

DRINKING IN MELBOURNE BARS: GENDER, CLASS, CULTURE AND ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

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Increasingly research on alcohol consumption is suggesting that the setting or the context is important for the way people drink. We know that, in terms of the social context, age is important. Young people tend to drink more in a session than older people, and there is more binge drinking. We also know that gender is important - that young men tend to drink more than young women. And we know that class is also important – those from lower socio-economic areas experience more alcohol related harm than their counterparts in other social locations. The physical context in which alcohol consumption takes place is also important. It has been established that large crowded venues, that have loud music, and a lack of seating, encourage excessive drinking.

The study that I am talking about today set out to investigate these issues further in the Australian context. Specifically we were examining the way class, gender and venue interact to shape consumption. The aim was to suggest more creative health interventions that could be targeted toward different alcohol consumption contexts.

First, I will briefly outline some broad changes that have taken place for young people and changes in drinking styles over the last couple of decades. Social change has been quite dramatic, there's been substantial demographic and labour market change and the whole 'youth' life stage has been extended. This is because young people are taking longer to finish education and establish themselves in the workforce, and more young people are living in the family home for longer. Later partnering and childbearing also has an impact. The 'going out' phase has been extended. Young people may not be earning much but they have quite a bit of disposable income if they are living at home. However, we should also remember that there are a number of young people who are excluded from participating in urban nightlife because they do not have the means to participate.

The drinking scene has changed a number of ways and for a number of reasons over the last two decades. Firstly because of the advent of dance music there has been a change from pub style drinking to club style venues. As most of the speakers at this conference have discussed there is been an increase of illicit drug use. Café style drinking has developed here, and in other Western countries, and liquor licensing laws have been relaxed, so you can now drink at any time without purchasing food. There is been the advent of the 'ready to drink' alcohol products – the so-called 'Alcopops', such as 'Breezers' or 'Ruskies' and these are marketed specifically towards young people. These products change very rapidly. There has also been a feminisation of nightlife. Public drinking spaces were traditionally male dominated and women were relegated to the ladies lounge, at least in Australian pubs. Now there is more gender equality in terms of drinking, but there is also more chance of alcohol related harm for young women in particular.

Method

In this study we conducted observations in 10 licensed premises and we looked at the social and physical aspects of the setting, as well as what kind of drinking was occurring there. Our role was low-level participant observation and we aimed not to substantially change the environments we were observing. We drank non-alcoholic or light alcohol beverages but if patrons approached us we would disclose that we were undertaking research. We undertook these observations on three of the most popular nights and we observed in three hours sessions. Two or three researchers undertook observations at each of these sessions.

We also recruited participants from the venues that we were observing in, and we conducted semi-structured interviews with them at a later date. We asked them questions about their cultural tastes, their drinking styles, and their venue choices. So this is an outline of the sample that we recruited (refers to screen). The sample of venues are not likely to be representative of what is going on in Melbourne for a number of reasons - we had to get permission from venue management to go in and do these observations, so we would assume that the venues allowing us access had nothing to hide - they did not have a problem with underage drinking specifically and felt quite comfortable about the drinking practices going on in their premises.

Our sample of interview participants has slightly more males than females; the average age is 23; half live at home; there is a bit of a mix of education – we were going for a contrast in terms of class so we have got people who had just finished secondary school, but also quite a few at the other end who either have a degree or are getting a degree. In terms of work, the majority were in clerical, sales and service work, but we had a range there as well, and a range of income levels

We wanted to examine social class differences. There is the older way of conceptualising class in terms of production – including variables such as education, occupation and parents level of occupation. But there are also more recent ways of conceptualising class around issues of consumption, lifestyle and taste. So we wanted to incorporate both of those elements. We developed a typology of five different types of venues to include in the study. We targeted corporate bars in the inner city that would be going for the kind of executive clientele; then the mainstream, Aussie suburban bars or clubs, and that includes the kind of branded pubs - those with an Irish, or Wild West, or a sports theme; alternative, middle class kind of bars, inner city bars; then the mega clubs for drinking and dancing, and grungy pubs.

Findings

I am presenting preliminary analysis today and I would like to talk about the distinction between commercial venues and niche venues. This is the core of our analysis at the moment and I think it is a useful way of conceptualising alcohol consumption contexts. We had five commercial venues and five niche venues in our sample.

Commercial and niche places are different for a number of reasons. They have a different style – the commercial places have a much more mainstream style, whereas the niche places offer a more stylish or an alternative aesthetic. The shabby-chic kind

of setting with second hand couches is very prevalent in Melbourne bars at the moment. In terms of music, the commercial venues played popular music and top 20 hits or cover bands, whereas the niche places play more independent artists and jazz. They are also different in terms of customer service or staff. You could say that the staff are chosen for their looks in both kinds of places, but they had different kinds of styles. So in the commercial settings the staff are more likely to have uniforms, they are more likely to have t-shirts with brands on them. So for example in one place, there were women behind the bar who were blond, wearing tight t-shirts on, tight pants and high heels – in fact they could have been straight from one of those Cougar adverts on TV. By contrast, staff in the niche venues were dressed in a style that reflected the aesthetic in those particular places. In one particular club, the men behind the bar provided a kind of performance for the patrons – they were drinking shots and throwing and rolling spirit bottles over their bodies in the preparation of cocktails. The staff were quite different in commercial and niche venues.

Security was also different at the different venues. The ‘gorilla’ and the ‘door bitch’, is a way of categorising them. The commercial places are much more likely to have the gorillas, the muscle kind of security men, or the traditional bouncers, who focus on crowd control and the eviction of patrons. By contrast niche venues are much more likely to have the door person, (who can be male or female incidentally), who will assess your style and determine whether you can come into the club or not. Niche venues are much more likely to be selective around issues of style and the composition of the crowd inside whereas the commercial places are much more likely to accept a very broad crowd. However both types of venues tended to accept women, and refuse groups of drunken men – so that’s something they have in common.

The venues also vary in terms of patron demographic. The commercial venues had a slightly younger crowd; they were more likely to be living at home. Three quarters of the interview participants were living at home, in comparison to the patrons at the niche places of whom two thirds were out of home and either renting or buying a place. In terms of class, it’s difficult to generalise, but we would say that the commercial spaces tended to have a more varied crowd in terms of social class, whereas those niche places tended to have more homogenous, middle class crowds. Another indication of this is where the patrons lived. Three quarters of people in commercial places (even though many of the commercial places were in the city) actually lived in an outer suburb. Whereas, those people attending the niche places, two thirds of those lived in the inner suburbs.

In terms of gender, all of the places we went to were very mixed spaces and there was some evidence of the places being more feminised. But at the same time there was a feeling that men still dominated in terms of patrons – it was maybe 60%/ 40%. Women didn’t tend to come alone to any of the places, but men were more likely to do that. Moreover women tended to come in larger groups. In some places, not all, some parts of the venue were dominated by one gender. For example, the central areas in some bars were dominated by men and the dance floor tended to be dominated by women. In terms of ethnic background, there was diversity across both commercial and niche venues. There were some bars and clubs that were Anglo-Celtic dominated, and others that had a much more mixed clientele. In both categories there was one commercial pub and one niche club that had Mediterranean nights on a Saturday night.

In terms of sexuality – it was not the focus of this research, we did not go out looking specifically at gay pubs or clubs for example – but to generalise you could say that the commercial places seemed to be more heterosexual; the niche places were more tolerant of diverse ways of dressing and behaving in terms of masculinity and femininity. But both kinds of places were definitely about meeting sexual partners.

Different types of alcohol were being consumed in the different venues. In terms of the types of drinks, the commercial places had a range of offerings including beer, wine, spirits, the ‘ready to drinks’ and alcopops. We had assumed that ‘alcopops’ would be very much seen as girls’ drinks but we found that working class men and the outer-suburban men were drinking these quite frequently in commercial clubs. By contrast niche places sold boutique alcohol products such as imported beers, top shelf spirits and better quality wine and spirits. Some of the niche venues did not have beer on tap at all and would just sell it from bottles from the fridge, and few had alcopops available.

There were quite stark differences in terms of drink promotions – basically, the commercial places had drink promotions and the niche places did not. Promotions included free drinks on entry, free drink cards (where you get a free drink after buying a certain number), the happy hour time slots with cheap drinks, or the membership deals where you get free entry and free drinks for friends on your birthday. There were also some places that had industry nights where people in particular industries could come along, and they were basically about getting drunk on the cheap.

In terms of drink prices, it was not as straight forward really. On the whole the commercial places did tend to have cheaper drinks than niche places, but not always and not by much. The niche places had more of a range of prices, but in most places, particularly clubs, both commercial and niche, you could not get a drink for under AU\$6, so a pretty expensive night out.

From the interview data, the venue type was also related to drinking styles. There was a distinction between having a quiet drink or having a big night and a celebration. A quiet drink tended to be at a pub or with dinner and included wine or beer, whereas a big night was about getting trashed at a club setting and possibly drinking at home first, and drinking spirits, cocktails or the ‘ready to drinks’.

Change over time was a strong theme in the data. People talked about drinking differently when they were younger, that they would tend to go to larger clubs, they would tend to be involved in drinking cheaper, heavier alcohol products, in comparison to their present drinking. Most envisaged that they would change their drinking patterns over the next five years too. Most thought they had probably drink less- less volume and less alcohol, and they had probably go out less in the future as well.

Unfortunately I have not time to show you much data, but this is an example of the high level of differentiation that young people have with types of drinks and the consumption context. I would like to do some further analysis in this area – so this is really just an example. Rachel says:

“Yeah, like if I go to a pub I’ll drink just beer, maybe it’s because the people that you’re around as well –like in a set. I drink red wine if I’m at a party. If it’s outdoors I’ll drink Champagne, for some reason, and beer. Yeah, there’s only the odd occasion when I’d drink mixed drinks, you know if I’m going out with certain people we’ll drink mixed drinks and they’ll buy them.” Hannah asks, “so like gin and tonic?”. “No, no, scotch and coke mainly, and maybe a vodka and orange”

It is quite interesting – she has got a very strict sense of what she should drink in different settings (and many of the other participants do too). The other area where I need to do further analysis is with the ongoing challenge for health intervention – the ‘drinking to get drunk’ phenomenon. This quote is from a discussion on drinking choice, with John who was recruited from a commercial mega-club:

‘I drink Sub-Zero because I don’t like bourbon. I mean I don’t mind the occasional beer, but if I drink it’s to get drunk sort of thing, so I don’t drink just for the fun of it, it’s like for a reason. Sub-Zero just goes down really easy, and because it’s vodka mixed with, you know, like a citrusy kind of soft drink it’s pretty easy. Like you don’t have one sip and wilt – so after about eight of them I’m flying. So probably Sub-Zero or vodka anyway.’

Sub-Zero is one of those alcopops.

Conclusion

Overall, drinking in Melbourne venues, the ones we observed anyway, was relatively safe. There was only one venue where we felt uncomfortable and did not feel that we were able to recruit participants. The patrons in the venues were drunk but there were no observed occasions of staggering or vomiting or intimidation or violence. We should remember that drinking in unregulated environments such as private homes, parties or public spaces such as parks is probably a lot less safe than what we were seeing in the venues we researched.

I hope that I have convinced you that examining the alcohol consumption contexts is useful, and we need to think about interventions and target those different venue types. The challenge is not to push middle class or older people’s drinking preferences – I mean it is just crazy to think that we should turn suburban mega-clubs into inner city bars where everyone sips cocktails. That is not the answer.

This is preliminary analysis and I would be really grateful for any ideas, but in terms of intervention perhaps we can investigate re-regulation and tying food to drinking at particular times. Maybe there is something that we can do in terms of drink promotions. Instead of banning them perhaps there is a possibility of putting water or bags of chips or something else on the drink card so you get to a certain number of drinks and then you get a free water and then you get a free bag of chips and then you get a free something else that might inhibit excessive alcohol consumption. We need to think again about healthier kinds of consumption and the marketing of drinks. I am sure you are aware that people tend to drink wine and beer usually more safely than white spirits and alcopops, particularly in the pub and club settings that we observed. Ultimately we have to encourage people to drink as part of leisure rather than to get ‘messed up’ as an end in itself.

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The report has now been completed and is available for download at
www.arts.monash.edu.au/sociology/staff/drinking_report.pdf