



## Research paper

# “That’s cool, you’re a musician and you drink”: Exploring entertainers’ accounts of their unique workplace relationship with alcohol



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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative research investigates the alcohol experiences of entertainers who perform within licensed premises. Previous, mainly quantitative, studies have found that entertainers, specifically musicians, are an occupational group who drink excessively. This qualitative study draws on a wider sample of entertainers to examine their accounts of drinking in the workplace and the explanations they provide for this. We conducted individual semi-structured interviews ( $n = 24$ ) with band-members, variety acts and DJs in Glasgow, Scotland. This revealed a workplace characterised by continual opportunities for often free alcohol consumption. Unlike most occupations, for entertainers ‘drinking-on-the-job’ was normative, expected, and sometimes encouraged by peers, the public, employers or sponsors. Entertainers also experienced performance-related incentives to drink before, during and/or after a show; including anxiety, matching their intoxication level to the audience’s, and ‘reward-drinking’. This qualitative research confirms the unique nature of the entertainer-alcohol link, even in comparison to that found within other leisure industry occupations. While providing some explanation as to why entertainers might drink excessively, participants’ accounts also suggested potential strategies for avoiding the negative outcomes of workplace drinking.

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## Introduction

There is a longstanding interest in the relationships between entertainment (e.g. music) and entertainers (e.g. ‘rock-stars’) with alcohol and other forms of substance use. To date however, the academic literature on entertainers’ associations with alcohol has mainly been quantitative and focused on celebrity. For example alcohol, often in conjunction with other drugs, has been found to be a contributory factor in the premature mortality of famous rock-musicians (Bellis et al., 2007; Hearnsum, 2012; Kenny, 2014; Lebrun & Strong, 2015; Lucijanec et al., 2010; Talevski, 2010).

From analysing rock autobiographies, Oksanen (2012) claims the “merely drunk and drugged” rock-star “living fast and dying young” is no longer sufficient to be considered authentic, arguing that surviving addiction has replaced the ‘Cult of Death’ (Thompson, 1999) as a key theme in rock-culture, hardening the

“transgressive side of these books [that] sells them”. These autobiographies describe excessive drinking, alcohol addiction and alcohol recovery more commonly than the consumption of, and recovery from, other substances.

Bellis, Hughes, Sharples, Hennell, and Hardcastle (2012) linked the early deaths of rock-stars to negative pre-fame experiences. However, Kenny (2015) notes that, in the absence of qualitative research, she can only speculate that the differences in life-expectancy experienced by music performers are a consequence of variance in the “ubiquitous presence of alcohol and other substances of addiction, irregular hours, touring, high levels of stress, performance anxiety”. Given this list of risk-factors for celebrity musicians, it is notable that the alcohol experiences of non-celebrity/pre-fame, ‘gigging’, entertainers have received little attention from substance use researchers. Alcohol concerns are unlikely to be restricted to the few musicians who find fame.

In addition, other entertainers who inhabit the same physical and psychosocial working environments as rock-musicians are equally likely to encounter these occupational hazards (e.g. ubiquitous alcohol and irregular hours). Certainly non-music entertainers’ transgressive behaviours can garner similar levels of media interest to those of rock-stars [see, for example, the drinks-party lifestyles of

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celebrity comedians (e.g. Clark, 2013; Dessau, 2013; Harmer, 2013) and 'superstar-DJ's' (e.g. Byrne, 2003; Pires, 2015)]. Sulkunen (citing Taylor, 1999) compares Oksanen's (2013) rock-star autobiographies with the writings of 18th century Romantic poets (e.g. Byron, Coleridge, Keats and Robert Burns) concluding both populations inhabited a subcultural world where the "supplement" of intoxication was normative "as an expected form of transgression" (Sulkunen, 2013). Whether this expectancy of transgression by intoxication applies only to celebrities but also to lesser-known/pre-fame entertainers is not known.

Despite the absence of studies into 'gigging' entertainers, research has been conducted into the drinking practices of staff working in licensed premises and other environments where entertainers perform, for example bartenders (Tutenges, Bøggkjær, Witte, & Hesse, 2013) and holiday-guides (Hughes, Bellis, & Chaudry, 2004; Kelly, Hughes, & Bellis, 2014) working at 'beer-tourism' destinations (Munar, 2013) such as Magaluf, Spain or Sunny Beach, Bulgaria. The role of these holiday-guides is of particular relevance here, as part of their job remit has been described as "stirring up effervescence" (Tutenges, 2013) among crowds by encouraging drinking and 'bar-crawls'. In the UK night-time economy DJs, comperes and karaoke-presenters have been observed engaging in practices that encourage similar 'drinks-party' atmospheres within venues (Forsyth & Cloonan, 2008; Forsyth, 2009; Hadfield, 2006), although what affect this has on these entertainers is unknown.

Both bartenders and resort-guides were found to exhibit higher levels of alcohol consumption compared to controls. Reasons for this included environmental and psychosocial pressures to drink at their workplace (Tutenges et al., 2013) and the greater length of time they necessarily spent in such alcohol-saturated environments (Hughes et al., 2004). However the question remains as to what extent these elevated levels are a direct consequence of their job or a consequence of self-selection (i.e. where people prone to heavy drinking actively seek-out such workplaces).

This question of self-selection was raised by Plant (1977) who reviewed the post-war literature comparing 'alcoholism' levels with occupations. Among the occupations with higher alcoholism rates were "musicians", but it was unclear then whether self-selection factors or job pressures were responsible. More recently, the charity *Help Musicians UK*, conducted a survey of professional musicians which found that 45% (220/491) of respondents reported experiencing problems with alcohol (Help Musicians UK, 2014). Music researchers have identified entertainers as 'sensation-seekers' (Miller & Quigley, 2011) and it has been suggested that the lifestyles of gigging entertainers fosters increased alcohol use because of work-related mental health issues (Dobson, 2010; Ewens, 2016; Kenny, Driscoll, & Ackermann, 2014; Raeburn, 1987). However the precise ways by which entertainers' drinking behaviour is shaped by their working conditions, rather than individual factors, remains unknown.

The present project attempts to fill this lacuna, by conducting qualitative interviews with a sample of gigging entertainers who perform in the pub/club scene of Glasgow, Scotland. This research intentionally goes beyond rock-musicians, to include other types of performer, DJs and variety acts (e.g. comedians) who share the same alcohol-licensed performance spaces and perhaps also similar 'transgressive expectancies'.

The current paper stems from research which was designed to explore how live entertainment is used as a marketing tool by the alcohol licensed-trade industry (Lennox & Forsyth, 2015). The entertainment and alcohol hospitality industries co-exist in the night-time economy. Entertainment is provided by pubs/clubs to attract customers, while entertainers benefit from the existence of these venues as performance spaces (Briggs, 2013; Forsyth & Cloonan, 2008; Hadfield, 2006; Homel & Tomsen, 1993). Taken

together this symbiotic relationship has been termed 'drinkertainment' (Bell, 2007). However, in our research it soon became apparent that while the presence of entertainers within licensed premises might increase the public's exposure to alcohol to some extent, being on licensed premises increased entertainers' exposure to alcohol to a much greater degree.

This qualitative paper investigates gigging entertainers' relationships with alcohol; specifically asking:

- Do entertainers provide accounts of (excessive) drinking in the workplace and what explanations do they provide for this?
- From their accounts, to what extent do entertainers attribute their (excessive) drinking to self-directed factors as opposed to their working environment?

## Methods

Twenty-four qualitative interviews were carried-out in late 2014 with entertainers currently working in Glasgow's pubs and nightclubs, although some toured extensively. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to explore their careers and their experiences of work-related alcohol issues. Although this focused mainly on their roles in alcohol marketing (Lennox & Forsyth, 2015) we also explored whether their own drinking was influenced by working in this sector. Participants were very talkative, perhaps being accustomed to giving recorded interviews as part of their job (several began by providing their stage-name unprompted). To ensure all points-of-interest were covered, the interview schedules included the following two questions about entertainers' drinking:

- *What are your views on drinking while performing?*
  - Do you drink before, during, after act? Why/why not? Examples of good/bad experiences?
- *Do you think it is easy or difficult to avoid drinking when involved in your line of work?*
  - In what way?

Before commencing this research, ethical approval was granted by The Glasgow School for Business & Society, Research Ethics committee, Glasgow Caledonian University. Before interviews, participants were given an information sheet describing the study and assurances of anonymity. They were asked to provide written consent. The consent form and information sheet were read aloud. Some demographic information was noted for sampling-frame monitoring.

Our sampling intended to include equal numbers of three broad categories of entertainers; specifically 'DJs' ( $n = 8$ ), 'Band-members' ( $n = 8$ ) and 'Variety Acts' ( $n = 8$ ). However, in practice many had performed across these categories during their performative careers, which usually began in their youth prior to entering the full-time labour market. Each DJ or Band-member varied by genre of music and venue-type, while the Variety Act category was particularly diverse; comprising two stand-up comics (one male, one female) a comedy sketch artist, an electronic performance artist, a cabaret-singer, a lounge-pianist, a karaoke-presenter and a quiz-host. Table 1 provides background information on all participants, including their employment histories (age being a proxy for experience) in both the entertainment and licensed-trade industries, the latter of which ranged from glass-collectors to a pub licensee.

Interviews were transcribed before being analysed. Pseudonyms were used and identifying features removed from transcripts. Thematic analysis was used due to the method's flexibility to provide a detailed and complex analysis for "identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p79). To ensure complete familiarisation with the

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