



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 patrons' 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 1714 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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1. 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 (Byrnes, Miller, Johnson, & Voas, 2014; Miller, Byrnes, Branner, Voas, & Johnson, 2013; Miller, Furr-Holden, Voas, & Bright, 2005; Miller et al., 2009). Using the portal survey method (Voas et al., 2006), in

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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.

2. Methods

2.1. 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 1714 participants provided sufficient information (out of 2099 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).

2.2. 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 2099 to 1714).

2.3. 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.

2.3.1. 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.”

Table 1
Summary descriptives of model variables.

Variables	Descriptives
Age	27.6 ($SD = 7.6$)
Sex	52.1% male
Race	57.4% White (non-Hispanic)
Entry BAC	.030 g/dl ($SD = .041$)
Exit BAC	.052 g/dl ($SD = .052$) [26.9% $\geq .08$ g/dl]
Security perceptions (1 to 5)	2.33 ($SD = 1.0$)
Witnessing problems (1 to 5)	1.56 ($SD = 0.7$)
Negative experiences (0 to 3)	0.43 ($SD = 0.7$) [30.3% Yes]
Perceived safety (1 to 4)	3.64 ($SD = 0.6$)
Return to same club	No: 28.7% Yes: 41.4%
Return to another club	No: 14.0% Yes: 61.2%

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.

2.3.2. 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.

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 ^a	.004	-.006	.024	-.006
Exit BAC			.085 ^a	.006	-.012	-.094 ^a
Perceived safety				.034	-.140 ^a	-.250 ^a
Perceived security					.160 ^a	.091 ^a
Witness problems						.274 ^a

^a Denotes statistically significant correlations ($p < .05$).

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