

## 'It Feels Like Life Is Narrowing': Aspirational Lifestyles and Ambivalent Futures among Norwegian 'Top Girls'

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### Abstract

Analyses of young feminine identities have often focused on consumption, career and intimate life as separate spheres. In this article, we bring these together to nuance the concept of the 'top girl'. Drawing on a qualitative study of young Norwegian 'top girls' alcohol consumption and lifestyles we explore how 'appropriate' feminine identities are configured in the present and in the future. We analyse how the egalitarian context shapes the contours of the 'top girl' and find that 'progressive' values are central to our participants' present lifestyles. However, these progressive lifestyles are expected to collide with the 'square' lives the participants see awaiting them as middle-class adult women and mothers. We argue that as the participants grow older, the range of legitimate, middle-class femininities is narrowing. Further, we suggest that in an egalitarian context such as the Norwegian context the 'top girl' lacks an attractive, adult equivalent.

### Keywords

alcohol, aspiration, class, femininities, imagined futures, lifestyle, post-feminism, qualitative methods

### Introduction

In contemporary western societies, young women are objects of both high expectations as well as intense scrutiny (Gill, 2007; Gill and Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2007). Claimed

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to be the 'ideal subjects' of neoliberalism, young women are seen as the key beneficiaries of a range of socio-economic changes that characterise western societies (Crofts and Coffey, 2016: 503), at the same time as being called upon to exercise self-government and self-management (McRobbie, 2015). The image of youthful and successful femininity is captured by figures such as the 'can do' girl (Harris, 2004), the 'successful' girl (Ringrose, 2007) or the 'top girl' (McRobbie, 2007); figures that emphasise how women have been granted rights and benefits previously primarily available to men, such as participation in education, employment and consumer culture and an entitlement to sexual desire and control over fertility (McRobbie, 2007). While each of these arenas is central to young women's 'success', they are often studied separately, through studies on work life (Allen, 2016; Crofts and Coffey, 2016), education (Renold and Allan, 2006; Ringrose, 2007) or sexuality and consumption (Evans et al., 2010; Harvey and Gill, 2011). In this article we investigate how these arenas are intertwined in distinct 'successful' lifestyles. Empirically, we take our starting point in young women's alcohol use as one site of 'empowered' consumption which has been highlighted as the prime example of women's freedom and new role as consumers (Gill and Scharff, 2011; Griffin et al., 2013; McRobbie, 2007). By not only focusing on distinctions concerning alcohol consumption but on how these distinctions are part of broader lifestyles, we seek a more holistic approach to how new femininities are lived out.

While the majority of the research on 'new femininities' emanates from the UK and Australia, we explore these questions in a Scandinavian context, where gender equality historically has a strong foothold and is institutionalised through both labour market and family policies (OECD, 2018). We draw on a qualitative study of alcohol consumption and identity formation among young women in Norway; women who can be seen as Norwegian 'top girls' with university qualifications and professional jobs. By situating the participants' alcohol use in their broader lifestyles and using this as a lens on their future orientations, we analyse how classed and gendered identities are 'consumed into being' (Walkerdine, 2003: 247) in the present and as the women imagine their futures. We show how 'progressive' values are central to our participants' present lifestyles and indeed to how the 'top girl' is constituted in the Norwegian context. However, these progressive lifestyles are expected to collide with the 'square' and rigid lives the participants see awaiting them as middle-class adult women and mothers, generating ambivalence towards this future. We argue that as the participants grow older, the range of legitimate, middle-class femininities is narrowing. Further, we suggest that in an egalitarian context such as Norway the 'top girl' has no attractive, adult equivalent. Through this analysis, the article also highlights the cultural specificity of the concept of the 'top girl'; a specificity that is often not drawn out. Below we first introduce the literature on new femininities and post-feminism and then outline how we attune our analytical approach to classed and gendered distinctions before we turn to the empirical analysis.

## **New Femininities, Post-Feminism and Post-Post-Feminism?**

Scholars have argued that we live in post-feminist times, dominated by a focus on 'individualism, choice and agency' (Gill, 2016: 613), a lack of recognition of structural inequalities and a shift 'from objectification to subjectification' in the representation of

women (Gill and Scharff, 2011: 4; see also McRobbie, 2007). We follow Gill and Scharff (2011) in approaching post-feminism as a *sensibility*; an orientation that suggests that there is no longer a need for feminism as gender equality is by and large achieved. However, the denial of external influences and an insistence on the neoliberal tropes of freedom, empowerment and choice obscures how the constitution of the ‘successful’ feminine subject is both classed and raced (Walkerdine et al., 2001). The ‘successful’ feminine subject is inherently contradictory in its demands and the solutions to these contradictions are sought in highly individualised strategies (Budgeon, 2011).

The post-feminist discourse of ‘female success’ (Crofts and Coffey, 2016: 503) links young women with ‘capacity, success, attainment, enjoyment, entitlement, social mobility and participation’ (McRobbie, 2007: 721) – attributes conventionally associated with masculinity (Budgeon, 2014; Ringrose, 2007). However, while these may be progressive identities, they are nevertheless ‘consummately and reassuringly feminine’ (McRobbie, 2009: 557), thereby not upsetting the broader gender structure (Budgeon, 2014).

More recently, though, feminism is seeing a renewed presence and legitimacy in political and popular culture and society at large. This led Rosalind Gill (2016) to ask whether we are now in an era where feminism is (again) desirable and even ‘cool’, or in other words an era that is ‘post-postfeminism’ (see also Banet-Weiser, 2018; McRobbie, 2015). According to Gill this is not the case. Rather, what is emerging is a particular type of feminism; one that is individualised and compatible with neoliberal competition and involves an amplification of control over women through demands of self-regulation rather than liberation (Gill and Orgad, 2016; McRobbie, 2015). Gill and Orgad (2016) go on to demonstrate how seemingly feminist and emancipatory calls to enhance female confidence operate as a type of self-government specifically addressed to girls and women. Indeed, Gill (2016) argues that the re-emergence of (popular) feminism is actually *informed by* a post-feminist sensibility and that the two go hand in hand (see also Banet-Weiser, 2018).

While these trends – new femininities, post-feminism and a re-emergence of (an individualised) feminism – are in some ways global in nature via their connection to popular culture (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016), they are simultaneously situated in local contexts and cultures. In Norway, gender equality has been both a political ambition and a cultural ideal (Formark and Öhman, 2013). Exploring young womanhood in Norway across generations, Nielsen (2004, 2017) suggests that women’s access to education is not a new phenomenon, but something that dates back at least a generation. Hence, young Norwegian women have had ‘modern mothers’ who studied and worked; something which might have given them a head start towards individuality (Nielsen, 2004: 22). Ideals of autonomy and individuality were indeed central to the generation of young women (born in 1971/1972) interviewed in Nielsen’s study, marking a difference to the interwar period’s traditional feminine ideals of sexual respectability and parental duty (Nielsen, 2017). This suggests that the autonomy our participants are seeking is not what sets them apart from the previous generation. However, in contrast to Nielsen’s participants, our participants have come of age at a time when, globally, neoliberalism has been on the rise (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) and locally, the Nordic model of gender equality has faced challenges (Formark and Öhman, 2013). This coexistence of feminism, gender equality as ideal, post-feminism and neoliberalism forms the complex backdrop of this article.

## Gender, Social Class and Alcohol Consumption

Most research on femininities and alcohol consumption has focused on young women's negotiation of 'excessive' and 'hypersexual' forms of femininity associated with drinking in public (Bernhardsson and Bogren, 2012; Griffin et al., 2013; Nicholls, 2018). According to Beverley Skeggs (1997: 95), classed and gendered identities intersect as 'femininity is always defined through class'. Following Skeggs, Jackson and Tinkler (2007) note how the figure of the young woman drinking to excess in public, the 'ladette', is associated with the 'unrespectable' elements of a working-class lifestyle, such as being excessive, disruptive, crude and aggressive (see also Griffin et al., 2013; Nicholls, 2018). Hence, while all young women must negotiate being 'up for it' in nightlife, women from lower social classes in particular are pathologised in this process (Griffin et al., 2013; Lennox et al., 2018). While Skeggs' seminal work focused on working-class women and their efforts to distance themselves from their working-class background and 'pass' for middle-class women, this article focuses on middle-class young women (more detail in the Methods section) and their attempts at producing 'respectable' gender *and* class identities. As Lawler (2005) argues, this is as much about the relational aspects of class as the substantive – middle-class identities are as much defined by what they are *not*, by their non-working-classness. This links to Bourdieu's (1984: 49) observation that 'tastes are first and foremost distastes', or in Warde's (2007: 2) words, '[t]aste is a weapon for drawing social distinctions and for exercising social and symbolic domination'. Hence, in the analysis focus is on how the participants draw distinctions to mark what they like and dislike, not just in nightlife settings but also in terms of broader lifestyle choices, as key to their social positioning as middle-class women high in cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984).

In Norway, research suggests that social class is generally denounced as part of an egalitarian culture and neither something people actively identify with nor speak of (Skarpenes and Sakslind, 2010). However, this does not mean that cultural distinctions do not exist (Jarness and Friedman, 2017). What is argued to be particularly 'Norwegian' is to follow a code of 'modesty' (Gullestad, 1992), distance oneself from what is seen as 'snobbish' or 'elitist' (Jarness, 2017) and even elites are expected to display this 'down-to-earthness' (Jarness and Flemmen, 2019). What this literature is less clear about is how gender plays into these culturally specific ways of drawing (middle-) class distinctions. We consider this in the analysis.

## Methods and Data

The article is based on a qualitative study of young Norwegian women's alcohol consumption and the meanings they associated with alcohol use in their current lives. To this end, 19 interviews were conducted in 2016/2017 with women aged 27–34 (mean age 30), living in the two largest cities in Norway. The research participants were recruited through the first author's extended network using a targeted sampling strategy that focused on female participants who lived in cities, held higher education degrees and were without children; characteristics associated with higher alcohol consumption (Horverak and Bye, 2007). From initial contacts further participants were recruited via snowball sampling, still with the specified criteria in place. The participants' educational

qualifications are the main reason for characterising them as ‘top girls’: eight participants held a BA degree and 11 participants held a Master’s degree, the majority (10) from Arts disciplines (Social Sciences, Journalism, History, Cultural Studies). Most participants had finished their studies in their mid-20s and had worked full-time for at least a couple of years. At the time of the interview, all participants except one held professional jobs related to their degrees, meaning that most were earning good salaries. Eight participants were single and 11 in a relationship. Apart from two who mentioned both former male and female partners, all participants identified as heterosexual.

To explore participants’ subjective understandings of alcohol use and nightlife preferences, individual, qualitative interviews were chosen. Approaching the interviews from a constructivist, epistemological point of view we view these as interactional and performative situations where knowledge is created rather than ‘excavated’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). The interviews were conducted by the first author who is close to the participants in terms of age and professional life. This might have created a sense of ‘shared understanding’ but also enhanced the need for participants to ‘match’ the interviewer’s presumed social position and associated lifestyle. As Bourdieu (1989) notes, distinctions are often most pronounced in relation to positions that are perceived as ‘close to home’. The interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide focusing on past and present drinking experiences, preferred drinking situations and positive and negative experiences in nightlife settings. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) and conducted in accordance with the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Science and Humanities’ ethical guidelines (NESH). Informed consent was secured and names and other identifying characteristics have been changed to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

Reading the interview transcripts, we noted that many participants talked about being at a point in life marked by a feeling of change in relation to their alcohol use as well as with regard to careers and intimate relationships. Descriptions of alcohol consumption were accompanied by discussions about the broader (present and future) lifestyles participants imagined, as ‘cultured’ women but also as women approaching family life and motherhood. This mirrors Brannen and Nilsen’s (2002) point that for young women, speaking about imagined futures inevitably involves speaking of family formation. In the analysis we seek to unpack the relation between present and future lifestyles and femininities. The first author coded the transcripts with two broad codes covering preferences in nightlife and domestic settings, respectively. A third code covered feelings and orientations towards the future. After this, both authors read all three codes and developed sub-codes relating to present and future preferences, both in nightlife and private settings.

## Analysis

The analysis is divided into three sections. First, we analyse how lifestyle orientations and preferences in nightlife settings are important to the participants’ identities as progressive and equality-oriented women. We then examine how the domestic sphere becomes increasingly central to their identities as (future) cultured women and housewives; identities that they have already started taking steps towards. Finally, we explore the dilemmas and ambivalence associated with these imagined futures.

### *Going Out: Progressive Lifestyles in Nightlife and Beyond*

Given the overall focus of the study, the interviews often took their point of departure in discussions about alcohol consumption and nightlife settings. As experienced patrons, they expressed a preference for ‘interesting’ venues with character and a distaste for venues characterised by a focus on ‘excessive’ consumption. For instance, Heidi described a venue she did not approve of:

[It is] a typical example of a place that I hate, but that we always end up going to every year, and it has actually become kind of funny [. . .] [it] is right in the middle of the western part of the city. And everyone – and now I’m probably generalising – but almost everyone looked the same, all the girls had fillers in their lips and that kind of look. Really tacky, like it’s cool to spray champagne around, that kind of place. I cannot think of anything worse. [. . .] It’s not my crowd at all.

Marking their distaste for ‘tacky’ venues and conspicuous consumption was just as much about distancing themselves from specific displays of femininity associated with these practices and venues. Underscoring the lack of individuality among the women at this venue and the displays of ‘fake’ feminine appearances contributed to constructing their own individuality, authenticity and progressiveness. This demonstrates how respectable middle-class femininity is often constructed through ‘othering’ of working-class women who are seen to lack the economic and cultural resources to consume ‘appropriately’ (Lennox et al., 2018: 14). This othering mainly centred around the presentations of bodies and displays of a ‘hypersexualised’ femininity, such as women who ‘use their money on silicone boobs’ (Maria), are ‘girly-girls’ (Nikoline), wear ‘sexy and skimpy outfits’ (Hanna, Tiril), ‘stilettos and sequined dresses’ (Maren) or ‘make-up, stilettos and a nice hair-do’ (Maja). These descriptions were in line with numerous accounts of ‘troublesome’ femininities in relation to alcohol and nightlife settings (see Griffin et al., 2013; Jackson and Tinkler, 2007; Nicholls, 2018 for examples of this). Following Skeggs (1997), such distanciations from what is seen as ‘vulgar’, ‘excessive’ and ‘sexualised’ are central in constructing positions as ‘respectable’ middle-class women.

At the same time, these descriptions also showed a disregard for what can be seen as luxurious, unnecessary spending as mere ‘showing off’ (Jarness, 2017). Maja’s description of her own style when going out was quite different and shows a veneration for a ‘simpler’ style: ‘I’ve never been that interested in clothing, make-up and that sort of thing. And never made much effort, just . . . decided to be a “low maintenance” kind of girl who is comfortable in my own skin (laughs).’ What Maja described is a style that does not require her to make an effort to look good; a style associated with comfort or confidence that is also more ‘authentic’ (Banet-Weiser, 2012); it is ‘her own skin’. However, as McCann (2020: 10) notes, ideals of ‘natural beauty’, such as Maja’s descriptions of a ‘low maintenance’ look, simply replace one set of gendered expectations with another. Nikoline argued that ‘it is that whole “dressing up for a man” compared to “dressing up for a girl” thing. Girls who dress up for other girls wear outfits that men often do not like at all.’ Hence, for Nikoline ‘dressing up’ was not necessarily problematic as such, it depended on who this ‘dressing up’ was for. In this way she tied her

aesthetic preferences to her politics; to a progressive femininity that was in opposition to ‘the male gaze’ (Mulvey, 1975). This also extended to a distaste for nightlife venues that were ‘meat markets’ where ‘the only relation a man and a woman can have when going out is hitting on each other’ (Astrid). Distancing themselves from heteronormative interaction patterns and objectification of women was important in establishing their progressive – for some explicitly feminist – identities. In that sense, while respectability and performing the ‘right’ femininity is always a balancing act (Skeggs, 1997), for these women a progressive, middle-class femininity involved downplaying sexualised, feminine aesthetics, in part because of the problematic gender relations these came to represent. Such relations were seen to reflect more general values as Maria described:

In the western part of the city it’s . . . I think it’s a bit more conservative. Gender roles are a bit more ‘stuck’ with typical expectations, a woman is supposed to look hot and be available, and there’s buying of drinks and . . . The gender roles are more traditional. I think there are different values in those kinds of environments. Even though there are of course women who prioritise their career and that kind of thing . . . I still think the conversations about those kinds of things are different.

Maria here distanced herself from ‘conservative’ gender relations, not just in nightlife settings but generally. ‘Prioritising a career’ was one key marker of this equality but not sufficient for an identity as a progressive woman; this also involved specific ‘values’. Hence, while many spoke about enjoying their emerging careers, being able to ‘really “go for it”’ (Nikoline) and ‘prioritise work right now’ (Maja), they also emphasised the meaningfulness of their work. Several had careers in government, law or politics; jobs that were seen as fulfilling and enabled them to ‘work for an important cause’ (Kristina). It was also clear that the workplace was not the only arena for creating a sense of achievement and progress. Rather, their careers were one part of broader lifestyles filled with cultural activities such as learning about art and music, or physical achievements in sports competitions. As well as jobs and careers being a source of self-realisation and enjoyment, Ingrid stated that spending time improving herself had become very important: ‘It’s probably mostly working out, being healthy and feeling good, really. So that’s what I prioritise. It’s a lot about me, you know. How I can optimise myself (laughs).’ The women’s present lives were often depicted as a time to cultivate and focus on themselves, their interests and abilities, reminiscent of McRobbie’s (2015: 3) argument that ‘the perfect’ is now on the ‘horizon of expectation’ for young women. For the participants in this study, being aspirational both in and beyond the work domain seemed to go hand in hand with, and indeed be a marker of, their progressive, middle-class lifestyles.

### *Staying In: The Taste of Successful Femininity*

As mentioned, many of the women talked about being at a time in life marked by feelings of change and this was reflected in how they viewed their alcohol consumption. While nightlife settings continued to be important spaces for drinking alcohol, a number of women described an increasing centrality of domestic settings. For instance, Ingrid described how her drinking practices had become ‘quieter’:

It's probably quieter now. Now it's probably more dinners. Not as much 'going out'. If you are partying, you are kind of back to being in someone's home . . . It isn't like a 'super-party', more like a dinner, drinking wine and enjoying ourselves . . . Or . . . party? That sounds silly (laughs). It's more like gatherings with alcohol.

For Ingrid, and many other participants, private settings and in particular dinner parties with friends and family were increasingly taking priority over clubbing. This was associated with a more controlled way of drinking that centred on 'enjoying' alcohol, in particular wine, which traditionally connotes cultural capital (cf. Brierley-Jones et al., 2014). For some participants, such as Nikoline, the transition to 'mature' alcohol consumption was a matter of realising a long-time aspirational identity:

I like the image of it, the aesthetics of having a glass of wine while reading a book (laughs). It's how I wanted to be when I was 17 years old. That sort of grown-up person working and having a glass of wine in the evening. There was something temptingly middle-class about it (laughs).

While Nikoline was the only one to identify explicitly with a middle-class identity in this way, the change in drinking practices was a recurring theme. Answering the question of how she likes to go out, Tiril questioned whether this was even the right word to describe her participation in nightlife settings:

It depends on how you define 'going out'. I use the city scene quite often at night. It's often a concert, and then a few beers, and that's it for the night. But going out to *dance* at a place like a nightclub, I *never* do that. But I often go to different events in the city. Last weekend there was something called 'Culture at night' and a lot of cool events were on, and that evening we had wine in one place, then went to a gig, and then went back and had some more wine, and eventually went home.

Tiril literally reconstructed what it means to 'go out', stating that she would '*use* the city scene' at night. Rather than partying and dancing, Tiril mentioned cultural events and drinking wine with friends in a controlled manner. The participants generally emphasised their (existing and expanding) cultural capital by asserting how their lives were rich in cultural activities such as concerts and going to the cinema and how they pursued their interest in food and in gathering friends for dinners in their homes. These dinners were not just about polite exchanges, but included 'lots of discussions [. . .] that's something that always happens in our home', as Heidi put it. Continuing in the same vein, Hilde talked about how her and her husband's home had become a social meeting point among their friends:

I'm very interested in cooking. And my husband and I enjoy cultural activities, we often go to the opera, concerts and those sorts of things. Movies. [. . .] And we are very fond of having people over, having friends for dinner and that kind of thing. Our apartment often becomes a sort of social meeting point.

For Hilde there was a clear connection between the cultural activities outside of the home and the dinner parties in her own home. Both were a means of presenting herself as an

intellectual and cultured woman who is knowledgeable about a wide range of ‘sophisticated’ consumption practices. These practices were also associated with cultivating an attractive home and private sphere; ideally creating a home that is a ‘social meeting point’. The topic of wine and food came up across a number of interviews as something the participants were trying to ‘upskill’ on. As Heidi put it:

I would like to learn more about wine. [. . .] if you’re out and you get a really well-matched wine with a dish . . . even if I can’t describe it, I understand that it’s well matched and try to figure it out myself. I really enjoy that. I think it’s fun to go to the bottle shop and get assistance from the staff, ‘I’m planning on cooking this or that, could you help me find something that goes well with that?’

For Heidi, learning about wine was not only about the pleasure of ‘really well-matched wine’ when going out for dinner, but as much about the *skill* in pairing food and wine. This was something she aspired to learn to improve her dinner parties. Here we see a parallel to McRobbie’s (2015) suggestion that successful femininity now also involves mastery of the home and domestic sphere as ‘the perfect’ becomes the measure of ‘the good life’. Demonstrating knowledge about wine was a way of asserting one’s own good taste and, again, appearing ‘cultured’. While most participants were critical of the ‘elitist’ sentiments inherent in these practices (cf. Jarness, 2017), Camilla nevertheless stated that ‘you don’t bring a bottle of prosecco if you’re invited to a dinner-party. You bring a locally produced red wine that you know is a bit expensive.’ In this way she displays both her cultural and economic capital (‘locally produced’, ‘a bit expensive’) (Bourdieu, 2000). And finally, being knowledgeable about food and wine was seen as an important part of being a good hostess as Hanna describes:

I think that if you’re making a nice dinner, having something nice to drink is part of that. And I don’t mean water or a Coke. . . . It’s also about good manners and etiquette. Good food and good wine . . . That’s something you’re supposed to be knowledgeable about. And it’s a nice thing to offer when you’re hosting a dinner party. [. . .] I really love hosting dinner parties, I like bringing people together.

For Hanna, knowledge about wine and food was a matter of ‘good manners’ and ‘etiquette’; something she believed she was ‘supposed to’ know about as a woman in her social position; that is, as a middle-class woman. However, this reference to ‘etiquette’ is reminiscent of a fairly traditional understanding of women’s responsibilities. Indeed, while many participants described how dinner parties were something both they and their partners were interested in and participated in – and that the guests were often other couples – they also tended to describe a gendered division of labour in the preparation of these dinners. As Hilde said, ‘it’s teamwork, but he often gets more in the way than he helps’.

### *‘Having It All?’*

As demonstrated above, the changes in the women’s drinking practices were embedded in broader lifestyle changes that were pointing towards their imagined future lives and

lifestyles. For most, this future also involved a family and/or children. In the previous section we illustrated how the participants were already taking steps towards and 'preparing for' this future as 'cultured' women and competent home-makers through lifestyle activities they enjoyed – demonstrating their educated middle-class tastes through both alcohol consumption, social activities and cultural events. However, many also demonstrated an ambivalence towards the future, seeing it as in some ways rewarding, but also as constraining. Observing friends who had already established a family reinforced this ambivalence, as Ellen described:

With these new mothers, there's a lot of baby-talk . . . I think they sometimes appreciate having me in their social circle to get some input on how it is to still be free, so to speak (laughs) and not have everything figured out and in order, while they very much live that A4 life . . . But there are still similarities. And everyone is kind of engaged, discuss politics, that sort of thing . . . solving world problems, even my friends with babies . . . But it is a bit different.

Ellen's friends' 'A4 lives' – rigid and standardised – served as a contrast to her own 'free' lifestyle. She emphasised how it was possible for her friends to maintain a progressive mind-set and do meaningful things ('solving world problems') after having children, but acknowledged that their social life together had changed. Other participants also used the notion of 'freedom' to describe their current lifestyles. For instance, Janne, who saw herself as 'an entrepreneur', described how she enjoyed the 'freedom' in her current lifestyle and had chosen *not* to establish a family at present: 'This [freedom] also makes me choose not to have that part of life, as in having children. I don't want that now.' Although Janne mentioned the structural constraints informing her decision (money and time), not having children was first and foremost presented as her individual choice. This mirrors Crofts and Coffey's (2016) analysis of how combining work and motherhood remains a highly gendered 'choice', which women more than their male partners bear the responsibility for. This individualisation of structural inequalities is an important dimension of post-feminist discourse (McRobbie, 2009). Janne's statement implied that she was still planning on having children at a later stage, just not 'now'. This was repeated in a number of interviews and only one participant explicitly considered not having children. Instead, for the majority establishing a family was rather a matter of timing, demonstrating the need to have a 'carefully monitored life plan' at hand (McRobbie, 2015: 17). Kristina discussed the option of getting a less demanding job in the future in order to combine work and family life:

I don't have children at this point, I've only got myself to think about, and that means I have the opportunity to do it (work hard), travel a lot and so on, and I think I'll have the opportunity to find a less demanding job later if I need to.

For Kristina, as for a number of other participants, maintaining her current career and lifestyle at the same time as having children did not seem a realistic option, and having children would entail a trade-off such as finding a 'less demanding' job. This trade-off, however, was in conflict with the women's emphasis on gender equality and their aspiration to have 'meaningful' careers. For Maria, whose friends had started having kids, the prospect of scaling down her career conflicted with her basic values:

I don't want it to be that way, that if we have children they'll grow up thinking that 'Dad works and supports the family and Mom's got a "pretend" job', right? That her main job is being with the children? I don't want kids, if that's how it will be. I want it to be *equal*, you know [. . .] It's scary. That freedom, in a way. That's what I feel I'm giving up. I found it hard moving in with my boyfriend, because of that . . . It's narrowing, you know, how your life will be. It's been so wide open, the world full of opportunities, and suddenly it's getting narrower.

Maria's feeling of life and opportunities 'narrowing' seemed symptomatic for many of the participants. Even though the idea of starting a family in the future appeared both natural and wanted, this was nonetheless associated with a loss of freedom as well as of with the risk of falling into more traditional gender roles, in which caring for children would become her main responsibility and her career would no longer be valued. For a number of participants, this dilemma meant that they postponed what appeared to be the 'inevitable' future, as Heidi described:

This is probably a really egotistic thing to say – but I'm very aware that this is a time in my life where . . . I think it's a wonderful time where you have a job you like, you have a good income and few commitments. I really appreciate that I can travel, and that we can prioritise our interests. And I'm very much like 'oh no, but I have to have . . .' – I want a family at some stage. I just kind of postpone it like 'in five years' and then again 'in five years', so that it's always further ahead.

The tension inherent in Heidi's comment seems to revolve around the impossibility of combining not only her career but her entire present lifestyle with future family life. As this seemed like a tension she could not resolve, she continuously postponed having children. Rather than considering a future without a family, Heidi's comment seemed to reflect the inevitability of family life as the normative destination (Gordon et al., 2005).

However, although the participants enjoyed the (middle-class) privilege of only having oneself to think about (cf. Allen, 2016), it was also fraught with tensions around being 'self-centred' (Ida) or 'egotistic', as Heidi put it above. As Budgeon (2016) argues, being a single woman may be acceptable as an empowering and legitimate choice, but only up until a certain age. Similarly, Nikoline told how she enjoyed her present lifestyle, but also mentioned the shame she associated with living what she saw as a privileged life:

Sometimes I feel bad about complaining about being busy or stressed about something, because I have no one I have to support. I have myself, a full salary that's big enough to support a family. [. . .] It really feels like . . . what older people write about, 'what today's youth have come to'. I am that person, and I like it, and have the attitude that 'Okay, too bad you didn't do that!' (laughs). [It's an] extended teenage period, only with money.

Nikoline refers to media representations of 'today's youth' as irresponsible when depicting how she enjoys her current situation and lifestyle with a substantial income that could 'support a family'. While she is critical of such media stories, it is still clear that being a 'progressive career woman' with a good salary does not quite suffice as a mature feminine identity. Instead, Nikoline feels like she is living a luxurious 'extended teenage

period', which is not seen as appropriate or legitimate. This demonstrates how refusing family life comes with not only a risk of being seen as narcissistic (Edelman, 2004) but also is perceived as refusing 'the good life' more generally (Ahmed, 2010).

## **Discussion: From 'Top Girls' to 'A4' Women?**

In the analysis, we demonstrated how Norwegian 'top girls' struggle to align their current, progressive lifestyles with their imagined futures. A number of key points and contributions can be drawn from this analysis.

Overall, the article contributes to the literature on new femininities by considering the different arenas of women's lives – social, professional and intimate – as intertwined, rather than studying aspects of these separately. Our approach also extends these lifestyles into the participants' imagined futures. In terms of our empirical starting point, alcohol consumption, this expanded lens enabled us to demonstrate how changes in young women's alcohol consumption must be understood in conjunction with broader lifestyle changes and future aspirations, both of which reflect classed and gendered norms. As Threadgold (2020: 693) writes, 'while the future is something that is immanent, it is also ever-present as a reflexive leitmotif'; that is, these imagined futures and future identities become signposts that guide and inform how present lifestyles, including alcohol consumption patterns, must be adapted.

The article also contributes to the literature on new femininities by looking at what happens when the figure of the 'top girl' travels to a Scandinavian, egalitarian context. The analysis revealed both complexity and ambivalence when exploring the present and perceived future lifestyles of Norwegian 'top girls'. In terms of their present, the 'top girl' in the Norwegian context is not only grasping the new opportunities available to her (McRobbie, 2007) in terms of completing higher education, seeking out career pathways and engaging in consumption patterns previously only available to men. She also sees herself as engaged and interested in politics such as environmental and social issues, is a proponent of gender equality in and beyond nightlife settings and aspires to not just a career job but a 'meaningful' one, united in a 'progressive' lifestyle and associated consumption patterns. This is a dimension we have not seen addressed in the existing literature on new femininities. Other studies, however, support this emphasis on liberal values as a means of distinction connected to cultural capital in the Norwegian context (Pedersen et al., 2018).

Further, the Norwegian version of the 'top girl', as it plays out in this study, demonstrates a complex relation to the individualised and consumer-based 'popular feminism', that both Banet-Weiser (2018) and Gill (2016) argue has gained prominence today. We can only speculate as to why this is the case, but differences in national gender cultures (Pfau-Effinger, 1998) and the institutionalised support for gender equality in Norway may be key here. This feminist orientation, though, does not mean that our participants wholly reject neoliberal and consumption-based feminism. We see traces of this reflected in the participants' focus on individual achievement and improvement across multiple arenas of their lives and in the centrality of consumption to the participants' lifestyles. They are indeed 'consuming [their] identities into being' as Walkerdine (2003: 247) put it. Hence, popular feminism appears to exist alongside the awareness of structural inequalities, with one seemingly 'tempering' the other.

The progressive lifestyle of the present, however, is not easily projected into the future. The women in our sample look to their friends as well as cultural images when they seek to imagine what ‘appropriate’ middle-class femininities may look like. On the one hand, they are attracted to what they see as a ‘cultivated’ and ‘intellectual’ lifestyle, which they have already started buying into as they are pivoting towards the domestic space. Interestingly, aspects of this lifestyle change might clash with their own distaste for luxurious consumption in nightlife settings and the general anti-elitist sentiment (Jarness, 2017; Jarness and Friedman, 2017), but also with their feminist orientation. However, these changes are framed as a matter of gender expectations – being ‘the hostess with the mostest’. This suggests that there are limits to how ‘down to earth’ (middle-class) women can be and still ‘pass’ as ‘proper’ women. As Skeggs (1997) has emphasised, respectability is a balancing act that involves neither ‘too much’ nor ‘too little’ femininity. What we see in the women’s turn to the domestic setting may be an expression of this kind of tightrope walk, signalling that the contours of appropriate, middle-class lifestyles and indeed femininities are being reconfigured as the women grow older.

What the participants are ambivalent towards, though, are the broader ‘A4 lives’ – rigid and standardised – they also see awaiting them, especially when looking further ahead to the ‘inevitable’ point of starting a family. Among our participants, motherhood is not an idealised or progressive identity, in contrast to Anglo-Saxon ideals such as the ‘yummy mummy’ (Littler, 2013) and therefore not the extension of the pre-maternal, ambitious and aspirational young working woman that McRobbie (2013) has suggested. Without drawing too firm conclusions on this, as this is beyond the main focus of the empirical study, we suggest that rather than approaching motherhood through a consumption lens (Littler, 2013, 2019), our participants mainly associate motherhood and family life with a loss of freedom, not just in terms of gender equality but also with regard to their progressive lifestyles and identities in a broader sense. This is why the ‘top girls’ in our study do not believe in ‘having it all’. The future lives they imagine involve compromises – with themselves and their own aspirations for their lifestyles and values. Ironically, we find this in a welfare state context with a state-backed gender equality ideology. Our insights here resonate with studies from Norway (Nielsen, 2017) and Finland (Gordon et al., 2005) that also found motherhood to be associated with ambivalence, revealing some of the ‘complexities and ambivalence beneath the surface of the Nordic progressiveness’ (Formark and Öhman, 2013: 3).


Returning to the question of future femininities, our findings suggest that in egalitarian contexts such as Norway the figure of the progressive ‘top girl’ does not seem to have an attractive adult equivalent. In this sense, we can understand the sense of ‘life narrowing’ described by our participants as a narrowing of acceptable feminine identities available to adult, middle-class women here. This is also where the application of the Anglo-Saxon figure of the ‘top girl’ to a new national context sheds light on cultural specificities inherent in the concept but usually invisible. In other words, by applying the figure of the ‘top girl’ to the Norwegian context we have not only gained insight into the aspirational lifestyles of young women here but also into how different national (gender) cultures enable different normative lifestyles and future aspirations.

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