

Can't dance without being drunk? Exploring the enjoyment and acceptability of conscious clubbing in young people

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In this chapter, we focus on the emergence of the conscious-clubbing movement and its potential benefits to young adults as a way of spending social time without drinking alcohol. Efforts to promote moderate drinking among young people may be challenging when the environment strongly encourages drinking, but conscious clubbing, which has roots in rave culture and involves dancing without the use of alcohol or other drugs, may offer an alternative. Drawing on literature from the rave scene and the benefits of dancing in a group, we introduce conscious clubbing and how it could bring about meaningful experiences in participants' lives, while at the same time, reducing the consumption of alcohol, and in doing so, we draw on our own recent survey research. This research illuminates challenges in the acceptability of conscious clubbing to some young people, which we discuss alongside suggestions for new directions for research in this area, at the end of the chapter.

The historical and cultural significance of raves

Anderson and Kavanaugh (2007) highlight how raves *“historically referred to grassroots organized, antiestablishment and unlicensed all-night dance parties, featuring electronically produced dance music (EDM), such as techno, house, trance and drum and bass”*, whilst acknowledging a number of additional distinct characteristics. These include: a unique sense of cultural identity, defined by 1960s-70 era liberalism, tolerance and unity; non-commercial, “grass-roots” organization in large unlicensed venues, and identity markers or symbols, including language, style, gestures and clothing. Most significantly, many conceptualise the concomitant use of psychoactive drugs, specifically MDMA, a “flagship” rave drug (Kavanaugh & Anderson 2008) as its defining element. During this time, patrons were drawn to contexts whereby they could dance, socialise and develop a sense of community togetherness with no alcohol-related aggression, violence or sexual harassment and no alcohol hangover (Goulding, Shankar & Elliott, 2002).

It is important to note however, that rave culture and psychoactive drug usage were a product of the historical and cultural context. Specifically, similarly to the 1920s US jazz and 1960s UK punk scenes, raves were considered as alternative, deviant or a form of youth subculture and identity in the late 1980s/early 1990s (Anderson & Kavanaugh, 2007; Measham, 2004). In addition to increases in both access and availability of these psychoactive drugs (Klee, 1998) at the time, the media were also considered to be amplifying public disapproval regarding alcohol consumption (and its potential relationship to public disorders), typified with discourses such as “lager lout” (Measham & Brain, 2005).

Recreational drug use is considered cyclical (Kohn, 1997) and subject to fashions and trends with the decline of alcohol consumption/increase in psychoactive drug consumption changing as time progressed through the so-called decade of dance (1988-98: Reynolds, 1998). The rave movement appears to have “died”, resulting from commercialization and emancipation of electronic dance music, the primary cultural product of the rave scene, now present in many elements of popular culture (Anderson & Kavanaugh, 2007). Alongside this, fashions in psychoactive drugs moved on, with a subsequent recommodification of alcoholic drinks because of policy changes in licensing, and the production of high strength bottled beers, alcopops and shooters (Measham, 2004). Such mixed drinks and legal stimulants are considered to provide a similar buzz to other substances (Measham, 2008). In addition, changes to drinking spaces, tailored for young people in terms of style and themes became more popular among young people who were moving toward a culture of intoxication and excess. Again, alcohol consumption had become socially acceptable and synonymous with “a good night out” (Measham & Brain, 2005).

After the mid-2000s (considered by some as 'peak booze') drinking patterns began to change, and at the time of writing it appears young people's drinking is in decline (Ng Fat, Shelton, & Cable, 2018). However, those that do drink still consume alcohol in large quantities, often with the intention of getting drunk, and this pattern of drinking is particularly prevalent among university students, many of whom drink at hazardous levels (Davoren, Demant, Shiely, & Perry, 2016). Young people are generally aware of the risks associated with excessive alcohol consumption, but because they see drinking as a pleasurable part of their social lives, they discount information about these risks (Hutton, 2012). Existing health campaigns tend to focus on encouraging individuals to reduce their alcohol consumption, without replacing the lost social pleasures. The ubiquity of alcohol in social occasions means that individuals who chose not to drink can feel stigmatised, and may adopt strategies including pretending to drink when socialising with friends (Conroy & de Visser, 2014).

Not only the social pressures, but the environment itself, within public houses, bars and nightclub settings, may impact on an individual's ability to regulate their alcohol consumption within these contexts due to the strong associative cues, which prompt drinking in these places (Qureshi, Monk, & Li, 2015). New approaches to understand such features of the both the social and the physical environment may be more effective than putting the focus on individual behaviour change, by limiting opportunities for risky consumption (Hill, Foxcroft, & Pilling, 2018). Here, qualitative research has illuminated the complex interplay between individual and social contexts including the rhetorical dynamics involved in negotiating drink offers as someone not drinking during a social situation (Conroy & de Visser, 2014; Piacentini, Chatzidakis, & Banister, 2012).

Current health campaigns also fail to account for varieties in 'drinking practices' –the different ways that alcohol is consumed. For example, for students, pre-drinking at home may occur prior to entering a nightclub with friends but may not occur prior to a meal with family. Thus, drinking behaviours belong in broader domains of social practice transmitted through 'performances' (Blue, Shove, Carmona, & Kelly, 2016). Elements of student drinking, the materials (e.g. bars attended), meanings (e.g. expectations and social pressure), and competencies (e.g. knowing what and how much to drink) are performed over time contribute to a shared understanding of these social practices (Supski, Lindsay, & Tanner, 2017). These elements are related, each shaping the others and contributing to the transmission of drinking practices to new students when they start (and even before they start) university (Supski et al., 2017). The implication of understanding drinking in this much broader way is that rather than solely targeting individuals, health campaigns also need to focus on disrupting these materials, challenging meanings, and instilling new competencies. For example, removing alcohol from events could change the bar environment, expectations about events, and the type of knowledge needed at such events.

However, currently, options for young people at university who chose not to drink, or who want to reduce their consumption are limited. Some focus on promoting participation in sports, but team sport players at university are often consider a high-risk drinking group (Zhou, Heim, & O'Brien, 2015). In the United States researchers examined the effectiveness of late night alcohol free events at a college, such as films and board games, and found decreased consumption and binge drinking in individuals who attended more frequently over the course of their four years at university (Layland, Calhoun, Russell, & Maggs, 2018). However, students may not wish to be excluded from music and dancing events, simply because they chose not to drink, which is why we focus here on the possibilities of conscious clubbing.

Conscious clubbing

Perhaps in line with decreases in drinking in some groups of the population, alcohol-free organisations and events have increased in recent years. For example, Club Soda, founded in 2015, is an organisation that encourages mindful drinking, and aims to ensure that non-

drinking is as socially acceptable as drinking. Additionally, there has been a rise in alcohol-free festivals, such as Buddhafield Festival and alcohol-free events, which focus on dancing and movement, (e.g., Wild Chocolate Club). There are also a growing number of online movements, such as 'Hello Sunday Morning' and 'Soberistas', offering support and an accessible community of other individuals.

Our focus here is on those alcohol-free events that involve music and dancing, often described as 'sober raves' or 'conscious clubbing' events. The term 'conscious clubbing' serves to show that this kind of event is an alternative to clubs and festivals where alcohol and other drugs are commonly used, instead, these events place emphasis on playing music alongside other forms of energising entertainment, such as yoga classes and massage. One example is Morning Gloryville, considered to be one of the pioneering alcohol-free clubbing events, which at the time of writing has operated in 14 different counties (including UK, Spain, Netherlands, Australia and Japan) and has attracted many popular mainstream music artists.

Aspects of the modern day conscious-clubbing phenomena have clear similarities to dance cultures rave scene of the 1980s, and the 'conscious-partying' movement of the 1990s (Beck & Lynch, 2009). Such conscious-partying events included creative opportunities for cultural, political, and spiritual transformation, alongside music and dancing in contrast to what its proponents viewed as the over-commercialisation of the dance scene (Beck & Lynch, 2009). They can be viewed as a counter cultural movement away from current alcohol consumption norms, characterised by alternative beverage selections, with electronic dance music and "under-ground" grass-roots style organisation, as key staples of many of these events. Conscious clubbing could be a response to strong public health discourses regarding the harmful nature of excessive alcohol consumption, and a reduction in youth drinking (Ng Fat, Shelton, & Cabel, 2018). Research into people's experiences of these events is limited at present, however, the act of dancing comes with many interpersonal and psychological pleasures, which is reason to hypothesise that conscious clubbing can extend positive benefits to those who participate, in addition to added health benefits of reducing drinking.

The pleasures and benefits of dancing and connecting with others through dance

Throughout history, people have gathered in groups for rituals, festivals, events, carnivals to listen to music and dance (Christensen, Cela-Conde, & Gomila, 2017). Whilst attending these gatherings, individuals may momentarily 'lose' themselves in the collective group experience (Ehrenreich, 2006). The anthropologist Victor Turner called these gatherings *communitas* (1969) and stressed their importance for human health and wellbeing. In *communitas*, people connect, social structures are disbanded temporarily, and through dancing, individuals may experience joy, healing, and bonding with others (Salamone, 2004). When the gathering is over, people return to normal life and its social structures, rules and order, but feel revitalized through new experiences of joy, connection and meaning. Researchers like Haidt, acknowledged this phenomenon, and referred to it as the *hive-hypothesis*, in which people feel that they lose themselves and reach peak levels of human growth by becoming part of a wider social movement (Haidt, Patrick Seder, & Kesebir, 2008).

Reviews of the literature and empirical studies show that dancing may promote a number of health-related beneficial outcomes including improving mood, self-concept, body image, and wellbeing, and reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression (Connolly, Quin, & Redding, 2011). EDM participants also express deep reasons for engaging in these events, such as identity formation and change, a deeper sense of belonging in this world as well as transcendence and flow experiences (Goulding, et al, 2002). Self-expression and identity are further expressed for these individuals in pre-event rituals and associated clothing. As mainstream culture has become individualized and less focused on communities, tradition and rituals, there are fewer opportunities for people to be connected to others, without some larger and more corporate purpose (Giddens, 1991). Dance music events may offer

opportunities for inter-personal connections, and the participant may interact with the special characteristics of the music together with other dancers as part of a pleasurable, inter-subjectively embodied experience (Solberg & Jensenius, 2016).

Dancing and being part of groups at festivals where one may lose oneself into a bigger group are beneficial in many ways for creating a sense of community and belonging (St John, 2006). Dance events such as Morning Gloryville and others, share similar characteristics found at festivals, EDM culture events and raves without adding alcohol and other drugs. Dressing up and other festival characteristics are part of preparing for the community and getting into a suitable mood. They cement the notion of letting go of the structure of society and getting into a temporary state where the participants can have fun, take on temporary new identities, explore and express themselves (Goulding, et al, 2002). It is these potential positive benefits, alongside the presumed absence of alcohol and other drugs that we sought to explore experiences of conscious clubbing. Specifically, we sought to examine; a) whether acceptability of and attitudes towards conscious clubbing events were associated with alcohol consumption, social connectedness and life satisfaction in addition to, b) people's rationale for choosing (or not choosing) to attend such events and c) personal experiences of attending them.

Survey methods

Method

Using a cross sectional survey design, UK university students were recruited into an online survey presented in Qualtrics software through research participation schemes and social media. Individuals were incentivised to take part by the opportunity to enter a prize draw to win an iPad. The survey took 15 minutes to complete and received ethical approval from Birmingham City University.

Measures

The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) (Babor, Higgins-Biddle, Saunders, & Monteiro, 2001) was used as a self-report indicator of potentially hazardous consumption levels (10 items; $\alpha = .81$). The revised Social Connectedness Questionnaire (Lee & Robbins, 1995) was incorporated to assess the degree to which individuals feel connected to others in their social environment (8 items; $\alpha = .96$). The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was incorporated to assess beliefs about satisfaction with one's life (5 items; $\alpha = .88$).

As part of the process to assess attitudes towards conscious clubbing events, participants were shown a video of a Morning Gloryville event (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OeMScv8er5Y>) and were asked their views about it. Attitudes were assessed in a similar manner to previous studies of attitudes towards consumption of alcohol-free drinks and binge drinking (Norman, 2011). The following phrase was used: "I think alcohol events like these seem..." (4 items; $\alpha = .85$). Acceptability of the introduction of conscious clubbing events was assessed using an index adapted from Petrescu et al. (2016). The question read: "Your university is going to introduce an alcohol-free social event, like the one in the video, in fresher's week instead of a traditional club night involving alcohol consumption." Acceptability was then assessed on a 7-point (1-7) scale, using the following two items: "Do you support or oppose this policy?" and "How acceptable do you find this policy?" (2 items; $\alpha = .74$).

A number of closed and open answer questions were then presented to explore participants' experiences of conscious clubbing. They were firstly asked whether they have previously attended "an alcohol-free social event that involved music such as a sober rave, conscious clubbing event or similar". Individuals who had attended were further questioned about their reasons for attending, followed by their experiences, both of which involved open-ended responses. Individuals yet to attend a conscious clubbing event were asked whether they have heard of such an event before, with those responding in the affirmative asked to

indicate why they chose not to attend (open-ended response). General demographic data (Age, gender, ethnicity) were also measured.

Analytic approach

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to assess the association between AUDIT scores, social connectedness, life satisfaction, acceptability and attitudes towards conscious clubbing. Open-ended questions were analysed using content analysis following the steps outlined by Treadwell (2013). These steps involved defining the unit of analysis as each individual response and subsequently, a coding scheme was developed using the participants' words as a starting point and this was applied to the data set. ELD initially generated the coding scheme and this was checked and further developed by MJ. All other authors checked and agreed with the final coding scheme. Content analysis was used to identify frequently mentioned topics within the open-ended questions. The most frequently identified codes for each of the three questions are presented below, alongside some illustrative quotes from the participants. First, we present the answers for those participants who had previously attended a conscious clubbing event, and then we present the answers from those who had not.

Results

The sample included 236 students, the majority of whom were female (82%), current drinkers (87%) and of white European ethnicity (70%) with an average age of 19 years. From our sample, 39 individuals (16%) specified that they have previously attended a conscious clubbing event, the majority of whom (N = 23) attended between two and five times. Of the 197 who have yet to attend an event, 47 respondents (20%) indicated that they had heard of these events (or similar). Highlights of the whole-sample correlational results (Table 1) revealed that individuals who consume more alcohol view conscious clubbing less favourably, while both AUDIT scores and attitudes towards conscious clubbing were unrelated to social connectedness or life satisfaction scores.

<insert Table 1 here>

Previous attenders: Reasons for attending conscious clubbing events (N = 39)

For individuals who had previously experienced a sober rave, the most commonly coded reasoning for their attendance was related to having fun without alcohol (N=14). Others talked about the negative effects of alcohol on a night out:

[I'm] Interested in having fun with friends without making stupid decisions and losing memory (Man, 20)

The second most common code was about connecting with people (N=13). Some discussed the importance of the social aspects, such as meeting likeminded people, or making new friends, while others talked about making more 'genuine' connections than were possible when drinking alcohol:

Normally I would drink during events like these however it is nice to relax and just socialise sober instead (Man, 20)

Four participants discussed how they enjoyed the feeling of dancing to music without being drunk, while others talked about attending the events specifically for the music:

Because for me, alcohol is not essential to have a good time and to dance. Dance music is something I'm passionate about, especially with friends (Woman, 20)

There was specific mention of not liking to be around drunk people by three participants:

Because I don't like the way people behave after alcohol consumption. I feel safer if there is no alcohol consumption near me (Woman, 22)

Other less frequently mentioned reasons were about being an alcoholic, trying something new, and feeling safer at such events. The mention of safety chimes with people's

experiences at rave events, reported to feel welcoming and safe spaces for participants (Goulding et al, 2002).

Previous attenders: Experiences at conscious clubbing events (N = 39)

The most common code in relation to people's experiences at events were related to the events being fun and joyful (N=16).

It was fun, due to not consuming alcohol I was far more aware of what I was doing but as everyone there was the same it meant there was still a carefree environment (Man, 18)

In my experience they can be great fun, sometimes you can feel just as energized as if you were drinking but the good times and memories aren't ruined by drunken incidents and hangovers (Woman, 19).

The above accounts illustrate the fun had during the event, and how the positive experiences are continued the next day, due to a lack of hangover. The second most commonly coded experience was the importance of connecting and being comfortable with people (N=6):

When I connect to myself, to others and to the music while I'm dancing I feel alive, I feel in my element, I feel to be me. Expressing myself in this way of dancing feels very authentic (Gender and age not supplied)

People also discussed other positive feelings (N=5), such as "letting loose" in "a carefree environment" and people being happier compared to traditional raves. Other common codes were related to the events being relaxed, friendly, connecting with the self and listening to good music.

The positive experiences reported by those participants who had attended a conscious-clubbing event demonstrate some of the potential benefits that could be experienced and highlight that these may be important selling points when trying to encourage young people who have not attended to give it a try. The importance of a positive and energized environment where freedom of expression was welcomed and encouraged seemed central to our participants' experiences. Alongside connecting with other attendees, some expressed the notion of connecting with themselves in an authentic manner, which chimes with other research suggesting that student non-drinkers chose not to drink in order to retain authenticity of the self, and one's higher order functions (Conroy & de Visser, 2015).

Non-attenders: Reasons for not attending conscious clubbing events (N = 49)

The most commonly coded reason for not attending a conscious clubbing event was related to people saying that they felt it was not for them (N= 14). For some, this was because the event was not appealing due to early mornings, or that they were simply not interested. Other participants said that they enjoyed drinking when they went clubbing.

Not interested in sober events, seems to defeat the purpose (Man, 20).

These kinds of responses reveal that some people may be resistant to attending a conscious clubbing event, as it breaks the normative assumptions about drinking. The second most commonly coded reason for not attending was that there was no opportunity to do so (N=9).

I wouldn't of minding going to those events but most good clubs or raves offer alcohol. I just never have a reason not to drink (Woman, 21)

People also said that they thought the event would not be fun as they could not dance without alcohol (N=8).

I like to drink and dance because I feel less conscious that way (Woman, 20)

In order to dance properly and have a good time I feel like I need to be a bit more outgoing and less self-conscious. Which is why I drink before a night out (Man, 20)

Other less commonly coded reasons included that friends would not want to attend this type of event.

Survey Discussion

In our study, young people who had positive attitudes toward conscious clubbing had higher levels of acceptability of such events, which in turn, related to life satisfaction and connectedness. Young people with high AUDIT scores had negative attitudes towards conscious clubbing, which may suggest that it does not appeal to those who drink more.

Although only small numbers of our participants had previously attended a conscious clubbing event, their reasons for doing so were about having fun without alcohol and connecting with others. However, some non-attenders specifically discussed the lack of alcohol. Of further interest is the perceived need for alcohol in order to be able to dance and not feel self-conscious. For those young people who enjoyed having fun without alcohol, the conscious-clubbing experience may be set apart from their experience of drinking and dancing, where alcohol is used to lower one's inhibitions and impose less control on the self, albeit often in a controlled fashion (Measham, 2004). Drinkers often have to monitor their feelings when drinking, balancing the desire to reach their ideal state of intoxication, which allows them to dance and socialise, while staying clear of their 'danger zone' (Zajdow & MacLean, 2014). This involves a continuous monitoring of the embodied experience of intoxication, which some drinkers experience as entirely negative, with a fear of loss of control at its heart (Burgess, Cooke & Davies, 2019). Conscious-clubbing events may allow participants engage with music and with others, without the need to attune to bodily sensations at the same time. Clearly, for some young people, it may be challenging to convince them that this could be a positive experience

Survey Limitations

Alongside the cross-sectional nature of the study, respondents were predominantly women, of White ethnicity, all were students, and most were drinkers. The video depicted only one type of event, and there are many other variations in existence, and we did not recruit large numbers of participants with previous experience of conscious clubbing events. An issue here could also be that these types of events may attract certain groups of people in their present format, perhaps those who are more health-conscious or those who had previously experienced problems with alcohol, and are specifically looking for an alternative. Although we do not yet have data about what groups of people attend conscious clubbing events, Vergeer et al, (2018) found that people engaged in similar holistic movement practices in Australia were more likely to be older, female, and had higher levels of education than those who did not participate.

Implications and future research

The first implication pertains to the positive benefits that young people reported from attending conscious-clubbing events, including the chance to socialise away from drinking environments. This needs exploration in future research with individuals who regularly attend such events to understand the mechanisms by which those positive experiences come about.

A second implication relates to the role of alcohol in enabling young people to participate in dancing. Previous research with young people highlights the role of self-consciousness in drinking, with many specifically discussing their need to drink in more to gain confidence to dance in nightclub settings (Davies & Paltoglou, 2019). This may be in contrast to the lack of self-consciousness associated with dancing within the rave scene and the *communitas* described earlier, probably because MDMA facilitates dancing without self-consciousness, while at the same time enables the user to feel more connected to others (Olavson, 2003). Further work should attempt to understand the experiences of those young people, like the

participants in our study, who are able to feel this connectedness to others without alcohol or other drugs.

The drive for pleasure and bonding with others is a strong motivator and drinking alcohol provides a way to try to satisfy such motives: this often goes unacknowledged in alcohol research. Trying to influence young people to drink less alcohol may not be effective in cultures where alcohol is widely acceptable, as it may be difficult for young people to decide not to drink when everybody else around them is doing it. For example, UK students reported that not drinking had a negative impact on their ability to enjoy nights out and meet new people (National Union of Students, 2016). This chapter suggests an alternative way through this challenge: conscious clubbing uses a powerful natural motivator, the search for pleasure and bonding with other people through music and dancing. Focusing on individual behaviour change puts unnecessary pressure on the individual, however by changing the environment (materials), their expectations and norms (meanings) and their knowledge about drinking (competencies) young people may be guided to healthier behaviours.

Future research on conscious clubbing is justified when looking at the impacts of other dance-based interventions aimed at young people, for example, they have shown promising positive results on improving mood, wellbeing, and self-concept, and reducing anxiety and depression (Connolly et al., 2011; Lopez-Rodriguez et al., 2017). One avenue for future research could be to recruit heavy drinkers to participate in a conscious clubbing activity in place of one of their usual drinking occasions. It would be interesting to explore whether the process of socialising in a space without alcohol allows young people to see themselves as able to have fun without alcohol outside of that space. Seeing oneself as a non-drinker could theoretically impact on alcohol consumption, as previous research has demonstrated that identification with non-drinker prototypes is associated with reduced alcohol consumption (Davies, 2019).

Conclusions

Conscious clubbing experiences within university settings have the potential to offer more than individual benefits to young people. Adding non-alcoholic social events to university environments offers an opportunity to disrupt the meanings, materials and practices associated with drinking for attendees. This disruption of socially shared meanings involving drinking might be an important way to change the prevalent cultures of heavy drinking at university, however, as our findings attest, it may be challenging to sell the idea of dancing without drinking to some young people.

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Table 1: Pearson correlations between AUDIT scores, social connectedness, life satisfaction, attitudes towards conscious clubbing and acceptability of policy to introduce conscious clubbing.

	AUDIT	Social Connectedness	Life Satisfaction	Conscious clubbing attitude	Acceptability
AUDIT	1	.02	.05	-.17**	-.13
Social Connectedness		1	.29**	.05	.08
Life Satisfaction			1	.11	.14*
Conscious clubbing attitude				1	.81**
Acceptability					1

Note: * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$