



**University  
of Victoria**

Graduate Studies

**Notice of the Final Oral Examination  
for the Degree of Master of Arts**

of

**ERIN CUSACK**

BSc (Dalhousie University, 2011)

**“The Relationship between Alcohol and Sexual Agency for Young Women in  
University”**

Social Dimensions of Health

Wednesday, May 10, 2017

3:00PM

University Centre Building  
Room A207a

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Charlotte Loppie, School of Public Health & Social Policy, University of Victoria (Co-Supervisor)

Dr. Bernadette Pauly, School of Nursing, UVic (Co-Supervisor)

Dr. Lyn Davis, School of Public Administration, UVic (Additional Member)

External Examiner:

Dr. Bonnie Leadbeater, Department of Psychology, UVic

Chair of Oral Examination:

Dr. Carmen Galang, Peter B. Gustavson School of Business, UVic

## **Abstract**

Despite the known risks, young women often perceive sexuality-related benefits of alcohol consumption that may contribute to the persistence of heavy drinking and associated sexual health harms among university populations (Messman-Moore et al., 2013; PHAC, 2016; Smith et al., 2009). In this qualitative study, I aimed to better understand the perceived sexuality-related benefits that may motivate young women to consume alcohol. Guided by feminist poststructuralist and intersectionality theories, I undertook a critical discourse analysis examining the relationship between alcohol and sexual agency for young women, and the social norms that influence this relationship. I collected data through semi-structured interviews with 14 young women in university between the ages of 19 and 25 who identified as heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. I produced some exploratory data on heteronormative and gendered drinking contexts that impact heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual young women's alcohol consumption and sexual agency in varying ways. The findings suggest young women may rely on alcohol to mitigate internalized shame and social stigma associated with gendered social expectations of women's sexuality that discourage their sexual expression and agency. These findings provide some insights on how young women's motivations for drinking are linked to social constructions of women's sexuality that could be relevant to harm reduction efforts.