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Night club patrons who feel safe will return: Evidence to encourage management to address club violence

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Abstract

Introduction—There is substantial evidence that heavy drinking is associated with aggression and violence. Most managers of drinking establishments are required to maintain a security staff to deal with disruptive patrons who threaten an organization's business or legal status. However, managers may focus little on minor instances of aggression even though these may escalate into more serious events. We hypothesize that proactive security efforts may positively affect patron's perceptions of nighttime safety and influence their decisions to return to the club, thereby affecting the club's bottom line.

Method—Data for this study were collected from entry and exit surveys with 1,714 attendees at 70 electronic music dance events at 10 clubs in the San Francisco Bay Area (2010–2012). Participants were asked to report on observations and experiences with aggressive behavior while in the club, their overall perception of club safety, and their plans to return to the same club in the next 30 days. Mediation multiple regression analysis was used to relate observations of club security to perceptions of personal safety and plans to return to the club.

Results—Reported observations of an active club security staff were positively related to perceptions of personal safety. Safety perceptions, in turn, were significantly related to plans to return to the club. The indirect path between perceptions of security and plans to return was significant as well.

Conclusions—The results suggest that an active security presence inside clubs can encourage club attendance by providing an environment where minor altercations are minimized, contributing to the perception of club safety.

Practical Applications—Evidence that proactive security efforts appear to increase return customers might motivate managers to implement better security policies.

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Keywords

intoxication; aggression; security; safety perceptions; clubs

Introduction

Extensive research has demonstrated that intoxication is associated with violence (Graham et al., 1998; Homel & Clark, 1994; Pernanen, 1991). The strong relationship between heavy drinking and aggressive behavior has historically presented a substantial problem for managers of drinking establishments (Gehan, Toomey, Jones-Webb, Rothstein, & Wagenaar, 1999; Graham et al., 2004; Lang, Stockwell, Rydon, & Beel, 1998; McKnight, 1991). Managers typically take responsibility for security on the premises, in parking lots, and in the areas around the entrance to the site, calling on the police only when a major problem occurs. Therefore, bar managers must implement security policies and train staff members to control aggressive and illegal activity on their premises. This activity is designed to minimize liability risks and is a basic expense of doing business.

Because security programs are motivated by liability concerns, they tend to focus on relatively serious events, such as fights or significant disruptions. Such disruptive behaviors generally evolve from a cascade of milder but potentially observable incidents (Graham et al., 2004)—for example, a heated verbal exchange that grows into a physical altercation. Club management may frequently be reticent to take action on minor, less salient behaviors out of concern that customers will react negatively to heavy-handed security practices. However, from a prevention perspective, it is clear that interceding at the first sign of trouble may prevent more problematic incidents from materializing. Efforts to encourage club management and staff to proactively address aggressive within clubs by reacting to early indicators of trouble may reduce incidents of more serious violence and harm.

Linking the practices of security and staff to the club's bottom line may be one avenue to appeal to owners and managers. We have experienced notable reluctance from management to provide fiscal data (e.g., revenue) about the clubs that would serve as a criterion for this analysis, but measuring repeat customers, or intentions to return to the club, may serve as a proxy. Evidence that patrons are less likely to return to a club they perceive to be unsafe (e.g., clubs without visible security or responsible staff) might encourage management to take serious proactive security practices.

Over the past decade, the research team has conducted surveys with young adults attending clubs that sponsor electronic music dance events (EMDEs) (Byrnes, Miller, Johnson, & Voas, 2014; Miller, Byrnes, Branner, Voas, & Johnson, 2013; Miller et al., 2009; Miller, Furr-Holden, Voas, & Bright, 2005). Using the portal survey method (Voas et al., 2006), in which information is collected from clients on entry and exit from drinking environments (e.g., nightclubs), it is possible to study attendees' perceptions of safety as a function of observed staff and security practices, as well as their attitudes toward returning to that same club. With these data, the objective of this study is to test the relationship between security and staff behavior, patrons' experiences at the club, and their willingness to return to that specific or any other club, mediated by perceptions of safety. Patrons' perceptions,

experiences, and observations of aggression (as well as reported safety) were related to plans to return to the current site or another club. This model also delineates the factors that moderate the relationship. Confirmation of this relationship should encourage owners and managers who are hesitant to promote proactive security out of concern that it will impair the atmosphere of fun and excitement at the club.

Methods

Sample

Data were collected from 10 clubs during 70 electronic music dance events between 2010 and 2012 in the San Francisco Bay Area. A total of 1,714 participants provided sufficient information (out of 2,099 who provided any data) to be included in this study. Club and event selection procedures and the methodologies are described more fully in Miller et al. (2013), Byrnes et al. (2014), and Voas et al. (2006).

Procedures

This research used the portal survey methodology (Voas et al., 2006), which provided a method to link entrance and exit data through the use of wrist bands while maintaining anonymity. Participants were recruited in groups since group members were unwilling to wait while individuals were interviewed and individuals were not willing to be left behind. Prospective participants were offered a \$10 incentive for the entry survey and \$20 for the exit survey.

The participation rate varied across clubs and events and as a function of weather, with a median participation rate of 57.9%. This rate is not particularly low for field intercept studies, and we have no evidence that our sample is missing specific segments of the club-going population. Most of those who agreed to participate provided both entrance and exit data (92.1%). Brief interviews, self-administered surveys, and biological measures to test for alcohol and drug use were attained upon entry to and exit from the club. Except for the exit blood alcohol concentration (BAC), all measures for the current analyses were derived from the self-administered surveys. Beyond those who did not complete the exit survey, self-reported experience of sexual aggression was the only item with a notable number of missing cases ($n = 138$) and the largest contributor to the reduction in sample size (from 2,099 to 1,714).

Measures

A descriptive summary of the variables used in analysis are provided in Table 1. Inter-correlations among predictors and blood alcohol concentrations are shown in Table 2.

Predictors—Three broad types of club experiences were used as our primary predictors, each of which was represented as a composite variable in the model. First was *Security Perceptions*—patrons witnessing the presence of an active security and staff. This composite variable was the mean score of three items measured as participants exited the club. Participants were asked to what extent they saw (a) security monitoring the bathroom areas, (b) security patrolling the club in general, and (c) service staff refusing to serve intoxicated

patrons. Participants scored all three items on a 5-point scale, ranging from “Saw a Little” to “Saw a Lot.” Participants had the option of responding “Not Sure.” Those cases were recoded as “Saw a Little” because it is reasonable to believe that had participants witnessed any security events they would have reported such.

The second composite variable was *Witnessing Problems*—reflecting risky activities that participants saw in the club but with which they were not necessarily directly involved. Participants indicated this variable by reporting any of the following three items: (a) people using drugs, (b) people selling or giving drugs, or (c) people engaged in sexual acts. All three items were measured using a 5-point scale from “Saw a Little” to “Saw a Lot.” Participants who reported “Not Sure” were assigned to the “Saw a Little” category.

A principal components analysis of the six aforementioned items (both composite variables) clearly revealed a two-factor solution with the three security variables and three witnessing problems variables clustering together. This helped justify our creation of composite variables as described.

The third composite variable was *Negative Experiences*—reflecting participants’ individual and direct exposure to interpersonal harm. This was identified by three dichotomous (yes-no) items. Upon exiting the club, participants were asked to indicate whether during their time at the club that night they were (a) insulted or shouted at by another patron, (b) pushed or punched, or (c) the victim of unwanted sexual aggression. These three items were used to inform a dichotomized Negative Experiences item, with participants coded as having a negative experience if they responded yes to any of the three items. A variant of the negative experience variable was created by summing the responses across all three items (which produced scores from 0 to 3). Results using this four-level variant mirrored the results of analysis that used the dichotomous item.

Covariates—Five single-item measured variables served as exogenous covariates: (1) participant sex (male vs. female), (2) race (White non-Hispanic vs. racial or ethnic minority), (3) age, (4) BAC measured at entrance, and (5) BAC measured at exit. A slight majority of the sample was male (52.0%), and slightly over one third were White (non-Hispanic) (35.1%). The median age was age 26.0, and only 12.4% of the participants were younger than 21 years.

Mediator—*Perceived Safety* was hypothesized to mediate the relationship between experiences in the club and the likelihood of returning to that club in the next 30 days. Perceived Safety was measured in our model by the item: “To what extent did you feel this club was a safe place to go tonight?” This was quantified on a 4-point scale (from “Not Safe” to “Very Safe”).

Outcome—The outcome tested in our model was whether patrons planned to return to the same club in the next 30 days. A plurality indicated definite plans to return to the club, while slightly less than one third each responded “No” and “Maybe” to the question. Patrons’ plans to go to *another* club in the next 30 days were also measured. Over two thirds indicated “Yes,” while fewer than 20% indicated “No” and “Maybe,” respectively.

Analytic Approach

The data were analyzed using generalized linear mixed modeling (PROC GLIMMIX in SAS). The variables peer-group and club were modeled as random effects to accommodate the non-independence of the data. Tests of mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986; MacKinnon, Warsi, & Dwyer, 1995) were conducted to demonstrate the strength and significance of the indirect relationship between perceptions of club security and likelihood of returning to the club (mediated feelings of safety).

Initial analysis predicted Perceived Safety from the three composite club predictors (Perceived Safety, Witnessing Problems, and Negative Experiences) and the five covariates. Results are shown in Table 3.

Only sex approached statistical significance, with older, male, and White non-Hispanic participants reporting feeling safer. Participants who entered with lower BACs and exiting with higher BACs reported feeling safer as well.

Next, the likelihood of returning to the club (3-point scale) was regressed onto the set of variables listed from the initial analysis (Table 4) as well as the perceived safety mediator variables. Peer-group and club were modeled as random effects, and the likelihood of returning outcome was specified as following a multinomial distribution for the purposes of generating appropriate standard errors.

Perceptions of safety were strongly and positively associated with likelihood of returning to the club such that people were more likely to report plans to return to the extent that they felt the club was safe. Controlling for perceived safety, only participant sex predicted willingness to return, with male participants in general being less likely. A non-significant trend suggested that White (non-Hispanic) participants were more likely to plan to return to the club. Individuals with higher exit BAC also were more likely to return.

Regarding club experiences, only perceptions of security significantly predicted the reported likelihood of returning to the club; those who reported seeing a proactive security presence were more likely to return. The actual experience of negative events did not predict plans to return. A non-significant trend suggested that those who witnessed events (such as drug use) were less likely to return.

In an ancillary analysis, the model described in Table 3 was replicated but the reported likelihood of returning to *another* club in the next 30 days was included as an additional covariate in order to demonstrate that the relationship between club experiences and plans to return were specific to the club in which the experience occurred. Above and beyond plans to return to a different club, perceptions of security were positively related to reported likelihood of returning to the same club from which they were sampled ($p < .01$, $b = .636$).

The Sobel test (Sobel, 1982) was used to test for mediation—that is, to assess the significance of the indirect path between club experiences and likelihood of returning to the club *through* perceptions of safety. This tested the regression weights and standard errors obtained through the analysis displayed in Tables 2 and 3 (see <http://quantpsy.org/sobel/sobel.htm>). Analysis was limited to perceptions of club security (and not witnessing

problems or negative experiences) because it was the only variable that significantly predicted both perceptions of safety and likelihood of returning to the club. The indirect path between security perception and returning to the club, as mediated by perceived safety, was statistically significant ($z = 4.3$, $p < .01$, $b = .044$). Accordingly, the extent to which participants perceived more proactive security was associated with greater perceptions of safety, which in turn was associated with greater willingness to return to the club.

For thoroughness, the Sobel test was replicated using parameter estimates derived from analysis that excluded the random effects components (i.e., peer-group and club). The indirect path, though smaller ($b = .024$), remained statistically significant ($p < .01$).

Discussion

Our findings indicate that patrons who perceive clubs as safe are more likely to return to that specific club in the next 30 days, above and beyond any general tendency to go clubbing at all during that period. Visibility of security staff is associated with patrons' perceptions of personal safety and negatively associated with experiences of aggression in the club that ostensibly could be prevented by security. Our analysis found that safety perceptions significantly mediated the relationship between perceptions of security and likelihood of returning to the club, and is consistent with the hypothesis that visible presence of security staff was associated with a positive perception of safety.

This research supports the earlier work on the Safer Bars program (Graham et al., 2004), which demonstrated that risk assessment, administered hand-in-hand with staff training, could lead to the suppression of both minor and serious instances of aggression. Therefore, management that establishes policies supporting staff efforts to identify problems early and intervene effectively can benefit via return customers.

This study was limited to young adults in the San Francisco Bay Area who attend electronic music dance events. Thus, the results may not apply to other types of drinking venues in other locations. All the variables of this study were based on self-reports with the exception of exit BAC. The key outcome measure was the report of a plan to return to the club, a response that could not be verified. The intensity of security activity was measured through the perception of the attendees. An objective measure of the ratio of staff to attendees was not available. Although some self-report responses were provided by participants who were intoxicated, it is not clear whether that intoxication would produce a *systematic* bias. In any case, our findings were significant above and beyond participant BACs.

It is also important to acknowledge that this research is correlational. The pattern of results is consistent with a causal concept whereby patron decisions to return or not return to a club are impacted by the security actions within the club. Yet the existence of alternative explanations cannot be exhaustively ruled out. Nevertheless, these correlational results may be sufficient to convince club owners and managers that there are bottom-line benefits to implementing proactive security policies.

With those limitations in mind, these findings should encourage owners and managers to consider a more proactive safety program, which would identify minor aggressive events

that occur under the radar of current standard security policies. Essential to such programs is the ability of staff to observe the less obvious acts of aggression and intervene effectively in a manner that does not impinge on the club atmosphere but results in increased feelings of safety. Responsible beverage service programs—which train staff to detect problems and take effective action—have been widely implemented with some evidence for effectiveness (Holder & Wagenaar, 1994; McKnight & Streff, 1994) but with generally mixed results (Lang et al., 1998; McKnight, 1991; McKnight, 1993; Toomey et al., 2001). Research has demonstrated that servers can be trained to recognize intoxicated patrons and implement appropriate serving procedures provided they have strong support from management (McKnight, 1993; Toomey et al., 1998).

The difficulty the public health community faces is not in knowing how to intervene in order to reduce nightlife aggression but rather in knowing how to create interventions that are self-sustaining. Buy-in and support from managers and owners is essential to this process. This study was designed to produce evidence that safety pays in terms of return customers, evidence that can be communicated to bar owners and managers to motivate greater involvement in *preventive* security practices. Finding the appropriate avenues for communicating this information to club owners and managers would be the next important step. Research that is able to relate specific safety strategies to increased revenue might further facilitate club owners and managers to adopt science-based safety strategies.

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Biographies

Mark B. Johnson, Ph.D., is a Senior Research Scientist at the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE). Mark holds a Ph.D. in Social Psychology from the University of Maryland. His research has focused largely on the prevention of alcohol- and drug-impaired driving, risky behavior and prevention in nightclub settings, and behavioral decision-making, including applying recent scientific advances in motivated cognition to the area health and risk-taking. His research portfolio includes an eclectic mix of methodologies—from laboratory and field experiments, epidemiological studies, and multi-community prevention program evaluations. Mark has developed new methodologies to tackle research questions when existing methodologies have fallen short.

Robert B. Voas, Ph.D., has been involved in research on alcohol and highway safety for over 45 years since joining the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in 1968, shortly after it was founded, as the manager of its Driver Safety Research program. His published works include studies of underage drinking, young adult drinking at bars, and college drinking laws and policies. He has conducted evaluations of most of the major types of traffic safety legislation; ALR laws, per se laws, safety belt laws, checkpoints, MLDA laws, PBT programs, court procedures and sanction programs such as vehicle impoundment and forfeiture, community service, jail and electronic BAC monitoring, and interlock

programs. His evaluations have involved a wide range of field data collection methods including directing National Roadside BAC Surveys and portal alcohol and drug surveys of college students and young adults attending drinking locations.

Brenda A. Miller, Ph.D., is a Senior Scientist at the Prevention Research Center, a component of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation. Her research focuses on young adult drug and alcohol use and other risky behaviors in club settings, developing environmental strategies for clubs, and group-based strategies for maintaining patrons' safety. Her work also includes development of online interactive family based prevention strategies to address underage drinking and risky sexual behaviors among older teens. She is actively pursuing these research topics in the United States and internationally.

Hilary F. Byrnes, Ph.D., is a Research Scientist at the Prevention Research Center, part of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation. Her research interests include social and environmental contextual factors influencing youth risk behaviors. She is currently conducting a study examining teens' exposure to contextual risks and resources, and how these are related to alcohol and other risk behaviors. She also collaborates on a study examining risks in nightclubs for young adult drinking, drug use, and other risk behaviors, as well as a study developing a web-based family prevention program for older teens' alcohol use and risky sexual behavior.

Beth Bourdeau, Ph.D., is an Associate Research Scientist at the Prevention Research Center, part of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation. Her research activities focus on family influences on youth risk behaviors, including alcohol and drug use among ethnic minority populations. She is also a Marriage and Family Therapist, specializing in the treatment of adult sexual abuse survivors. She evaluated juvenile justice programs, sex education programs, and HIV/substance abuse prevention programs for Latino youth and men who have sex with men.

Highlights

- We examined whether club security practices were related to patron's experiences.
- Club patrons were interviewed entering and again leaving the club.
- Club patrons who reported an active security presence described feeling safer.
- Patrons who felt safer reported being more likely to return to the same club.
- Managers who implement proactive security measures may see more return clientele.

Table 1

Summary descriptives of model variables

Variables	Descriptives
Age	27.6 (<i>SD</i> = 7.6)
Sex	52.1% male
Race	57.4% White (non-Hispanic)
Entry BAC	.030 g/dl (<i>SD</i> = .041)
Exit BAC	.052 g/dl (<i>SD</i> = .052) [26.9% .08 g/dl]
Security Perceptions (1 to 5)	2.33 (<i>SD</i> = 1.0)
Witnessing Problems (1 to 5)	1.56 (<i>SD</i> = 0.7)
Negative Experiences (0 to 3)	0.43 (<i>SD</i> = 0.7) [30.3% Yes]
Perceived Safety (1 to 4)	3.64 (<i>SD</i> = 0.6)
Return to Same Club	No: 28.7% Yes: 41.4%
Return to Another Club	No: 14.0% Yes: 61.2%

Table 2

Correlations among club experiences, perceived safety and alcohol concentrations

	Entry BAC	Exit BAC	Perceived Safety	Perceived Security	Witness Problems	Negative Experiences
Entry BAC		.691*	.004	-.006	.024	-.006
Exit BAC			.085*	.006	-.012	-.094*
Perceived Safety				.034	-.140*	-.250*
Perceived Security					.160*	.091*
Witness Problems						.274*

* denotes statistically significant correlations ($p < .05$)

Table 3

Perceived safety regressed onto club experiences

	Statistical Test	Regression Coefficient (B) *
<i>Covariates</i>		
Age	$F(1,823) = 2.6, p = .11$	0.003
Sex	$F(1,823) = 3.7, p = .06$	Male: -0.054
Race	$F(1,823) = 2.4, p < .13$	White (non-Hispanic): 0.045
Entry BAC	$F(1,823) = 3.0, p = .08$	-0.819
Exit BAC	$F(1,823) = 5.4, p < .05$	0.901
<i>Club Experiences</i>		
Security Perceptions	$F(1,823) = 23.7, p < .01$	0.072
Witnessing Problems	$F(1,823) = 10.2, p < .01$	-0.066
Negative Experiences	$F(1,823) = 28.3, p < .01$	-0.174

* For continuous variables, the regression coefficients reflect the change in perceived safety for a one-unit change in the predictor. Regression weights for BACs often appear exaggerated because the range of actual BACs covers only a fraction of one unit.

Table 4

Likelihood of returning to the club regressed onto club experiences and perceived safety

	Statistical Test	Regression Coefficient (B) *
<i>Mediator</i>		
Perceived Safety	$F(1,821) = 51.0, p < .01$	0.784
<i>Covariates</i>		
Age	$F(1,821) = 0.1, p = .77$	.003
Sex	$F(1,821) = 13.5, p < .01$	Male: -0.446
Race	$F(1,821) = 3.5, p = .06$	White (non-Hispanic): 0.241
Entry BAC	$F(1,821) = 0.4, p = .54$	-1.248
Exit BAC	$F(1,821) = 4.3, p < .05$	3.450
<i>Club Experiences</i>		
Security Perceptions	$F(1,821) = 82.3, p < .01$	0.613
Witnessing Problems	$F(1,821) = 2.9, p = .09$	-0.153
Negative Experiences	$F(1,821) = 0.4, p = .52$	-0.089

* For continuous variables, the regression coefficients reflect the change in perceived safety for a one-unit change in the predictor. Regression weights for BACs often appear exaggerated because the range of actual BACs covers only a fraction of one unit.