Challenges to British Nightclubs During and After the Covid-19 Pandemic

Feature Article

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Abstract

This article assesses the situation of nightclubs in Britain during the Covid-19 pandemic, considering the prospects for this segment of the British night time economy as the Covid crisis unfolded as well as its long-term prospects, in light of the changing patterns of the consumption of club music. It is based on interviews with leading professionals working in the sector, who have long-term experience of managing clubs, organising events and overseeing the sector as a whole. The study is informed by research about the social, economic and cultural value of clubbing and the consequences of Covid restrictions on the British night time economy and clubbing in particular, as well as on other aspects of the British economy and social life.

Keywords: nightclubs, clubbing, night time economy, electronic dance music, Covid-19

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Introduction

The social consumption of music has long been a cultural staple and much-loved pastime throughout the world, with related activities taken for granted until the Covid-19 pandemic began to take hold in late 2019 and early 2020. At this point in many territories, social gathering came to an abrupt halt. This was instigated by policy makers, in particular governments introducing emergency measures to reduce the spread of the Coronavirus. In the UK, policymakers demonstrated different attitudes to different segments of the hospitality industry. This article assesses the consequences and position of nightclubs in Britain as the Covid-19 pandemic developed and considers the prospects for this segment of the British night time economy beyond it.

The article is based on a variety of sources. These include publications about the benefits of clubbing and the problems facing clubs before the pandemic, especially in the UK. Second, we conducted interviews with a number of the UK's leading professionals working in the sector who have long-term experience of operating nightclubs and related businesses. We also used articles about the consequences of Covid restrictions on the British night time economy and clubbing in particular, alongside the report, produced following an inquiry by the All-Party Group for the Night Time Economy, published in February 2021: "Covid-19 and UK Nightlife". Finally, we drew on the expertise within the nightclub sector of one of the co-authors, Tony Rigg, who occupied command positions in a number of market leading organisations specialising in the late-night entertainment and dance music industries since 1989, including Luminar Leisure PLC, which operated 237 sites circa the year 2000 making it the biggest venue operator in the UK to date, as well as leading dance music brand Ministry of Sound, etc. He also works as a professional advisor within the sector.

This article has two aims: to inform readers about the situation in which the nightclub sector found itself during the Covid pandemic; and to help prevent a similar situation happening again by highlighting the biases and mistakes committed by institutions whose role it is to support culture and the economy, so that they may endure these kinds of difficult times.

The Benefits of Clubbing

Clubbing brings numerous benefits, which can be grouped into several categories: health and wellbeing, economic, social and cultural. Alder and Seligman correlate wellbeing and Gross Domestic Product (GDP), regarding it as "the current gold standard for national prosperity" (Adler & Seligman 2016: 1). They consider what wellbeing is and how it can be measured. They profile a number of concepts including subjective wellbeing (SWB), also referred to as hedonic wellbeing, stating that "overall high SWB combines three specific factors: (1) frequent and intense positive affective states, (2) the relative absence of negative emotions, and (3) global life satisfaction". They also consider the alternative approach of the eudaemonic paradigm, "in which wellbeing is construed as an ongoing, dynamic process (rather than a fixed state) of effortful living by means of engagement in meaningful activities". Seligman delineates five domains of life that people pursue for

their own sake: positive emotion, engagement or flow, positive relationships, meaning or purpose, and achievement, or PERMA" (Adler & Seligman 2015: 5). Sheppard and Broughton provide further insights as to how music and dance cultural practices relate to social determinants of health, in which they conclude that "actively participating in music and dance is an effective means through which individuals and populations can maintain and promote wellbeing and health across the life course" (Sheppard and Broughton 2020: 16). With this in mind, it is not difficult to see how key activities associated with clubbing, music, dancing, socialising etc could contribute to a sense of wellbeing, be part of an appropriate work life balance and ultimately feed into and contribute to national prosperity. The idea that dancing reduces the stresses of daily life is captured by films such as *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and the term "Living for the Weekend" has frequently been used in association with dance music and clubbing activities. In illustration of this, Ministry of Sound produced a compilation series in the noughties called *Big Tunes (Living for the Weekend)*; in 2014 the BBC produced a television programme titled *Northern Soul: Living for the Weekend;* and the term was featured in the title of a *Daily Mail* article, "Saturday Night Fever! How 1970s New Yorkers living for the weekend turned the city in to a Hedonistic Mecca and dance the nights away at clubs like Studio 54". This demonstrates further the importance of escaping the weekly nine to five treadmill and establishing an appropriate work-life balance. Some authors also argue that clubbing is a substitute of organised religion by offering an "experience of collective communion and transcendence" (Reynolds 1999: 242; see also St. John 2004).

As part of the night time economy, nightclubs create revenue, directly and more importantly, indirectly. Admittedly, even in cities such as Berlin, regarded as the capital of clubbing in continental Europe, the club scene achieves a relatively low total revenue through its direct business activity (Drevenstedt 2020: 15; Lücke 2020: 57-9). However, when the upstream and downstream turnover (in gastronomy, logistics, the music industry etc) is combined, this amounts to a sizeable income and provides a significant proportion of the employment opportunities in large towns and cities, often accounting for 20 per cent of the workforce. This includes many young people working on a part-time basis, who are less likely to gain permanent and full-time work. By the same token, nightclubs, along with community centres and youth clubs, provide distraction and respite from youth unemployment and the other cultural traps associated with it, such as drug addiction, poor health and criminality (Drevenstedt 2020: 15-7). In the most recent decade or so, nightclubs have been seen as the "saviours of the high street", filling spaces abandoned by shops and attracting visitors to the remaining establishments (Berkley 1999: 12-13; Stone 2018). Nightclubs, through an upward domino effect, also attract other sectors of the music business. Investigating how Berlin became such a major focus of the international music industry, Ingo Bader and Albert Scharenberg go as far as to assert that clubs and their associated musical subcultures are "the main reason that global players and major music industry associations have moved their headquarters to Berlin" (Bader and Scharenberg 2010: 76). Nightclubs are also a primary reason or at least a motivation for tourists to visit such cities as London, Manchester or Berlin (Sellars 1998; Berkley 1999: 12).

Clubs also bring social advantages. They make the areas where they are located more attractive to potential residents by making them safer and more glamorous (Berkley 1999: 13; Kolioulis 2018). However, the relationship between nightclubs and gentrification in cities such as NYC and London is complex and contradictory. On one hand, the presence of artists and spaces signifying the subcultural richness of socially deprived neighbourhoods, such as clubs, triggered the "hipster gentrification" of these neighbourhoods. On the other hand, once gentrification kicked in, nightlife businesses were blamed for defiling the quality of life of those very same neighbourhoods (Hae 2012: 69-74; Kolioulis 2018: 210-11). There have been numerous high-profile examples of long-established nightclubs coming under threat due to proposed residential developments, including Ministry of Sound in London for example, when developer Englewood sought permission to build new flats in close proximity to the venue. This was resolved in 2014 through a Section 106 agreement, a decision approved by the then Mayor of London, Boris Johnson (Bothwell 2014). It is not uncommon for nightclubs to be subject to noise complaints from residents, particularly in gentrifying areas. Rigg has dealt with a number, but one of particular note was the Ritz in Manchester (built in 1927) which, despite being the oldest purpose-built nightclub in the UK and having survived World War II, came under threat in the early 2000s, when high rise flats were built on the sites of car parks either side of the venue. The Ritz has so far survived, but other nightclubs have become casualties of residential representations. Experience shows that some people can buy residential properties next to nightclubs and still be surprised by noise. Understandably, local authorities would rather not receive noise and other complaints related to nuisance from nightclubs. With local authorities presiding over licensing and public entertainment in the UK since the Licensing Act 2003 came into force, clearly this can lead to a precarious situation for nightclubs in which they are seen as problems by those in authority. Returning to the subject of gentrification, consequential increases in rents have also been a reason for the demise of clubs, impacting on their viability (Kolioulis 2018: 213).

Nightclubs are also known for forging specific subcultural and political identities. They provide space for marginalised communities, such as queer communities, and overcome existing social divisions, for example between ethnic minorities and the white majority, and youth from different cities and countries (Campkin and Marshall 2016, 2017 and 2018). Clubs can be seen also as laboratories of social change (Thornton 1995; Rymajdo 2019: 112). By the same token, they are important "capsules of history", which might otherwise pass undocumented (Haslam 2015a). The cultural dimension of clubs is recognised by political authorities in some cities, which treat clubs as a part of their local and national heritage, offering them a special status and protection through taxation. The German government proved in agreement in 2016 when courts ruled that Berlin's techno mecca Berghain should be in the same tax category as concert venues and museums, given that it produces work of cultural significance (Oltermann 2016). A similar narrative of cultural impact can be traced in Britain: "We've seen how often a venue getting critical acclaim or helping achieve critical mass can go on to have a much wider impact" (Haslam 2015a: 345-46).

Nightclubs have often provided outlets for creative practice. When speaking with Graham Massey (co-founder of 808 State) for this article, he pointed out how important underground clubs were in the evolution of his band's outputs and activities, providing opportunities to collaborate, experiment and test new music, as well as a means to engage and interact with associated communities. Massey's sentiment that nightclubs are important incubators for original music was further endorsed by Jules O'Riordan (A.K.A. Judge Jules), Tristan Hunt from the Association for Electronic Music, and leading music industry executive Silvia Montello, in an online round table discussion streamed live 6 May 2021 (Music Research Group 2021). In this forum, they discussed nightclubs' importance to the electronic music industry, with Jules describing them as the "soil in which the more underground records grow". Apart from being testing grounds for new music, nightclubs also serve to facilitate other arts, providing a workshop, laboratory and presentation space for the visual arts, such as painters, video artists and fashion designers (Drevenstedt 2020: 17). By the same token, they allow audiences to appreciate these different arts in conjunction with each other, offering them a more complex and active aesthetic experience than that resulting from visiting a gallery, for example, given that in clubs the patrons are not merely passive consumers of art, but are active contributors, inventing new ways of dancing, talking and enjoying themselves. Offering aesthetic pleasures is especially important, given that a significant proportion of club goers are not used to visiting places of high culture, such as opera houses or museums. Clubbing thus assists in career development and provides a resource in civic and aesthetic education, whilst facilitating cultural engagement for mainstream audiences.

BRITISH NIGHTCLUBS BEFORE THE COVID PANDEMIC

Nightclubs constitute part of the night time industry, and to assess its role, it is worth defining this term and considering the night time sector at large. It is normally defined as the broad ecosystem of businesses operating between the hours of 6pm and 6am. According to the Night Time Industries Association, the night time economy contributes £66 billion per year to the UK economy. This makes the sector the UK's fifth largest industry, accounting for 1.3 million jobs and 8 per cent of the UK's total workforce (Night Time Industry Association). With a vast supply chain of sole traders and suppliers, alongside supporting thousands of freelancers and auxiliary businesses, the sector is a core pillar of the British economy. 60 per cent of town centre revenue is generated after 6pm. Much of the attraction of nightlife is in participating in music events and UK Music estimates that for every £10 spent in a live music venue, a further £17 is spent in the local community. Many of these venues play electronic music for dancing, with much of it produced in the UK. This should be also seen in the context of the global position of the UK popular music industry, which is the third biggest music market in the world, behind only the USA and Japan (IFPI 2020). Furthermore, popular music is a major export for the UK, generating £2.9 billion for the British economy in 2019 (UK Music 2020), and as previously stated, nightclubs are laboratories for some of this new music. Moreover, some British clubbing brands have gone

on to become globally respected market leading businesses. Ministry of Sound, launched in 1991, became a global lifestyle empire, developing substantial digital communities, a global events business delivering hundreds of club nights all over the world each year, as well as fashion and consumer electronics businesses. The brand also launched a number of nightclubs with international partners in overseas locations. It is also worth noting that Ministry developed a substantial record label out of their London club which was acquired by Sony Music in 2016 for a sum in the region of £67 million (Ingham 2017). Perhaps most importantly, organisations such as Ministry of Sound incubated early career talent, producing many of today's leaders and senior managers in the creative industries. These include the current President of RCA UK at Sony music Entertainment David Dollimore; the Managing Director at Island Records, Nicola Spokes; the Managing Director at Marie Claire (Future Media), Caroline Stent; as well as individuals holding senior positions in leading digital organisations such as Soundcloud and Facebook.

There have also been serious problems experienced by British nightclubs. Most importantly, the nightclub sector in Britain has been contracting. Britain had circa 1,500 nightclubs before the onset of the pandemic, but this number had previously been significantly higher. In London alone, during the first half of the 2010s, the number of nightclubs across the city's 33 local authorities decreased by 50% (see Haslam 2015b; Cafe 2016 and Lima and Davies 2017). Moreover, British nightclubs could be regarded as precarious according to three criteria. First, their profit to sales ratio runs at a far from luxurious position, thus in normal circumstances there is an ever-present risk where profits can change into loss. Secondly, they are subject to seasonal patterns, with the bulk of their profits being made during several relatively short periods, often mimicking the students' calendar, such as freshers' week in university towns and cities, with the converse typically occurring in locations without universities. Thirdly, as is the case in many hospitality businesses, clubs have a high payroll to sales ratio due to many transactions being of low value but requiring labour intensive delivery, as is common with the sale of drinks. Furthermore, there are legal pressures to provide minimum levels of security personnel, all of whom must have been vetted, trained and registered with the Security Industries Association. This means that when their staff costs are not fully covered, shortfalls can cost them more than owners of other businesses. Over time, nightclubs became victims of progressively more stringent constraints and other commercial pressures. In addition to the Licensing Act 2003, which placed late licenses for the service of alcohol within the grasp of almost any licensed premises, clubs were also subjected to restrictions placed by policy makers on the level of discounts applicable to drinks' prices (Talbot 2006). At the same time, supermarkets were permitted to sell unrestricted quantities of alcoholic beverages at any price. The result of this rule was the development of behaviours such as clubbers pre-loading with alcohol and pushing back the start of their night out, with clubs getting the blame for the ensuing alcohol-related disorder. It is interesting to note that, according to one of our interviewees, the average number of drinks purchased per customer in a club is often somewhere in the region of two per visit, although this can often be a double spirit shot with a mixer, depending on the type

of club and duration of visit. Of the many forces that have compromised nightclubs and led to evolving customer propositions, social media and dating apps have also impacted heavily on nightclub attendances, particularly between 2005 and 2012, providing an alternative means to meet new people and partners. At this moment however, the sector began to experience stabilisation as evolving consumer behaviours settled, with clubbing activities in cities demonstrating more resilience than in provincial towns. Despite their contributions to the British economy, as well as social and cultural life, nightclubs have historically received little support from central and local governments and have suffered bad press. This situation can be attributed to the character of entertainment offered by clubs as well as certain misconceptions about club music and culture. Club music is seen as different from classical music and live music due to being commercial and lacking the "authenticity" possessed by artists playing acoustic instruments in front of a static audience (Mau and Nicholas 2020). This is despite the fact that it has been demonstrated on many occasions that DJs and other performers in nightclub productions can be virtuosos of their instruments in the same way as singers, pianists and violinists. Clubbing is also associated with violent behaviour, caused by alcohol and drug consumption, as well as corridors of hospital ER wards filled with intoxicated and injured young people. This perception is not without validity (Hughes et al. 2007; Pedersen et al. 2016), but nightclubs should also be seen as a way to minimise these social problems and contain them in the safest way possible, thanks to such measures as stringent door policies, ID checking and risk-assessment protocols.

The message that clubbing is dangerous reverberated within policy with the introduction of Form 696. Effective from 2005 till 2017, it was the paperwork used by London's Metropolitan Police to measure the risk of violence at music events by gathering the personal details of artists and promoters, targeting genres such as grime, garage, R&B and house. In a wider sense, it targeted Black, working-class music culture (Bernard 2018). So pervasive was its use that the whole London grime scene was nearly derailed, with a similar approach adopted by police across the rest of the country (Rymajdo 2017). This example points to two issues which play an important role in the treatment of nightclubs during the Covid pandemic. One is an apparent lack of appreciation on the part of the authorities for the value of nightclubs, especially under the Conservative government, arguably in part reflecting the fact that young people and people on low incomes (the majority of the nightclubs' employees) do not constitute the main voting bloc for this party. Another connected issue, is a lack of understanding of the specific ways in which nightclubs function, including the seasonality of clubbing and the precarity of the sector, which means that even the most successful operators do not have large cash reserves nor command the same level of trust of the banks as other, admittedly more sustainable businesses. Clubs were further hit by the smoking ban in 2007, the purpose of which was to improve the health of the population. This ban drove some clubbers away, in part because many of them were smokers and in part because smoking was seen as part of the club atmosphere, which actually served to mask other odours.

To summarise this part of the article, we argue that prior to Covid, British nightclubs faced many challenges, but managed to hold their ground and enter a period of stabilisation.

Methodological Approach

The empirical part of our research is based on interviews with industry insiders from different sub-sectors and regions of Britain, conducted in October and November 2020. They include Sacha Lord, who is the Night Time Economy Advisor for Greater Manchester, as well as a founder of the UK's market leading dance music event Warehouse Project and Parklife Festival. Lord was appointed as Greater Manchester's "night tsar" in June 2018, with Manchester following in the footsteps of London, Berlin and Amsterdam (Heward 2018). We also interviewed Peter Marks, who is C.E.O. of the largely southern based Rekom UK (formerly Deltic Group), at the time the UK's largest operator of late night entertainment venues. Another of our interviewees is an international operator, Aaron Mellor, who is owner and C.E.O. of the market leading music venue and club chain Tokyo Industries. He has many northern based premises in his estate and an expanding international portfolio. We also interviewed Michael Kill who is the C.E.O. of the N.T.I.A. (Night Time Industries Association) industry trade body. Our final interviewees were Martha Bolton, an event promoter and manager of a female collective of DJs called "Not Bad for a Girl", operating in the North-West of England, and Graham Massey, a well-known electronic musician from Manchester. With the exceptions of Lord and Bolton, Rigg has worked closely with the respondents, in particular with Marks and Mellor, in varying roles and capacities.

The interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours and were semi-structured. We asked our informants how the Covid restrictions affected the nightclub sector and their own business or area of work, as well as how they assessed the ways the authorities used to mitigate the negative consequences of these restrictions. We also asked them about possible scenarios for nightclubs if the restrictions persisted and if they were entirely or partially lifted. The first set of interviews was followed by e-mail exchanges, to revisit points which required clarification after transcribing and to find out where the responses were still valid, given the fast-changing situation of the Covid pandemic.

In the choice of our interviewees we followed several criteria. We wanted to get a picture from people with protracted experience in the sector and a more holistic outlook, able to comment not only on the position of their enterprise, but the sector as a whole. For this reason, we approached Michael Kill and Sacha Lord. Secondly, we tried to collect testimonies about the situations in different regions of Britain: Michael Kill, Peter Marks and Aaron Mellor all had such insights. Thirdly, we tried to gather views of representatives of different clubbing professions: most importantly managers and organisers of events, and therefore we also asked Martha Bolton for her views. As our goal was not to present the specific views of each interviewed person, but to use their testimonies to paint a larger picture, we decided not to attribute individual views to each of our interviewees. Another reason to do so was the fact that our informants shared similar insights into the situation of clubs during Covid.

A further source of information feeding into our research was the report "Covid-19 and UK Nightlife: An Inquiry by the All-Party Group for the Night Time Economy", published in February 2021, which documented the impact of the Covid pandemic and the measures taken to control it within the night time economy at large, as well as the recommendations concerning the reopening of this sector and its recovery. It was one of the main sources on which the next section of this article is based. We were also following information about the situation of nightclubs and the consequences of their closures in the British press.

The Landscape of Clubbing During the Covid Pandemic

As our informants told us, the Covid pandemic caught them by surprise, as was also the case with most other businesses and institutions. They were unprepared for its immediate impact on British and European populations, as well as its protracted duration. One of our interviewees compared the reaction to going through five stages of grief, beginning with denial, namely insisting that the situation was not serious and would not last for long. This surprise was understandable, given that the whole country was unprepared for the scale of the problem and the government's continuously changing strategy to fight it, especially the multiple lockdowns which resulted in many businesses being closed, opened and closed again, whilst, however, nightclubs remained shut.

The British government recognised that it could not expect businesses to close and cover their losses themselves. Accordingly, it came up with eleven schemes which were intended to ease the burden of those businesses forced to close or reduce operations during the crisis. Some of these were blanket policies, but others had caveats attached, which had the potential to prevent or reduce eligibility. Nightclubs predominantly qualified for three of these schemes, with some exceptions qualifying for others. One that nightclubs did qualify for was the Coronavirus Job Retention Support Scheme, popularly known as furlough, which covered 80 per cent of the wages of furloughed employees for hours not worked, with employers covering national insurance and pension contributions. However, from the perspective of employers, this scheme was far from satisfactory due to the need to make up the shortfall in wages, as well as the fact that staff continued to accrue holiday entitlement throughout the period of closure at a very significant cost to operators, despite employees not actually being permitted to do any work to offset the cost implications. One of the operators interviewed was still holding a payroll of 1,300 employees a year after having been ordered to cease trading, despite already reluctantly having made redundancies, exiting a number of sites and having had to seek alternative financial backing to survive. Arguably, the furlough scheme and the parallel Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS), which operated on a similar basis to the furlough scheme, running through a similar time period, was not designed to help the nightclub sector, but only to prevent mass unemployment. Furthermore, the operators were required to deal with the administrative processes at their own expense, in effect serving as benefit processing agencies, whilst being unable to generate any revenue.

Other strands of help that nightclubs qualified for included rates forgiveness. However, the relief provided by this scheme, whilst helpful, was relatively small. A moratorium preventing the eviction of tenants for non-payment of rent at a time of closure, has enabled many operators to mothball and hold onto their businesses. Whilst this may have bought time, it is simply storing up a problem for when the rent arrears eventually have to be paid. Despite this, if a business goes bankrupt, unless there is a payment of the accrued debt, the landlord is within their rights to take on another tenant, thus assigning the value in the premises to the new company, to the detriment of the creditors of the original business.

As well as the heavy payroll commitments and rental costs, there are other significant costs typically associated with running a nightclub business, whether it is able to trade or not, including property related costs such as service charges on rental premises; essential maintenance; the upkeep of legally required certifications and insurances; utility costs, which typically have significant fixed charges; and costs associated with licenses. In this respect, managers of nightclubs are in a much more difficult position than music festivals for example, which typically do not have the burden of these fixed costs.

All businesses forced to close due to Covid-19 were eligible to claim grants via their local authorities, with the size of the grant linked to the rateable value of the business. In addition, retail, hospitality and leisure businesses were able to claim one-off grants from £4,000 up to £9,000 based on their rateable value, and local authorities in England have been provided with over £1.5bn of funding overall to support businesses on a discretionary basis. Another form of support was the Culture Recovery Fund: a £1.57bn package of grants delivered through the Arts Council England, the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Historic England and the British Film Institute. It was open to applications from organisations deemed to meet core eligibility criteria based on cultural significance, financial viability and sustainability. Whilst some nightclubs such as Ministry of Sound in London and the Cavern Club in Liverpool, as well as other operators of electronic music events such as Warehouse Project did receive awards, only a small number of the very well-known operators were recipients, whilst the largest operator of UK Nightclubs at the time, Deltic Group (now Rekom), received nothing at all. It is perhaps also telling that the winners of the grants were required publicly to acknowledge the awards they received.

Although these grants were welcomed, they were not seen as well-tailored to the needs of the night time economy and the nightclub sector in particular. According to our informants, institutions awarding these grants were less inclined to recognise popular music and specifically music more typically consumed in nightclubs. Moreover, some grant schemes were designed in such a way that nightclubs could not apply. This referred, for example, to the local authority grant schemes, which permitted applications only from companies which were not allowed to hold debt or those which opened their premises during the pandemic, even if only working at a fraction of their capacity.

This type of support also laid bare the fact that popular music professionals, in contrast to their counterparts operating in the classical music and other "high art" segments of the industry, were not experienced in writing grant applications, having been able to rely

on their commercial viability prior to Covid. Hence they were at a disadvantage when competing against those who previously supported themselves through government money and the patronage of other arts funding institutions. As one of our informants told us, there was also open hostility to music typically associated with clubs and their orientation towards playing pre-recorded music. This came from politicians such as Oliver Dowden, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, who we were told said in Parliament that live music should be permitted during lockdown, but that this would not include music played in nightclubs, as it is not "live". This echoes the previously mentioned view that popular electronic music is perceived by some as lacking authenticity. Club music was thus seen as being caught in a limbo between classical live music, played in high art venues, which traditionally receives the bulk of subsidies from the state, and more popular live music, played in smaller, local grassroots venues, which prior to Covid started to be seen as important for developing local talent and local culture, largely due to the well documented fact that they were in decline. Another source of prejudice towards such music, according to our interviewees, was the perception that its culture, in common with the entire night time economy, was lacking in professionalism, employing people with low cultural capital. In reality, as we argue, its economy is based on collaboration between people with different skills. This, in our opinion, constitutes its strength, as it represents a cross-section of society.

Another grudge that clubs had towards policymakers was the singling out of the hospitality sector as a source of a large number of infections. However, this was not the case, as demonstrated by the fact that according to figures released by Public Health England, during the five to six weeks at the start of the pandemic when clubs were permitted to operate, the hospitality sector had between only 2 and 4 per cent of traceable transmissions of the virus. Even when schemes like "Eat Out to Help Out" were introduced, this did not result in a spike of Covid cases. In fact, during the time when pubs were allowed to open, cases of Covid fell rather than going up (Thatcher 2020). It is also worth noting that, as a consequence of legislative legacy, clubs have very efficient air exchange systems, in contrast to other hospitality businesses such as pubs, which makes them less prone to Covid transmissions.

Despite this, the hospitality sector was targeted for closures, unlike other institutions of cultural production such as university campuses, which were allowed to operate. According to our informants, this pointed to the fact that the government's Covid strategy was based less on epidemiological evidence than on choosing to close those sectors of the economy which were easy to close, while keeping open those which were difficult to close due to the state's investment in them and possible social backlash, even if they were Covid hotspots. This grudge was increased by the fact that many clubs invested heavily, in the area of £20,000 to £30,000 per club, to create Covid-safe environments. This investment was largely wasted as clubs had to remain closed and were the last hospitality businesses to be permitted to reopen.

Another issue affecting nightclubs during the pandemic was the lack of clear information provided by the government as to when clubs would be able to operate, under what

conditions and whether this "new normality" would be permanent or cyclical. Against this backdrop, arrangements to resource the survival of nightclub businesses such as bank loans, would be difficult to assess without a sense of the extent of the problem. This was in part attributable to the level of uncertainty pertaining to the behaviour of the virus itself, as well as social reaction to the danger it poses, but also, in the view of our respondents, resulted from the government's hostile and possibly disingenuous attitude to the night time economy and nightclubs. This arguably prejudicial attitude was reflected in the government's unwillingness to establish what "Covid-secure" meant in relation to clubs, so that club owners could adjust their premises in order to achieve the required level of safety and demonstrate it to the authorities. Despite this, the NTIA resourced research and produced a series of risk mitigation policies and guidelines with a view to demonstrating that they were no less safe than other hospitality businesses that were encouraged and even incentivised to reopen.

It could also be argued that the government has broken a social contract with British businesses, according to which businesses pay their taxes in recognition that a proportion of such payments would be used to pay them back during a period of hardship, especially if this occurred at no fault of these businesses. In particular, as one of our informants suggested, if a nightclub chain contributed £3.3 million per month in corporation tax, it would surely make sense to support it to the sum of £1 million per month if it would ensure successful "hibernation" and recovery post pandemic to start paying taxes again. It is also worth noting that nightclub operations are very efficient with regard to giving back to the economy, for a number of reasons, including the high payroll to sales ratio, which is around 30 per cent of turnover, and thus being subject to income tax and employer's national insurance contributions, as well as feeding into public spending. Furthermore, with a not insignificant proportion of their income being derived from the sale of alcohol, this also contributes to the economy through additional alcohol duties, not to mention corporation tax on profits. Bankrupting them for no fault of their own is not only ethically questionable, but also detrimental to the British economy.

A further concern in the Covid pre-vaccine era was the blossoming of unregulated raves and parties, which are arguably more conducive to spreading the virus and other problems. Examples of such activities included two unregulated "quarantine raves" in Greater Manchester, that attracted 6,000 people between 13 and 14 June 2020 and resulted in reports of a 20 year old male dying from a suspected drug overdose, a woman being raped, three stabbings and with police officers attending being met with violence. Indeed, the closing of nightclubs and the consequential gap is likely to have given rise to such a situation. Furthermore, police across the country attended to numerous illegal parties during the first lockdown. Between 25 March and 7 April, 1,132 Coronavirus-related breaches were reported to the Greater Manchester Police Force, which included 494 house parties and 166 street parties (BBC News2020a). How many were not discovered, it is impossible to say, in light of their clandestine character. There is no doubt, however, that they resulted in an increased health risk, given that such parties did not include any official

risk assessment procedures, not to mention the loss of revenue for the government, as taxes were not collected from such events.

The combined effect of nightclubs' protracted closure, and a sense that the night time economy was dispensable or at least of low social and economic value, led to fears of financial insecurity among people working in this sector. 60 per cent of employees surveyed felt they may lose their jobs as a result of the pandemic and not be able to return to their chosen professions ("Report on Impact of Covid-19 on UK Nightlife" 2021). Further illustrating this, as reported by *Mixmag*, in a survey of 20,000 DJs conducted by the music community Pirate.com, 70 per cent of DJs had "decided to retrain or learn a new skill" (Wheeler 2021). Such a sense affects both their morale and creativity, adding to the expectations that talent in electronic music will exit the sector or leave Britain to relocate to countries more friendly towards club culture, such as Germany.

Exit Strategy and Post-Lockdown Scenario

When talking to our informants about their future, we asked three questions. One was how they planned to survive the most acute crisis, namely the period of closure during the lockdown, the duration of which was unknown at the time. The second was about conditions of re-opening nightclubs and the immediate period after this. Thirdly, we asked about how the pandemic might affect long-term plans within the club sector.

The Government announced a Road Map out of lockdown on 22 February 2021 with key dates pertaining to releasing restrictions, though with the caveat that the implementation would be subject to data, rather than dates. It was announced that shops, beauty parlours, gyms and outdoor hospitality would be permitted on 12 April. Indoor pubs, restaurants and entertainment would be reinstated on 17 May, with all limits on social contact lifted on 21 June. Clearly these were broad statements, but with a promise of more detail to follow. Whilst this communication provided hope to the general public, more specific information was required by operators to enable planning and a return to trading. Following this, various trials to investigate the safe return of sports matches, events and nightclubs were announced, including a pilot scheme for club activity, by way of two 3,000 capacity events on 30 April and 1 May in Liverpool organised without social distancing, which required attendees to be able to demonstrate a negative test taken within 24 hours of the event as a condition of entry (Mehta 2021).

In relation to the first question, prior to these announcements, the conclusion was that the sector as a whole would be able to survive only if offered substantial help from the government. This included extending the furlough scheme until businesses could operate without restrictions, extending VAT and business rates relief through 2021, expanding eligibility for the Culture Recovery Fund and providing a sector-specific support package. In particular, industry leaders suggested that clubs might survive the period of "hibernation" if their costs (apart from salaries, covered by furlough) were divided equally among three interested parties: the club owners, the landlords and the state. Conversely, putting all non-

salary expenses on the shoulders of clubs might result in the sector losing 50-70 per cent of its venues after a year of inactivity. Obviously, the longer the inactivity lasted, the greater the number of bankruptcies, and the longer the suffering from the commercial legacy of deeper debt.

Whilst following up after the initial series of interviews, one of our respondents reported it was his understanding that they would be able to operate without restrictions from 17 May. However, in the unfolding picture, the government announced that a vaccine passport would be required to enter, specifically marking out nightclubs as associated with spreading Covid, only to give up on this idea in a matter of days (Jackson 2021). Again, this testified to the problems experienced by the club sector, resulting from the lack of a clear and consistent approach to it from the political authorities. By this point, however, and in light of the fact that vaccine passports have been widely adopted in other countries, it is expected that they will be required in Britain as well. An alternative to this is proof of a negative Covid test result.

Some of our interviewees saw a move to cashless operation for clubs as likely. These changes also hold implications relating to a "culture of surveillance", which might be contentious to a significant proportion of potential visitors, concerned about their privacy or simply unwilling to endure extra bureaucratic burdens. It is already noted that the idea of "vaccine passports" proved unpopular in Britain, especially among the young who would be less inclined to obtain such passports due to being last in the queue for vaccinations, as well as safety concerns about the AstraZeneca vaccine, resulting from a possible link between this vaccine and blood clotting, leading to serious side-effects, including death (Boseley 2021).

Other safety measures that had been considered included working at less than full capacity, and for reduced hours. However, apart from this resulting in lowering the income of nightclubs, it would also have negative effects on the club atmosphere. Our interviewees pointed out that a key component of the club experience is the energy generated by the crowd, which is compromised in the case of partial capacity events, and they unanimously agreed that this was not a feasible scenario. In theory, moving some of nightclubs' activities outdoors could help to make up for the lost capacity, because outdoor activities are perceived to be safer. In practice, however, nightclubs seldom benefit from having significant outside spaces. Even if they did, there are a number of practical issues to consider, including the British climate and the noise typically associated with clubbing.

Irrespective of these adjustments, nightclubs cannot just simply open their doors and recommence trading without planning and preparation. "Hibernated" premises require significant preparation and maintenance to be reactivated. Calendars are often punctuated with "concert level" events, which are subject to the availability of talent and require advance promotion to ensure commercial success.

It was hoped that the sector would benefit from some specific government support, such as lowering of VAT, but again, in contrast to other hospitality businesses, nightclubs were

afforded no comparable benefits. Government-backed insurance schemes were also hoped for as a solution to spiralling commercial rent debt, though again, at the time of writing, these were not forthcoming.

In the long term, it is expected that nightclubs might change in two ways. First, they may need to extend the scope of their operations and be better integrated with other cultural activities, thus providing access to additional funding prospects. This means that venues will need to be more versatile, extend trading hours and expand into additional demographics beyond clubbers. There was already clear evidence of this happening before the pandemic, with some operators disassociating themselves with the term "nightclub" in favour of other descriptors such as "music venue" and "arts and event space", an approach employed by Aaron Mellor with some of his venues. This is a trend we expect to continue moving forward. This framing is also reflective of the evolving product and services on offer in some venues, though equally there are operators who will continue to embrace more traditional approaches. Another possible change concerns the convergence of the digital realm with music and real-world clubbing experiences. The Covid induced disruptions to nightclubs inspired some operators to look beyond the historic scope of their activities into the digital realm. Areas investigated that are likely to manifest include apps for virtual and remote access and interactions with real world events and participants. Smart devices and gaming technologies, including virtual reality hardware, hold potential to facilitate the convergence of virtual and real worlds. Furthermore, such investigations have increased the appetite of operators to enhance real world experiences with augmented reality, tapping into the medium of customers' smart phones. With steps being made towards these initiatives also comes potential for new models of practice and business.

Conclusions

It is commonplace to say that the Covid pandemic is a testing period in the history of Britain and the Western world at large, often being compared to the period of the Second World War. It is thus not surprising that nightclubs share in this difficulty and trauma. However, our argument is that their share was larger than it could and should be, reflecting the prejudices of the political authorities against the night time economy, the liminal status of electronic music and, paradoxically, the financial self-reliance of the sector pre-Covid. This meant that the sector was disadvantaged, vulnerable and thus dependant on state help during the period of crises, and that this help was small, patchy and poorly-tailored to the needs of the nightclub sector. Consequently, there have been nightclubs that have not survived the pandemic, exacerbating the long-standing shrinkage and precarity of British nightclubs. The smaller the venues and the smaller their financial reserves pre-Covid, the greater the danger that they would cease to operate during a period of restrictions, or even after them, due to the need to deal with the problems that accumulated during their inactivity. The larger operators with deeper pockets, and those without rent liabilities, were, of course, better placed to weather the storm. However, even the largest of the UK nightclub operators became a casualty, though it largely re-emerged with a new investment

scenario. This article highlights a number of points which suggest key policy makers are unsympathetic to nightclubs or are at least more inclined towards supporting other aspects of the UK economy and the hospitality industries. However, professional industry associations such as the NTIA hold potential to educate and influence policy makers as to the benefits nightclubs offer to society and the economy. That said, the economic benefits will be smaller due to pandemic related sector shrinkage. It is fair to say that the NTIA made significant inroads, however, their task was not an easy one. Some of the closed and vacant sites are likely to re-emerge as nightclubs or similar operations, but others will be lost and re-purposed. Although the situation for nightclubs has been and remains very difficult at the time of writing, we argue that they deserve to be saved, as the alternative would be a great loss for the British economy, culture and social life. Moreover, the Covid pandemic showed a need for the closer collaboration between different stakeholders in the nightclub sector, such as local authorities and landlords, as well as the need for better information about the different dimensions and advantages of clubbing.

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