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## The pub: an expanded office. A qualitative study on Norwegian female employees' experiences with English work-related drinking culture

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### ABSTRACT

**Aim:** The aim of this study is to explore how Norwegian female employees experience work-related alcohol use in British working life using cultural analysis.

**Design:** Explorative design with strategic population; in-depth interviews with eight female Norwegian employees working in London, in addition to field observation in two typical 'after-work' pubs in London. The data was analysed through bricolage: themes and subthemes were identified and Hall's theory of high- and low-context cultures and Bourdieu's concepts of capital and field were applied.

**Results:** The pub appeared to be a significant arena for Norwegian female employees in London to adapt to British working culture and work-related drinking. Four main themes emerged: (1) Breaking the code in communication at work, (2) Adjusting to English office 'etiquette' through pub visits, (3) Adhering to pub rules and developing strategies, and (4) Balancing after-work pub culture and family obligations.

**Conclusion:** Navigating British pub culture demands cultural awareness to maintain one's work-related position and career progress, including balancing gender-specific expectations and contextual drinking culture.

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### KEYWORDS

Drinking culture; Pub; workplace; female employees; qualitative research



### Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore how Norwegian female employees experience the work-related drinking culture in the British working environment using cultural analysis. We are interested in how female work migrants adjust to British after-work drinking culture and how understanding different ways of communicating is a fundamental part of this adjustment. We ask how Norwegian female employees living and working in London experience and adjust to work-related pub culture and drinking practices.

The use of alcohol is associated with contexts, expectations, ideas, culturally significant behaviors and values (Heath, 2000), and several typologies have been developed to explain the concept of drinking culture (Mäkelä et al., 2006; Room & Mitchell, 1972). Savic et al. (2016) offer a broad definition of the concept, highlighting the multiple and multifaceted nature(s) of drinking culture at both macro and micro levels. Although globalization has affected national drinking cultures (Savic et al., 2016), cross-cultural differences still exist and drinking cultures vary between countries (Pittman & White, 1991). Work migrants, expatriates (sent on assignment from the home country), guest workers and other employees working in foreign countries will encounter different drinking cultures in different countries. Studies of alcohol culture have

focused on various subjects including gender differences (Ames & Rebhun, 1996; Campbell, 2009; Kuntsche et al., 2006), the elemental role of different beverages (Wilson, 2005) and different drinking contexts (Heath, 2000; Hunt & Satterlee, 1987; Muir, 2009; Sulkunen et al., 1997), and identity (Wilson, 2005). Also, drinking in the 'grey zone' between work and leisure time has been related to drinking cultures (Porsfelt, 2007; Sagvaag et al., 2019). The grey zone is understood as an irremediable area of ambiguity (Bonner, 2009), in this case a blurred zone between working hours and spare time, including activities like work celebrations, Christmas parties, work-related travels and drinking with colleagues after work (Buvik, 2020; Buvik & Sagvaag, 2012; Nordaune et al., 2017; Sagvaag et al., 2019). Although alcohol culture is an important marker of national culture and identity (Wilson, 2004) and many employees have the world as their 'work and playground', there is not much research on how employees handle the work-related drinking culture in foreign countries. For this reason, the present study will add to the knowledge of how the modern, multicultural workforce navigates different drinking cultures.

The context of this study is London (England) because of its attractiveness for overseas businesses and large international workforce. British drinking culture is characterized by daily drinking and heavy drinking (Nicholls, 2013). Norwegian

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drinking culture, by contrast, is characterized by drinking at parties, on weekends, without food, and often to excess (binge drinking) (Hoverak & Bye, 2007), but not daily. We must stress that neither Norway's nor England's drinking culture is homogenous, and rich variations of drinking cultures can be found within countries and vary among groups of individuals (Kilian et al., 2021; Savic et al., 2016).

Because the public house (pub) has played a historical role in Great Britain (Chatterton & Hollands, 2003) and still is an important part of everyday life (Lane, 2018; MacGregor, 2013; Muir, 2009; Thurnell-Read, 2021), the work-related pub visit is a relevant arena to explore. Pubs have traditionally been dominated by men (Holloway et al., 2009), especially men from the working class (Pratten & Lovatt, 2007), with alcohol consumption being the primary source of revenue (Lugosi et al., 2020). However, the social context of female public drinking has changed in recent decades (Holloway et al., 2009; Lane, 2018; Lugosi et al., 2020; Nicholls, 2020; Pratten & Carlier, 2012). Changes in licensed leisure locations and products, increased standards and improved facilities have made pubs more attractive to women (Lugosi et al., 2020; Measham, 2004; Pratten & Carlier, 2012; Pratten & Lovatt, 2007). The entrance of more women into pubs and other public drinking spaces may also reflect changes in gender roles and identity (Lyon & Willott, 2008; Measham, 2002), increased gender equality and female employment outside the home, higher disposable income and changes in women's social position (Lyons & Willott, 2008; Measham, 2002). Many pubs nowadays appeal to both genders and to consumers with high education, income and socio-economic status (Järvinen et al., 2014; Lyons & Willott, 2008; Measham, 2002; Pratten & Carlier, 2012). Even though women are welcomed guests and enter pubs as equals (Lane, 2018), pubs are still a male domain (Järvinen et al., 2014, Lyons & Willott, 2008, Atkinson et al., 2012).

Studies on female public drinking, especially among young women, mainly focus on consequences such as intoxication, binge drinking and vulnerability (Herold & Hunt, 2020; Measham & Østergaard, 2009) and there has been little research on women's use of pubs in relation to work.

Therefore, it is relevant to focus on female perspectives on pub visits. In this study, we interviewed Norwegian female employees to highlight the female perspective on work-related drinking in London. How do Norwegian female employees living and working in London experience and adjust to work-related pub culture and drinking practices?

## Theoretical framework

To develop a cultural understanding of alcohol use among female Norwegian employees working in London we draw on Hall's (1989) distinction between high-context and low-context cultures. These concepts have proved useful in transcultural studies (Kim et al., 1998) and we find them particularly helpful for exploring communication and adjustment in a foreign country. Additionally, to better understand the practice of work-related alcohol use and its meaning, we complement Hall's concepts with Bourdieu's theoretical

framework and the concepts of field and capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

### *High-context and low-context cultures*

Hall's (1989) theory of high- and low-context cultures highlights cultural differences in communication. Although most cultures share both high- and low-context traits (Hall, 1989), there are important cultural differences between countries. In low-context cultures, communication is direct, precise and open (Hall, 1989) and the boundaries between work and leisure are clear (Djursaa, 1994). In these cultures, collegial relationships are loose and compartmentalized, and people are not expected to spend time networking after work (Djursaa, 1994). Scandinavia, Germany and Switzerland are cultures with predominantly low-context communication (Djursaa, 1994; Hall, 1989).

In high-context cultures, implied meaning is usually embedded in information such as body language, eye movements or paraverbal cues, and the listener is expected to read 'between the lines'. It is therefore crucial to spend time and build relationships with colleagues/clients after work (Djursaa, 1994). Japan and Arab countries are considered high-context cultures. Hall places Britain and the Scandinavian countries in the same low-context category, but Djursaa (1994) identifies many high-context traits in British business culture. Although it might be a stretch to describe the British as 'deeply involved with each other', Djursaa (1994) found that personal relationships are more important in British business culture than in Denmark. She also emphasizes how the British 'wrap' information and express themselves indirectly, in line with Hall's (1989) description of high-context cultures.

Hall's theoretical framework enables us to understand and emphasize cultural differences in relation to types and forms of communication in international business. If we consider British business culture to be high-context (Djursaa, 1994), it is reasonable to believe that adapting to this culture might be a challenge for employees from low-context countries. Hall's (1989) work highlights the importance of recognizing hidden cultural dimensions affecting Norwegian female employees' attempts to adjust to English work-related pub culture and drinking practices.

### *The concepts of field and Capital*

In this article, Bourdieu's theoretical framework allows us to explore the social dynamics and meaning of work-related alcohol use within the context of a typical English pub. According to Bourdieu, the human world is divided into social fields. These fields are interrelated and operate with their own rules of conduct and inherent logic (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). A social field represents an arena where certain rules apply and specific resources (capital) are at stake, allowing for a network of hierarchically defined positions held by those who know 'how to play the game' (Bourdieu, 1977; Veenstra & Burnett, 2014). The nature of capital determines each person's position in the field.

However, there is an ongoing process of negotiation between those playing the game and attempting to profit from their resources and accumulate capital, which allows them to position themselves. Bourdieu (1986) identifies various forms of capital, including social (resources accrued through social networks), cultural (taste, correct behavior, knowledge, skills and qualifications), and symbolic capital (prestige, social power). Capital becomes symbolic once it is legitimated or recognized by others and identified with specific meaning and value (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). As seen in the present study, the power of an employee to accumulate various forms of capital, and to define those forms as legitimate, is proportionate to their position within the social field in question. Bourdieu's concepts make it possible to understand the context of drinking as a field where drinking practices are interwoven with work-related practices, with colleagues constantly negotiating different forms of capital in search of power, prestige and advancement.

Bourdieu's work is relevant for understanding practices of alcohol use (Järvinen et al., 2014; MacArthur et al., 2017; Miller, 2011; Townshead, 2013) and serves as a framework for understanding international differences in working life (Al Ariss et al., 2013; Doherty & Dickmann, 2009). While Bourdieu's concepts are intricately linked, several researchers have taken a pragmatic approach to his framework, using only some of his concepts in their analyses (Doherty & Dickmann, 2009; Lamont, 2012). Lunnay et al. (2011) highlight the concept of symbolic capital to understand drinking decisions as determined by either cultural environment or individual, independent choices. Brierley-Jones et al. (2014) use Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to understand different drinking patterns among male and female employees in England. In this article, we argue that the concepts of field and capital can help us attain a more multifaceted understanding of the social processes involved as female employees adapt to and make sense of work-related alcohol use in a foreign country.

## Methods and data

The article is based on in-depth interviews with eight female Norwegian employees working in London in combination with field observations at two London pubs (see Table 1). The interview participants were recruited via Nora, a non-profit organization offering Norwegian female professionals a place to network and socialize in London. We reached out to the group's members by posting a short description of the

study and our contact information (email and telephone number) on their website. Seven participants contacted us after reading about the study. One participant was recruited via a colleague who had an acquaintance in London using the snowball sampling method (Thompson & Collins, 2002). It turned out that all the participants belonged to the middle class, although this was not intentional. This study was originally designed with in-depth interviews, but as all participants cited the pub as a significant arena, we sensed that there was something important to be learned from field observations at pubs after work. Thus, we extended the data by including field observations at two typical 'after-work pubs' in central London (City and Westminster) recommended by the participants.

The first pub was modern with gold and white interior details, offering a relaxed luxury experience. The air was filled with the scent of perfume and champagne. The second had a dark mahogany bar and was filled with vintage decorations and antiques. There was a strong smell of old wood and ale, and conversation and laughter reverberated. This old traditional English pub served after-work drinks and traditional British pub food in a warm and friendly atmosphere. These two pubs were chosen to represent pub culture because they were mentioned by several participants and had features that appeal to middle-class female employees.

All the interviews were conducted by the first and second author and took place at pubs and in participants' homes and workplaces. Each interview lasted between one and two hours and was conducted in Norwegian, audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and anonymized. Participants gave written consent to participate and could leave without repercussions. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide. Both researchers asked open-ended questions, such as 'What's your experience with work-related drinking in London?' and 'How did you react to...?', to ensure open and exploratory conversations. We sought to follow up on the informants' answers by grouping them into themes and were attentive to the emergence of new themes (Silverman, 2020).

The analysis process was inspired by bricolage research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), which addresses the plurality and complexity in qualitative research, and did not follow set procedures (Rogers, 2012). Bricolage enabled us to embrace a multiplicity of research tools to accomplish a meaning-making task (Rogers, 2012) while drawing on multiple analytic methods (Wickens, 2011). The bricolage approach allowed us

**Table 1.** Overview of the participants.

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Professional role</i>	<i>Education level</i>	<i>Civil status</i>	<i>Children</i>	<i>Living in London</i>
<i>Lisa</i>	<i>40s</i>	<i>Self-employed/ partner, private sector</i>	<i>University</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>20 years</i>
<i>Veronica</i>	<i>50s</i>	<i>Culture/instruction education</i>	<i>University</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>25 years</i>
<i>Camilla</i>	<i>20s</i>	<i>Administrative management, public sector</i>	<i>University</i>	<i>Single</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>2 years</i>
<i>Nina</i>	<i>60s</i>	<i>Culture/education</i>	<i>University</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>35 years</i>
<i>Charlotte</i>	<i>30s</i>	<i>Management, public organization</i>	<i>University</i>	<i>Single</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>4 months</i>
<i>Cecilie</i>	<i>40s</i>	<i>Management, private sector</i>	<i>University</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>6 months</i>
<i>Lilly</i>	<i>30s</i>	<i>Management, media</i>	<i>University</i>	<i>Cohabiting</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>5 years</i>
<i>Eva</i>	<i>20s</i>	<i>Artistic leader</i>	<i>University</i>	<i>Married</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>10 years</i>



to conceptually grasp the complexity of the study and made for an open and creative analytic process.

The analysis was a dynamic process inspired by Lindseth and Norberg (2004) wherein themes emerged inductively in line with bricolage (Rogers, 2012). The first author read all interviews several times from a naïve position to grasp the meaning of employees' experiences with English work-related drinking culture. The meanings extracted guided the next level of the analysis, namely a thematic coding of the interviews. Themes were first identified *within* and then *across* interviews. The first and second author discussed the findings. The first author began to search for new themes, immersing herself in each interview to note preliminary interpretations and reflections. A third reading was conducted by the first author to validate the themes. This inductive approach uncovered four themes. Although we were familiar with Hall and Bourdieu, it wasn't until we had converted the data into content themes that we discovered their concepts would be particularly helpful for exploring the data in our study. The themes were then interpreted in light of Hall's and Bourdieu's theoretical frameworks (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

Quotations from participants cited in this article were translated into English. Being two observers (first and second authors) during the field observations allowed us to fit in with other colleagues/groups of after-work pub guests, provide rich observations, and discuss our observations with each other. We made notes while at the pubs and wrote more complete field notes later the same evening. Our analyses of the field observations were then added to the themes and reflections from the interviews.

Appropriate ethical considerations were adopted in conducting the research (NSD Project number 20452).

## Results

With the aim of understanding how Norwegian female employees living and working in London experience and adjust to work-related pub culture and drinking practices, the present analysis focuses on four significant themes based on the participants' experiences: (1) Breaking the code in communication at work (2) Adjusting to English office 'etiquette' through pub visits, (3) Adhering to pub rules and developing strategies, and (4) Balancing after-work pub culture and family obligations. The four themes will be analysed in the light of Hall's theoretical framework and three of the themes will be complemented with an analysis using Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital

### Breaking the code in communication at work

Working in a foreign country requires adapting to different aspects of culture and communication. The participants described working in London as an enriching but exhausting experience. It took them some time to understand cultural differences at work and in daily life related to customs, attitudes and communication styles. As one participant stated,

working life in England is quite different from in Norway. English people are very polite and at work they stick to 'safe' conversation topics. It is important to understand that you should not talk about your private life, politics or anything controversial at work ... (Camilla).

The participants experienced that their English colleagues might avoid saying 'no' directly to others to maintain a harmonious atmosphere, and they learned to keep their thoughts to themselves.

As a Norwegian you are used to expressing what you think and mean, but in England you must learn that this is not a good idea! (Camilla)

In addition, the participants highlighted the ambiguous communication at work in England.

You must pay attention to any kind of indirect speech. A 'yes' in England does not necessarily mean yes. And pay attention to body language and eye movements. The English communicate differently than Norwegians at work. 'Interesting' might mean 'this is bullshit' (Veronica).

Using Hall's (1989) theoretical framework, we view the participants' encounters with British working culture as a meeting between low-context and high-context cultures. Coming from a low-context culture, Norwegians may be considered rude when using direct, self-expressive and confrontational low-context communication at work in the British high-context culture, which values ambiguous language and where opinions are expressed indirectly.

Surprises are inevitable for employees from low-context cultures when words and sentences in a high-context culture have an entirely different meaning than what is explicitly expressed, as Veronica points out in the quote above.

Other challenges for the participants in the workplace were non-verbal communication and the British penchant for understatement, which resulted in misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Drawing on Hall (1989), we understand that Norwegians responded mainly to verbal low-context communication while their English high-context colleagues seemed to expect them to understand cues, and they relied on the receivers' ability to grasp the non-verbal messages. Breaking the code for professional communication is important; still, the keys to several important codes are surprisingly found *outside* the workplace, at the pub.

### Adjusting to English office 'etiquette' through pub visits

As part of English office etiquette, all the participants were invited to the pub after work. In going, they discovered that unlike workplace communication, pub conversations were open, direct, and even private.

As Camilla said, '*colleagues need to relate to each other, so the pub has an important function. Whereas in Norway you have a private conversation with colleagues over a cup of coffee, in England you go to the pub with colleagues after work*'.

This is in line with our observations:

We entered the pub at 5:30pm and it was nearly empty. At 5:45pm, men and women, many of them with small leather briefcases, entered the pub. The men were mostly dressed in dark

suits, while most women wore coat dresses to fit in with the dress code policy in the company culture. Their professional outfits and business formal attire contrasted with their causal behavior as they smiled, laughed, drank, and talked together in groups. (Field note)

It was also at the pub that some of the participants learned from colleagues how to communicate and understand English working life.

It was in a pub after work that my colleagues told me that my direct communication style was not considered proper behavior at work (Camilla).

The pub represented a different atmosphere than the workplace. With a pint or a glass of wine in hand, it was possible for colleagues to converse about different aspects of life. The pub represented a less formal communication style with more direct verbal communication.

Because pubs are spaces where transformations of national and transnational identities are played out (Wilson, 2005), the communicative social act of drinking at the pub functions as a silent language. Drawing on Hall's (1989) theory, in high-context cultures alcohol can be understood as an elixir of verbiage that gives employees license to talk. As a social setting that allows people to verbalize non-verbal communication, the pub becomes a translator context by breaking communication codes and offering opportunities for cultural 'education'. When employees start to recognize the high-context communication and understand how to respond to, act in, and interpret formal English work life, they gain cultural capital. In this way they can play the game by using the social dynamic at the pub to gain access to work-related positions. The pub, as a field, becomes the ambassador of Britishness. Even though many of the participants had visited pubs after work in Norway, they experienced that pubs played a significantly different role in English working life in terms of enhancing their career. As Lise said, *'in the beginning of my stay in London I didn't realize how important the pub was for building relationships'*.

The pub was described as a social gathering place allowing for socializing across the workplace hierarchy, and the participants experienced their conversations in London pubs as being of primary importance in building their careers.

As one participant said,

I believe it is more important to build personal and professional relationships in England than in Norway. Drinking in a pub after work in London is an effective way to build professional relationships. These networks are important for building a career and doing business. (Lilly)

English work culture, as described by Djurssa (1994), places a strong emphasis on personal relationships. The dynamics of relationships within high- and low-context cultures are very different (Hall, 1989), and our result indicates that high-context communication in English workplaces makes it essential for the employees to visit the pub after work. After-work pub visits are an unwritten expectation of English, high-context working life (Hall, 1989) implying that employees contribute and socialize with colleagues, customers and clients at the pub after regular working hours. The high-context culture in English work life is influenced by the closeness of

human relationships and collectivist values (work-related demands). In addition, professional relationships are considered to be of great importance as high-context cultures distinguish between people inside and outside one's circle (Douglas, 2003; Sandiford & Seymour, 2013; van Mannen, 1992). At the same time, the low-context dimension is highlighted in terms of individualistic achievement (Hall, 1989) in the form of increased social capital (Bourdieu, 1996). Although this combination of high- and low-context dimensions is unfamiliar to foreign employees, learning English office 'etiquette' is essential for success at work.

Drawing on Bourdieu (1977), we can understand the pub as a field where employees achieve social capital by building relationships with people whose social position is perceived as important. This social capital, transferred to work life, enables employees to attain and maintain positions. By increasing their resources through networks, employees can accumulate their skills and qualifications. The practices at the pub after work are an embedded part of work life – 'an expanded office' – a field for gaining both cultural and social capital by building professional relationships (Bourdieu, 1977).

### Adhering to pub rules and developing strategies

Using Bourdieu's (1977) concepts, the after-work pub visit can be understood as playing the game of building capital, which requires navigating the reciprocal drink-giving practice known as round-buying. Getting in a round is a longstanding tradition in England, and the participants experienced that they could not afford to ignore the rules of round-buying if they wanted to participate in the after-work pub culture.

In the context of the pub, it was essential for foreigners to have a clear understanding of the sociocultural functions and meanings of drinking. Many of the participants saw the pub culture as positive: *'Round-buying gives me the occasion to start conversations with important people in my work network'* (Camilla).

The participants were familiar with a practice similar to round-buying but noted that people in Norway usually pay individually for their drinks. One participant explained it this way: *'Englishmen are very polite; they buy large rounds. But if you are a group of six colleagues, you don't have to drink six rounds. It's important to understand this – if not you will get drunk'* (Lisa).

This quote underlines how the rounds system and its code of hospitality could lead participants to drink a lot faster and a lot more than they realized and wanted. Still, the participants described how they handled the practice and developed strategies to regulate the amount of alcohol they consumed. One of these strategies was to buy a round early. *'You have more control if you buy the first round of drinks because then you have done your part in the round system and you can buy a non-alcoholic beverage for yourself'* (Eva). By using this strategy, they contributed both economically and symbolically, and it was easier to decline when offered later rounds.

However, some of the participants experienced that their English colleagues did not take 'no' for an answer. One strategy was then to keep the same glass of wine/beer during the whole afternoon/evening and just consume this single glass. Another strategy the participants used to stay sober was to hold on to a full glass all evening, just pretending to drink. As Camilla said, *'When I go to the pub with my work colleagues, I buy rounds, but male colleagues buy more rounds than female colleagues. The men in England are very polite'*. This is consistent with our observations:

In the mixed-sex groups most men said 'it's my round' when the majority of the glasses were about three-quarters empty. While the men ordered several rounds of pints, the female employees held a hand over their glass when they were offered more wine by their male colleagues. (Field note)

Even though several of the participants experienced a high exposure to work-related drinking at pubs, they were not expected to drink more than 1–4 units, and it was generally not acceptable to give in to the effects of intoxication.

The pub's relaxing atmosphere might give the impression that there are no rules to follow. Nevertheless, as a social field, the pub has its own logic and rules of conduct (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) which are vital to understand. The participants adhered to pub rules and developed strategies by imitating the English employees and internalizing their drinking behaviors, reshaping them as cultural capital. Hall's (1989) contention that learning in a high-context culture occurs by observing others as models can explain how and why the Norwegian employees followed the explicit round buying. As Camilla said, *'If drinking with Brits, you must adhere to these rules'*.

In light of Bourdieu (1977), after-work pub visits offer employees opportunities to demonstrate cultural knowledge and distinction. On the other hand, being unable or unwilling to join these visits can have negative consequences as employees miss the opportunity to show that they are 'team players' interested in employee bonding, in addition to missing out on important work-related discussions. When the pub becomes an expanded office where one is at work after work, it is important to be there and to follow proper etiquette. However, expectations, obligations and needs seemed to vary according to age, gender and position (Ames & Rebhun, 1996; Buvik & Sagvaag, 2012; Nixon & Crewe, 2004). We will highlight these factors in the following section.

### Balancing after-work pub culture and family obligations

Many participants were ambivalent about how to deal with the perceived rules for drinking in pubs after work. Still, not all of them experienced the same expectations to join pub gatherings.

The employees described more gender differences in England than in Norway and explained that expensive child-care, fewer parental leave privileges and long commutes often resulted in women staying home with children instead of working outside the house. The traditional gender roles in

England were also believed to have an impact on pub visits. One participant expressed it in the following way:

I think going to the pub is especially important for men. Most managers and colleagues understand and accept that female employees have a greater responsibility for family and children. This makes it more convenient for female employees to avoid the pub after work. But younger female employees without children...in competition with men.... It might go wrong ... (Nina)

Being a mother appeared to be a valid reason for not going to the pub after work, as stated by Eva, Lisa and Nina: *'Female employees with small children have an excuse for not going to the pub after work'*.

However, even though caring for children was seen as an excuse for not going to the pub after work, some of the participants experienced challenges if they skipped this activity. The traditional gender stereotypes in England, with women taking the main responsibility for home and children, made egalitarian relationships and career progression more difficult for young female employees. The participants thought it might decrease their chances of promotion in the company if they were not able (or willing) to join colleagues at the pub after work. The following statement reflected this dynamic: *'Employees who are not able to go to the pub after work are constantly at risk of missing the opportunity to get a new project at work'* (Eva). However, it was not only well-educated (young) mothers who experienced less pressure to visit the pub after work. One female employee articulated the stakes very clearly: *'It was much more important to join [colleagues] at the pub after work when I was younger and building my career'* (Lilly). This quote suggests that female leaders had less need for socializing at the pub. Male leaders might still be expected to attend the pub after work, but it was less important and less expected for female leaders to join these gatherings. This was also observed in the two after-work pubs we visited.

Most pub visitors were men in the 20–60-year age group. The women, on the other hand, were younger, mostly in their 20s or early 30s. Only a few female employees in their 40–60s visited the pubs. Pub visit does not seem to last all night. By 9:00 pm most guests had left the pub, probably heading home. Too late to potentially 'kiss the children goodnight', but early enough to get ready for a new working day. (Field notes)

Using Bourdieu's (1977) theoretical framework, the perceived necessity to accumulate cultural capital (etiquette), social capital (networking) and symbolic capital (social power) seems to be the participants' key motivation for pub visits, as pub culture provides access to all these resources. Bourdieu (1999) claims that people use strategies to defend their current and potential positions in the social field. Due to the structure of hierarchy in high-context culture (Hall, 1989), the participants used the pub to defend their potential position on the corporate ladder despite the effort it required. As primarily younger female employees visited the pubs, we understand these women to be most in need of social capital to achieve power and status (Bourdieu, 1986, 1999), and therefore of deeper professional high-context involvement (Hall, 1989), as opposed to middle-aged women whose careers are already established. Still, gender differences can

reflect different cultural attitudes towards men and women, resulting in limited access to capital for female employees. Several participants noted, *'In Norway we have equality between men and women, while here in England there are more traditional gender roles. There are greater expectations for men to attend the pub after work'* (Nina, Camilla and Lilly). The potential exclusion from important networking in pubs after work can also partly explain why young women developing their careers delay parenthood (Wu & MacNeill, 2002).

## Discussion

This article investigates how Norwegian female employees living and working in London experience and adjust to work-related pub culture and drinking practices. We find the drinking culture in modern English working life to be an institution that places certain expectations on employees outside the workplace.

Drinking with colleagues is an investment in the work environment, in line with Buvik (2020), and a solid investment to produce capital profit. As Walker and Bridgman (2013) note, alcohol *is* a part of work life. Our findings are consistent with Porsfelt (2007), who also highlights the importance of 'after work' and describes the pub as the 'company's third space' because it is situated outside the workplace. Male and female employees are still judged against their professional role, and what happens at the pub after work can have an impact on a person's career. Unlike Gusfield (1987), who regards after work as a marker of the transition from work to leisure time, our results indicate that drinking after work *is* work and participating in this expanded office is vital to gaining personal advantage.

Our study shows that it was crucial for the female Norwegian employees to visit the pub after work in London to accumulate cultural capital (etiquette), social capital (networking) and symbolic capital (social power), as pub culture provides access to all these resources. As professional relationships are of great importance in English working life (Douglas, 2003; Sandiford & Seymour, 2013; van Mannen, 1992) and drinking is considered an effective way to build relationships (Walker & Bridgman, 2013), drinking in pubs plays an essential role. Järvinen et al. (2014) find that mostly men in high status positions report that drinking in pubs has a positive effect on their career and helps with network building. Our findings indicate that building social capital at the pub is also important for female employees in building a career.

The female Norwegian employees in our study enjoyed pub visits (to a certain degree), and studies have shown that changes in location, products and facilities have made pubs more attractive to women (Pratten & Carlier, 2012; Pratten & Lovatt, 2007). On the one hand, it is possible that increased female presence at pubs is an expression of changing gender roles and social positions (Lyons & Willott, 2008; Measham, 2002), when competitive, success-oriented young female employees join male colleagues after work in the pub demonstrating parity with their male colleagues. On the other hand, pub visit patterns still differ between males and

females, and some degree of gender segregation still exists in pubs (Lane, 2018). Our results show that demonstrating drinking behaviors in line with traditional feminine values (modesty in drinking) was important, a finding echoed in other studies (Buvik & Sagvaag, 2012; Measham, 2002; Sagvaag, 2007). Different pub visit patterns may reflect old gender norms (Lane, 2018), and the pub continues to be a central field for the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity (Campbell, 2009).

In addition, the tension participants described between after-work pub culture and family obligations might also be an important reason for gender segregation at the pub. Social roles still differ between men and women, with mothers/women being primarily responsible for care work (Colell et al., 2014; Emslie et al., 2004). Our results reflect different cultural attitudes towards male and female employees, which affect participation in pub visits and result in uneven access to capital.

Even though children are most likely valued in both Norwegian and English society, structural challenges and cultural norms in England may influence work culture and complicate work opportunities for the main care provider (mothers). This will have an impact on the status and position of men and women alike, both in the field of work and at the pub. Gender equity and social welfare systems influence how family responsibility and employment are associated with the use of alcohol (Rahav et al., 2006). The tension between expectations to socialize at the pub and family obligations might limit female employees' opportunities to gain the capital necessary for career advancement.

## Conclusions

We understand the pub as 'an expanded office': for many employees in London, after-work *is* work, an integrated part of the working day. The pub is an important cultural institution where drinking practices related to work take place. Several of the participants felt it was essential to join the pub after work to gain cultural, social and symbolic capital in English working life. The participants had to adjust to the drinking culture of being 'at work after work'. Still, we identified gender specific expectations and tension between after-work pub culture and family obligations that might limit female employees' opportunities to gain the capital needed to build a career and progress at work.

This study sheds light on why (young) female employees invest time in pubs; when drinking is part of a business-oriented activity, the pub becomes an important extension of the office. As noted, the drinking culture in modern English working life places certain expectations on employees outside the workplace. The differences between English and Scandinavian work culture, while not always easy to see, can pose significant challenges and influence work-related alcohol consumption. This study highlights that cultural awareness and knowledge are crucial for female employees to understand and navigate English pub culture in relation to work.



## Limitations

The data from eight in-depth interviews and field observations at two pubs in London do not represent the broader population. However, the high degree of consistency between the present findings and previous studies suggest that our results are indicative of trends. Nonetheless, caution should be exercised in generalizing these results to a broader context and several limitations in this study should be acknowledged. In this paper, urban pubs are seen as heterogeneous constructions; however, different pubs might appeal to different genders, professions and ages. Finally, caution should be taken due to the multiple gender discourses and gender norms. Even if these findings are not representative of all middle-class female employees, the data underline how social norms and power structures affect the lives and opportunities available to groups of employees.

## Implications for practice

Based on the findings, we recommend that companies posting female employees abroad on assignment inform their employees about the alcohol culture in the new country. Employees with knowledge about different alcohol cultures have a greater chance of successfully navigating the local alcohol culture and are more likely to avoid unpleasant aspects of work-related alcohol consumption. Our concern is with employees who may feel compelled to drink at the pub to conform to cultural expectations and employees who may feel uncomfortable in the 'expanded office' due to religion, family situation, gender norms, alcohol-related problems etc. We would also stress the less favourable aspects of the pub as an expanded office considering public health challenges. More research is needed on the role of alcohol and drinking practices in international work environments for both genders.

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