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# Safety strategies, status positioning and gendered double standards: adolescents' narratives of sexualised risk in alcohol intoxication contexts

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## ABSTRACT

In adolescence, drinking in party settings represents socialisation and fun but also a *red zone* for sexual assaults. Expanding current knowledge of sexual assault as a systemic attack, this article investigates how adolescents understand and navigate sexualised risk in alcohol intoxication contexts. Using a narrative lens and interviews with 95 15- to 19-year-olds in Norway, we found that adolescents linked drinking to the risk of *total loss of control* and, specifically for girls, to experiencing sexual assaults. Based on peer- and media-circulated stories, sexualised risk in drunken settings was a pervasive master narrative that shaped girls' risk understandings and behaviours in ways that spoke to a gendered risk regime. To navigate drunken settings, girls described individual and social safety strategies that underscored the importance of being in control. Notably, lower-status girls, in contrast to higher-status girls, often lacked the social resources that enabled collective safety strategies. In general, girls' quest for control appeared double-edged—it limited sexual assault risk but also intruded on their freedom, formed basis for moral judgement and reproduced gendered double standards for adolescents' drinking and sexual practices. Because social status also intersected in girls' risk management, this gendered risk regime particularly amplifies vulnerability in lower-status girls.

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## Introduction

Research has shown that social drinking is important for adolescents' positioning in peer groups (Buvik et al. 2021; LaBrie, Hummer, and Pedersen 2007; Real and Rimal 2007), contributing to the formation of social capital (Demant and Järvinen 2011; Pearson et al. 2006). However, social drinking has also been well documented to have a darker side; the situation can spin out of control and leave young people vulnerable (Tutenges, Sandberg, and Pedersen 2020). The duality of social drinking in adolescence—implying pleasure and fun as well as risk and danger—is an important backdrop to the present study,

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which investigates how adolescents perceive and navigate sexualised risk in alcohol intoxication settings.

A gendered lens is vital in this investigation. The drunken youth party represents a liminal space that is open to transgressions—for doing things that one would not normally do (Measham, 2002; Tutenges, Sandberg, and Pedersen 2020), such as engaging in sexual experimentation (Fjær, Pedersen, and Sandberg 2015). While sexual encounters in drunken settings are often positive experiences (Pedersen, Tutenges, and Sandberg 2017), the drunken youth party also represents a risky context for sexual exploitation and assault, particularly for girls (Pape 2014; Stefansen, Løvgren, and Frøyland 2019). How girls navigate sexualised risk in intoxication settings is complicated by gendered sexual double standards, which also prevail in otherwise gender egalitarian contexts (Aresi et al. 2021; Fjær, Pedersen, and Sandberg 2015). While girls are expected to be sexually active and free, they also risk being labelled promiscuous and held partially responsible for any sexual victimisation that they might suffer when intoxicated (Bogren 2014; Day, Gough, and McFadden 2004; Hutton et al. 2016). This is an important background for girls' socialisation into fear of sexual assaults (Berrington and Jones 2002; Stanko 1990).

Our analysis builds on Munro's (2010) argument that sexual assaults represent both 'a personal and a systemic attack' (46), meaning that the ramification of assaults 'transcends the harm experienced by those directly affected' (Stefansen 2020, 52). The concept of a *gendered risk regime* (Hannah-Moffat and O'Malley 2007) is a relevant inroad to understanding how sexual assault restricts women's and girls' freedom. Risk regimes are often internalised and taken for granted but become visible through their effects (Hannah-Moffat and O'Malley 2007), for instance, through the *safety strategies* girls and women are found to engage in to minimise risk exposure when drinking alcohol (Armstrong et al. 2014b). Such strategies include watching their drinks to avoid spiking (Zajdow and MacLean 2014), not drinking to intoxication, covering up their body and not walking alone (Weiss 2011). These strategies can offer girls and women a sense of safety but are also forms of self-disciplining that restrict their freedom and pave the way for social shaming (Hannah-Moffat and O'Malley 2007). An issue that has yet to be explored is how a gendered risk regime and the subsequent safety strategies are bound to girls' social position in peer hierarchies. Another important but sparsely explored side to a gendered risk regime is how the digital aspect of youth cultures, in which everything can be documented and shared, affects girls' ideas of risk and their risk management in social drinking settings. The present study builds from this notion of risk regimes and extends previous research on the systemic harms of sexual assault by addressing risk regimes related to a specific context, the drunken youth party. More specifically, we explore how gendered narratives of sexualised risk are reconfigured and reproduced by girls – who want to party, drink, and be social. In addition, we investigate how safety strategies are connected to girls' social position in the peer group.

We rely on interviews with 16- to 19-year-olds from a multi-site, qualitative longitudinal study on adolescents' drinking and substance use in Norway, which represents a liberal context in terms of norms for adolescent drinking and sexual activities.

### ***Adolescent drinking practices in an alcohol-liberal context***

Norway is considered part of the North European *binge-drinking belt* (Vaynman, Sandberg, and Pedersen 2020). Alcohol intoxication situations remain integrated into youth culture,

but drinking practices and motives have also changed over (historic) time and vary with age (Buvik et al. 2021). While drinking to get drunk has characterised adolescent drinking in Norway, there has been a significant decline in adolescent drinking over the past decade, as in many other Western countries (Scheffels et al. 2020; Törrönen et al. 2019; Pape, Rossow, and Brunborg 2018).

Still, drinking remains common, especially in late adolescence. In a recent study, 25% of 15- to 16-year-old Norwegians reported having drunk alcohol to intoxication, while the same was the case for 80% of 18- to 19-year-olds (Bakken 2021). Buvik et al. (2021) found that, at age 15–16, when non-drinking is the majority practice, adolescents typically emphasise the negative effects of alcohol, along with parental expectations of non-drinking and a view of drinking as being incompatible with sports- and school-oriented goals. Among the minority of adolescents who start drinking early, the identified drivers are curiosity and access to social networks, along with individual and social vulnerability (Buvik et al. 2021; Scheffels et al. 2020). In late adolescence, when drinking becomes the majority practice, adolescents describe increased acceptance, availability, social benefits and peer pressure as their motives for drinking. The non-drinking position in late adolescence is, for some, associated with weaker social ties (Buvik et al. 2021), suggesting that adolescents' social position is important for drinking practices.

Adolescent drinking is further linked to gender in different ways. Across contexts, girls and women are subjected to double standards (Aresi et al. 2021; Armstrong et al. 2014a); heavy drinking, much like sexual promiscuity, is generally less socially acceptable in girls than in boys (de Visser and McDonnell 2012; Herold and Hunt 2020). This is also true in Norway, where adolescent girls and boys commonly attend the same social drinking settings (Vaadal 2022). Young women particularly struggle to find a balance between *control* and *loss of control* related to drinking, which might place them in difficult situations in social drinking settings (Zajdow and MacLean 2014). We take from this literature that, adolescent girls consume alcohol within a social context that is distinctly different from that of their male counterparts, and that they may also face risks that are specific to their gender.

### *A narrative perspective*

To analyse how adolescents understand and navigate sexualised risk in alcohol intoxication settings, we build on insights from narrative criminology, which is 'a theoretical paradigm centred on the view that stories influence human actions and arrangements, including those that harm' (Presser and Sandberg 2019, 131). Studies within this tradition usually direct attention to those who engage in harmful behaviours. In the present study, we shift the focus to those who seek to avoid others' harmful behaviours.

Narrative criminology sees narratives as central to people's sense making by providing a frame of reference that assigns order and explains how things *are* (Huemmer, McLaughlin, and Blumell 2019; Loseke 2007). Narratives typically 'include a setting or context; are temporally bounded; establish causal relationships (between settings, events, and/or characters); are populated with characters (e.g. heroes, villains, and victims); contain conflicts and resolutions, and provide moral lessons' (McLaughlin, Velez, and Dunn 2019, 157–158).

The notion of master narratives—the shared and often uncontested core ideas about social phenomena or categories of people—is key to our analysis. The power of master narratives derives from their internalisation, as they become templates for giving meaning to others' experiences, as well as our own (Bamberg and Andrews 2004). As such, master narratives make for pervasive stories that anyone can draw on or distance themselves from when telling their own stories (Jamieson 1998, 11). The fixed meaning of master narratives can also complicate interpretations of experiences that differ from the established script. An example is how the master narrative of rape as a blitz attack from a stranger can make it more difficult to identify and label sexual violations perpetrated by someone you know as assaults (Huemmer, McLaughlin, and Blumell 2019) and to report these to the police (Hansen, Stefansen, and Skilbrei 2021).

The sociopath model is a parallel master narrative in intoxication settings (Stefansen, Frøyland, and Overlien 2021). The model refers to the idea that sexual assaults in such settings involve manipulation, such as men tricking women into drinking to unconsciousness or spiking their drinks to that effect. While these assaults exist, chaotic sexual interactions leading to assault, what Tutenges, Sandberg, and Pedersen (2020, 406) refer to as 'sexually violent effervescence', as well as more 'opportunistic transgressions', are more prevalent among adolescents (Stefansen, Frøyland, and Overlien 2021, 1381). Because the victim may have been active and also possibly interested in the assailant, such assaults are more complicated to *read* as rape (Stefansen and Solstad 2021). Sexual assault statistics paired with stereotypical media-produced rape narratives and prevention campaigns on alcohol-related sexual assaults, in which the message is that girls and women need to drink moderately and watch their drinks, contribute to girls' risk understanding (Berrington and Jones 2002; Stanko 1990). This message also constructs the risk of sexual assault as something that can be managed individually, echoing and reinforcing ideas integrated in progressive lifestyles, in which girls and women are expected to exercise self-government and control in professional, social and intimate contexts (McRobbie 2015; see also Vaadal and Ravn 2021).

## Methodology

The interviews we analyse come from the MyLife study, which is a large-scale longitudinal investigation of adolescent drinking and drug use. The study has been approved by the Norwegian Data Inspectorate (no. 15/01495) after ethical evaluation by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (no. 2016/137), and includes a heterogeneous sample of adolescents. Six school classes from different regions were enrolled at baseline in 2014 (118 adolescents, 12–13 years of age, 60 girls). Active informed consent was obtained from all participating adolescents and their parents. For more details about the recruitment procedures, see Brunborg et al. (2019).

In this article, we used data from 184 personal interviews carried out with 95 of the adolescents enrolled at baseline. The interviews were conducted when the participants were aged 15–16 (2018,  $n = 95$ ), 16–17 (2019,  $n = 80$ ) and 18–19 (2020,  $n = 9$ ). Only one school class was included in the last wave of interviews, because of COVID-19 restrictions.

All participants were interviewed during school hours and at school or nearby school premises by a group of trained researchers, the first and second author included and the adolescents were generally followed up by the same interviewer over time.

Ethical issues are of great importance in our study. Before each interview, the adolescents were informed about the study, how their anonymity would be protected, their right to refrain from or discontinue the interview at any time. Participants were provided written information to the Norwegian Red Cross' telephone line and chat service for youth in case they wanted to talk with a professional after the interview.

During the interviews we sought to provide a friendly atmosphere and used open questions and empathic responding. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was audiotaped and transcribed. Names were replaced with pseudonyms, and all identifying factors were removed from the transcripts. We used age- and context-adapted semi-structured interview guides covering a broad range of themes: family and friendship relations, interests, future ambitions, and perceptions of and experiences with tobacco, drugs and alcohol. The main themes and reflections were discussed and captured in field notes after each interview to help systematise the initial interpretation of the data and inform later analyses. The field notes also provided us with broad contextual data.

### *Data analysis*

The data were systematically coded using the qualitative analysis software HyperRESEARCH. The initial coding involved devising a codebook based on wide-ranging, pre-defined themes, such as alcohol drinking practices, effects, negative/positive experiences and risk perceptions. To ensure unambiguous coding, two researchers coded one third of the interviews. For this article, we analysed data from four codes: negative experiences when drunk, drinking practices, reasons for non-drinking and sexual experiences. Analyses were conducted in accordance with principles from reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2020), which emphasised the importance of researchers' subjectivity as an analytic resource, and flexibility in engaging with theory, data and interpretation (Braun and Clarke 2020).

Alcohol use was thoroughly covered in all the interviews, but sexual assault was not. The participants, and girls specifically, frequently referred to the risk of sexual assaults, often matter-of-factly, in response to questions about their drinking practices and/or negative drinking experiences. The repeated appearance of this theme across the interviews with girls at different schools in different regions gives an important indication of the degree to which understandings of gendered risk in intoxicated settings are incorporated and internalised by the adolescent girls. If the topic was addressed directly, the interviewees may have strived to reflect the societal norm of gender equality and, perhaps, as part of self-presentation, offered more socially desirable answers. The study thus provides a unique entry point for exploring the degree to which gendered risk perceptions pervade and play out in present youth culture.

To further explore the relationship between sexual risk when intoxicated, gender and social status position, we also focused on a subgroup of adolescents identified as having ambivalent or negative sexual experiences in social drinking situations.

We use the term 'master narrative' to capture the ubiquitous and incorporated nature of gendered risk perceptions among Norwegian adolescents across geographical locations and social status positions. This master narrative was widespread and appeared to both reflect and shape the adolescents' understanding of risk in social drinking settings in markedly gendered ways. We start by unpacking this narrative—how it is articulated,

and the situations and persons it marks as risky. Then, we attend to how risk narratives are circulated and how the moral meanings of risk and responsibility are conveyed in girls' retelling of these stories. Finally, we focus on how girls use safety strategies to navigate sexual risk in intoxication contexts and how these strategies are linked to girls' social positions in the local peer hierarchy.

### *Gendered risk in social drinking contexts*

Drinking and parties were generally framed as socially important and linked to loss of control. Transcending gender, the adolescents commonly associated drinking with a risk of 'total loss of control'. Gendered differences were manifested in stories about the consequences of 'lacking control' when intoxicated. Boys normally linked the risk of drunkenness to lacking control over their own behaviour, illustrated by statements about 'vomiting' (Steffen, 16; Ryan, 17), being 'wasted to the level that I had to be taken to the hospital to be pumped' (Magne, 15), 'destroying things' (Yngve, 16) and 'I was stupidly drunk and got into a fight' (Roald, 17). Girls more often linked intoxication to the risk of being subject to others' unwanted behaviours. They commonly referred to sexual assault and sexualised social stigma as a sort of universal truth to which—by virtue of their gender—they needed to relate. Thus, while the drunken risk of total loss of control was a shared theme across genders, the risk narrative of sexual assault was specific to girls.

Stories of sexualised risk appeared widely available to the girls, pointing to the existence of a pervasive master narrative. The narrative portrays sexual assaults in intoxication settings as a general risk to all girls, intoxicated boys as potential perpetrators and alcohol as the triggering ingredient.

Regardless of their drinking practices and lived experiences of sexual assaults, the girls seemingly shared an understanding of drinking as entailing gender-specific risks. Klara (16) said:

If you drink too much, you won't be able to take care of yourself. You're easily used. These things happen; they're frightening.

Klara associated drunkenness with vulnerability and presented sexual victimisation as a 'likely' consequence. Guro (16), who considered herself a 'light drinker', explained her reluctance to drink and attend parties based on the perceived 'likelihood' of being raped when losing control:

If you get drunk and black out, you won't remember what happened. If there have been boys present, it's easy to fear what might've happened, especially if nobody has watched over you.

- What are you afraid might happen?

Sexual assaults, to be raped, really, if boys are present.

Guro echoed the stories told by several girls in our study, across time and place. They described the risk of sexual victimisation in alcohol intoxication situations as a well-established, taken-for-granted fact.

The adolescents spoke about intoxicated boys as sexually opportunistic and intoxicated girls as vulnerable and sexually available. Astrid (18) described how, in the party setting, boys could change their approach towards girls:

This is typically when boys become tough. They're usually pigeonhearted, but at parties, they just, 'Now I'm going to sleep with that girl'.

In a similar vein, from a boy's perspective, Snorre (18) considered girls' willingness and sexual interactions as normal features of parties:

At these parties, late at night, there's a lot of drinking. There are always minors who want to join the party. In particular, girls have easy access. The boys probably want to get something, and the girls don't mind. It's part of the package.

The adolescents' portrayal of aroused boys and willing girls reflects their views of the established hook-up culture in youth party settings. Snorre's statement of how younger girls are included because boys want sex can also be read as a reference to the power dynamics at play. The adolescents referred to several instances they had witnessed or heard about in which sexual experimentation progressed into sexual assault, suggesting a general atmosphere of 'sexually violent effervescence' at youth parties (Tutenges, Sandberg, and Pedersen 2020). As confirmed by another boy, Kjetil (17):

I was at a party some weeks ago where everything got out of hand—too many people showed up, and a girl got raped by a guy I went to school with. There was too much alcohol. It was really bad.

In Kjetil's account, alcohol was the real culprit, causing chaos and mayhem. The same was the case in Annett's (15) story:

This was a year ago at a typical party. You know lots of alcohol and wasted people. The party became a big mess—with the ambulance and parents arriving. I was brought to the sexual assault centre because ... Well, I wasn't raped exactly, but I was completely wasted and had fucked a guy on the sofa. And there was blood on the fabric and they didn't know if I had consented. I only remember fragments ... I concluded that alcohol isn't for me.

Annett's description of her firsthand experience of drunken, potentially involuntary sex in a tumultuous party context portrays the 'typical party' as a sexual space beyond morality and alcohol as the catalyst. The girl who passes out is cast as fair game. Several of Annett's classmates retold this episode to illustrate how parties could spin out of control. The practice of circulating such risk stories throughout adolescents' social networks illustrates how drunken sexual interactions can affect the girl involved. Digital technology seemed to play an important role in these contexts. The lens of the ever-present smartphone posed as an additional stress factor for the adolescent girls, increasing the social risk of being shamed for 'engaging' in drunken sex. Their concern was focused on the possibility of having unflattering episodes documented and shared on social media:

Everyone films at parties. You always see these videos of people puking and kissing. It's not fun to learn what happened at yesterday's party and that 17 people have already seen the video. (Kathrine, 16)

The risk of digital 'surveillance' came across as an integrated and taken-for-granted fact and danger in the adolescents' social lives, exacerbating the girls' proclivity for self-surveillance and being in control at parties. Tapping into gendered sexual double standards, some girls talked about digital loss of control as a gendered risk:

If you're a girl who hooks up and sleeps with boys at parties, you can be filmed. You must know that that's a consequence. Everyone goes around with a phone in their hands. I'm happy I haven't experienced it, but that's because I always behave like I'm sober. I always watch myself; I don't do bad things I wouldn't otherwise do. (Rannveig, 17)

According to Rannveig, girls engaging with boys at parties risked that their sexual experiences might go public on social media. The quote displays how gendered risk narratives were drawn on to mark distance from their own stories (cf. Jamieson 1998). Rannveig emphasised that girls did not need to experience assault as long as they maintained control, like she did, suggesting that those who do experience assault are not without blame for what happened.

### *Interpretations and moral assessments of circulating risk stories*

The circulating risk stories appeared to be a mixture of myths and actual incidents. The sexual assault situations portrayed in these stories aligned with the sociopath model of sexual assaults and worked to undermine other types of assaults as 'real' ones. They were also often saturated with moral valuations that underscored gendered norms for drinking and sex in an otherwise gender egalitarian context. Although the girls typically relied on risk stories to display their own drinking behaviours as responsible, the moral dimension of the implied dichotomy was consequential, as it seemingly invalidated the drunken girls' sexual assault experiences and upheld and added to the sexual and social risks associated with girls' drinking.

The girls' risk perceptions were informed by a mix of stories from news and social media, popular culture and their peers or friends' experiences. When conveying experienced-based risk stories, they often drew on the master narrative as a basis for interpreting what had happened and for describing their views about the people involved. Eva (16) described the assault of a girl from her school, which she connected with wider circulating stories of rape drugs:

I know some girls in our school who went to a party in an outdoor area. People always party there, but this year, one of the girls got raped. She was in an intoxicated state, you know. Those stories get you frightened because you hear how people can just smuggle a pill in your drink when you're not watching. There's a risk involved with attending parties; it's always at the back of your mind.

As noted by Eva, stories of girls being 'drugged' and raped at parties served to inform others of sexual risk as an embedded dimension of the drinking context. The girls typically linked risk to a certain type of assault that echoed the 'rape myth' genre, a form of 'horror story' with aggressive boys attacking or exploiting vulnerable girls. Sexual assaults that deviated from this script were seldom framed as risky in the same way or even as sexual assaults (cf. Stefansen and Solstad 2021).

Some of the stories about friends' experiences were ambivalent and illustrated not only alcohol-related risks but also how rape myths worked to minimise events and stigmatise victimised girls. Anniken (16) noted:

My friend claimed to be raped at this party. She was brought into the sexual assault centre that night. Several were raped, but in her case it wasn't rape because her boyfriend wasn't aware that she had passed out [during the sexual interaction]. So, the whole thing was just a misunderstanding.

Ideas about rape as a violent attack by strangers, coupled with gendered double standards, seemingly undermined the ‘truth value’ of sexual assaults that deviated from this script. Similarly, Maren (18) said:

I just heard about this girl who recently claimed to have been raped. But I don’t know if she can be trusted. She was totally wasted. So, those things can happen.

- What makes you question her story?

Well, she often drinks a lot, and this time, she completely blacked out. They say that he hadn’t drunk that much and that they had hooked up before. I couldn’t tell what happened between them except for them being alone in a room. I guess they could’ve experienced the situation differently.

As illustrated above, some adolescents seemed to doubt drunken girls’ assault stories, especially when they were known to drink a lot and the assaults were carried out by boys they knew. Maren’s conclusive statement regarding the possibility of assault because the girl was wasted reflects the master narrative of gendered risk and how it contributes to girls’ understanding of a ‘causal’ relationship between being drunk and being assaulted, paired with the ‘moral lesson’ of intoxication as a form of irresponsibility on the girl’s part (see also McLaughlin, Velez, and Dunn 2019). Consequently, drunkenness seemingly positioned assaulted girls as ‘less ideal victims’ (Christie 1986).

We saw some glimpses of counter-stories, which added nuances to the hyper-gendered stereotyped image of youth sexual cultures. Isak (18) challenged the taken-for-granted narrative of boys preying on intoxicated girls:

It’s disappointing to arrive at a party only to realise that the girl you’ve previously been flirting with is really drunk, and you’re not. Then it feels weird—a bit unethical, sort of—to hook up.

Lea (17) added another perspective, first talking affirmingly about how ‘boys just help themselves whenever they want’ but later noting how girls can be assailants, too: ‘Although I feel boys are to be blamed in most sexual assaults, I also see many pushy girls who don’t take no for an answer’.

Risk stories were also circulated digitally. Regardless of whether they attended parties or not, girls could infer gendered risk from what they saw in their peers’ social media feeds:

Ane: Boys post videos of themselves fucking and fighting. You can just scroll through these videos of them fucking around. It’s crazy, with all the girls formerly known as ‘good girls’ now suddenly fucking on Instagram or giving blowjobs to attend parties. (...) One of these girls is known to be a slut, but all the boys she sleeps with, no one bothers to label them.

- Are girls really offering blow jobs to join parties?

Yes, if you’re just an ordinary girl, one whom no one knows; you have to give something in return, in one way or another. (Ane, 17)

The excerpt show how peers sexualised interactions were efficiently spread on social media platforms, contributing to sustain a gendered risk regime by reproducing narratives of sexualised risk. Further, Ane alluded to the risk associated with girls’ ‘prostitution-like’ interactions at parties and described a ‘catch 22’ for girls placed low in the social hierarchy. While sexual transactions were portrayed as a way for less popular girls to gain access to socially valued parties, they apparently still risked maintaining a

low social status because of the stigmatising labels given to promiscuous girls. Coming through in the excerpt is also the practice of slut-shaming sexually active girls (Armstrong et al. 2014a; Fjær, Pedersen, and Sandberg 2015), displaying gendered norms and how they intersect with girls' social status positions in party contexts (cf. Demant and Järvinen 2011). Labelling other girls as *good* or *bad* emerged as a practice that enabled the girls to negotiate their own social status and rank.

### *Navigating risk in social drinking settings: risk regimes and social status*

The master narrative of girls at risk of sexual assault in drunken settings worked to shape not only gendered understandings but also gendered behaviours. For girls to engage in drinking and partying, safety strategies seemed to be *required*. We interpret these practices as expressions of a gendered risk regime that girls construct and act according to as ways of navigating the risk of sexual assault and the risk of moral shaming in party settings. Although the girls related to or used them in different ways, the risk regime appeared to be drawn from, reflect and reinforce the master narrative of gendered risk.

While portrayed as risky, partaking in the intoxicated party setting clearly held social value for many adolescents. Girls and boys commonly talked about attending parties and drinking as socially important—signalling belonging, acceptance and sociability. Hence for girls, attending parties was both a matter of navigating sexualised risk and of social positioning in peer groups.

There were subtle nuances to this duality in the interviews. Some girls alluded to the risk of voluntarily engaging in behaviours that could lead to involuntary sex. For instance, Cecilie—a good-looking, popular girl—described how she started drinking in early adolescence. She vividly expressed how she enjoyed drinking with her friends because of 'the time-out' and 'the fun', but she also repeatedly said that she 'knew' of the risk it involved: '... drinking can obviously be dangerous; you can do things you wouldn't otherwise do' (Cecilie, 16). Cecilie's drinking position mirrors the *controlled loss of control* position described in earlier research (Measham 2002). This example also illustrates how social position and social capital affect drinking practices.

The girls described engaging in individual and social safety strategies to minimise party-related sexualised risks. Individual safety strategies were evident in the way some girls drew on risk narratives to validate their position as abstainers or light drinkers, as illustrated by Elin:

[With alcohol] you lose control over yourself and do things you normally wouldn't. I usually hang out with boys. Going to a party with boys only can easily turn out wrong; it can easily go bad. I've heard so many stories about how sexual assaults just happened, and I just can't bear to experience that. (Elin 17)

Elin described parties as 'red zones' for sexual assaults. She rationalised her non-drinking by equating drinking to loss of control and sexually opportunistic boys. Similarly, Caroline (16) stated, 'Many people who drink too much get raped. So I don't want to drink'. In lieu of this, non-drinking and avoidance of parties represent individual safety strategies. For girls who were not invited to parties, the risk narrative provided a legitimate explanation for not attending, as the master narrative established drinking and parties as unattractive. As several rhetorically pointed out, given the *known* risk, why should they want to take part?

For the girls who participated at parties, risk stories were also used to frame their own drinking practices as more responsible. Eva (17), for instance, talked about how she chose particular parties as a safety strategy.

Girls need to be particularly careful when it comes to parties. It's stupid, but it's how it is. Indoor parties are best. To me, the most important part is to feel safe—safe surroundings and being with someone you trust. You need someone to cover your back because you get very vulnerable when you drink.

Eva described safety strategies as unfortunate necessities. Furthermore, her quote illustrates the social safety strategies that the girls engaged in: making sure that they had friends present, who could look after them. Inger (19) commented: 'It's necessary that my friends and I look after one another ... that we drink in a controlled manner'. Echoing this, Kjersti detailed how she and her friends collectively organised their safety strategies in drinking settings:

At parties, the three of us take turns so that one is in charge of being the sober one, overseeing the others (Kjersti, 17).

Being planned and organised was a way to deal with the possible chaos at parties, enabling the girls to collectively maintain control. Through these behaviours, they could position themselves as informed and responsible, and their drinking as a controlled loss of control (Measham 2002). They could now both engage in risk by drinking and partying, and position themselves as someone who was naturally included in all things social.

Simultaneously, the types of safety strategies that the girls used reflected their social status positions in the peer hierarchy. Not everyone had friends to watch their backs. Notably, refraining from drinking and partying was often intertwined with the girls' social positions. Lacking close friendships could make drinking situations either unavailable or riskier. Hilma (17) pointed to her own *low* social status when she explained why she rarely drank or attended parties:

Why don't I drink? Not that rape is common around here but having someone do things to me that I don't want ... Not being in control. Who's going to watch over me? I'm a loser in the hierarchy of popularity. (...) I'm not one of the cool, tough, pretty girls who attend parties and drinks.

Hilma's observation of girls without friends being more vulnerable resonated with the social context outlined by Julie, who was one of the few girls who described being sexually assaulted when drunk. Julie talked about her low position in the social peer hierarchy and how she, a 'quiet type' who did not make much out of herself, did not have access to youth parties reserved for 'the cool ones'. The night of the assault, she joined a group of older youth, whom she had met through her cousin, to go to a club in a nearby city. However, she lost them upon arrival, so she entered the club alone.

At the nightclub, I met this guy who didn't take no for an answer. He tried to pull me into the toilet, but I wouldn't let him. Although I didn't do anything wrong, we both got evicted. I tried to tell the bouncer, but he didn't care. So I found myself alone with [the assailant] in the city. I was really drunk ... I tried to get rid of him, even locked myself into a toilet at McDonald's, but people started knocking, and I had to leave. Outside, the guy reappeared ... He raped me in a back alley. (Julie, 18)

Julie was distressed when recounting the assault. Her story exemplifies how a lack of peer-resources to engage in social safety strategies can make lower-status girls more vulnerable to sexual assaults. Moreover, Julie's description of being evicted from the club for causing a scene when trying to avoid being sexually assaulted may point to established understandings of drunken girls as *silly* (McMillan and White 2015), sexually available (Buvik and Baklien 2016), and partly responsible for their assault.

In the aftermath, Julie started sanctioning her own behaviour by wearing clothes that were supposed to make her less of a 'tempting sexual object'. At the same time, noting that 'it shouldn't be like that', she acknowledged that her safety strategies conflicted with social norms of gender equality. Julie's story also underscored how the availability of safety strategies appeared to intersect with social status. Theoretically, all girls could experience being shamed if they failed to navigate in accordance with gendered social norms and risk regimes. Yet, the empirical findings suggest that girls who positioned themselves low in the social hierarchy were more exposed to sexual assaults, social sanctions and stigma.

## Discussion

Sexual assault can represent both personal and systemic attacks (Munro 2010). By exploring how adolescents understand and navigate risk in social drinking settings, this study sheds light on the latter and less explored side of sexual assaults as a social phenomenon. Enabled by an extensive dataset on adolescent drinking and party practices, and a narrative analytical lens, we identified, what we call a master narrative of sexualised risk in alcohol intoxication settings that affects how adolescents socialise, drink, and position themselves. Below we discuss the key findings from the present analysis focusing on how the gendered sexualised risk regime works in present youth culture.

Evidently, gender represent a key dimension in our study. Drunken boys were framed as sexually aggressive, drunken girls as vulnerable prey. Subsequently, sexual risk in intoxication contexts was reserved for girls. Among girls, sexual assault risk was accepted as a sort of fact; it was rarely questioned or challenged. On the surface, the risk narrative reflects statistics of girls being likelier victims of sexual assaults than boys are, also in drunken contexts (Pape 2014; Stefansen, Løvgren, and Frøyland 2019).

The girls in our study outlined a narrative that cast sexual assaults narrowly as calculated attacks accomplished through manipulative behaviour, such as over-serving and drink spiking. In contrast, studies describe a variety of intoxicated sexual assault dynamics ranging from chaotic interactions that spin out of control to opportunistic exploitation and manipulative or violent attacks (Stefansen 2020; Stefansen and Solstad 2021). Thus, through largely misrepresenting how sexual assaults in alcohol intoxication settings play out, the risk narrative served to obscure other types of assaults as real assaults and worked to reproduce rape myths (Berrington and Jones 2002; Stefansen, Frøyland, and Overlien 2021). This came across in the adolescents' assessments of drunken assault experiences within their social network, typically involving a friend or boyfriend, which deviated from the stereotypical model. Rather than revising and adjusting their views of how sexual assaults can occur, they aligned their perceptions and moral views to fit a narrow model of alcohol-related sexual assault—questioning the assault stories and the involved girls' credibility in the process. The same is identified with girls who

have personal sexual assault experiences that differ from the stereotypical (Huemmer, McLaughlin, and Blumell 2019; Stefansen and Solstad 2021). Our study complements this research by tapping into the pervasiveness and rigidity of cultural barriers that surround and protect rape myths.

Because the dominant risk narrative is emphasised and conveyed across multiple and diverse arenas in youths' social worlds, including social media, it seem to take shape as a form of truth in adolescents' minds. Our study points to how these circulating narratives of sexual assaults affect girls' sense of safety (Berrington and Jones 2002; Stanko 1990) and lead to a risk regime marked by self-disciplining practices (Hannah-Moffat and O'Malley 2007), which also reproduce gendered double standards for drinking and sex. Notably, it still appears more acceptable for boys and men to get drunk, lose control and be sexually active than it is for girls and women (Aresi et al. 2021; Fjær, Pedersen, and Sandberg 2015).

Digital technology also plays a role in constructing gendered sexualised risk in these contexts. The presence of smartphones at youth parties represented the additional risk of having unflattering or incriminating content captured and shared on social media. Reflecting gendered double standards, the 'digital youth culture' appeared to amplify girls' risk of sticky labels in drunken settings while also playing a role in casting girls as the responsible part—girls 'should know' that sexualised content can be spread on social media, must take responsibility to avoid this and can blame themselves if they fail. Girls seem to manage this surveillance dimension and their digital appearance by engaging in self-surveillance.

Our analysis shows how navigating risk and avoiding sexual assault are presented as individual responsibilities for girls and something that they do habitually (cf. Hannah-Moffat and O'Malley 2007; Zajdow and MacLean 2014). It also points to an important and so far, overlooked aspect of the responsabilisation of girls—that strategies for navigating risk are not equally available to all girls. Safety strategies intersect with girls' social positions in their peer groups in ways that imply greater sexual and social risks for socially vulnerable girls. In contrast to higher-status girls, lower-status girls were less likely to engage in social safety strategies as they lacked access to the valued youth parties and/or friends to mobilise for this purpose. They were also more likely to experience slut-shaming and sexual risks when engaging in drinking and intoxication settings.

One important question is how the gendered risk regime is sustained. Our study indicates that risk regimes can have various practical functions, including to legitimise the non-or light-drinking practices of girls who lack the will, parental permission or social status to drink or party; to confirm the higher social status of girls who have access to parties and the peer-resources to can engage in social safety strategies; and finally to provide girls with a sense of safety—that is as long as they navigate risk in the *correct* ways. To understand why risk regimes are upheld over time, and how they affect adolescents' social practices, its more productive sides must also be included in the analysis.

In the context of gender-progressive and alcohol-liberal Norway, the pervasive and incorporated nature and effect of gendered sexual risk narratives alone is notable. Further research should investigate how this transfers to other contexts. Finally, how social status links to risk regimes should be further unpacked. Our study suggest that high-status girls seemingly have more leeway to navigate risk aptly and effectively,

whereas those in socially vulnerable positions appear more constrained and more at risk. Hence, while the individualisation of responsibility on the part of girls—inherent in the adolescents' talk about risk and safety strategies—can contribute to devalue assaulted intoxicated girls' status as *worthy* victims in general. It seems to add insult to the injury for socially vulnerable girls in particular.

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## Data availability statement

Because of the sensitive nature of this research, the participants of the study did not agree that their data be shared publicly, so supporting data are not available.

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