. The storytelling which became part of the performance of gender construction was within the constraints of approved young masculine discourses framing the alcohol consumption practice.

**Caring and doing gender through caregiving**

There is an understanding from many of the young people that they will care for their friends when participating in a ‘proper night out’and their friends, if required, will care for them. The provision of care was complicated, gendered and could damage or strengthen friendships. Caregiving in the context of a ‘proper night out’ was associated with looking after and supporting friends suffering from the ill-effects of intoxication during the practice, helping each other to get home, physical protection and supporting each other through any other drink related accidents linked to the practice. Amy for example explained how she regarded herself as the ‘*sensible one’* who drinks less and is able to look after her friends. Alcohol studies have shown that drinking practices replicate normative patterns about gender and friendship, with young women more likely than young men to be close and intimate during the drinking experience and to care for each other (Campbell, 2000; Leyshon, 2005; de Visser and Smith, 2007). However, this study found that although the caregiving was gendered both the young men and young women in the study narrated a discourse of caregiving within this practice.

The young men’s caregiving was frequently seen to take the form of the role of ‘protector’ as Becky and Emma discuss.

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| Claire: | *I think you feel more safe when you go out with lads cos if there’s trouble then you just push them towards them. You’ll be like you go and sort it.* |
| Emma: | *…. when you go into somewhere really rough you want to feel protected. And I felt much more comfortable going out [on a proper night out] in like a foreign place with a group of lads to like look after me. Cos I knew that they’d never like let any trouble come to us. I think it’s in that sense of looking after us. I think it’s good.* |
| Becky: | *Yer I think like that. Not that I can get more drunk or anything it’s more like if a lad pushed you, like if a lad started on you, and went to try and hit you or something rather than you not being able to do anything cos you are a girl you’ve got lads there that’ll say stop it. So, you feel comfortable.* |

Protection practices reflect and cement a situational hegemonic masculinity (Toffoletti, 2017). The discussions in the group interviews suggest this is done by both acknowledging and celebrating the protective masculine routinised habits embedded within the practice. Mark described how at the end of the night he would always make sure that his friend Emily got home even when this took him out of his way; they considered this to be an integral part of their friendship.

Andy however took exception to having this protector role of girlfriends thrust upon him and instead expressed a preference for going out with his male friends. When with male friends he described an alternative caring relationship, that was reciprocal; looking after and out for each other, as illustrated in the discussion below.

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| Andy: | *You just feel like you have to look after them [girls] rather than worry about yourself... It’s weird …, one of my mates who is like 6’4” he is massive but he is the biggest lightweight which is weird cos you’d think that he could drink more but he gets worse. He is 6’4” and massive so I can’t like pick him up or anything. I couldn’t carry him or anything. We was on our way home once and he couldn’t walk any more he was just lying on the floor and it should have been about a half an hour walk, but it took us three hours, cos of how drunk he was. And it was pissing down as well.* |
| Researcher: | *But you didn’t leave him? You didn’t just sort yourself out?* |
| Andy: | *No but then he’s had to do it for me…* |
| Researcher: | *So he’s taken you home, so there is an expectation that if you get that drunk and into that state, then..* |
| Andy: | *But if someone does yes then.* |
| Researcher: | *And you said as well that you like going out with the lads because…?.* |
| Andy: | *Cos they look after you.* |

The discussion above illustrates the fluidity and equity of the construction of the role of carer in an all-male friendship group. Although caring has traditionally been associated with femininity, some researchers have conceptualised this trait in men as ‘caring masculinities’ (Elliott, 2015). Caring masculinities have been constructed as the rejection of some hegemonic masculinity ideals such as protector and instead embraces values of care and interdependence (Elliott, 2015; Gärtner et al., 2006). However, the analysis in this study suggests that different configurations of practice have value in particular social contexts and that transgressions of hegemonic norms are themselves a demonstration of hegemonic masculinities drawing on tropes of independence, self-reliance and group friendship and are constitutive of the localised rules of the practice. This is illustrated by Andy with this statement; “*if they get too drunk you have to look after them*.” These caring masculinities were evident in the narrations of the well-established all-male friendship groups. (Andy is describing being with his friends who he has known since primary school).

This ‘caring’ construction was also evident in the discussion on all-women friendship groups as this extract demonstrates:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Researcher: | *Ye you’ve got that bit of ..[interrupted] does anyone else kind of play a caring protective role when you go out?* |
| Emma: | *I’m like that* *I looked after Rachel when she was drunk.* |
| Rachel: | *That was one time [laughter].* |
| Researcher: | *Does that happen generally when you go out that there is someone?* |
| Emma: | *There’s always someone [agreement].* |

As well as demonstrating that girlfriends also construct a role of caregiver. This extract above also illustrates how Rachel distances herself from the drunk ‘other’ by stating that this was the only time that she needed care. The following discussion demonstrates how other forms of care are provided including safeguarding of dignity and protection from harm.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Researcher: | *Do you always go [to the toilets] with a friend?* |
| Becky: | *Yeh I always go with a friend it’s just like safety isn’t it. If someone like tries to rob your bag in the toilets and you have someone with you…* |
| Claire: | *And they do never have locks so you need to have someone there to stand by it and keep the door shut for you.* |
| Researcher: | *And has someone tried to rob your bag?* |
| Becky: | *Ye it happened in xxx. On like one of my first nights out.* |

The extract above reveals how all-girl friendships on the ‘proper night out’are associated withinterdependence and safety. In the example above, protection from violence (in the form of robbery) connects with protection of dignity whilst using the toilet. In this way, traditional notions of femininity and respectability are incorporated and embedded in the practice.

**Conclusion**

By exploring this intoxicated drinking practice bundle of a ‘proper night out’ this paper has demonstrated how ways of doing gender are integral to both the real-time and the virtual performance of the practice and how place, situation and materiality are not passive backdrops to the doing of gender within social practice. In doing so we have sought to illustrate how social practice theorists can and must both acknowledge and incorporate gender into their work.

As new young people are recruited to this bundle of practice, they absorb the practice know how (Shove et al., 2012) which centres on reaching the right level of intoxication through purposeful or functional drinking and a gendered practice performance that is recognisable as a ‘proper night out’. We have shown in this paper how this bundle of practices has come together because of practice intelligibility (Schatzki, 2012). In other words, the actions that these young people perform are those that make sense to them to perform, and this includes an appropriate (for them in this situation) performance of gender. In this case, the young men and women are not locked in to displaying one performance of masculinity or femininity rather they engage in multifaceted performances of masculinities and femininities and switch between their real time performance, their virtual performance and their narrative or storytelling performance.

The performances of the practice for both the young men and young women are judged and are seen as being valued and accepted or not; by themselves, by their friends, by other participants of the practice and by their wider social networks. The young men demonstrate alternative masculinities that are not subordinate but are fluid, acceptable and are, like hegemonic masculinities, displayed through drinking large amounts of alcohol (particularly beer and spirits) (Willott and Lyons, 2012) but differ in that they are not displayed through ‘drinking fitness’ (Campbell, 2000) but by a less controlled intoxication (Thurnell-Read, 2013). They speak of their performance in terms of a socially valued (by their peers and wider social networks) form of masculinity in contemporary society that is acceptable within this practice.

For the young women in the study the practice performance is gendered in that an acceptable performance enables them to drink to intoxication as long as more traditional notions of how to do gender are performed by maintaining some control of the intoxicated experience (at least publicly), feminising the drinking experience (Nicholls, 2016), performing a hyper feminine, polished and managed virtual performance (Bailey et al., 2015) and caregiving and receiving (where appropriate). Some actions are viewed as being transgressive for example out-of-control bodily performances by the young women.

The intelligibility determining factors relevant for this bundle of practice consist of varying and differing combinations of the three elements; materials including alcohol, the corporeal, spaces, finance and mobile technology; the social and symbolic meanings of social recognition, sociability, caring and group belonging, and knowledge and competences related to the consumption of alcohol and staying safe (Hennell et al., 2020). For example, the types of alcohol in the form of girl’s drinks and boy’s drinks (Nicholls, 2016). This knowledge is gained by the learning of the practice when additional young people are recruited into it (Shove at al., 2012).

While the argument that practice theories could make a useful contribution to understanding social practices has previously been made, the operationalisation of this theoretical perspective in understanding the gendered alcohol consumption practices of young people is original. This study has provided an empirical example of how practice theory can combine with gender studies to broaden understandings of notions of acceptable and suitable alcohol consumption practice performance. The participant’s narratives and social media content highlight the tensions between intoxication and performing acceptable masculinities and femininities, and how they navigate their on and offline worlds to construct their gendered selves.

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