

Assessing the role that entertainers play in alcohol marketing and the maintenance of good order within on-trade licensed premises

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Key findings

- Most study participants felt that without licensed venues it would be hard to get gigs and that many venues would cease trading if they could not offer live entertainment.
- Interviewees felt the co-existence of live entertainment and alcohol consumption was for good reason, with each enhancing the pleasurable mood alteration produced by the other.
- Live entertainment is used by venues to attract specific clienteles, increase attendance, raise drinking rates and promote spending on expensive beverages.
- Rather than overt marketing (e.g. advertising, pricing, sponsorship etc.), entertainers more often influenced purchasing behaviours through breaks and intermissions, selected beats and tempos, and leading by example to create a party atmosphere.
- Work as an entertainer in licensed premises, often several nights per week, can be a risky business, financially, artistically, in terms of personal safety, and in terms of own alcohol consumption.
- Some interviewees felt unprepared for dealing with drunken audiences and the various financial arrangements which nightlife entertainers faced. Training better tailored to the practical needs of live entertainers could benefit them and help foster safer bars.

Research team

Jemma C. Lennox¹ & Alasdair J. M. Forsyth

Institute for Society & Social Justice Research, Glasgow Caledonian University

1 now at the Department of Psychology, University of Bath

Corresponding author - Alasdair.Forsyth@gcu.ac.uk

Background

The main aim of this project was to recruit and interview a range of on-trade pub/nightclub entertainers in order to explore their roles in drinks marketing and crowd control. Recently, overt forms of alcohol marketing such as sponsorship or discount pricing have come under increasing scrutiny and, to some degree, regulation (e.g. advertising restrictions and 'happy hour' bans). Therefore, entertainment provision is likely to become increasingly important as a means for on-trade licensed premises to both attract and retain target customers.

This project builds upon an earlier Alcohol Research UK (then AERC)-funded participant observational research study conducted in 8 nightclubs in Glasgow, Scotland (Forsyth, 2009) and an NHS-funded study conducted in 8 nearby pubs around the same time (Forsyth et al, 2006). In both studies, music entertainment was noted as influencing crowds in terms of both drinking rates behaviour (through forms of 'soft policing').

These findings were consistent with similar international studies, and also with music-oriented bar-lab experimental studies. These indicated that the provision of on entertainment or music can increase, or decrease, drinking rates via changes to tempo, volume, lyrical content, distraction, subtle mood alteration or indeed the mere presence of any music. Entertainment has also been demonstrated to influence which patron-types are attracted to licensed premises (the 'sonic demarcation' of the nightscape), how long they stay and the cost of their beverage choices (see Forsyth, 2011, for review).

As well as observing these effects in the field, our previous research also received a degree of corroboration from interviews conducted with nightclub patrons and pub staff. However, entertainers themselves were not consulted at that time. The present study addresses this knowledge gap by asking 24 Glasgow pub/club entertainers if they are aware of the effects that their performances may have on audiences' alcohol consumption and intoxicated behaviours - and if they are aware, to what extent are they actively encouraged to market alcohol, and what are their training needs (if any) in regard to managing drunken crowds?

Methods

Twenty-four qualitative interviews were conducted. To ensure a range of entertainers took part, a sample frame was constructed to include eight DJs (all playing different music genres or in different venues), eight band members (again comprising various music genres or instruments) and eight 'other'/ variety acts (e.g. comedians, performance artists, cabaret acts, and hosts/presenters). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used for this study (Braun & Clarke (2006). Transcripts were reread for data familiarisation before being entered into the qualitative data management software NVivo 10 for more formal coding and analysis.

Findings

Some participants were formally trained (e.g. at music or drama college) but found employment via the licensed trade, while others became entertainers via on-trade alcohol retail work. All struggled to think of gigs they had played where alcohol was not available or when they had played to a sober audience (or, in some cases, when they themselves had performed completely sober).

Although some denied that performing in licensed premises, or even verbally directing people to the bar, constituted alcohol marketing in any way, most realized from the outset that they were employed to help on-trade premises return profits:

"...early on I realised it's not just, like you're not just playing some tunes and that's the end of it you know? You are driving bar-sales..." (#09, male, DJ)

"...because pubs especially want things that are upbeat because if they're upbeat they're [audi-

ence] more likely to stay, they're more likely to drink more. So they've [pubs] got like a hidden agenda with having a DJ because you're providing a service that's keeping people drinking." (#08, female, DJ)

"If they [audience] are there longer then they buy more drink. It's as simple as that. I have, in the past had managers come up to me or managers come up and go "could you clear the dance floor a wee bit, there's nobody at the bar." (#07, male, DJ)

Participants felt that alcohol helped facilitate greater audience enjoyment of their acts and that by contrast playing to sober crowds could be stressful. Drinking often preceded any audience participation such as dancing, singing, clapping along to the music or laughing at the comedy. Positive reactions to the entertainment would then lead to faster or more prolonged drinking.

"...some people won't get up to dance until they've had a few drinks and then I think once they do then they do tend to drink, like it kinda goes sort of in tandem with the dancing as well. It's like they're like 'oh love this song!' and then they'll maybe sort of go and get a drink but then, it's like the two things kinda sorta happen at the same time." (#01, male, DJ)

"...take as many breaks as you want, stop and chat to people, venues love that cause often if they [patrons] feel like a personal connection to you they are guilted into staying for more drinks. That's actually what you're there to do. You're really just an alcohol pusher in a lot of places..." (#20, male, lounge pianist)

Consequently, it was felt that without alcohol people might not enjoy themselves or even attend. Entertainers encouraged a degree of drinking in their shows as this was felt to improve the enjoyment of their act. However, they took care not to overdo this, as heavily intoxicated crowds could lose interest in the show or cause trouble.

Alcohol-related disorder was an occupational hazard. This could either be confined to the audience or directed at the performers themselves. There was no consensus among participants on how, or whether, to intervene in drunken violence (e.g. should the band quite literally play on). Most had learned 'soft policing' skills on the job, by trial and error or through training received in other bar work or 'day jobs'. Many tailored their 'harm reduction' techniques to specific venue types.

"I've had a few drinks thrown at me over the years [laughs]" (#01, male, DJ)

"And how do you deal with situations like that?" (interviewer)

"Oh dear, well eh well I got better at getting out of the way [laughs] and then I kind of started realising 'well ok well why are people throwing drinks over me?' And then I realised well it's just because I was being, I was being a little bit cheeky with people." (#01, male, DJ)

Although some felt this was not their job, and that dealing with disorder should be left to stewards and bouncers, most were enthusiastic about the prospect of such training. They also supported improved education on other aspects of night-time economy work.

"I did a music degree, and I know that out of everyone that did the degree not everyone is going to be a gigging musician, but a lot of them are, and so for example the cultural relevance of music in the 80s is all well and good, but really, how to do your own accounts, how to deal with drunk people

are 2 lectures I would have turned up for every time.” (#20, male, lounge-pianist)

Working continuously within alcohol environments, in an occupation culturally associated with drinking, and where consumption on the job was often encouraged, put participants' own health and safety at risk. Some took steps to minimize this by, for example, reducing their own drinking.

“[I] ...said I'll drive the van or whatever so that kind of meant I had an excuse almost to say...‘oh no I'm drinking water because I'm driving' so it's very much, especially in these kind of pub environments you are very much expected to be drinking as a band member, you know, and most of the other band members did have a drink... and in that environment everyone is drinking, and it's very much alcohol and music. It's very much part of it” (#21, male, band-member)

Although, by definition, our sample comprised pub/club entertainers, it was notable that they all struggled to think of ever having performed in alcohol-free spaces and as such felt that they could have no job in show business without the existence of licensed premises.

“I don't think I ever played to anybody that's been sober to be honest” (#22 male, band-member)

“[in Glasgow] ...there are no alcohol-free spaces for people to perform.” (#15, male, performance-artist)

Many also felt that the lack of performance spaces was exacerbated by the potential demise of on-trade licensed premises through pub closures.

“I think it's one of those things that's just endemic of a pub. It's part and parcel of a pub. I can't think of any pubs that wouldn't have some form of entertainment, whether that's a DJ or a quiz or, and I think the pub would die out if they didn't, I think the two of them need each other.” (#04, male, quiz-host)

Implications

Live entertainment and licensed premises clearly go hand-in-hand. Continued pub closures seem likely to reduce available spaces for performers and public access to live entertainment. Similarly, many pubs may not survive if they are unable to offer entertainment to attract custom, especially in the face of competition from the off-trade and the internet.

There may be a role for developing more alcohol-free venues. Although unlicensed performance spaces may struggle financially, or encourage pre-loading, such venues would open doors to other audiences (and performers), who in the current scenario are effectively barred from accessing live entertainment because of the presence of alcohol: including under-18s, -religious, groups non-drinking subcultures (e.g. 'straight-edge') and people with addiction issues.

There was a clear need for training in issues such as crowd control, dealing with heavily intoxicated persons and violence prevention/reduction to at least be made available to entertainers. Participants felt they could have benefitted from formal training on how to deal with intoxicated crowds and working in the night-time economy more generally.

Conclusion

This study suggests that the relationship between alcohol and live entertainment is culturally embedded in the UK. When combined, alcohol and entertainment (e.g. music) can alter moods, of crowds and indi-

viduals, often in a pleasurable direction, for example the idea that drinking and dancing go in tandem. Thus, even if the strictest regulations to prevent overt alcohol marketing (e.g. bans on advertising, verbal endorsements, branding, sponsorship, and price controls) were to be introduced, this link is likely to persist, and be exploited to promote bar-sales. However, participants spoke of an ideal level of relatively moderate intoxication, a temporal 'golden point' that could bring out the best in them and in their audiences (e.g. preventing trouble). Thus, on-trade entertainment provision could provide an alternative attraction for nightlife patrons instead of mere intoxication, and alternative income for venues (e.g. entry fees or more attendance, a selling-point over the off-trade) as opposed reliance on alcohol provision alone.

Further Information

For Further information please contact Dr Alasdair Forsyth, Glasgow Caledonian University.

References

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