

From ‘Night on the Town’ to Lockdown: Exploring Student Night-time Economy (NTE) Experiences and the Role they Play in What it Means to be a Student Today

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Declaration

I, Molly King, declare that this thesis is my original work and has not been previously submitted for assessment at any other institution. I also confirm that ethical approval was granted for the research presented.

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Abstract

Night-time economy (NTE) experiences are among the first non-academic, social experiences students have at university. *Freshers' Week*, designed to welcome students to university, is saturated with NTE engagement, conflating the two as if an introduction to student life were an introduction to nightlife. Considering this association, there has been surprisingly little academic focus on how students experience the NTE, and the wider significance of these experiences, especially given their well-established importance in young people's lives more generally (e.g. Hollands, 2016; Roberts, 2015; Smith, 2013).

This thesis addresses this gap by investigating how students experience the NTE, and the role these experiences play in what it means to be a student today. I employ a multi-method approach, including the innovative use of *Snapchat*-based video diaries, to gather insights from thirty undergraduates at a pre-92 English university.

I uncover how student NTE experiences are collectively shaped by space, time and studenthood (termed as such to refer to the life stage as well as identity and institutional elements of university life), departing from purely spatial understandings. I argue that these three components operate as an interconnected nexus, which I propose can operate as a conceptual framework to deepen understandings of student NTE experiences. Drawing on these insights, I offer new perspectives on narratives regarding the "student experience" and student-as-customer debates.

Though initially disruptive, the COVID-19 pandemic became an opportunity to investigate how this "nexus" responds to external forces, (re)shaping students' NTE experiences and their intersection with university life. The context is also significant, given the challenges the NTE industry has faced in recent years, including COVID-19 and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. Accompanied by changing student drinking habits and "value for money" a key narrative about higher education, it is more important than ever to understand nuances and significance of student NTE experiences.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Night-time Economy (NTE) has attracted scholarly interest from multiple academic fields since its inception in post-deindustrialisation urban revitalisation initiatives (Bianchini, 1995; Heath, 1997). As the Literature Review explores, its definition is fluid and non-concrete. Although research has primarily concentrated on licensed venues (e.g. pubs and nightclubs) and customer mobilities between them, a growing body of work has also considered the role of the home, increasingly regarded as part of NTE experiences like “pre-drinks” (Atkinson and Sumnall, 2019; Bancroft, 2012; Barton and Husk, 2014). NTE spaces are often associated with excitement, freedom and hedonism, but also risk, crime and disorder (Demant, 2013; Hutton, 2016; Woodrow, 2017). NTE experiences provide customers with a liminal opportunity to break away from the mundanity of everyday life marked by social restraints and structured routines and temporarily behave more freely, often in ways uncharacteristic of themselves (Hobbs et al., 2000; Huddleston, 2014; McBride, 2019).

NTE experiences are among some of the first non-academic, social experiences students have at university. *Freshers' Week*, for example, is designed to welcome students into this new phase of life and typically consists of a calendar dominated by NTE events (see Becker and Price, 2003; Clark and Hall, 2010; Fuller, 2019). It conflates the two, as if an introduction to university life were also an introduction to nightlife. Beyond this week, many students continue to frequent the NTE as they progress through their academic careers (Arria et al., 2016; Bewick et al., 2008; Chatterton, 1999; Holton, 2017). “Going out” and consuming alcohol becomes associated with student culture, regardless of individual participation (Cheeseman, 2018; Nicholls, 2019).

Portrayals of the hedonistic, carefree, ‘party animal’ dominate popular culture representations of students, from sitcoms like *Fresh Meat* (2011) and *Big Boys* (2022) to the reality documentary series *Freshers'* (2013). Students' NTE engagement is also frequently highlighted in the media, with headlines like: “*Boozy students drink, party, vomit and collapse on Britain's streets as Freshers' Week swings into gear*” (Duell, 2019)

and “*Hard-partying students in fancy dress let their hair down for a night out in Nottingham and Birmingham*” (Weston, 2021) simultaneously mocking and critiquing this suggested facet of student culture (for more on mockery and false praise see Blackman, 2011; Blackman and Rogers, 2017b).

Despite the association between student culture and NTE engagement, relatively little academic attention has been paid to student NTE experiences, with research tending to focus on young people more generally (some exceptions include Bancroft, 2012; Gant and Terry, 2017; Holton, 2017). Experiences within the NTE have been established as important for identity formation and community building (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Kovac and Trussell, 2015; Malbon, 1998; Northcote, 2006; Rief, 2009; Smith, 2013; Winlow and Hall, 2009), and their value as part of young people’s lives has been communicated (Barnes, 2017; Gallan, 2015; Hollands, 2002; 2016). But can, and *should*, students be lumped in with wider categorisations of young people, when their lives greatly differ from those not at university? For example, internationally there has been exploration into the distinct drinking patterns of students compared to other young people of the same age (Carter et al., 2010; Kypri et al., 2005; Linden-Carmichael and Lanza, 2018).

Being a student is a unique time, considered an extension of adolescence (Settersten and Ray, 2010) with added independence and agency. Although I do not wish to claim that all students lead a homogenised, uniform lifestyle, certain aspects of their lives distinguish them from other young people, such as those in school or full-time employment. These distinctions include aspects like responsibilities, “free” time (Noonan, 2009) and stereotypes often attached to the group. I explore their impact in *Chapter 6*. This research addresses the lack of student-specific NTE research, offering a focused exploration of their NTE experiences and deeper insight into how student life uniquely interacts with the NTE.

Existing research on the NTE is also dominated by work on intoxication, specifically an emphasis on alcohol consumption. Shaw (2014: p.90) critiques this as a “*reductio ad alcohol*”, as it misses other aspects of the NTE experience. Interestingly, this also

intersects with research on the student experience and university culture, reporting widely on student alcohol consumption and the “black sheep” (Conroy and De Visser, 2014: p.544) who abstain (e.g. Gambles et al., 2022; Hepworth et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2025; Riordan and Carey, 2019). Whilst it cannot be denied that alcohol plays a large part in NTE experiences, and university culture, it does not capture the student NTE experience in its entirety. Some of the participants in this research do not consume alcohol, yet still regularly frequent the NTE. Student drinking habits are also changing; some are going out less, others are doing so sober (Conroy et al., 2021; Graber et al., 2016; Månsson et al., 2022). Shifting the focus away from alcohol allows for the consideration of other elements that contribute to students’ NTE experiences and deepens understanding of their significance beyond mere intoxication, addressing a gap in current research.

The Research Context

The current moment presents a particularly significant opportunity to explore the themes of this research. Although the NTE industry was already under strain prior to COVID-19 (The Economist, 2021), the pandemic, along with other economic and political factors including Brexit and the cost-of-living crisis, have further intensified its challenges (Cohen, 2023; Davies, 2024; Woodham and Hemmati, 2025). Since March 2020, nightclubs have closed at a rate of three per week (NTIA, 2024a). The *Night Time Industries Association* (2024a) also cautions that if this trajectory persists, nightlife will become “extinct” by 2030, highlighting the pressing need for government support. This hardship has been compounded with changes in student drinking habits (Fenton et al., 2024b; Hill et al., 2025; Holmes et al., 2022), with industry leaders directly blaming students for venue closures (Gruet, 2024).

The landscape of higher education is also changing. Universities are under increasing financial strain, contributed to by lowered public funding, higher operational costs and fewer international student enrolments (Bolton, 2025). This coincides with reforms to student finance, as tuition fees, capped since 2017, are due to rise in the 2025-2026

academic year (Department for Education, 2024). Students are becoming more concerned with “value for money” (Jones et al., 2020; Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2023; Woodall et al., 2014) in terms of teaching, facilities and career outcomes. However, as I explore further in *Chapter 8*, students perceive the university experience to be about more than just studying. Their concerns over “value for money” also relate to social aspects of university life and are tied to the expectations they have for their time at university, which for many includes NTE engagement. Fee increases also tie into conversations around the marketisation of higher education and whether students ought to be considered customers (Finney and Finney, 2010; Guilbault, 2016; Lomas, 2007; Xu et al., 2018). These debates have circulated since tuition fees were introduced and will continue as fees rise.

Considering these shifts, there is clear value in understanding the role of NTE experiences within student life. While neither the NTE or higher education sector may be seeking reform based on student’s experiences and perceptions, there are benefits to a more nuanced understanding of student NTE experiences and the role they play in university life today.

COVID-19: Context, Challenge, Opportunity

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped this thesis, as it did everyday life. It is important to situate the unique context of this research, as well as the challenges and opportunities it was afforded. NTE venues were ordered to close on 20th March 2020, followed days later by a nationwide lockdown (Johnson, 2020). At this time universities closed their campuses and moved to online teaching, with students studying from home (Hubble et al., 2021). What followed was a 16-month period of fluctuating regulations, adjusting as the pandemic unfolded. I explore those related to student life and NTE experiences in the *Literature Review*. When the NTE reopened, it was under different circumstances, requiring the implementation of measures to ensure they were “COVID secure” (Cabinet Office, 2020b), altering the NTE experience in the process (see *Chapter 5: The Importance of Space*). Many NTE venues remained closed until 19th July 2021, where

measures were mostly¹ lifted, and they could operate with dancefloors once again (Morton, 2021a).

The pandemic posed significant challenges to my research, fundamentally altering its course. With NTE venues closed and being unable to conduct any form of data collection face-to-face, let alone using traditional observational or ethnographic methods, I had to adapt and become creative to gain insights to participant experiences (see *Chapter 3* for further discussion). Nonetheless, COVID-19 also provided a unique and unexpected opportunity: during pilot test interviews, conducted right before the third lockdown was lifted, participants spoke about their NTE experiences in romanticised ways and mentioned aspects of student life they felt they were “missing out” on due to COVID-19. The absence of these experiences allowed for exploration of what a student experience might look like without the NTE, a scenario that has previously only been hypothetical. Furthermore, the timeframe of the data collection, between March 2021 and February 2022, overlapped with the gradual easing of restrictions, providing opportunity to chart how student NTE experiences and their intersections with student life, shifted and adapted with regulations.

This thesis contributes to relatively uncharted areas of research, providing insights into both student experiences during COVID-19, and also experiences of NTE spaces and leisure during this context. At the time of writing, limited research is available in both areas, perhaps due to the practical constraints and the unique context of the situation (for some exceptions see Assiter, 2022; Le et al., 2022; Townsend, 2023).

Research Aim

The aim of this research is to enhance understanding of student NTE experiences and their wider significance in student life. It is a two-part investigation: first, exploring how

¹ Some regulations and restrictions extended beyond, or came after, 19th July 2021, including Vaccine Passes during the winter of 2021 (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021).

students experience the NTE; and then using this insight to contribute to broader understandings of what it means to be a student today. I do this by using the experiences of 30 undergraduate participants, collected over 10 months via interviews, focus groups and video diaries some created using *Snapchat*². I theorise their experiences through a novel conceptual framework I term “the nexus”, shedding light on the interconnected roles of space, time and studenthood³, which shape their NTE experiences.

The research uses *CityX* as a case study, through which student NTE experiences are investigated. It presents an interesting study site, as a small city with two universities and a significant seasonal student population (see *Methodology* for further information). However, the aim is not to generalise or universalise the experiences of participants, nor present a singular narrative of student NTE engagement. While the findings are grounded in the particular context of *CityX*, it is the proposed conceptual framework (the space-time-studenthood nexus), developed through analysis of participants’ experiences, that offers transferable insights and informs broader understandings.

My overall research question is: **How do students experience the night-time economy, and what role do these experiences have in what it means to be a student today?** To answer this question, I address the following sub-questions:

1. How do students define and experience the NTE?

This marks a critical shift from existing research that tends to subsume students into the broader demographic of “young people”. It also centres student voices, allowing them to define the NTE in their own terms, a concept, that, as the *Literature Review* explores, is often loosely defined and inconsistently applied.

² *Snapchat* is a multimedia messaging app released in 2011, popular amongst young people. Users can send *snaps* (either videos or pictures) to *friends* (added contacts) with optional text. They are considered ephemeral data as individual *snaps* disappear once they are opened by the receiver, only to be viewed one time (Anderson, 2015)

³ Although “studenthood” is used as a term in other research (e.g. Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Rutherford and Pickup, 2015), I employ the term in this thesis to refer to time spent at university as a “phase of life” just as childhood and adulthood. The term encompasses a variety of aspects related to student life, from their student identities to institutional elements. I expand on this definition in subsequent chapters.

2. How do space, time and studenthood shape these experiences?

This question responds to scholarly calls to consider the role of time, alongside space in shaping lived experience (for example Harvey, 1996; Massey, 2005; Thrift, 2008). It also explores how they are shaped by student-specific elements: student life, student identity and institutional elements of the university. I encapsulate these in the term “studenthood”, reflective of their life-stage, akin to adulthood or childhood.

3. What broader significance do these experiences have as part of student life?

This builds on the first two research questions by applying these new understandings of student NTE engagement to wider discussions on their role as part of what it means to be a student today.

4. What effect did COVID-19 have on NTE experiences and how they intersect with student life?

The pandemic provided a unique context in which both the NTE and student life were radically disrupted. This question allows for reflection on student life without the NTE and invites further interrogation of how the proposed space-time-studenthood nexus responds to external forces.

This thesis sits at a juncture between various fields of research, intersecting with youth studies, higher education research, and scholarship on the NTE. It also draws on my background in Human Geography, particularly Cultural Geography, and its longstanding concern with the ways in which social life is shaped by spatial processes. As the Literature Review will show, these fields rarely engage in sustained dialogue. Through this research, they are brought together, incorporating further insights from Sociology and Cultural Studies, to generate a spatially informed geographical analytical lens, lending itself to the development of the Nexus framework.

Introducing the Nexus: A New Conceptual Framework

This research addresses several gaps in current literature, specifically: the lack of student-specific research, the over-emphasis on alcohol, and the need for research framed within the context of COVID-19. Beyond this, its contributions are multi-fold, offering methodological insight and adding to the fields of youth and higher education research. A comprehensive overview of these contributions is provided in the conclusions chapter.

However, at this juncture, I wish to draw particular attention to the research's primary theoretical contribution: the space-time-studenthood nexus. Although elaboration will follow alongside the data analysis, it is important to establish its conceptual foundation in this introductory chapter, so its purpose and relevance are clear.

Since the spatial turn, scholars have become interested with space as more than just an empty container (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1993; Soja, 1998). They have begun to investigate how it contributes to and moulds the lived experience. This has been developed further by scholars like Massey (2005), Harvey (1996) and Thrift (2008) who have taken time into equal consideration, studying their combined influence as space-time (or TimeSpace (May and Thrift, 2003)). The conceptual framework I refer to as “the nexus”, brings their collective roles into conversation with elements unique to the student context, shaping the overall student NTE experience. The term “Studenthood” is used to capture this context, conveying a phase of life, like adulthood or childhood, but with a specific focus, tied to their liminal university years. Studenthood incorporates elements of student life, aspects of their individual and collective student identities and various institutional elements of university in one all-encompassing term.

The crux of this conceptualisation is that the influence of one nexus element cannot be isolated from the others; they function as more than just a sum of their parts. Space, time and studenthood are deeply intertwined in a dynamic constellation (Figure 1). Understanding how student NTE experiences are shaped through this “nexus” of elements, deepens existing understandings and offers new perspectives to existing

debates within the research field. As the analysis chapters will demonstrate, the nexus is susceptible to external perturbations, with COVID-19 illustrating this dynamic. In the next, and final, section of this chapter, I outline the approach of this thesis, providing a chapter overview which highlights how the nexus becomes more fully drawn out as analysis progresses.

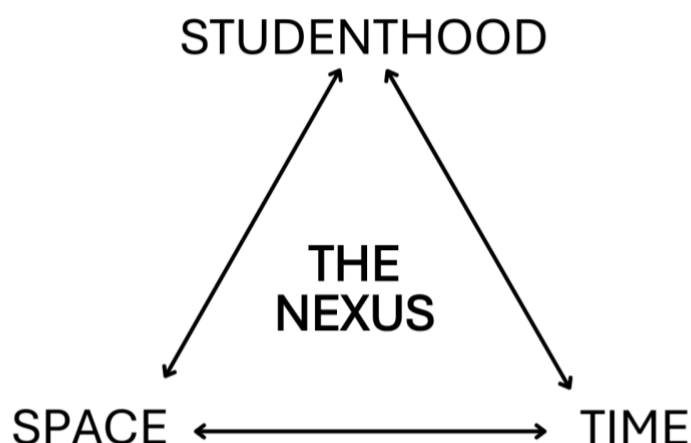


Figure 1 is a diagram of “the nexus” a conceptual framework for exploring student NTE experiences, proposed throughout the thesis. It demonstrates the interrelated elements of space, time and studenthood.

Thesis Overview

In the *Literature Review* I examine existing work on both the NTE and student life. My research brings these two separate areas of research into dialogue by exploring student experiences of the NTE as *part* of the university experience. I outline the origins of the NTE, conceived as part of plans for urban revival (Bianchini, 1995; Heath, 1997), and trace its transformation, with discourses now centred on alcohol, risk and pleasure. I explore themes of identity and community as well as outlining the limited related literature on the COVID-19 pandemic. I also introduce key theoretical frameworks, including Anderson’s (2009) *Affective Atmospheres*, and explore calls to consider the temporal when studying the spatial (e.g Massey, 2005). This underpins my conceptualisation of the nexus as a theoretical tool that captures how student NTE experiences are shaped by the interplay of space, time and studenthood.

Following this, the *Methodology* details the data collection process, which employed a multi-method approach, including the novel use of *Snapchat* for participant video diaries. I reflect on my positionality within the research and address the additional practical and ethical considerations that emerged, both due to conducting research during a pandemic and from prevailing perceptions of the NTE as a ‘risky’ space.

The first analysis chapter focuses on *Defining a Night Out*; looking at participants’ spatial and temporal definitions and highlighting the cultural understandings of this that students share. This lays the groundwork for subsequent analysis and begins to point to the crucial roles of space and time within student NTE experiences.

In *Chapter 5: The Importance of Space*, I build on the notion that rather than merely an inert backdrop (Lefebvre, 1991) or empty container (Massey, 1993; 2005), space plays a role in shaping experiences. I explore the unique Affective Atmospheres (Anderson, 2009) of the NTE, brought into being through a complex assemblage of socio-material elements (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988), that impacts how students experience the space. The chapter also reflects on the impacts of COVID-19; the altered atmosphere at socially-distanced, “COVID secure” (Cabinet Office, 2020b) events, and the attempts to reassemble the NTE atmosphere, at home or online, when the industry was closed. Although time and studenthood surface throughout this analysis, reinforcing the interconnectedness of all three nexus elements, space remains the central focus of this chapter, mirroring its prominence within the existing scholarly landscape.

Chapter 6 introduces time and studenthood into the analysis, signifying that student NTE experiences are shaped by *More Than Space* alone. I examine the *why*, *when* and *where* of student NTE engagement, illustrating that all three elements of the nexus influence these experiences, even before they take place. It is also within this chapter that I present a detailed explanation of the nexus as a concept, demonstrating its value in enhancing our understanding of the complexities and nuances of student experiences in the NTE.

Using the nexus framework, I then explore the lived dimensions of students’ nights out, specifically their *Experiences of Risk and Pleasure*. As two key features of the NTE, they

provide an opportunity to illustrate the application of the nexus. I explore how space, time and studenthood work together to shape how the NTE becomes associated with risk and pleasure. I also unpack how participants navigate this through “edgework” (Lyng, 1990), aiming for maximum pleasure without crossing into excessive risk. The nexus enables a more nuanced understanding of these experiences, including how they are altered by external forces and disruptions, such as COVID-19.

Building upon earlier discussion, the final analysis chapter explores how viewing student NTE experiences, as shaped through a space-time-studenthood nexus, can deepen our understanding of their broader significance within student life. Embedded in transitions, becoming a student and belonging as part of the university community, I explore the relationship between *Nightlife and The Student Experience*. I consider the impacts of missing out on, what participants deem, “key experiences” (Ali [P23, male]), whether due to personal choice or COVID-19 restrictions. Applying the nexus in this context offers new contributions to ongoing debates around the “student experience” and positioning of students as customers.

Concluding the thesis, I return to the research questions, outlining how the nexus, as a key theoretical contribution of this research, progresses understandings of how students experience the NTE and the role such experiences play in what it means to be a student today. I highlight further contributions of this work, including those pertaining to methods and insights relating to youth and higher education research. I discuss the limitations of this research, noting also that COVID-19, though providing a challenge, was a unique opportunity to illustrate the value of the NTE, given the industry’s temporary closure. Finally, I propose directions for future research, for instance, applying the nexus framework to other aspects of student leisure, or considering the experiences of international students. Through its deliberate structure, each chapter builds upon the previous, forming not only a systematic exploration of participants’ NTE experiences, but also a cumulative argument for the value of the nexus as a framework for understanding their complexity.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I establish the foundations of this thesis by critically reviewing relevant literature and identifying key gaps. This review covers a broad spectrum of work, highlighting both convergence and disconnection across fields such as night-time economy (NTE), youth studies, and higher education research.

I begin by reviewing existing NTE literature, tracing its historical emergence, conceptual development and its complex relationship with risk, pleasure and governance. I then draw on theories of space and time that challenge static views of the NTE, reconceptualising it as fluid and affective, shaped by more than just consumption. This framing supports the thesis' broader goal, to better capture the NTE as a lived and embodied experience.

Subsequent sections turn to themes of identity and community, considering how the NTE is a space for exploration, performance and belonging. Towards the end of the chapter, I engage with research on the “student experience” and consider its increasing entanglement with market logic. Finally, I bring in research that pertains to COVID-19, though note that studies are still being published relating to the longer-term effects of the pandemic. Together, these areas of scholarship provide the foundation upon which this thesis is built, and support a more experiential, spatio-temporally nuanced understanding of student NTE experiences.

The Night-Time Economy

The NTE features in a broad range of research spanning a number of disciplines, including cultural studies (Homan, 2019; Hutton, 2016), criminology (Crawford and Flint, 2009; Hadfield et al., 2009; Hobbs et al., 2005a; Measham and Moore, 2009; Wadds, 2015), geography (Jayne et al., 2010; Roberts, 2015; Shaw, 2010), urban studies (Brands et al., 2015b; Hadfield, 2015; Talbot, 2006; van Liempt et al., 2015), sociology (Hayward and Hobbs, 2007; Hobbs et al., 2000) and youth studies (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003;

Hollands, 1995; 2016; Smith, 2013). It focuses on the city at night, including a range of venues, like bars and nightclubs, and social and leisure activities, bringing people back into the city centre after work or at weekends (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Hollands, 1995).

Existing research is dominated by British (e.g. Diaz-Fernandez and Evans, 2020; Gant and Terry, 2017; Haleem et al., 2021; Measham and Moore, 2009; Talbot and Böse, 2007) and Australian (e.g. Cozens and Greive, 2011; Duff and Moore, 2015; Homan, 2019; Wadds, 2015; Waitt and De Jong, 2014) contexts, though there is a growing body of work focused on other parts of Europe (e.g. Aramayona and García-Sánchez, 2019; Pinke-Sziva et al., 2019; Schwanen et al., 2012; Søgaaard, 2017) and beyond (e.g. Hutton, 2010; Lin et al., 2022; Son et al., 2023; Wells et al., 2010).

A Brief History of the NTE

To understand the modern context of the NTE and the experiences of those who participate in it, one must first consider its origins, rooted in neoliberal policy and urban planning. The NTE was a proposed solution to inner-city decline following deindustrialisation in 1990s Britain (Rowe and Bavinton, 2011; Smith and Hall, 2013). Scholars and think tanks⁴ identified potential for “doubling” the city’s economy (Bianchini, 1995: p.214), where towns and cities were facing a “crisis” (Worpole, 1992: p.1) in urban vitality. Addressing the disparity between underdeveloped evening and night-time economies and their daytime counterparts, they called for a “time shift” to extend economic and social life beyond daylight hours and emulate continental European café culture (Roberts, 2006; Roberts and Turner, 2005). The term ‘night-time economy’ was therefore strategically used to sell this idea to local and national authorities (Hadfield, 2006; Holden and Iveson, 2003; Shaw, 2014), promoting a transition towards a 24-hour city model (Lovatt, 1994; Smith and Hall, 2013; Tiesdell and

⁴ *Comedia* was one of the major forces in this work and produced the *Out of Hours: A study of economic, social and cultural life in twelve town centres in the UK* (Comedia, 1991) a document aimed at policy makers based on 12 months of research in 15 town centres. They also organised conferences to further push the agenda of the 24-hour city and NTE initiatives

Slater, 2006). Greater flexibility in licensing laws, were supported as a means to create “lively, engaging city centres in which human interaction and therefore creativity could flourish” (Roberts, 2006: p.333).

Though the intention was to develop a more holistic culture of urban cities at night, spanning multiple industries (Bianchini, 1995; Lovatt and O'Connor, 1995), private sector investment from alcohol leisure was, at the time, best placed to take up the cheap developmental opportunities available (Hadfield et al., 2001; Hobbs et al., 2005b; Huddleston, 2014). Hadfield et al. (2001 p.300) lament how the vision imagined by early NTE advocates and city planners has since been “assaulted” and left “dead in streets splattered with blood, vomit, urine and the sodden remains of takeaways” by the “Mass Volume Vertical Drinker”. Their harsh words exemplify the distance between the alcohol-centred reality of these policies and the cultural initiatives initially intended (Lovatt and O'Connor, 1995; Roberts and Turner, 2005; Roberts et al., 2006). Their “descent” to “booze sodden destination[s]” (Roberts, 2006: p.332) has shaped the urban landscape and influenced broader perceptions of the NTE, often positioned at the centre of recurring “moral panics” (Cohen, 1972) surrounding youth, alcohol, drugs and the night (Blackman, 2011; Crawford and Flint, 2009; Hall and Winlow, 2005; Talbot, 2007; Winlow, 2010).

Defining the NTE

Despite the lack of a fixed definition, many scholars, policy makers and institutions commonly frame the NTE as “the broad ecosystem of businesses operating between the hours of 6pm and 6am” (Mazierska and Rigg, 2021: p.75; see also ONS, 2023b; Son et al., 2023; Vance et al., 2023). I contend that this definition is too broad and is also misaligned with the focus of most existing NTE research. In the evening, shops, theatres, cafes and museums continue to operate. These spaces differ from those usually featured in NTE research. They are also not typically associated with the same kinds of practices, attitudes and behaviours central to the NTE experience. Including hours of the evening within the definition of the NTE is misleading and detracts focus from the spaces central to the experience.

Additionally, whilst some NTE venues open as early as 6pm, there is a more specific conceptualisation of the NTE (as *Chapter 4* explores), that takes place later at night. The “unregulated zone of quasi-liminality awash on a sea of alcohol” (Hobbs, 2003: p.28) and the “carnavalesque” (Hubbard, 2013; Pennay, 2012; Ravenscroft and Gilchrist, 2009) to which scholars refer, are tied to the *night*, not the evening. Researchers refer to the “nocturnal” (e.g. Becerra Pozos, 2023; Dunn, 2023; Shaw, 2018) or the “hours of darkness” (e.g. Bromley et al., 2000; Gant and Terry, 2017; Roberts and Gornostaeva, 2007), emphasising the importance of the night. By contrast, Tiesdell and Slater (2006), who adopt the earlier starting timeframe, explicitly term their focus the “Evening and Night-time Economy”, differentiating it from these other studies.

Another issue with the definition is its focus on the “economy”. Although the origins of the term stem from economic pursuits, focusing too heavily on economic value, ignores the cultural, social and experiential dimensions of nightlife (Bøhling, 2015; Hobbs et al., 2005b; Shaw, 2010; 2014). Smith and Hall (2013: p.91) critique that such a narrow view “obscures the lived, street-level, politics revealed via a fuller engagement” with the city at night. Whilst economic aspects of the NTE are an important part of the space-time, it cannot be relied upon solely. Chatterton and Hollands’ (2003) work on “nightscapes” remains among the most influential contributions to the field. Building on the earlier concept of “playscapes” (Chatterton and Hollands, 2002) they move beyond a purely economic interpretation to explore it as a space of youth culture, focusing on their nightlife activities, including consumption, but also play and hedonism. It considers how the NTE is shaped by more than just economic forces.

As well as an economic focus, Shaw (2014: p.90) also critiques the prevailing tendency in NTE research to focus disproportionately on alcohol (he terms this a “*reductio ad alcohol*”). While this critique is particularly relevant in settings such as raves and dance music venues, where illicit substances often play a more prominent role than alcohol (Abidi; Ayres, 2019; Ayres and Taylor, 2020; Blackman, 2011; Bøhling, 2014; Silverstone, 2016; Weber, 1999), it’s implications extend across the broader NTE. Shaw’s (2014) concern surrounds the narrow over-focus on alcohol and related issues, to the detriment of other focuses.

My research responds to Shaw's (2014: p.87) call to "explore how non-economic and non-alcohol based practices intersect with more visible features of the urban night". Focusing too heavily on alcohol consumption overshadows other important dimensions of the NTE experience and fails to account for those who abstain from alcohol altogether. Some participants in this study (Appendix 1) explicitly disassociate themselves from the "*drinking culture*" (Steve [P29, male]), commonly associated with the student NTE. Nevertheless, their experiences remain central to understanding the NTE and its influence on what it means to be a student.

Space and the NTE

NTE research has largely focused on nightlife venues such as pubs, bars, music venues, and nightclubs, where alcohol consumption and entertainment dominate. Focusing on "any space where beverages are served, and where dancing is the primary form of entertainment on offer" (Crim, 2008: p.9) ignores the spaces in-between and the wider city at night. Crim (2008: p.7) exemplifies the importance of these spaces as part of the NTE, suggesting: "clubbing is not just what goes on once you are past the bouncer" and that "the mix of stimuli that hits you on the street is a compliment to that which you get inside".

Academics have increasingly turned their attention to the spaces in-between licenced venues as part of the NTE, focusing on the movement between venues or the home (Duff and Moore, 2015; Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2018) and the embodied experiences of those navigating the streets at night (Schwanen et al., 2012; Shaw, 2014; Smith and Hall, 2013). In parallel, media coverage of the NTE routinely features images and stories of young people, not within the venues themselves, but in the spaces between, as they "spill onto streets" (Lake, 2016), travelling to takeaways or making their ways home (Duell, 2019; McManus, 2018). Focusing only on licenced premises also ignores other late-night entertainment practices like raves or gatherings outdoors. During COVID-19 outdoor spaces, in particular, became part of the NTE experience (see *Chapter 5*) as

ways of socialising and engaging in practices associated with the NTE, even if against regulations at the time (Abbott et al. 2020).

This narrow spatial focus also misses other important aspects of the NTE experience; for instance, “pre-drinking” (Atkinson and Sumnall, 2019; Bancroft, 2012; Barton and Husk, 2014; Foster and Ferguson, 2014; McCreanor et al., 2016) has received recent attention, highlighting the role of the domestic space within NTE experiences and demonstrating that the NTE is more than simply bars and nightclubs. When participants relay their NTE experiences, they mention specific late night entertainment venues, but also their journeys to, from and in between them as part of the “night out” (see *Chapter 4*). It emphasises the importance of the journey rather than the destination, suggesting that spatial conceptualisations of the NTE should not be so fixed. Other scholars have disrupted these rigid physical views of the NTE; they conceptualise space as in constant (re)production, shaped through social and material elements (e.g. Bøhling, 2015; Demant, 2013; Månsson et al., 2024; Michels, 2015; Shaw, 2014).

Understanding the NTE through Spatial Theory

Since the Spatial Turn, increasing attention has been paid to the role of space as a force that shapes social experiences, an active designer of our social relations. It is no longer viewed as an inert backdrop upon which the social happens, or a container to be filled with “the social”, but something intertwined and co-produced through relations with the social (Davis, 2008; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005; Soja, 1998). Gottdiener (1993: pp.131-132) explains: “space is both a medium of social relations and a material product that can affect social relations”.

Understanding space in this way, suggests that the NTE space shapes, rather than simply houses, these experiences. Beyond looking at what occurs in spaces, studies must also consider how they are (re)produced and how this (re)production influences the experience of space. I use ‘(re)produced’ here as scholars have addressed the fact that the space is likely to change, transform and be remade with social aspects. I now

consider two key spatial theorisations, central to how I deal with space as one of the main themes of the thesis: assemblage theory and affective atmospheres.

Assemblage Theory

There has been a shift in spatial thought towards understanding space as a composition of the material and the social that is continually being remade (Ahmed, 2006; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005; Michels, 2015; Thrift, 2008). Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) concept of "agencement" (translated as "assemblage" (Phillips, 2006; Shaw, 2014)) can be used to understand this spatio-material dynamism. Within this framework, space is seen as being produced, or *assembled*, by the coming together of heterogeneous components (human, non-human, material etc.). These assemblages are never static or finished; they are continually reassembled and reconfigured, offering a fluid and generative view of space. Researchers like McCann and Ward (2011) and Demant (2013) have applied an assemblage framework to understandings of the NTE, suggesting the space is shaped through continuous "(inter)actions of humans, alcohol, space, discourses and music" (Bøhling, 2015: p.133) amongst other things.

Assemblage theory decentres the human (Bennett, 2010), redistributing agency to material objects or non-human elements in the space. It also embraces what Demant (2013: p.197) calls "material-discursive heterogeneity" whereby "no priority will be given to any specific actant" (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011: p.125). Illustrating this, Deleuze and Guattari (1988) use the metaphor of rhizomes, plants with shallow, horizontally spreading root systems (Li and Beuselinck, 1996). This imagery gives space a living quality, reflecting that it is constantly growing and being (re)produced, without any one element taking priority. In *Chapter 5* I challenge this notion of no hierarchy. Elements like the crowd seem essential to the NTE experience as students understand it, implying it may hold a more dominant role in the spatial assemblage.

Affective Atmospheres

Shaw (2014: p.88) extends assemblage theory, proposing that when an assemblage "gains place" it manifests as an "atmosphere", influencing how the space is

experienced. The theorisation draws on Anderson's (2009) "affective atmospheres" to tie assemblage and affect⁵, emphasising the power a space can have on its inhabitants and the "affective experience" (Shaw, 2014: p.88). The atmosphere is intangible and everyday use of the term equates it to a 'vibe' or 'ambiance', 'mood' or 'tone' of a place, something that can be 'felt' when someone enters its realms (Brennan, 2004).

Michels (2015) poses that there are three interrelated ways to understand affective atmospheres: their spatio-materiality (the assemblage), their sensuality (how they affect bodies within them) and their (in)stability. Whilst spatio-materiality links to previous discussions on assemblage theory, I now outline the remaining two dimensions as they relate to discussions later in this thesis regarding how atmospheres are felt and function.

The sensuality of affective atmospheres refers to their ability to affect those in the space emotionally and physically, creating what Bissell (2010: p.273) describes as a "pull or charge". It highlights the sensuous experience of a space in that resulting affects derive from the space's "socio-spatial mediation and articulation" (Bondi et al., 2005: p.3). These affects can be forceful, sometimes generating what Thrift (2008: p.240) refers to as an "irresistible impulse to act, regardless of the rationality of the motivation". This has been observed in the NTE, with Demant (2013: p.199) noting that the aggression exhibited by some customers was "a direct result of the fact that they are embodied within the occurrence of a place where violence is present". Consequently, it is unsurprising that NTE venues engineer space to induce particular affects: to drive profits, increase alcohol consumption (Tutenges and Bøhling, 2019), heighten specific emotions (Bille et al., 2015; Wilkinson, 2017) or reduce violence and aggression (Hughes et al., 2011; Seyfert, 2012) and other unwanted outcomes (Homel et al., 2004; Koleczko and Garcia Hansen, 2011).

⁵ It is worth mentioning here that throughout the thesis I use the term "affect" intentionally, even where "effect" may appear more grammatically appropriate (e.g. "the affects of the space"). This is intentional and theoretically informed, in line with affect theory. It relates to the embodied intensities produced or emanating from the atmosphere.

Although some theorists conceptualise affects as “collective” (Anderson and Ash, 2015) and “transpersonal intensities” (Michels, 2015), suggesting that we form “affectual tribes” (Anderson, 2009: p.79), affects are still experienced through individual bodies and the space can therefore be interpreted differently. Linking to Massey’s (2005) concept of multiplicity of space, one person may sense danger whilst others nostalgia, suggesting that the translation of the affect may depend on intersectionality and individuality (Seyfert, 2012). Bøhling (2015: p.136) summarises this complexity, though noting that the NTE affective atmosphere remains relevant:

Whereas it can be debated to what extent people are affected in the same way by the same things (Ahmed, 2008; Löw, 2008), it seems difficult to deny that the ‘buzz’, ‘vibe’ or atmosphere (Anderson, 2009; Böhme, 1993) of nightclubs in one way or another impacts the (social) practices and experiences of drinking in the NTE (Duff, 2008; Jayne et al., 2010; MacLean and Moore, 2014).

Additionally, Anderson and Ash (2015: p.39) caution against reducing an atmosphere to one “overarching name”. Instead, they propose spaces are “constituted by multiple atmospheres that touch, contact, and rub up against one another”. These co-existing atmospheres can produce varied, and sometimes contradictory affective responses within the same space.

The final way of understanding affective atmospheres, suggested by Michels (2015), is considering their (in)stability. Just as assemblages are dynamic and under constant (re)production, so too are the affective atmospheres they produce. Their intensity can be temporarily stabilised, and “entrenched” (Shaw, 2014: p.90) by borders. In the NTE such borders can be physical and spatial, like the walls of the nightclub, or temporal such as the transition from night into day. Shaw (2014: p.92) suggests these borders heighten the affective charge of the space, without them, “the strength of the affective atmosphere would be weakened”. These boundaries are also permeable and susceptible to “micro-breaks” (Shaw, 2014: p.93), exemplified by taxis which “pierce” the atmosphere transporting customers away from the NTE.

Whilst Shaw (2014) acknowledges the fluidity of borders, his framing may still be too rigid. The affects of the NTE atmosphere do not abruptly stop at defined edges, the atmosphere is “an energy not confined to bars and clubs but spilling over into the streets” (McBride, 2024: p.1092). They gradually reduce with time and distance away from the NTE. Instead, I propose the NTE affective atmosphere should be conceptualised as a series of overlapping epicentral extensions (Figure 2). Licenced venues of the NTE form ‘epicentres’ where the atmosphere’s affects are experienced most strongly. Like seismic waves, the affective intensities spread outwards from the NTE venue, impacting other surrounding spaces like streets and takeaways in a more ‘diluted’ form as the intensity gradually dissipates.

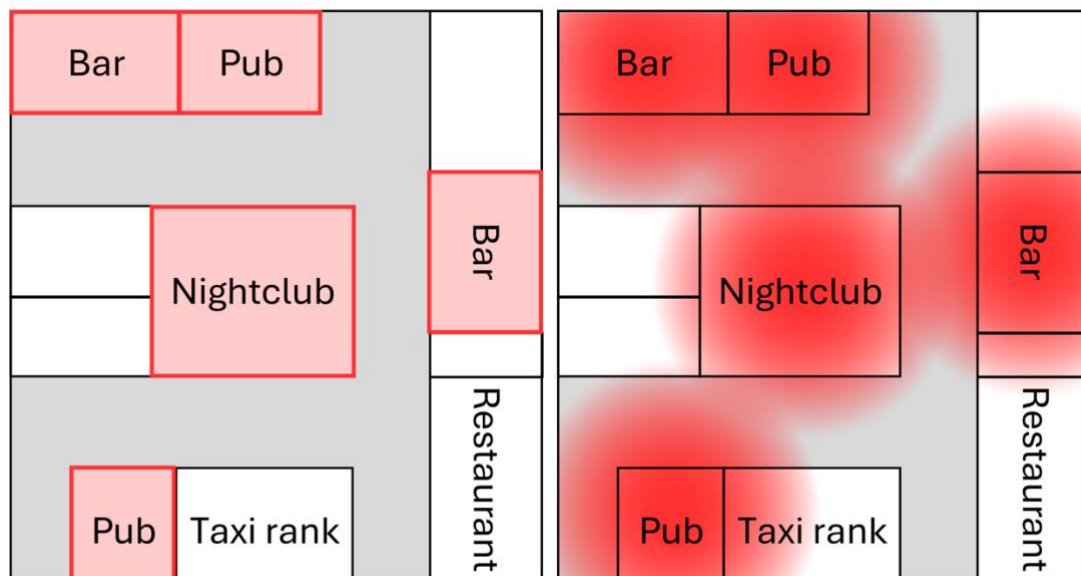


Figure 2 is a diagram illustrating traditional understandings of the night-time economy (NTE) [left], bounded by the physical borders of the NTE venue, compared to my alternative conceptualisation of the NTE as a series of overlapping epicentral extensions [right]. The strength of the atmosphere dissipates with greater distance from the NTE venue.

Understanding the NTE as an assembled affective atmosphere emphasises the idea that the NTE space shapes the NTE experience. This framing provides the theoretical foundations for this research. Shaw (2014: p.93) summarises this approach to the NTE space, beyond the aforementioned intoxication and economic foci, by stating: “The night-time city is not the night-time economy: it is a vibrating, pulsating atmosphere. It

differs from the day as a variety of affects and practices gain traction within a particular space-time and generate this atmosphere”.

Time and the NTE

Shaw’s (2014) mention of the “space-time” of the NTE prompts me to address a critical gap within research. Though time is often referred to within research on the NTE, being part of its very name, it is not often given adequate weighting especially in comparison to spatial lenses.

Some researchers have explored time in the NTE from the perspective of liminality (e.g. Hayward and Hobbs, 2007; Hobbs et al., 2000; Roberts, 2015; Shaw, 2014), experiences bounded by time, limited to the night, and separate to the everyday. Tiesdell and Slater (2006) also point to the influence of time in policy, contrasting the spatial nature of planning controls with licensing, governed largely by time. I argue that this does not do justice to the fundamental role of time in shaping the NTE and its associated experiences. It also neglects important scholarly arguments advocating for the joint consideration of space and time. This is something that this thesis aims to address.

Focusing solely on space freezes it in time, it does not capture the dynamics and fluidity of real-world processes. Scholars have emphasised the need to bring the temporal into the spatial (Massey, 1993; 1994; 2005; Merriman et al., 2012; Soja, 1999; Unwin, 2000) particularly reflecting upon its joint role as space-time (Harvey, 1990; Massey, 2005; May and Thrift, 2003). The two concepts are relational, dynamic and intertwined. Their compression helps to interpret the connectivities between space and time (Merriman et al., 2012; Unwin, 2000) and gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience.

Arguing for the importance of their combined consideration Massey (1994) quotes Minkowski (1964: p.297): “space by itself and time by itself are doomed to fade away into mere shadows, and only a kind of union of the two will preserve an independent reality”. They are “implicated in each other” (Massey, 2005: p.18) and therefore conceptualisations of the NTE, and experiences within, must take into consideration

their deeply interconnected nature. My proposed framework introduces the combined role of space and time, along with elements of student life, identity and various institutional elements of university (that I combine to term “studenthood”). These elements work together to shape the NTE. Recognising their combined role provides a more nuanced, deeper understanding of the NTE, and how student experiences are shaped (see *Chapter 6*).

The NTE in This Thesis

The phrase “night-time economy” within this research acknowledges its historical development, heeds caution of overemphasis on alcohol or economic activity and considers the (re)production of space and time. However, what constitutes the NTE and a “night out” is intentionally left to the discretion of participants (see *Chapter 4*). Leaving this open to their interpretation allows them to draw out aspects they deem as important to the NTE experience. Notably, their accounts centre on the entire journey rather than bars and clubs, and as subsequent analysis chapters draw out, they describe NTE experiences that are shaped by space, time, and studenthood. While Shaw (2014) argues that continued use of the term “night-time economy” risks reinforcing consumption-led narratives, I contend that its origins still play a vital role in how the night is understood today. I retain the term not uncritically, but as a conscious “nod” to its background and to maintain coherence with existing literature on nightlife.

The Complexities of the NTE: Pleasure, Risk and Governance

After dark, the city is transformed into a space associated with excitement and unpredictability. Huddleston (2014: p.11) describes that “at night, the city is a place of wonder, leisure and merriment; however, beneath this hedonistic façade lurks a realm of unparalleled chaos, illicit activities and the potential for violence”, summarising the complex nature of the space. Here, I explore the literature relating to the NTE as a space

of risk and pleasure. It provides contextual framing for *Chapter 7* and signifies further distance from the initial visions of the NTE held by its early advocates.

Pleasure

The night-time city is largely characterised by “the pursuit of pleasure and hedonistic excess in bounded urban ‘wild zones’” (Griffin et al., 2009: p.503), associated with “good times of stylish, exclusive activity” (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003: p.45). The NTE is viewed as a site for the “carnavalesque” (Hubbard, 2013; Ravenscroft and Gilchrist, 2009), a “free and hedonistic place for pleasure” (Demant, 2013: p.196). Within the NTE one can experience liminal freedoms as the social world of the day is “divorced from the night” (Huddleston, 2014: p.11). It adds to this excitement as a juxtaposition affording opportunity to escape structured routines and familiar norms in an “episodic loosening of the bonds of restraint imposed by paid employment and domestic labour” (Hobbs et al., 2000: p.711).

Pleasure forms a primary motivator for both alcohol consumption and going out in the NTE (McBride, 2024; Szmigin et al., 2008) yet studies have rarely turned to it as a focus within NTE research (see Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Fry, 2011; Hutton, 2016; McBride, 2019; 2024; Pennay, 2012). This is something my thesis seeks to address. McBride (2019: p.16) critiques that, instead, young people’s NTE experiences and drinking cultures are “overwhelmingly framed” as problematic as if the pleasures are “erased” in spaces of risk (Duff, 2008; Moore, 2008). Pleasure and hedonism are often portrayed as “excessive” or “deviant”, straying into problematic zones of disorder, incivility, and risk (Ayres, 2019; Crawford and Flint, 2009; Hobbs et al., 2005b; Huddleston, 2014; Roberts, 2015), requiring containment and control. Instead, most of the research has focused on the NTE as a site of risk, associated with crime, disorder and violence.

Crime and Disorder

There is a substantial, multidisciplinary body of NTE research that is concerned with crime, violence and disorder (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Hadfield, 2015; Hobbs, 2003; Philpot et al., 2019; Savard et al., 2019; Wadds, 2015; Winlow, 2010). Winlow and Hall (2006) title their research *Violent Night* as tribute to this. Whilst it would be impossible to examine such a broad area in depth, given the constraints of this literature review, scholarship has generally traced how the NTE has emerged as a criminological concern, following the aforementioned initiatives for urban revival. The developments became associated with rising alcohol consumption (Measham and Brain, 2005; Roberts, 2006) and increases in crime and disorder (Bromley and Nelson, 2002; Hobbs et al., 2005a; Savard et al., 2019). Since then, the NTE and its customers have elicited concern (Tomsen, 2018; Wüllenweber and Burrell, 2024).

NTE spaces are considered “hotspots” for violence, crime and disorder⁶ (Hamel and Tomsen, 1993; Newton, 2015), especially as the venues, and hence potential victims and perpetrators, tend to be clustered around a small geographical area (Wüllenweber and Burrell, 2024). The association between the NTE and heightened risk is a recurring theme in this thesis (particularly in *Chapter 7*). Being within the NTE “exposes” individuals to potential violence, crime and disorder (Haleem et al., 2021). For Shaw (2014: p.90), the NTE often appears as a space where “wild and dangerous behaviour takes control of the city centre for a period of time”, especially to outside observers. There appears to be a stigmatisation of the space, or an imagined geography, framing it as a “highly criminogenic environment” (Smith and Hall, 2013: p.91). Media coverage of nightlife-related violence and disorder further perpetuates a sense of customer vulnerability, often exaggerating statistics on the likelihood of victimisation (Murphy, 2023).

Although my research aims to move beyond an alcohol-centric focus, understanding its role in the associations between the NTE and crime and disorder is important.

⁶ NTE-related Research into NTE-related crime has spanned a broad spectrum of offences, encompassing anti-social behaviour (see Crawford and Flint, 2009) being drunk and disorderly (see Jayne et al., 2006), robbery (see Wüllenweber and Burrell, 2024), sexual violence (see Anitha et al., 2021; Quigg et al., 2020) and even homicide (see Tomsen, 2018).

Intoxication is persistently implicated in the study of NTE violence and disorder (see Ayres and Treadwell, 2012; Block and Block, 1995; Bromley and Nelson, 2002; Tutenges, 2023). Scholars imply that this stems from their “co-occurrence” (see Newton, 2015; Wüllenweber and Burrell, 2024) leaving them to be perceived as virtually synonymous. Hobbs (2003: p.46) explain how “violence and disorder are regular fixtures of our NTE” as it is viewed as an “amphitheatre” of drugs and alcohol, conflating the two elements. Even aspects of the broader NTE experience, like “pre-drinking” and “pre-loading”, have been linked to increased likelihood of involvement in violence (Foster and Ferguson, 2014).

Cozens and Greive (2011) warn against focusing too narrowly on alcohol. They suggest it can obscure broader ties between the NTE and violence and disorder. Scholarship has therefore progressed beyond this to consider, for instance, aspects like space, aligning with the direction of this research. Ratcliffe (2012) draws on environmental criminology to explore “criminogenic places”, while MacLean and Moore (2014) highlight how the NTE operates as an “affectively charged” space, capable of generating heightened emotional states and fuelling aggression. Aspects of the NTE’s socio-material assemblage have been linked to violence and disorder including lighting, layout, crowd density, time and even social norms (Fung et al., 2018; Koleczko and Garcia Hansen, 2011; MacIntyre and Homel, 1994).

Risk and Governance

As an environment so closely associated with crime and disorder, the NTE is frequently portrayed as a space of risk (see *Chapter 7*). However, this obscures a more complex reality. Crucially, these instances of disorder unfold against a backdrop of order and governance, an area which has also received significant scholarly attention. Far from the “unregulated zone” that Hobbs (2003: p.28) initially evoke, NTE spaces are subject to legal, political and moral regulation, diffuse throughout a network of state and private actors.

Hayward and Hobbs (2007: p.443) refer to the “myth of the carnival”, as the perceptibly free and hedonistic individual becomes ordered through control and governance. Others have termed engagement with risk for the pursuit of pleasure in the NTE as a “controlled loss of control” (Measham and Brain, 2005: p.273) or “riskless risk” (Smith, 2014: p.91) along similar lines. They suggest there is always an element of order, even when one may perceive “liberating spaces of resistance” (Rigakos, 2008: p.5) the space is managed through a range of aspects including police and security personnel, technology (e.g. CCTV), venue policies and regulations (for a range of studies exploring different elements of NTE governance see Brands et al., 2015b; 2016; Hadfield et al., 2009; Herrick, 2011; Hobbs, 2003; Homan, 2019; Søgaaard, 2014; Wadds, 2015). It is a “licensed transgression” (Griffin et al., 2018: p.487) with the opportunity to “transgress” permitted through these ordered systems of governance, surveillance and control.

Yet, this governance is not only external. Recent work has also paid attention to processes of self-regulation and individualised forms of control (Levine et al., 2012; Nicholls, 2017; Ronneberger, 2008). Individuals become part of the NTE governance through management and regulation of their behaviours, “do[ing] his or her bit” (Moore and Burgess, 2011: p.120) to lessen overall risk in the space, for instance managing their intoxication or de-escalating tension. Furthering this discussion, in *Chapter 7*, I apply Moore and Burges’ (2011) concept of risk rituals, as a form of self-governance within the NTE. Risk rituals are behavioural adaptations to risks that become embedded into everyday practices, becoming unconscious and detached from the risk they were implemented to address. They differ from constrained behaviours as their use as a “preventative measure [becomes] secondary to the form of the ritual” (Moore and Burgess, 2011: p.115), demonstrating how risk can be managed without it being at the forefront of the individual’s mind.

Managing experiences of risk and pleasure in the NTE aligns with the concept of “edgework” (Lyng, 1990), a form of boundary negotiation, as customers strive for some level of risk engagement deemed thrilling, whilst also maintaining personal safety. In fact, as Blackman (2011: p.97, emphasis added) suggests: “young people understand their participation in risk as leisure” and a source of pleasure. Negotiating the boundary

between “chaos and order” (Lyng, 1990: p.855) requires active management, skill and experience. Within the NTE the “seductions of transgression” (Hobbs, 2003: p.46) are part of the pleasurable appeal of risk, so the boundary must be negotiated. It is for this reason that Månsson et al. (2024) suggest that rather than a “controlled loss of control” (Measham and Brain, 2005: p.273), for some, the NTE experience should be framed as “controlled attainment of control” as control is never completely lost, given their dynamic and calculated approach to risk-engagement. Similar concepts like “calculated hedonism” (Featherstone, 2007; Szmigin et al., 2008) consider the intentionality behind NTE customer actions, explored in relation to risk-engagement and pleasure-seeking in *Chapter 7*.

The NTE and Identity

Nightclubs offer interesting sites for exploring the relationship between space and identity formation, functioning as liminal and unique experiences that “[offer] those who partake in its practices... spaces in which they can express themselves and feel an affiliation of affection with others, forging and reforming their self and group identities” (Malbon, 1999: p.266). In this sub-section I examine the literature to better understand the performances, experimentations and temporary adaptations of identity within the NTE, including the relatively limited work that considers student identity. Whilst a wide body of scholarship has examined how intersectional identities shape experiences of the NTE (see Kovac and Trussell, 2015; Tan, 2014), I focus on how identities are formulated and explored within the NTE, foregrounding *Chapter 8*’s discussion on becoming a student. This is not to deny the enduring relevance of identity in shaping NTE experiences; in fact, *Chapters 6 and 7* address how aspects of student identity influence the NTE experience. Rather, I draw on Malbon’s (1998: p.279) notion of “going beyond” fixed identity, in the NTE, into more fluid and transient modes of identification.

Mainstream NTE venues are often criticised for reproducing and reinforcing dominant identities and social norms, particularly white, heteronormative and hypersexualised identities (e.g. Boyd, 2010). However alternative NTE spaces, such as those connected

to rave culture, have played a crucial role in fostering non-normative youth identities (Malbon, 1998; Nofre and Garcia-Ruiz, 2023; Pini, 2001; Rief, 2009). Beyond raves, alternative NTE venues also offer safe and affirming environments that help individuals develop identities that might be suppressed elsewhere. This is especially evident in LGBTQ+ contexts, where nightlife spaces have been shown to aid identity and community development (e.g. Almeida, 2022; Almond, 2011; Davis, 2008; Glavev, 2023; Moraes and Ferreira, 2021).

The NTE has long been recognised as a key space for the formation of youth identities in particular, with its significance well-documented in several decades of research (see Cattán and Vanolo, 2014; Chambers, 1975; Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Nofre and Garcia-Ruiz, 2023; Northcote, 2006). More than entertainment and leisure, they offer young people a medium for self-expression through consumption (Dempster, 2011; Hollands, 1995; Malbon, 1998; Rief, 2009). Chatterton and Hollands (2003) for example, describe youth as a phase defined by experimentation and liminality, which aligns with why young people are drawn to the NTE (Dempster, 2011; Gant and Terry, 2017; Malbon, 1999; Nairn et al., 2006). The experiences are especially relevant during times of transition (Gallán, 2015), and while authors highlight this in terms of the transition to adulthood (Northcote, 2006), it is also relevant during the transition to university.

The NTE provides an interesting space-time for identity formulation due to its liminality and separation from the everyday. They are “spaces of hedonism and escape” (Gallán, 2015: p.557) where individuals can temporarily suspend everyday identities, experiment with alternative versions of the self and forge new identities (Hubbard, 2005; Indrayuni et al., 2024). Grazian (2003) terms this the emergence of our “nocturnal self”. These processes of experimentation are often conceptualised as “identity work” (e.g. Hadfield, 2015: p.608), with Roberts (2015) describing a “big night out” as a direct example of such work rather than merely a setting in which it occurs. In contrast, Demant (2013) describes it as a form of “play” evoking a more light-hearted and impermanent form of experimentation, which is a source of fun in itself. Smith (2013) adds another layer to the significance of the NTE within this process, highlighting the role of alcohol in lowering inhibitions, allowing individuals to experiment without concern for how they are

perceived. It frames the NTE as a liberating and free space where customers can explore and experiment with their identities without fear of judgement.

Aside from experimentation, identity in the NTE has also been framed through the lens of performance, drawing on Butler's (1990) theory of performativity, where aspects of identity, like gender, are constructed through repeated performance. Although Butler's (1990; 1993) concepts were not originally necessarily tied to space, scholars later extended her framework to spatial contexts (e.g. Bell and Valentine, 1994; Duncan, 1996). Tan (2013; 2014) and Grazian (2007) each explore how gender is performed in NTE settings. Within these spaces individuals may accentuate aspects of their identities, for instance performing hyper-femininity or masculinity (Kovac and Trussell, 2015; Nicholls, 2019; 2020; Mackiewicz, 2013) or alternatively perform in ways that resist, adjust or redefine them (Kovac and Trussell, 2015; Nicholls, 2017; 2019; 2020; Peralta, 2008). This reflects the duality of NTE performances as "sometimes, people want to be seen at night, while at other times, they wish to be hidden." (Scott, 2025: p.1). The performances are fleeting and often strategic, for instance, responding to perceived risk (Fileborn, 2016b; Nicholls, 2017), rather than sincere. As Crabbe (2006: p.161) explains, they are: "performing rather than building anything solid... rather than expressing who [they] are".

Considering the NTE as a site of performance, Goffman's (1971) ideas about performance of self, come to mind. His idea that life consists of "front stage" and "backstage" spaces where individuals curate impressions based on audience and setting, maps onto the NTE context. While typical "front stage" settings like workplaces demand performance of expected norms, the NTE offers a more permissive stage, allowing individuals to "'act out' certain identities that are different from their daily lives as a form of escape from reality" (Indrayuni et al., 2024: p.1558). However, this sense of liberation should not be mistaken as a "backstage", devoid of the need to perform. They still function as "front stages" as individuals remain visible to an audience and thus engage in active "impression management" (Goffman, 1971). As Scott (2025) points out, even these spaces can place individuals under audience scrutiny, turning self-expression into a carefully managed act. Dressing up, putting on make-up and even acts

like pre-drinking become part of the “backstage” work, that facilitate the “front stage” performance in the NTE (Northcote, 2006).

The NTE and Student Identity

Although the significance of the NTE in shaping youth identities has been well-established, student identity has received comparatively less attention, often subsumed under broader youth categories. University represents a unique time for students to explore dimensions of their identity (Riordan and Carey, 2019) especially during times of transition, where they forge new (student) identities, moving away from earlier versions of themselves (Meehan and Howells, 2019; Riordan and Carey, 2019; Scanlon et al., 2007; Wilcox et al., 2005). This thesis addresses this gap, exploring how student identity both shapes and is shaped by NTE experiences.

Some studies have touched upon aspects of student identity in nightlife settings; Murphy (2023), for example, explores how male students perform masculine identities, though this is not necessarily a *student* masculine identity. Other research has explored the role of alcohol within the formulation of student identities, noting it forms part of the student identity itself. Riordan and Carey (2019: p.35), for example, has commented that students may use alcohol to “facilitate identity exploration, to cope with identity confusion, or as part of their university identity”. However, these place primary emphasis on alcohol, rather than the significance of the broader NTE experience or space.

A more direct approach is taken by Chatterton and Hollands (2003), dedicating a chapter to students in *Urban Nightscapes*. They argue that “social life and nightlife are central aspects of student identity” (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003: p.127), referring to student identity as a form of subcultural identity (Hollands, 1995). They observe that due to this, nightlife operators help to construct student identity, as much as students help to create nightlife. Yet, they criticise the commodification of nightlife and its connections to identity, arguing student identities: “are being appropriated, sanitised and sold back to students by corporate nightlife operators eager to cash in on this lucrative market” (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003: p.142). The student identity being sold is a very specific

formulation, which I return to later in the chapter, alienating those who do not fit the archetype.

Cheeseman (2010; 2017; 2018) takes a performative approach, demonstrating that students enact their identities through NTE engagement and “the performance of going out” (2010: p.115). His research is mostly tied to the specific context of Sheffield University, though it demonstrates that through participation and performance in the NTE, students can develop a student identity. Moreover, these actions constitute part of student identity and culture rather than just being a means to perform them.

Holton (2017) considers how spaces, particularly the NTE and halls of residence (see also Holton, 2015a; Holton and Riley, 2016), contribute to student identity formation. He conceptualises that spaces closely associated with student life like the Students’ Union and student-only nights form a “student bubble”, aiding the development of student identities, especially for first-years. This is often compounded through self-segregation (a concept I return to in *Chapters 6-8*). Over time, as identities become more secure, students move beyond these spaces opting for more diverse NTE experiences.

The Typical Student

When the literature suggests the NTE is a space to enact, experiment with, or develop student identities, there is a specific pre-defined student identity (Holdsworth, 2009; Jones, 2014) in mind. This is a social construction of a student archetype, often labelled as the “traditional” (Chatterton, 1999; Nakazawa, 2017; Sykes, 2021), “normal” (Andersson et al., 2012; Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003) or “typical” (Cheeseman, 2018; Sabri, 2011) student. The term “traditional”, in particular, reflects the history of higher education, where university was mainly reserved for white, non-working-class students. This archetype is a common feature in discussions of student experience across policy, research, and everyday discourse, homogenising heterogeneous student lives into specific demographic and lifestyle characteristics. This becomes “internalised and embodied” (Chatterton, 1999: p.119) by students, something they are expected to replicate (Cheeseman, 2010; Pötschulat et al., 2021) as they learn the “rules of the

student game” (Holton, 2015b) and develop both individual and collective student identities (Holdsworth, 2009).

The “typical student” is ordinarily connected with specific socio-economic characteristics; usually white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender, secular, able-bodied and young (Ballantyne, 2012; Chatterton, 1999; Holdsworth, 2009; Holloway et al., 2010; Mountford, 2017; Pötschulat et al., 2021; Scandone, 2017). Quinn (2007) also suggests that this specific image of the student has historically been the focus of university marketing strategies, though I would argue this has now progressed at most institutions, to showcase a diverse student body, highlighting a “global community” (see Pike, 2012). Assumptions regarding lifestyle such as being a school-leaver (Ballantyne, 2012), free of domestic obligations (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Patfield et al., 2021), and living away from home (Christie et al., 2008; Sykes, 2021) are also central to this construction. Others also identify practices (or “traditions” as Skyes (2021: p.83) refers to them) like drinking, risk-engagement and generalised hedonism as part of their lifestyles (Andersson et al., 2012; Calver and Michael-Fox, 2021; Cook et al., 2022; Hollands, 1995; Nicholls, 2019; Robertson and Tustin, 2018).

Students are attuned to these aspects of the typical student persona even before arriving at university, through portrayals in popular culture (Calver and Michael-Fox, 2021; Cheeseman, 2010). As Cheeseman (2010) and Pötschulat et al. (2021) suggest, even students who do not fully identify with this archetype often feel compelled to measure themselves against it, underlining the potency of this idealised student persona. Yet, unsurprisingly, the typical student persona is often not reflective of the heterogenous lifestyles and characteristics of students. Sykes (2021: p.90), for example, refers to it as an “enduring myth”. Students are inherently heterogeneous, experiencing university in different ways, not all conform to (British) media stereotypes (Holloway et al., 2010; Holton, 2015b).

Widening participation initiatives stemming from the 1990s (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003) and changes to accessing university have challenged and complicated the idea of the “traditional student” (Holton and Riley, 2016; Nakazawa, 2017). Growth and change

in the student demographic have expanded “non-traditional”, or “new”, student groups, who now represent a “significant proportion of the overall student population within British universities” (Chatterton, 1999: p.118), including the University central to this research. However, although certain norms or practices, associated with the idea of the “typical student”, are not performed or experienced by all, they still dominate the *idea* of being a student. Chatterton (1999: p.118) notes that they “still largely determine the overall image of who a student is within British society”, whilst Cheeseman (2010: p.79) argues “while there is no archetypical experience, there is a general student type, to which a large group of behaviours are expected to correspond”. What matters not is whether it is representative, only how the very idea of a “typical student” shapes their perceptions of self, practices and ultimately identity formation (explored in *Chapter 8*).

The NTE and Community

The NTE also functions as a key site for developing social bonds and “a sense of *communitas* and belonging” (Smith, 2013: p.1069; see also Northcote, 2006). Hollands (1995: p.18) highlights that it is the ritualisation of NTE experiences that acts as “young adults’ attempt to construct a modern equivalent of ‘community’”, echoed by Cheeseman (2017: p.104) as “an efficient ritual of bonding”. Alcohol is, once again, centralised in this process, positioned as a social lubricant (Gambles et al., 2022; Ross-Houle and Quigg, 2019) or the “modern way of bonding” (de Visser et al., 2013; see also Hollands, 1995; Ogilvie, 2018). The NTE atmosphere produces an “aura of collectivity” (Bøhling, 2015: p.136) and “affective solidarity” (Dimou and Ilan, 2018: p.11), creating connections between those in the space, even where they may not have previously existed. Such spaces are also significant for marginalised communities, for whom they may act as “a place of belonging that gives shape and location to particular needs” (Moran and Skeggs, 2004: p.57; see also Adeyemi, 2022).

The power of the NTE in generating this belonging and sense of community lies in the shared, embodied nature of the experience (Denovan and Macaskill, 2016). Being together, often in close proximity, sharing the space and “conviviality” (Malbon, 1998:

p.273), help to establish and maintain some form of unity or group membership. The sense of escapism offered by these liminal experiences (Denovan and Macaskill, 2016; Hutchinson et al., 2003) further adds to this, providing “intense but short-lived” (Hollands, 2002) moments of collectivity. The crowd, in particular, seems a central component, fostering a sense of unity and “collective attunement” (Tutenges, 2015: p.290). Individual identities become abandoned as people “move and feel as one” (Goulding et al., 2009: p.762), experiencing a shared emotional charge scholars term “effervescence” (Durkheim, 1995; Hopkins et al., 2016; Tutenges, 2023). This aspect of crowd dynamics is well-researched in contexts like football stadiums (e.g. Hill et al., 2022; Neville and Reicher, 2011), music festivals/events (e.g. Davis, 2017; Drury et al., 2015; McPherson and Blackman, 2025), protests (e.g. Drury and Reicher, 2000; Stott et al., 2018) and the NTE (e.g. Garcia, 2011; 2013; Tutenges, 2013; 2015). Even among strangers, crowded dancefloors can evoke solidarity. As Garcia (2013: p.268) notes, “on a nightclub dance floor, strangers have no clear reason to feel connected to each other—and yet often they do.”

The Student Community

Palmer et al. (2009) suggest that although there is an assumption that students, once at university, feel located and instantly belong, the reality is that this is rarely the case (see also Ogilvie, 2018). A student’s sense of belonging is not immediate nor automatic yet receives academic attention due to its importance not only for well-being, but also for academic performance and student retention (Allaire, 2022; Buote et al., 2007; Kyne and Thompson, 2020; van Gijn-Grosvenor and Huisman, 2020). Despite a growing body of research on belonging (e.g. Fenton et al., 2024a; Kelly et al., 2024; Quinn, 2005), little considers how the NTE helps to shape the student community, and even fewer move beyond alcohol-centric interpretations (e.g. Gambles et al., 2022; Nicholls, 2020; Tarrant et al., 2019; Winlow and Hall, 2009). The student identity literature discussed earlier (e.g. Cheeseman, 2010; Holton, 2017) engages more directly with both students and the NTE, offering rare insights into how student communities can emerge within these spaces, albeit grounded in the same generalised imaginaries of the student.

In understanding the student community, I employ Anderson's (1983) concept of *Imagined Communities*, given that the only connection all students share is being "one who studies" (Cheeseman, 2017: p.107). Originally tied to ideas of nationhood, Anderson's (1983) concept has been applied to various contexts (for examples relating to students see Dawson, 2017; Wilding, 2022) to describe how people connect through imagined ties. It is "imagined" because its members "will never know most of their fellow-members," (Anderson, 1983: p.6) yet feel connected, imagining shared beliefs, attitudes and goals. His concept has not gone without criticism though, with scholars (e.g. Mitchell, 2000; Winichakul, 1994) arguing that it focuses too heavily on the existence of the imaginary rather than the forces and practices which sustain it. NTE experiences, I argue, are something that helps to sustain this (see *Chapters 7 and 8*). Cheeseman (2018: p.39) encapsulates the role of the NTE in contributing to this imaginary in his work: "the nightclub as a dreamscape, with its strobes, anthems and smoke hypnotise[s] a large group into believing in its own existence... This means that the wider community only exists in the imagination of students performing on the dance floor. It doesn't exist elsewhere".

Sense of community is also strengthened through processes of othering and exclusivity within the NTE (Fileborn, 2016b; Malbon, 1999; Smith, 2013). Creating distinctions and divisions between "us and them" (MacRae, 2004: p.63) helps to strengthen the identity of the "in-group" against that of the "out-group" (Anderson and Knee, 2021; Ethier and Deaux, 1994; Gale and Hodge, 2017; Proshansky et al., 1983; Tajfel and Turner, 2004) as who students are becomes equally as meaningful as who they *are not*. For Smith (2013: p.1071) the imaginary feeds into ideas of inclusion and exclusion; imagined attributes of "coolness" possessed by the in-group (or "cool" venues) contribute to "a faux sense of community" between them, in these spaces. These processes of exclusion are based on the imaginary and socially constructed forms of "abstract symbolism". Applied to the student context, they are based on being drawn to other students ("campus insiders" (Andersson et al., 2012)), with non-students, or those who do not fit the typical student archetype, as the 'other', left out or avoided (Conroy and De Visser, 2014; Gambles et al., 2022; Holdsworth, 2009; 2006; Nicholls, 2020; Reay et al., 2010; Sykes, 2021).

The NTE space feeds into this as students’ “exclusive geographies” (Chatterton, 1999) and “self-segregation” (Holton, 2017: p.70) keep them spatially segregated from the out-group (Hollands, 2002; Holt and Griffin, 2005; Hubbard, 2005; Smith and Hubbard, 2014) which can lead to a “divided city” (Hollands, 1995: p.23) or tensions between groups (Aden et al., 2010; Holton, 2017; 2015a; Lazzeroni and Piccaluga, 2015; Martin et al., 2005; Nakazawa, 2017). Student-only spaces, like the students’ union or other “student-centric night-time social spaces” (Holton, 2017: p.72) further this divide, strengthening the sense of student community (see discussion on the “student bubble” (Holton, 2017) earlier in the chapter). That said, the homogeneity they reproduce may hold the potential to further exclude some students (Andersson et al., 2012), signifying a lack of genuine cohesivity amongst the entire student population.

The NTE and “The Student Experience”

The concept of “the student experience” has become a ubiquitous feature, or “buzz-word”, within higher education discourse, attempting to make sense of what it means to be a student (Chow and Healey, 2008; Pötschulat et al., 2021). The consistent use of the definite article implies a generalised and shared experience, even when realities remain diverse. It ties in with the imagined and idealised constructions of students I have already discussed in this chapter, both marketable and entangled with processes of neoliberalisation in higher education, and the commodification of student life (Chatterton, 2010; Smith and Hubbard, 2014).

Harvey et al. (1992) are first credited with the term’s use, suggesting it is the most important factor when assessing the quality of higher education provision. This did not just refer to the academic experience though, as they stated: “this is not restricted to the student experience in the classroom but to the total student experience” (Harvey et al., 1992: p.1). The term has since gained further traction in policy and has also been adopted in university strategy documents, marketing initiatives, student surveys and league tables (Chatterton, 2010; Matus et al., 2021; Sabri, 2011). For example, the *Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey* (Jack, 2024) includes indicators such as “good

social life” and “community atmosphere”, rewarding awards to institutions, based on the rankings. Additionally, according to research by Pötschulat et al. (2021: p.8), 16 of 24 Russell Group universities reference both curricular and non-curricular aspects under the banner of “*student experience*” on their websites. It means that students are introduced to this concept well before they attend university (Chatterton, 1999; Meehan and Howells, 2018).

Despite its widespread use it is critiqued as a “fuzzy term” lacking precision (Benckendorff et al., 2009; Matus et al., 2021) and masking inequality. Scholars like Sabri (2011) and Pötschulat et al. (2021) argue that it acts as a catch-all category that flattens meaningful distinctions between students and ignores the structural forces shaping their lives. It advances illusions of equality as it implies every student can access the same experience, regardless of their circumstances (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). Pötschulat et al. (2021) ask, “Whose student experience?”, challenging the default, dominant constructions of the “typical student” as misrepresentative. Despite this, the concept of the student experience remains central to students’ expectations and sense-making of student life as well as university operations (Benckendorff et al., 2009; Chatterton, 1999; 2010; Pötschulat et al., 2021; Stevenson and Clegg, 2011).

Interpretations of “the student experience”, though hard for students to articulate (Pötschulat et al., 2021), tend to emphasise the social and cultural over the academic. While policy focuses on teaching quality and infrastructure, students associate the term with friendship, leisure, and other non-academic aspects (Benckendorff et al., 2009; Matus et al., 2021; Pötschulat et al., 2021). Cheeseman (2018: p.15) refers to this as the “day-to-day lived experience of student life”. The term is also tied to the NTE, with nightlife events promoters explicitly using the term in their advertising (Pötschulat et al., 2021).

Pötschulat et al. (2021: p.11) similarly identify a common trend amongst students who consider ‘going out’ as a central aspect of the student experience (see also Andersson et al., 2012; Chatterton, 1999; Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Cheeseman, 2010; 2017;

2018; Nicholls, 2019), adding the experiences contribute to processes of “meaning-making” and “acting out the student experience”. *Freshers’ Week*, in particular, is filled with expectations of nightlife participation and is often described as a key “rite of passage” into university life (Cheeseman, 2010; Riordan and Carey, 2019; Wilcox et al., 2005).

Despite its centrality, existing scholarship often reduces the NTE to a focus on alcohol consumption. Studies describe the stereotypical student lifestyle as being rooted in excessive drinking and partying (Robertson and Tustin, 2018; Sykes, 2021). Universities, themselves, are complicit in reinforcing this narrative (Fuller et al., 2018; Ross-Houle and Quigg, 2019) through promotional materials that centre the drinking culture, and “Student Union events” that “espous[e] the view that drinking[is] an integral part of most social events and key to enjoying social occasions” (Gambles et al., 2022: p.253). While some efforts have been made to offer alcohol-free alternatives (Fenton et al., 2024b; Fuller et al., 2018; Ross-Houle and Quigg, 2019), these tend to be temporally segregated or peripheral, thereby maintaining the dominant drinking culture.

Students as Customers

The concept of “the student experience” contributes to the neoliberalisation of higher education and the commodification of student life (Pötschulat et al., 2021), as if it were a standardised product to be marketed and sold (Lomas, 2007). It contributes to debates as to whether students are customers of the university (Ballantyne, 2012; Finney and Finney, 2010; Hoffman and Kretoivics, 2004; Khalifa, 2009), paying for goods, services or experiences like customers of any other business. Such debates are not new, though they especially gain prominence at times where policy debates arise around tuition fee adjustment (Bunce et al., 2017). It is likely this topic will see a resurgence, given the rise in tuition fees scheduled for the 2025-2026 academic year (Department for Education, 2024).

Some argue universities are adopting increasingly business-like models, marketing themselves in the increasingly competitive higher education sector (Lomas, 2007;

Patfield et al., 2021). Many specifically liken the sector to the service industry, with students positioned as paying customers (Ng and Forbes, 2009; Xu et al., 2018), and universities tailoring their offerings to meet consumer expectations (Adisa et al., 2023; Guilbault, 2018; İşlek and Kocaman, 2024; Sabri, 2011). Advertising strategies, aimed at the recruitment of new students, mirror commercial efforts to recruit customers (Chapleo and Reader, 2014; Guilbault, 2016) furthering this framing.

Although there is limited empirical evidence regarding the extent to which students consider themselves customers (Bunce and Bennett, 2021; Saunders, 2015; Tomlinson, 2014; 2017), they reflect consumer attitudes (Ballantyne, 2012; Brooks, 2022; Lomas, 2007). In research by Williams (2012), students rejected the customer label, yet acknowledged their financial investment in university and their futures (see also Bunce and Bennett, 2021; Bunce et al., 2017). Tomlinson's (2014) participants expressed similar views, rather than self-identifying as customers they instead presented consumer attitudes and concerns. This included the desire for a good quality university experience reflecting "value for money" (see also Biggs et al., 2022; Lomas, 2007) and ultimately led back to the requirement to pay tuition fees.

If students are considered customers, then there is a level of expectation or sense of entitlement regarding the service they are due to receive (Finney and Finney, 2010). This entitlement is reflective in student attitudes as they ask what they can *get* from the experience rather than what they ought to *do* as part of it (Lomas, 2007; Morley, 2003). It is also associated with higher levels of complaining (Finney and Finney, 2010; Lomas, 2007). Ballantyne (2012: p.48) reports that when students do not receive this, they feel misled, with participants citing "false advertising". There is also a concern that students who believe they are customers exhibit a passive attitude towards their education (Ashwin et al., 2023), and there have also been reported ties to lower academic performance (Bunce et al., 2017; Woodall et al., 2014).

Critics of the student-as-customer mindset suggest it can homogenise the learning process and the student experience (Askham, 2008) as customers of universities would "require the same standardisation, reliability and predictability as they do when

purchasing a burger” (Lomas, 2007: p.33). Academics in particular have critiqued the view that education can be portrayed as “just another service industry” (Lomas, 2007: p.31). Harvey and Green (1993: p.24) base their counter argument on the fact that education is a form of development and that in this instance universities are “doing something *to* the customer rather than just doing something *for* the customer” (emphasis added), and others also highlight the active role students play as part of their own education (e.g. Sharrock, 2000). As such alternative conceptualisations have been proposed including students as products (Hoffman and Kretovics, 2004; Obermiller et al., 2005), partners or co-producers (Clayson and Haley, 2005; İşlek and Kocaman, 2024; Mark, 2013) and aspirants (Khalifa, 2009; Xu et al., 2018). Notably, these studies have primarily been tied to the academic experience. The extent to which the broader student experience is a paid-for service is relatively underexplored, a gap my research seeks to address. What remains key is the consideration of the role played by the students, moreover the role they believe they play, as part of the experience (Ashwin et al., 2023; Tomlinson, 2024).

COVID-19

As I already began to explore in the *Introduction*, COVID-19 had huge impacts on both the lives of students and the NTE industry. In the UK on the 16th March 2020 the Prime Minister advised people to “avoid pubs and restaurants”, though no official closure orders were given until the 20th (Dunn et al., 2021). On the 23rd March a nationwide lockdown was announced, which was the first of various stay at home orders imposed (Johnson, 2020). This also corresponded with the closure of university campuses and teaching and assessment were “pivoted” online (Belluigi et al., 2020; Hubble et al., 2021). The lifting of this lockdown notably coincided with a devolution of regulation and policy as each government implemented its own system (Torrance, 2025). Herein, I refer only to rules and policies pertaining to England, given the context of this thesis (Figure 3).

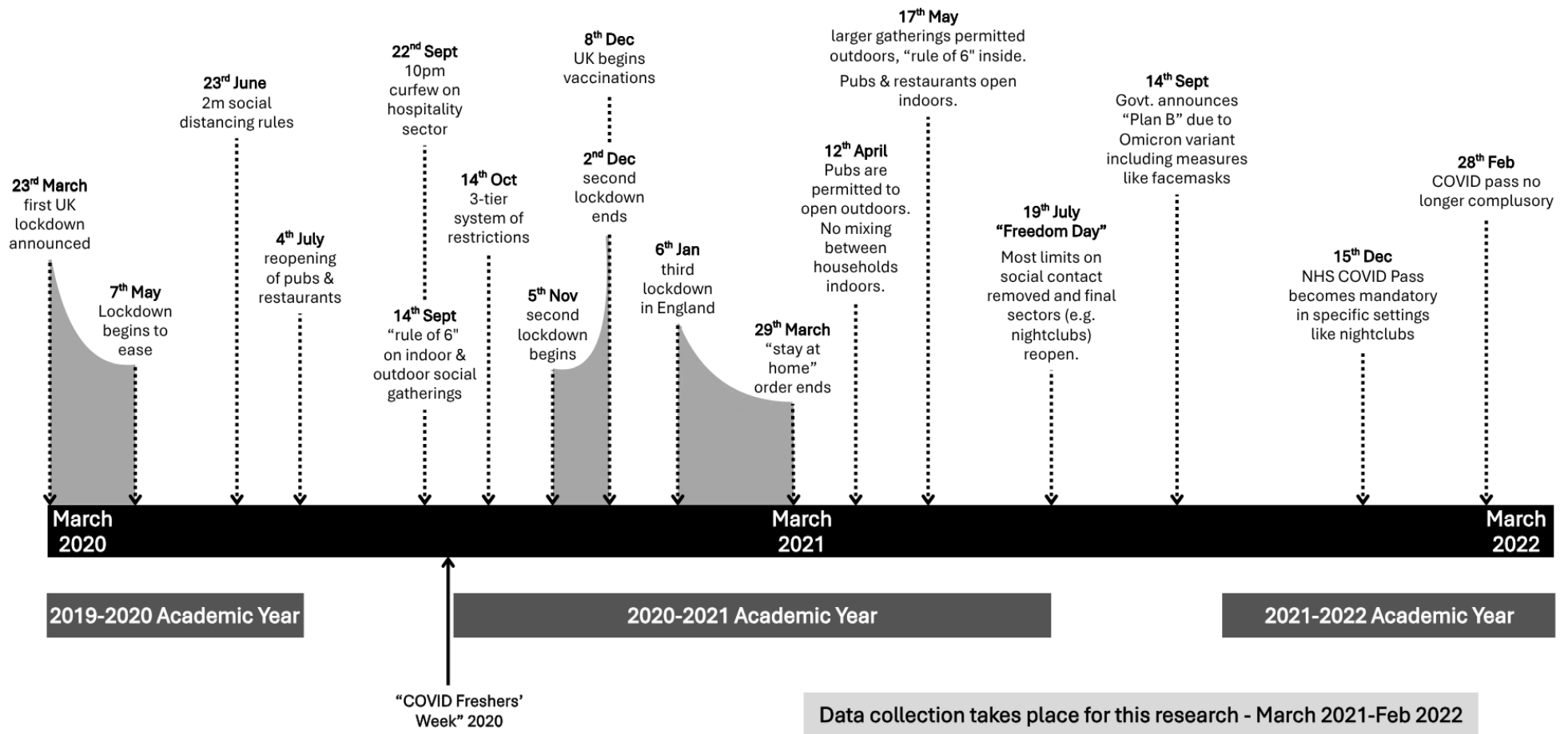


Figure 3 is a timeline demonstrating various COVID-19 measures that relate to this research from March 2020 to March 2022. Three academic years are also marked, along with the period of data collection for this research, spanning from March 2021 to February 2022

When lockdown measures were lifted, additional measures were imposed on the NTE that included curfews, table service, and what has been referred to as “stop- start partial-reopening” (Woodrow and Moore, 2021), conveying the lack of uniformity and uncertainty the industry faced. Under these circumstances, re- opening was not always feasible for many NTE venues. Assiter (2022: p.1) acknowledges that “COVID-19 physical distancing measures have had especially radical impacts on cultures and economies with conviviality at their core”, such as the crowded dancefloors of nightclub spaces. Even as some forms of hospitality began to reopen, albeit with “track and trace”⁷ and “rule of six”⁸ conditions attached (APPG, 2021), many NTE venues could not. For them, this was “neither economically viable nor logistically simple” (APPG, 2021: p.38). It is reported that many NTE venues remained closed, even 16 months after initial measures were instated (APPG, 2021).

Not only was it more difficult to reopen nightclubs logistically and economically, but policy also delayed their reopening. Nightclubs were framed as being spaces where the spread of COVID-19 or abandonment of the rules was more likely to occur (Mazierska and Rigg, 2021). Research has since proven that some of the early spread of the virus, did, in fact, stem from close contact in nightclubs (Afonso et al., 2025; Kadokura et al., 2024; van der Veer et al., 2023). However, their delayed reopening, especially in comparison to other busy NTE and hospitality spaces like pubs, bars and restaurants, were framed through the other perceived risks, like violence and disorder. In a report for the Welsh Government, Janssen et al. (2020: p.6) frequently cited that pandemic restrictions would lead to violence in nightlife settings, suggesting things like “social distancing may lead to queues and crowding outside venues, which can be associated with violence”. It demonstrates the deep-rooted perception of the NTE, specifically nightclubs, as ‘risky’, a reoccurring theme in literature and public perception.

⁷ NHS Track and Trace required hospitality venues and some other services to keep a temporary record of all visitors for 21 days and assist NHS Test and Trace with requests for data if needed. This was either done manually or through the NHS QR code and the COVID-19 NHS app.

⁸ The “rule of six” meant that social gatherings were limited to six people, aside from set exemptions including work and education.

“Freedom Day”, July 19th 2021 was intended to signify the complete ‘opening up’ of the NTE sector and a return to “normal” (Morton, 2021a). However, regulations continued in various forms beyond this (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021), most that did not apply to bars and restaurants. *Vaccine Passes*, proposed as part of the government’s *Plan B* for autumn and winter 2021, were required for nightclubs and “other venues that share specified characteristics with nightclubs” (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021). These were venues that were: “open between 1am and 5am, [served] alcohol during this period, [had] a dance floor or space for dancing” (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021). The roll out of this measure created direct associations between such spaces and the spread of COVID-19. Why the line was drawn here, and why nightclubs were framed so differently to bars (which no longer had to adhere to distancing regulations or table service so had crowded queues at the bar) or other crowded spaces like public transport, is due to the perceptions that nightclubs are risky spaces.

At universities, the 2020-2021 academic year began with varying rules and restrictions nationwide. Students were “urged” to get their vaccines before the start of university (Evans et al., 2021). Yet, notably, most young adults were low on the priority list for the vaccine rollout (Public Health England, 2021). So, when the media reported on the large numbers still not fully vaccinated, it was likely a reflection of the wait rather than their intent. *Freshers’ Week 2020* was held in an altered capacity, mostly through online platforms despite many students making the move to campus (Sandiford, 2021; Townsend, 2023). Shortly after this, a second period of lockdown commenced with students often blamed for the rising cases (McShane, 2020). Universities did not properly return to in-person teaching (aside from a few specific courses) until after restrictions lifted in July 2021 (Johnson, 2021) and even this involved a phased return with many online aspects remaining today.

Research, conducted at the time, primarily comprised rapid studies or conceptual reviews that aimed to quickly communicate anticipated impacts of COVID-19 and suggest ways to address them (e.g. Burns et al., 2020; Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Janssen et al., 2020; Mazierska and Rigg, 2021). More longitudinal research has since been

published, designed with COVID-19 in mind. These studies are still being published, and investigate the longer-term effects experienced by students and other young people, as well as how the NTE industry and research landscape have been reshaped (e.g. Goncalves et al., 2021; Nofre et al., 2020; 2023; Pakdaman and Clapp, 2021; Woodrow and Moore, 2021). Academics called for a special issue of the journal *YOUNG* to investigate how COVID-19 affected young people and how they adapted to the pandemic (Bengtsson et al., 2021). The issue explored disruptions to social life, increased feelings of marginalisation, and the emergence of new inequalities. It critically unpacked the media's double standards: young people were vilified as "irresponsible virus super-spreaders" (Bengtsson et al., 2021: p.327) yet simultaneously depended upon to fill frontline roles in sectors like retail that remained operational throughout lockdown. This contradiction is further explored in *Chapter 7*.

Research into the effects of COVID-19 on the NTE industry has focused on economic impacts and recovery (see APPG 2021; Mazierska and Rigg, 2021; Nozawa et al., 2024; NTIA 2023; Santiago-Iglesias et al., 2024a; 2024b). This topic has also received a large amount of media coverage, given the rate at which NTE venues have closed in the years following the pandemic (e.g. Woodham and Hemmati, 2025). To date, there has only been very limited research regarding experiences of, and adaptations to, the NTE during COVID-19. Some key publications include investigation into how the spaces adapted (Straw, 2022), alternative forms of NTE leisure when spaces were closed (Brown, 2021; Gordon-Wilson, 2021; Grebenar, 2024; Iwanicki and Dłużewska, 2023; Townsend, 2023), and experiences of the NTE space in an altered capacity when things began to reopen (Assiter, 2022; Le et al., 2022).

Research on the impact to students has tended to focus on impacts to the learning experience and their resulting levels of satisfaction (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Belluigi et al., 2020; Petillion and McNeil, 2020; Sutcliffe and Noble, 2022). News coverage has seen students attempt to demand refunds for tuition (e.g. BBC, 2021). It ties in with the perception of students as a paying customer I explored earlier in the review. Other avenues of research have centred on students' mental health and wellbeing (Appleby et al., 2022; Chen and Lucock, 2022; Holm-Hadulla et al., 2021; Ihm et al., 2021; Plakhotnik

et al., 2021), with little other focus on non-academic aspects of university life. A notable exception is Townsend (2023), who explored how student drinking habits altered during COVID-19 due to aspects like curfews. He explains that this led many to feel as though they missed out on elements of university life. His research diverges from mine in that it focuses specifically on alcohol consumption and has a data-collection period that ends as COVID-19 measures lifted. This research builds upon Townsend's starting point, exploring the wider NTE experience and beyond just the context of COVID-19, to explore the wider significance of student NTE experiences in what it means to be a student.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that this thesis intersects with a broad range of literature, including NTE studies, youth studies, human geography, and higher education research. Despite the thematic overlaps, the fields of study often remain disconnected and stand to gain from greater interdisciplinary engagement. My research provides an example of the deeper insights that can emerge from bringing these perspectives together. Whilst the review establishes the foundations for this thesis, introducing key theories and concepts relevant to my analysis, it also highlights key gaps that this thesis sets out to address.

A reoccurring theme across the reviewed literature is the lack of research that centres specifically on students; consequently, I place student experiences at the research's core, drawing directly on their voices and perspectives to better understand their experiences of the NTE and student life. Additionally, much of the existing research on the NTE, and broader accounts of student life, tends to focus too heavily on the role of alcohol, often overlooking other aspects of the experience. My research conceptualises the NTE as an affective atmosphere, shaped not just by alcohol but by a broader socio-material assemblage (i.e. lighting, music, the crowd, etc.). Decentring alcohol from these experiences is especially relevant in light of shifting student drinking habits (Fenton et al., 2024b; Hill et al., 2025; Holmes et al., 2022).

I engage with scholarly calls to consider time alongside space when analysing social experience. In fact, I consider their interconnected relationship, in combination with studenthood, working together to dynamically shape student NTE experiences. Finally, despite the disruptive and transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on both student life and the NTE, research on these experiences remains limited. The timing of this research means I can address this gap, providing valuable insight into student experiences of the pandemic, as well as how the NTE industry adapted and was transformed.

The analysis chapters that follow, build on this foundation, contributing to a nuanced and relevant understanding of how students experience the NTE, how this is influenced by space, time and studenthood, and how this changed during COVID-19. In the next chapter, I begin this task by examining how participants define a “night out”, establishing a basis for the analysis of their NTE experiences that follow.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter covers all aspects of the research’s methodology including an overview of participant recruitment, explanation and justification for data collection methods used, and reflections on my researcher positionality. It builds on the introduction to the Night-time Economy (NTE) from earlier chapters, to introduce *CityX*⁹, and its specific NTE, as the research context. I then preface the discussion of the data collection methods with insight into conducting research in a pandemic. The initial plan for the research had to be rethought, as life “pivoted” online (Belluigi et al., 2020), which was accompanied by additional methodological and ethical considerations. In closing, I provide some initial reflections on the “messy” nature of research, though further insight on the lessons learnt from this experience can be found in the *Conclusions* chapter.

CityX

The Literature Review explored various conceptualisations of the NTE, including the types of venues typically involved. Given that this research is grounded in the spatial setting of *CityX*, it is important to provide some contextual background on the city and its NTE. It helps to frame the NTE experiences participants discuss in interviews and focus groups, although comparisons to other geographic locations occasionally emerge. As previously stated, participants’ narratives, tied to *CityX*, are not intended for extrapolation beyond this context. Their insights feed into how we can understand student NTE experiences more broadly, rather than serving as a basis for homogenisation. The NTE, and hence the experience, of *CityX* is unique.

CityX is a small city in the North of England. It has a population of 142,900 people, of which roughly 13% are students (ONS, 2023a). It houses two universities; consequently, a large portion of the area’s population come and go annually with the university calendar. Given its geographical size, spatial divides between students and residents are

⁹ The city, its NTE venues, and all participants are given pseudonyms for the purposes of the research.

not as discernible as some other university cities. Nonetheless, at times, relations between locals and students become strained (see *Chapters 6-8*). Though not uncommon for university cities (Addie et al., 2014; Aden et al., 2010; Holt and Griffin, 2005), student participants express feeling safer amongst others “*like them*” (Sarah [P6, female]). Local community *Facebook* groups also often feature complaints about students being too loud and taking over the city. There are also frequent tensions over the building of new student accommodation blocks, some of which have also threatened the operations of the local NTE (Macdonald, 2023).

Both universities’ prospectuses cite the city’s “vibrant nightlife” as part of the student experience. Whilst the city has more than 130 pubs and bars, only a handful of venues are open after 1am. Participants frequently refer to these including: *StudentLand*, a student-only venue owned by the University Students’ Union; *Glitter*, which describes itself as catering to the LGBTQ+ community; and *Vortex*, a mainstream venue frequented by locals and students alike. *StudentLand* is mentioned most frequently and generally has a positive reputation. *Vortex* appears to have a more negative reputation amongst students, coming out strongly in concerns over safety and conduct of staff.

I chose to focus on *CityX*, in part, due to my familiarity with the city, but also for ease, given the context of the global pandemic. Whilst a comparative study could be a direction for future research, spreading the data collection too thinly across cities during the context of COVID-19, would not have allowed for the right level of in-depth analysis I sought.

Conducting research online (in a pandemic)

The pandemic and its associated measures impacted this research, much as it impacted the NTE. The initial plan was based on in-person interviews, focus groups and conducting observational shadowing. When schools, universities and some forms of work “pivoted” online (Belluigi et al., 2020), so did my research. Despite this, there were no additional

barriers to participation (Zhou et al., 2020), as participants were already required to be online for their studies.

Whilst features of in-person discussion cannot always be replicated online (Vindrola-Padros et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2020), rapid qualitative studies had luckily been conducted earlier in the pandemic, from which advice could be taken and potential issues anticipated (Santana et al., 2021; Teti et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2020). Santana et al. (2021), in particular, give an excellent overview of physical, psychological, and ethical challenges that faced qualitative researchers as a result of social distancing and other COVID-related measures. They offer ways to mitigate them which I explore in the relevant sub-sections of the chapter.

Others who have conducted discussion-based methods via online platforms (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Marhefka et al., 2020), caution that technology itself may cause issues. Both participants and I encountered technical difficulties with connection, audio or visual elements. Phrases like *“I think you may have frozen”* (Fergus [P4, male]) or, in my case, *“I didn’t quite catch that last part”* feature in many of the transcripts. Following Santana et al. (2021), I set aside time to accommodate such issues and provided reassurance when audio or visual quality was poor, sticking with the conversation. When this occurred, I found the flow of conversation was not broken entirely as the students had become used to small technical disruptions. Emma [P11, female], for example, commented: *“oh god, I’m frozen, aren’t I? this always happens at the worst times... can you hear me again yet?”*, before resuming her response to my question.

Once ethical approval for the revised methods of data collection was gained (early in 2021), I conducted pilot test focus groups. This allowed me to ‘iron out’ some of the additional challenges presented by COVID-19 measures. Practical lessons were learnt, varying from encouraging others to put their cameras on (as conversation felt more natural and flowed more easily that way) to noting which room had the best Wi-Fi connection. A major takeaway was the use of “warm up” activities countering lack of conversational flow and perceived awkwardness, in the beginning few minutes of each Teams call. This is expanded upon later in the chapter.

Data Collection

Data collection spanned 10 months and straddled two academic years (2020/2021 and 2021/2022, Figure 3). The lengthy period of research allowed for examination of the effects of changing COVID-19 contexts, as UK restrictions began to lift (Institute for Government, 2021). It also allowed me to investigate how student NTE engagement patterns fluctuate across the academic year, which I discovered early on to be important. The university year has ‘peaks’ and ‘troughs’, whereby academic workload and time available for leisure vary. Early focus groups suggested that there was a connection between the university academic calendar and when students are more likely to attend the NTE. ‘Peaks’, such as *Freshers’ Week*, and ‘troughs’, like exam periods, were identified by student participants. I built these into my research design, ensuring that the data collection would span the fluctuations to be able to examine the relationship between university life and student NTE engagement. This relationship is analysed in *Chapter 6*.

Data collection was structured around these key moments, both, in terms of themes and discussion points, but also the timing of interviews and focus groups. I asked questions about key times of the year, such as *Freshers’ Week*, but also scheduled interviews and focus groups to coincide with them. Conducting the data collection in this way, meant that I had ongoing conversations with many participants, who were involved at various stages of the research. It built rapport and allowed for a deeper understanding of their individual experiences as the year went on, COVID-19 restrictions eased, and NTE habits changed. This approach gives insight into another layer of the relationship between student NTE experiences and university life, bringing attention to how COVID-19 disrupted this relationship. For example, at the start of the research, there was no hospitality provision due to lockdowns and tiered systems (Dunn et al., 2021) whilst towards the end it had reopened.

The delayed start of the data collection meant that the research did not align uniformly with an academic year, spanning two instead (Figure 3). However, this provided an

opportunity to hear from a new cohort of participants who joined university in 2021, under different circumstances than those the year prior.

Student Participants

Thirty participants took part in the research which spanned two academic years (Figure 3). They were required to be undergraduate students, studying at a specific university within *CityX*. They needed to be studying full-time and not only at the university for a short period (i.e. study abroad students). The lower age limit for the research was 18 with an open-ended upper limit so long as they met the other criteria. Mature students (i.e. those who begin university aged 21 or above) are still students after all. I decided to only include undergraduate students since some taught postgraduate courses only run for a short amount of time (i.e. 1 year) with a different academic calendar to undergraduates. Identified undergraduate ‘peaks’ and ‘troughs’ do not always apply to postgraduates.

Prior engagement with the NTE or enjoying and participating in nights out were not requirements for participation. Research posters (

Appendix 2), published online, actively encouraged those who had never been (or wanted to be) involved with the NTE, as well as those who did not engage in certain practices associated with the NTE (e.g. alcohol consumption) to apply.

There was a range of backgrounds amongst those who took part, allowing for some form of representation of LGBTQ+ and Global Majority backgrounds. However, as chapters later in the thesis discuss (See *Chapter 8*), there is no one single type of university student and with a relatively small sample size, total representation is not possible to achieve. Basic information on all participants (pseudonyms used) can be found in Appendix 1.

Beyond the use of pseudonyms, ensuring protection for participants in the research was essential at all stages. Prior to data collection, I provided participants an extensive information sheet (

), detailing aspects of the research, from what would be required of them at different stages, to the storage of their data and personal information. They were given opportunity to ask questions and could agree to take part in some aspects of the research and not others (e.g. the *Snapchat* video diaries were not compulsory). I also gave information regarding withdrawing participation, prior to giving informed consent.

Recruitment

Due to COVID-19 measures, recruitment had to be carried out completely digitally. I used a research website and social media, targeting student groups' pages. Many participants, after interviewing, spread information about the research and, in turn, recruited other students to participate. In January 2022, a second round of recruitment occurred, as I was keen to also hear the experiences of those who began university in October 2021 under more "*normal circumstances*" (Harrison [P21, male]). It also helped replace participants who had withdrawn from the research or graduated from university.

Recruiting online was a challenge. Posts were shared several times, but applications were few and far between. This meant I had to post a lot, on a variety of pages. My approach was borrowed from Green et al. (2021), who reflect upon their difficulty in recruiting via *Facebook*, often not producing adequate engagement. However, in their recruitment process they used paid-for ads, targeting a wide population who may not meet the criteria for the research or allow for others to share it onwards. Instead, I sought out specific student-related pages, meaning that all those who applied met the criteria (i.e. were undergraduate students in *CityX*). Other research by Kim et al. (2021) deemed *Facebook* recruitment unsuccessful. Like me, they shared information to targeted pages, though notably they turned-off commenting and sharing tools. I found these to be useful, as people could recommend the research to their friends by sharing or tagging them in the comments.

Attrition

One of the other biggest challenges of the study was attrition. Ideally, participants who took part at the beginning of the data collection period would have all returned at multiple points along the research timeline, building rapport and giving more insight into their NTE experiences as contexts changed throughout the year. Whilst there were some participants who took part in several elements of the research at different points of the timeline, many did not, arguably wasting potential valuable insight.

Some participants graduated, and therefore no longer met the criteria to participate, and others withdrew or stopped responding. This largely coincided with the easing of lockdown measures and the world “opening up” again. Many at the start had additional free time, without the possibility of engaging in many leisure activities (Woodrow and Moore, 2021), meaning they may have initially engaged with research to occupy their time. In later stages of the research, as things began to return to pre-COVID conditions, people may have become busier and less willing to engage. They may have wanted to spend more time doing the things they were previously unable to, such as attending the NTE, as opposed to talking about them.

As mentioned, attrition rates provided opportunity for a second round of recruitment, which presented opportunities to hear from first-years who began their university experiences after most COVID-19 restrictions had been lifted. This was an added benefit that was not initially planned, nor would have likely been attempted were attrition rates lower. Overall, I feel sufficient fruitful data was collected from those initially involved in the study and the new recruits, to give insight into the role their NTE experiences play in what it means to be a student today.

Multi-Method Approach

The research involved three different methods of data collection: interviews, focus groups, and participant video diaries created through the social media application *Snapchat*. There are arguments to be made that a multi-method approach allows the strengths of one method to “cover” potential downfalls of others (Brewer and Hunter, 2006), or that it corroborates ideas, themes and concepts introduced through other methods (Halverson, 2017). For example, interviews allow for a building of rapport with the participant and learning the intricacies of their personal experiences, not always possible in focus groups, whilst focus groups provide opportunity for debate and discussion among participants that cannot occur in a one-to-one setting.

The rationale for this multi-method approach, was to reflect the fact that the NTE experience is simultaneously a collective and individualised experience. Use of both interviews and focus group reflected that. Participants go on nights out to socialise and spend time with their friends, to an extent it is a collective experience (Grazian, 2007). Yet, at the same time, it can bring up discussion of more sensitive issues such as spiking, sexual assault, or violence (see Quigg et al., 2020) which could be harder for participants to talk about in a group setting.

Incorporating the visual method of *Snapchat* video diaries allowed me to see a more intimate account of participants’ nights out, especially useful at times where restrictions were in place, preventing me from conducting forms of in-person observation. It allowed participants to showcase their interpretation of what their night out involved and was also a useful information recall tool and prompt, in follow up discussions, similar to other research (see Ekholm, 2004; Gmel and Daepfen, 2007; Storm-Mathisen, 2018). In the following sub-sections, I explain the use of each method within the research, highlighting the challenges faced and adaptations made.

Interviews

Interviews are said to be “the gold standard” of qualitative research (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006: p.400) and “the most productive mode for producing narrative data” (Holt, 2010: p.113). In total, I interviewed 10 participants, on a one-to-one basis, resulting in over 290 minutes of material for analysis. The students gave in-depth insight into their NTE experiences as well as their perceptions and opinions surrounding the NTE and student leisure time more generally.

Interviewing can be a very personal method of data collection (Jain, 2021; Lyon et al., 2011), requiring certain levels of trust and rapport between interviewee and interviewer (Varma et al., 2021). My intention was to create a comfortable environment whereby the conversation flowed more like a casual discussion, rather than specific, direct questions. In many of the interviews, I also shared my experiences in the NTE, particularly when they were similar in nature or location. The absence of clear structure or rigid schedule was intentional, allowing participants to fully explore topics they were interested in, passionate about or that were sensitive in nature.

I designed the interview protocol to focus on themes, rather than specific questions, to promote this discussion-like format. First, I would ask questions likely to illicit lengthy responses from participants such as: “What does the night out process involve for you?”, “Talk me through a typical night out” or “What makes a bad night out?”. Then, I would focus on certain themes and ideas they mentioned, asking follow-up questions or gently steering the conversation to explore them further, before starting a new topic. This approach helped to mask the unavoidable researcher-participant power imbalance as the participant dictated the flow and direction of conversation.

Borrowing from Williams et al. (2020), an iterative process was used whereby emergent themes from early discussions were used to refine and develop questions for subsequent focus groups and interviews. The topic of *Freshers’ Week*, for example, was prominent in early

interviews, so I incorporated discussion points around this in others. Themes were also sometimes influenced by external forces like news media. For example, early in the research, news of Sarah Everard's¹⁰ abduction and murder dominated the news and social media (see Cockroft, 2021; Halle-Richards, 2021; Morton, 2021b). Later in the year, nightclub boycotts took place across the country under the 'Girls Night In' initiative in response to drink spiking (Pittam, 2021). Both dominated discussions at the time, as analysis chapters will show.

As already mentioned, all interviews were conducted online via *Microsoft Teams*, regardless of restrictions at the time. This presented potential challenges. For example, Bauman (2015: p.201) questions: "how does one conduct an online interview that meets the requirements of academic rigor and ethics?", particularly noticing that traditional ways of building rapport and trust may not work on virtual platforms (see also Brown, 2022; Varma et al., 2021). Physical, body language, cues that one could pick up in-person, may be missed online (Brown, 2022; Seitz, 2016). It could also impact discussions of a particularly sensitive nature (Santana et al., 2021; Varma et al., 2021). Addressing such issues, authors who also had to move their research online at the time, suggested more lengthy or frequent communication with participants (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Marhefka et al., 2020). The length of the period of data collection in this research worked favourably to build rapport. I also made sure to have initial brief meetings to explain the research and introduce myself prior to the interviews to establish connections prior to data collection.

Whilst *Teams* interviews began awkwardly, with some participants being slow to open up, uncomfortable with the online format, or the fact I was a stranger. By the end of the interviews, conversation was flowing much more naturally. This rapport building was also evident

¹⁰ Sarah Everard was a 33-year-old female, who, when walking home from a friend's house in Clapham, was abducted and murdered. The attention the case received in the news, sparked conversations around female safety at night and several "reclaim the night" initiatives followed (Hymas, 2021; Morton, 2021b).

for the people who had already been involved in the research in focus groups prior to their interview (e.g. Aaron [*P1, male*], Sarah [*P6, female*], Matt [*P8, male*], Maisy [*P9, female*], Hailey [*P10, female*]). The interviews allowed for deeper insight into their individual experiences, and, as they had already been through a similar process and discussed similar themes before, conversation flowed easier than their first involvement.

Sensitive issues arose occasionally in the interview process, more so than in focus groups or video diaries. The NTE overlaps with themes that can be difficult for participants to discuss such as violence, sexual assault and substance abuse. These were not easy conversations to have, and they resulted in participants being candid and open about unpleasant experiences they had had. During these conversations, I made sure to reassure them that they did not have to discuss anything that would cause them to become distressed or cause them any emotional or psychological harm. I acted patiently, allowing them to talk if they wanted, rather than probing for more information. Sections later in this chapter, regarding ethical considerations, also discuss the ways I prepared resources and contacts, should specific topics of discussion arise. I am grateful that participants felt they could open up to me in such a way to discuss some of these topics. I believe that had I solely relied on focus groups, such conversations may not have occurred.

Focus Groups

Focus groups allowed a different perspective of NTE experiences. Since, for most, going out is a group activity, discussing it as a group made sense. It also provided participants opportunity to disagree or challenge certain ideas, and to gain a range of perspectives at once. 26 participants took part in focus groups, resulting in over 375 minutes of transcribed data. There were between 2 and 5 people in each focus group, with the average being 4 per group.

Some were focus groups made up of friends or flatmates (e.g. FG2 and FG9). This worked well as it allowed them to discuss specific NTE experiences they had all shared, from differing perspectives. It meant that they were already comfortable talking to each other but may have also had limits as there were potentially things they did not want to say in front of friends. Laura [P24, *female*], for example, spoke about enjoying nights out and being care-free in the NTE in focus groups, yet in her interview, expressed how she felt anxious she did not know how to act or behave the first time she went on a night out.

Other groups were made up of participants who, to my knowledge, did not know each other prior to their involvement (e.g. FG6 and FG7). Whilst it meant that in the beginning few minutes the conversation flow was slow to take off, there was no risk of them hiding information or insights from someone they knew. Many participants who were in this position had, by this point, already been involved in the research through interviews. They had already experienced discussing their NTE perceptions and practices with me and levels of rapport had been established prior. I believe this worked in the favour of the research as, despite not being familiar with the other participants of the focus group, they were somewhat familiar with me.

To mitigate any potential awkwardness, especially between groups who did not know each other prior, a short “warm up” activity was added to the agenda. This involved creating a group mind map of what a typical night out looked like or discussing the NTE venues they attended using a map of *CityX*. It helped to create a relaxed, open environment prior to the main discussion. Overall, the mixture of known and unknown focus groups worked well for the purpose of the research as each afforded different kinds of input from those involved, focusing on general experiences of the NTE as well as recalling specific night out tales.

Like the interviews, the focus groups had to take place online via *Teams*, with each participant joining from their own device, despite some being within the same household. They were unable to change their display names in *Teams* as the students held institutional accounts linked to their university portal. As such, additional agreements had to be added to the consent form (

) to ensure that those involved in the focus group would not reveal the identities of others. Whilst they presented many of the same challenges as online interviews, there were benefits to holding focus groups online. It is suggested (Stewart and Williams, 2005; Tates et al., 2009) that online there is less “desirability bias”, where participants may voice opinions just to please, or fit in with the rest of the group. This is because they do not see each other in-person.

There were, however, other challenges. The online platform impeded the natural flow of conversation, making it harder for participants to identify pauses where they could naturally interject. There were frequent accidental interruptions, particularly after I had asked the group a question, and long pauses of silence, as people waited for others to go first. Unnatural patterns emerged as people began to take turns answering in a repeating order. This, in particular, diminished some of the merits of a focus group, such as the potential for participants to challenge or feedback on others’ points even if just nodding in agreement.

Fosslien and Duffy (2020) also cautioned of “zoom fatigue” amongst participants of online research, in reference to another popular platform. I had to keep in mind that participants may end up feeling drained by the use of online platforms (Shockley et al., 2021; Wang and Prester, 2022), especially during times where they were undergoing online teaching. For example, the ‘turn-taking’ approach, mirrored some of my own experiences, teaching online seminars, where students would wait their perceived turn before stating their point. Some participants were notably less engaged as the focus groups went on, contributing less. This could have been a sign of this fatigue or simply because they did not want to contribute to the topic of discussion. The use of the warmup exercise was an effort to combat this feeling and make the experience more engaging for participants from the beginning.

Snapchat Video Diaries

Many researchers had to adapt their data collection methods due to COVID-19 restrictions, often opting for digital methods (Lupton, 2020; Pocock et al., 2021). My

research was much the same; the initial plan was to conduct in-person observational shadowing of participants. Instead, a different approach had to be taken entirely. Video diaries were selected as they would provide a form of data on the “lived experiences” (Nash and Moore, 2018: p.590) of students in the NTE.

Video diaries have been used as a technique in research of different kinds to give participants an opportunity to present accounts of their own lives (Holliday, 2004; Noyes, 2004). It is said to be a particularly useful tool in studying young people as it allows them to express themselves and communicate in “meaningful and contextualised ways” (Azzarito and Sterling, 2010: p.213). Participants decided what to include in their diaries, giving them agency in the process of producing and representing knowledge. It also gave opportunity for a greater degree of reflection on their own experiences (Holliday, 2004) and was used for information recall in follow-up interviews, termed elsewhere as “video dialogue” (Storm-Mathisen, 2018: p.266). Although primarily using it in this way, as a means of information recall and to prompt discussion, it was also used in analysis. Screenshots from the diaries feature in chapters later in the thesis to illustrate the arguments made and enhance the narrative data.

This particular way of using the diaries has proven to be useful in other NTE research (Ekholm, 2004; Gmel and Daepfen, 2007). In such examples, diaries offered a “more ‘direct’ understanding of participants’ experiences than is afforded by data that are controlled by a researcher” (Gibson, 2005: p.34). They also rely less on researcher-participant dynamics than interviews and focus groups (Larkin and Jorgensen, 2016). This is not to say content would not be influenced by the researcher’s agenda in some way (Järvinen, 2000). Nevertheless, Tribe (2006) argues that representation, through video diaries, can still be considered true, as participants are the “contextual experts” (see Jones et al., 2015: p.8) even if the diary is based on prompts or framed by the researcher.

Snapchat was used as the tool for video diary creation, specifically the *Snapchat Stories*¹¹ feature. At the time, it was already being used in research into social media habits (Anderson, 2015; Bayer et al., 2016; Piwek and Joinson, 2016) and coping with social isolation (Al-Kandari and Al-Sejari, 2020). However, it is rarely used solely as a tool for wider analysis, as is the case in this study. I chose *Snapchat* as the tool for creation of the diaries for several reasons. A common issue that arises with video diaries is that participants potentially feel uneasy or awkward about creating content (Jones, 2017), especially using a video camera. With *Snapchat*, they could use their own mobile devices on an app where daily sharing is already embedded into many young peoples' lives (Villaespesa and Wowkowych, 2020).

The app is popular amongst the age cohort for this study, at the time of data collection it was reaching 90% of the 13 to 24-year-old population of the UK (Snap Inc., 2021). The app also fits well with the very concept of video diaries, as content shared via *Snapchat* is “typically mundane, quotidian ‘little snippets’ of everyday life” (Bayer et al., 2016: p.956). Moreover, social media use, and apps like *Snapchat*, are already tied up with NTE experiences, used to document the night out (Atkinson and Sumnall 2012; Brown and Gregg, 2012; REKOM, 2022b) and to recommend venues and experiences to others (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010).

New accounts were created for the purposes of the research, keeping the *Snap*s for the research, separate from any personal accounts. The application is end-to-end encrypted, and participants were required to have passwords on their devices to ensure that nobody else could access these accounts or data. Participants were given basic instructions to upload images and videos to their story, representing their night out. The content of these stories was entirely up to them and could involve text or voice-over. They were also instructed not to focus on anyone directly without consent, and to operate within *Snapchat*'s terms of use¹².

¹¹ Stories is a Snapchat feature added in 2016. It allows users to post *snap*s to an area their entire contact list can view as opposed to direct recipients. The content can only be viewed for a 24-hour period unless removed earlier by the user or downloaded onto their device (Costine, 2016)

¹² Snapchat's terms of use can be found on their website, www.snap.com/terms?lang=en-GB

Participants went on nights out and captured *Snap*s of whatever content they deemed relevant, uploading it to their *Story*. I then downloaded this the following morning at an agreed time, giving time for participants to delete anything they did not want to share for the research. It was somewhat similar to the approach taken by Wargo (2015), although he used a screen mirroring technique to capture the data from his subject's *Story*, before saving it on his own computer. Whilst this technique works, it will notify the user that their content has been recorded (McRoberts et al., 2017). It could reinforce the impression of them being watched, which then may affect what sort of content the subject chooses to post. My aim was to avoid reminding them of this.

Once downloaded, these *Stories*, now MP4 files, were uploaded to the Apple IOS app *MovStash*, designed to facilitate face-blurring and pixelization through automated face tracking software, ensuring identities of those captured remained hidden. This is a common form of anonymisation in video recordings (Ilia et al., 2015; Li et al., 2017). Whilst the app *Snapchat* does offer some form of identity obscuration through *filters*, directing participants to use this specific feature in all media captured seemed too restrictive and likely another reminder of the researcher framing, rather than a focus on their choice of content (Järvinen, 2000; Pini, 2001).

8 participants took part in *Snapchat* video diary creation, some creating multiple at different stages of the research. Examples of the type of content created are shown below (Figure 4). Not all participants wanted to create a video diary, as even though they were all familiar with the app, it still felt, in their words, “*strange*” (Fergus [P4, male]). The intention was for these video files to be a supplementary form of data collection, prompting further discussion and reflection of NTE practices and experiences. However, they ended up providing useful insight, particularly into the experiences of the altered NTE, operating under COVID-19 restrictions, providing a visual representation of elements mentioned in discussions.



Figure 4 is two examples of stills from a video diary created by Aaron [P1] of a night out in summer 2021. It shows both content from the “COVID night out” and some filmed prior, at home.

Analysis

Full transcriptions were created, with pseudonyms used in place of names of participants and venues. Data from interviews, focus groups and *Snapchat* video diaries, once anonymised, were analysed thematically, guided by the principles of a grounded theory approach (Aresi and Pedersen, 2016; Charmaz, 2014; 2017; Corbin and Strauss, 2014; Glaser and Strauss, 1973) allowing themes and sub-themes to emerge inductively from participants’ accounts. Given that data collection took place over an extended period, analysis occurred concurrently with data collection, following an iterative process in which early insights from open coding informed later stages of data collection (Bryman, 2016; Charmaz, 2014), whilst also maintaining openness to emerging themes (Kovac and Trussell, 2015). As these new themes emerged, I adjusted subsequent data collection and explored these concepts in greater depth, enabling a nuanced understanding of participants’ experiences. This approach allowed me to look for

patterns across the data while maintaining sensitivity to context and variation, and to use these themes as a foundation for developing theory that accurately reflects participants' perspectives.

Several major themes were identified, with sub-themes nested within them. Risk, for instance, encompassed both being *at risk* (violence, unwanted attention, gendered experiences) and engagement with risk for pleasure (intoxication, freedom). While some themes aligned with existing NTE research, others reflected temporal or media-driven factors, highlighting the nuanced ways in which context and experience intersect. Such attention to temporal and social context facilitated a “thick description” of participants' experiences (Geertz, 1973), capturing not only what they did, but how and why these experiences were meaningful. For example, themes such as settling into university life and *Freshers' Week* nights out were more prominent immediately after *Freshers' Week* 2021, reflecting the temporal salience of these events. By situating participants' accounts in this way, I was able to interpret the interplay of space, time, and studenthood in shaping night-time economy experiences, providing the detailed insights necessary to support the development of the Nexus framework.

Positionality

Acknowledging positionality is essential in maintaining a balance between what is known and what is interpreted (Hodkinson, 2005; Patterson and Goulter, 2015), as well as actively working to avoid assumptions. Moving away from ideas of being *absolute* insiders or outsiders (especially impractical within the NTE (Measham and Moore, 2006)) and understanding “subjective proximity” (Hodkinson, 2005: p.131) as affording insight, is important. Sharp (2021) terms this positionality as being an “insighter”. My positionality provided advantages, including knowing where to access participants online (Taylor, 2011), shared social and cultural knowledge (Hodkinson, 2005) and discussion of similar and shared experiences (Roseneil, 1993). However, the literature also cautions against the risk of “insider bias” (Chavez, 2008: p.475) and other challenges that may arise due to close proximity to the research context.

I needed to remain critically aware of the multiple, and sometimes competing, ‘hats’ I wore throughout the research process, and to consider how each influenced not only my interpretation and understanding of the data, but also my interactions with participants. For instance, although I was no longer part of the undergraduate community, I had been in the past and therefore may have had experiences similar to those of the participants, both within the NTE and in broader aspects of student life. Moreover, I previously worked within the local NTE of *CityX*, affording me a “backstage” knowledge of the industry and its inner workings. Yet, as a researcher I was never simply a peer with whom participants could interact with as one of their own. I was a fluctuating “insighter”, or even “partial insider” (Measham and Moore, 2006), yet this still had the potential to influence the ways participant perspectives were presented in the research. “Ongoing reflexive boundary work” (Sharp, 2021: p.799) was key to avoid speaking *for* participants based on knowledge that I assumed we shared. Such “ventriloquism” would create only the “illusion of listening” (Blackman, 2016: p.102), while, in reality, inadvertently reinforcing implicit assumptions or subtle interpretive tendencies of which I may not have been consciously aware (see also Connor, 2000; Savin-Baden and Major, 2023).

My approach can be understood as a “critical ventriloquy” (Blackman, 2016). I confronted some inevitable degree of participant voice mediation (see also Back, 2009; Blackman and Commane, 2012; Clifford and Marcus, 2023; Fine, 2014; Letherby et al., 2012), yet worked to avoid simply projecting my own voice *through* theirs. In practice, this involved encouraging participants to elaborate on their comments and to fully articulate their perspectives, particularly in moments where I might otherwise have relied on my own positionality or assumed shared knowledge. For example, during a focus group discussion about *Vortex*, a local NTE venue, David [*P18, male*] remarked: “*well you know what Vortex is like, that’s why we never go there*”. His comment was met with laughter and nods of agreement, suggesting a collective understanding of the venue’s reputation. As I was already aware of the venue’s ‘bad’ reputation among students, my instinct could have been to take his meaning for granted. Instead, I reflexively acknowledged this potential bias and asked: “*Could you explain what you mean by that... what is Vortex like*

as a venue?”. This prompted a richer and more detailed account than would otherwise have emerged.

With the aid of a reflexive journal (as borrowed from Sharp’s (2021) study) I confronted negotiations of proximity and distance, empathy and analysis, and the known and the interpreted, throughout the research process. Reflexivity, in this sense, was not only an intellectual exercise but also an emotional one. It required careful attention to how my feelings, assumptions, and relational dynamics with participants shaped both the interactions during data collection and the interpretations that followed.

Ethical considerations

Reasonable steps were taken to prevent harm to participants in my research. An ongoing risk assessment was regularly revisited within the course of the data collection period as government guidance surrounding COVID-19 changed several times (Figure 3). This also meant that specific logistical elements had to be constantly rethought and adapted when measures changed.

The reoccurring theme of the NTE as a ‘risky’ space is discussed in greater detail in later chapters. However, this also had implications for the methodological and ethical considerations. Upon seeking ethical approval for the research, the University Ethics Committee expressed this view of the NTE, leading to concerns around additional risks participants may face. They wanted me to ensure that participants would not face additional risk as a result of taking part in my research. It was based on three concerns: the NTE as a ‘risky’ space, COVID-19 and filming in public places. Although I had already given considerable attention to potential associated ethical issues, through additional explanation and adapting some details of certain methods, I was able to allay their concerns. This next section of the chapter talks through these ethical considerations and how I addressed the specific concerns of the committee.

The NTE as a ‘risky’ space

The imagined geography of the NTE as a space which is inherently risky, is a common theme of this research, and something I have touched upon already in the *Literature Review*. The perception that the space characteristically poses unavoidable risk to anyone who entered, and therefore my participants, affected perceptions of my research. As I explored earlier in the thesis, despite perceptions that may suggest otherwise, the NTE space is, in fact, heavily regulated and governed. It is why scholars refer to associated risk-engagement as a “controlled loss of control” (Measham and Brain, 2005: p.273). However, the University Ethics Committee raised concerns born out of its reputation with risk.

The participants were never specifically asked to attend NTE spaces, or engage with certain related practices, which could be deemed risky, as part of my research; only to create video diaries if they chose to. In fact, some participants did not enjoy going to the NTE, so never did (Hope [P12, female]).

Concerns also surrounded risky behaviours that may be captured or witnessed by participants being in the NTE. Though I had not put participants at risk by asking them to take part, they could discuss or capture risky or illicit behaviour. I therefore needed clear policies regarding confidentiality and when breaking it would be appropriate. As part of the informed consent procedure, participants were made aware that all topics discussed (in focus groups and interviews) or activities shown (in *Snapchat* video diaries) would remain confidential unless *significant imminent harm* was determined to be caused. This is a common approach which has been used for decades within criminological research (Fry et al., 2005; Loxley et al., 1997). My approach is summed up in the advice from the United States National Advisory Council on Drug Abuse (NACDA, 2019): sensitive information, including the use of illegal drugs among research participants, should not be disclosed unless there is a risk of imminent danger to themselves or others. It was essential that participants were not left facing any negative consequences due to information divulged for the purposes of the research. They entered into the research under the agreement of confidentiality, unless severe

imminent harm was suspected to be caused, and therefore this needed to be respected. For example, at times participants discussed use of substances classified as illegal to possess under UK drug laws, however this was not deemed to be of serious immediate danger or harm, so confidentiality was upheld.

The nature of the *Snapchat* diaries also meant that the researcher was unlikely to witness any form of illicit behaviour through this method which would require reporting. Any licenced venues the participants chose to attend would have their own security systems (bouncers, CCTV etc.) and protocols for dealing with any illegal behaviour. Hence, this was not the responsibility of the researcher, nor cause to breach participant-researcher confidentiality.

On top of this, a series of “what ifs” and risk-response protocols (Appendix 4) were created (similar to Osburg, 2013), to address the concerns of the University Ethics Committee and reassure them that potential occurrences, no matter how likely, had been considered. These responses were created using my personal insider knowledge (Bennett, 2003) and that of my wider supervisory team. They included protocols like having welfare resources on hand, related to topics of conversation. This were particularly useful in scenarios where participants brought up topics of a sensitive nature.

COVID-19 Concerns

Contracting COVID-19 was a risk for anyone who went out in public during the time of my research. As I was planning the data collection, the entire country was in complete lockdown (WHO, 2020), and at different stages various measures were in place, reflecting the government-determined risk. Participants who opted to produce *Snapchat* video diaries were not asked to break any governmental regulations regarding social gatherings, nor requested to attend NTE venues they would not otherwise already be attending. If these venues were open for customers to attend, then the level of risk was deemed low enough by the UK Government.

I advised participants to keep up to date with national and local COVID-19 measures, especially prior to NTE experiences. If they broke COVID-19 regulations, and either revealed this to me or it was captured in video diaries, I would follow a similar approach to that of other risks. I would only break confidentiality if serious immediate harm was believed to have been caused. This was also included in the “what ifs” (Appendix 4). My approach is a typical negotiation that occurs in research on transgression. Whilst no rule-breaks were caught on the *Snapchat* diaries, some participants who began university during 2020, discussed “meet-ups” on the university fields during lockdown (e.g. Tom [P28, male]). As they only revealed this retrospectively, over a year later, I could not attribute immediate or severe harm to this situation and hence confidentiality was not broken.

Filming in Public Spaces

The selection of *Snapchat* as a tool for creating diaries was carefully thought out, to mimic typical use of the application. It was intended that such use would minimise awkwardness for participants and avoid attention being drawn to them whilst capturing content. Whilst I have already discussed the concern that participants may film something illegal, additional concerns were raised regarding the position participants would be put in, filming in any capacity.

The Ethics Committee were concerned that participants may capture videos of people without their consent, opening them up to potential confrontation. As NTE venues are often very crowded spaces, obtaining consent from all people who may have potentially been captured on film in the background of participants’ video diaries was unrealistic. Though all videos would be anonymised, instructions were given to avoid potential issues arising from capturing someone on film. Participants were asked not to directly focus on anyone without their consent. Whilst images of objects, the space and friends could still be captured, the subject of the video diaries was intended to be the individual. Participants also had the opportunity to delete anything they, or those accidentally captured in the background, were unhappy with. I also sent them information cards (Appendix 5) which they could print and carry physically or on their device, explaining the

purpose of filming, anonymisation techniques and my contact information, for anyone who asked.

It is also worth noting that, for many, taking images and videos of themselves, their friends and the space, is a routine part of a night out (Labhart et al., 2020; Lyons et al., 2017; Truong, 2018). In fact, in a focus group before the NTE reopened, Emma [P11, female] spoke of looking over old videos and images of “*great nights out... great memories*”, aligning with the literature. Furthermore, other forms of video recording are common within the NTE. CCTV is standard in licensed premises throughout the venue; entry is understood as consent to be filmed in this way. Nightclub promoters, including those in *CityX*, also often use videos of crowds for marketing materials. Whilst some famous venues, such as *Berghain*, or more recently London’s *Fabric* (Saville, 2021), require patrons to place stickers over phone cameras to avoid “unauthorised photos or videos”, this is not the industry norm, nor a requirement for any of the nightclubs in *CityX*.

Videotaping in NTE venues for research purposes is also not a new phenomenon (Kuntsche and Labhart, 2012; 2013; Labhart et al., 2020; Salter et al., 2005). Similar research (Labhart et al., 2020; Truong, 2018; Truong et al., 2020) involving participant videography, found only a small number of people noticed or asked the participant what they were doing and had no mention of aggression or confrontation.

Reflecting on the ‘messy’ nature of research

This chapter has shown that my research plan had to change and adapt several times. Whether it was pivoting online due to a global pandemic, adding elements to appease concerns of the Ethics Committee, rethinking recruitment strategies after limited sign-ups and attrition, or adapting interview and focus group discussions based on prevalent themes, it always seemed to be changing. The experience mirrors that of many qualitative studies at the time, adapting and working flexibly to continue where possible and rolling with arising delays and challenges (see Dodds and Hess, 2020; Rahman et al., 2021). It aligns with work highlighting the ‘messy’ nature of research (see Law, 2004;

Matthews, 2025; Mellor, 2001) and the necessity for researchers to be reflexive and adaptive to specific characteristics of the research context.

Despite the challenges and changes, I feel sufficient data was collected from the students involved in this study to give insight into how they experience the NTE and the role the experiences play in what it means to be a student today. Additionally, being adaptable made me more prepared. For example, although I had anticipated and prepared for potential issues arising, prior to addressing the concerns of the University Ethics Committee, having clear measures ready and in place such as the 'what ifs' (Appendix 4) made me feel very prepared to commence the data collection and proved useful when required.

Now that I have outlined the data collection methods, the challenges faced, additional considerations made and its adaptive and somewhat 'messy' nature, I will communicate my findings in the following chapters.

Chapter 4: Defining a “Night Out”

This research investigates student experiences in the night-time economy (NTE) and the role they play in what it means to be a student today. When participants discussed their experiences and insights, I set no parameters as to what constituted an “NTE experience”. I intentionally left this open to their interpretation to understand what they mean by an NTE experience. Participants refer to this as a “night out”.

In the *Methodology*, I highlighted the importance in avoiding assumptions based on terminology. So, it is vital to unpack and define exactly what participants refer to when discussing NTE experiences or mentioning a “night out”; Their understanding may be different to mine, and establishing the parameters that make a “night out”, from venues and timings to activities, is a crucial foundation to analyse such experiences.

This chapter will focus on participant definitions of a “night out”. Using participants’ words and experiences, I not only argue that students have a clear and shared understanding of what this term refers to, but also that it is framed by spatial and temporal definitions. I also examine the durability of such definitions, how they have shifted over the years compared to prior research, and how the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily altered their meaning. Understanding this term, and how it changes, prefaces subsequent analysis chapters, looking deeper into aspects of student “night out” experiences.

Temporal Definitions

Participants’ understanding of the term “night out” is constructed, in part, around time. As the phrase “*night* out” suggests, the time of day is important; experiences must occur late at night, into the early hours of the morning. An afternoon drink at a local pub would not meet their shared definition.

MATT: There have been a couple of times where it's not necessarily been a night out, but we'd just go to the pub for a couple of drinks and then you come home, get an early night and a good night's sleep. You wouldn't get that with a proper big night out because you'd be getting in late, at least after 2[am].

Matt [P8, male], defines a "night out" in terms of temporal relationality. He differentiates an "*early night*" where one might get "*a good night's sleep*", from "*a proper big night out*", even though both occur within an NTE space. The differentiating factor is the finishing time. His definition of a "night out" covers experiences that finish no earlier than 2am. Matt [P8, male] also adds additional description ("*proper big*") to frame it against other forms of NTE leisure activity. In doing so, he conveys that it lasts a significant length of time. This was also an important defining factor of a "night out" for other participants. Experiences ought to last a significant amount of time, not just a brief "*pint at the pub*".

DANIEL: A night out is like a late one. It's not, you know, just a pint at the pub. It doesn't have to be, like, planned but you're out for a good few hours either a big pub crawl or something, but usually a club.

If time spent in the NTE is too short, it is not classed as a "night out", as if there is a temporal requirement that an experience must meet before it can be defined as such; not just late at night but being in these spaces for a certain amount of time. REKOM's night index (2022b) adds to this idea as not only do they suggest that "nights out" are at least 4.5 hours but that younger people (18-24) spend the longest time on them, averaging 5 hours and 6 minutes. Time is key in being able to differentiate a "night out" from other social or leisure experiences, like a casual drink in the pub. However, it also shapes student understandings of a "night out" by structuring key activities and experiences into a linear, temporal order, specifically understood as a "night out".

Though initially designed as a 'warm up' activity, discussing "a typical night out" revealed students follow set timelines, with little variation between participants. Their NTE experiences are structured by similar timings (e.g. entering the NTE between 10:30 and 11:30pm) and activities carried out in the same order (e.g. getting ready, followed by

“pre-drinks”, travelling to, then entering the NTE). Their shared understanding of what a “night out” involves mirrors research by Roberts et al. (2012, 2015) where young people, even from different regions, described “night out” patterns “tending towards homogeneity” (Roberts, 2015: p.572). Examples of these timelines are included below.

EMMA: Once you’re all ready, it starts with ‘pres’¹³ for a couple of hours in someone’s kitchen with friends and then maybe getting a bus or taxi or walking to the nightclub... Then stay in the club for a few hours, go grab a takeaway or something then occasionally back at someone else’s for afters¹⁴ keeping things going.

HAILEY: Yeah, mine’s similar. Start off with ‘pres’ at our house or someone else’s and then maybe 11pm head to the club... stay in there... usually until closing to be honest, and then food and bed for me. I was never that hardcore, I could never manage afters.

SASHA: I liked to get ready with my friends whilst having a drink then when it got to like 11[pm], half 11[pm] we’d get a taxi to the club. If we did go to a bar for a drink beforehand it would just be one quick drink in one bar, [...] if it was a late one it would be 4am finish with cheesy chips in hand or round someone else’s flat.

Similar times are given for key activities like arriving at a nightclub or at-home drinking. These timings also feature in participants’ video diaries, as some chose to time-stamp their content. Henry’s [*P14, male*] diary (Figure 5), for example, shows his sports team taking part in pre-drinking prior to 11pm, aligning with Sasha [*P13, female*] and Hailey’s [*P10, female*] assertion that 11pm tends to be when they leave home for the NTE. His arrival time at the nightclub also matches their timelines.

¹³ “Pres” used here refers to “pre-drinks” or “pre-loading” (Wells et al., 2009), given further references made in the focus group. Though the term can also cover any form of socialisation or party before the main event, regardless of whether alcohol is consumed.

¹⁴ Referring to “after parties” or “post-loading” (Engineer et al., 2003)



Figure 5 shows stills from Henry's [P14] Snapchat diary from November 2021. His sports team are shown consuming alcohol in a domestic setting (10:40pm) before entering a nightclub (11:21pm). He chose to time-stamp these videos as part of his diary creation.

Data from REKOM (2022b) further supports the timings given by participants; the average nightclub arrival time occurs between 11pm and midnight, whilst leaving occurs at around 3am. This also demonstrates how understandings of a “night out” are structured around licensing regulations, shaped by rules that govern the space time, including restrictions on venue opening hours and when the sale of alcohol can occur (Licensing Act, 2003). In other contexts, with alternative regulations, timings may be altered.

Whilst there is little variation in the temporal definitions and timelines given by the participants, not all NTE experiences follow such timings. There is indication that participants share similar temporal definitions of a “night out”, but it is also dependent on context. I have already highlighted what little variety of NTE venues there are in *CityX*.

In fact, it would probably be classed as what Jayne et al. (2008) term a “blandscape”. With greater NTE variety, more timeline variance may occur. For example, Sasha [P13, *female*] describes her night finishing at the latest 4am and Hailey [P10, *female*] labels post-nightclub consumption of alcohol as “*hardcore*”. Yet, many alternative NTE cultures, such as rave scenes continue to have after-parties well beyond this time (Weber, 1999).

Participants’ timelines also highlight that more times, rather than those just spent within the NTE, are involved in a “night out” or NTE experience. When asked to discuss a “typical” night out participants mention elements like “pre-drinking” (or “pre-loading” (Wells et al., 2009)), getting ready and even planning their night out.

EMMA: It’s hard to say when it starts because I’m a planner. I like to be prepared. So, like I’ll pick my outfit and do my tan and stuff the night before and that already is like getting into the mood for the night out, I’d definitely include that in my like night out ritual or ‘must-dos’

SUSAN: On a Fridays we structure our *entire* day around going out. Like, we’d wake up and be like “*got to shave my legs!*” then if we’re going to campus, we need to get back by five so we can make food by six and then go have a shower get ready by seven so we’re ready for pre-drinks by nine. It like takes over your structure a bit, you know?

CHRIS: Yeah. I also think [...] you start talking about the night out that you think you’re going to have, and like messaging the plans and stuff. It kind of brings a bit more excitement to it. [...] I will also often eat a bit more that teatime just to make sure I’m prepared and the alcohol won’t affect me as badly the next day

Although most participants suggest key activities like pre-loading tend to commence at similar timings (around 9pm), other preparatory activities could cause the “night out” timeline to span the entire day, demonstrating the time and effort young people invest in their NTE experiences (Moore and Miles, 2004). Whilst NTE research often covers pre-drinking, labelled an “integral part of the nightclub experience, part of the pre-club ritual”

(Forsyth, 2010: p.37) or an “important and routine sequential feature [of] social drinking occasions” (Atkinson and Sumnall, 2019: p.60), all of these activities and experiences should be taken into account when studying NTE experiences as they contribute to students’ definitions. Yet, as the *Literature Review* highlighted, at present most research focuses on experiences within the NTE space-time.

Spatial Definitions

Participants also have clear ideas of the spaces that are, and are not, involved in a “night out”. Being “out” in the NTE is essential, specifically in nightclubs and bars. Other leisure spaces, especially when experienced alone, do not qualify as a “night out”. Even Hope [P12, *female*], who does not typically enjoy nor regularly engage with the NTE, is able to clearly differentiate the spaces that meet this classification:

HOPE: See I don’t really go on nights out, for me I like to go for nice dinners or to the cinema or something to socialise, but that’s not a night out (*laugh*). A night out is clubbing, probably dancing, probably drinking.

Classification of space is important. Experiences of other spaces may incorporate behaviours and actions typical of the NTE space (e.g. consuming alcohol and dancing), but without an NTE space, it is not a “night out”. Gant and Terry (2017: p.113) produced similar findings suggesting: “being out with friends and drinking alcohol” for example in a field or on a street corner “is not enough to make it a night out”, it is the NTE space that makes it a “night out”.

Spaces, like the home or a pub, may also be involved in the wider NTE experience, but without NTE venues, they do not class as a “night out” in participants’ eyes. The concept of “pre-drinking” (Bancroft, 2012) in the domestic setting incorporates other spaces as part of the NTE experience. However, it also assumes “that there is a main event which it precedes” (Room and Livingston, 2009: p.10). Without this it is just at-home drinking, not a “night out”. The NTE space is this “main event”, the key space which transforms the meaning of the at-home alcohol consumption.

In their definitions, participants are aware of the necessity of the “main event”, stressing the importance of nightclubs, rather than any form of NTE space. Without this specific “main event”, it is just another form of social or leisure experience.

AARON: The way I’d describe it is the night out part is like *actually* going to the club. Like you can do all the other stuff like drinking at home or in the pub and stuff but unless you end up in a nightclub I don’t think most people would class it as “*going out*”. But then if you do, all the other stuff becomes part of the night out

Aaron [P1, male] places importance on the nightclub space and highlights its role in transforming the leisure experience to a “night out”. It is interesting that he separates nightclubs from other spaces, like the home, even those also in the NTE, like pubs and bars, as it was previously argued that such spaces were becoming more similar (Jayne et al., 2008). Other scholars suggest a blurring of boundaries “between pubs, nightclubs and bars, particularly with recent UK legislation extending opening hours across all sectors of the industry” (Kubacki et al., 2007: p.958). This idea may now perhaps be outdated, as it contrasts the clear distinction and varying importance student participants place on different types of NTE venues that define a “night out”.

Aaron’s [P1, male] description of events is also particularly interesting as it emphasises the central role of the nightclub space in organising and structuring the spontaneity of their plans, to form a “night out”. He uses phrases like “end up in a nightclub”, as if it is accidental or, at the least, unplanned. Once they attend such space, any previous activity without clear plan or direction, seems to transform to the clearer framing of a “night out”. It also demonstrates that although participants tended to follow linear timelines of a “night out”, it was not always intended or perceived as particularly structured, regimented and patterned, in the moment.

Though not the “main event”, the home space still plays an important role in a “night out”. Barton and Husk (2012: p.58) proposed a shift in the “pub-club” model of a night out to “home-pub-club” to reflect this growing importance. However, participants in this research seem to suggest that other non-nightclub spaces are becoming less significant

as part of a “night out”. Few mention bars or pubs in their typical night out timelines. James [P3, *male*] is one of the few participants who regularly attends a pub as part of this “night out”. He even acknowledges that it is less common for students to regularly do this now.

JAMES: See, it’s not that common anymore, but we quite like a quick few in the pub beforehand. Yeah, we will still do the whole pre-drinks thing, but we’ll leave a bit earlier, say like 10pm or something, head to a pub... once ready, to the club.

He places his trip to the pub within the “night out” timeline but still highlights the nightclub as the “main event”. It is the central feature that makes their drinking practices a “night out”. Whilst his “night out” may take the “home-pub-club” (Barton and Husk, 2012) format, the experience of other students seems to have strayed from this now decade-old model. They convey experiences where visits to the pub are eclipsed by at-home drinking, changing the model to simply: *home-club*. This could be an indication of a shift in student NTE practices compared with this earlier research, perhaps becoming prevalent given student economic pressures (Busby, 2023).

SASHA: we pre-drink because we’re poor students trying to save money by drinking at home, rather than buying drinks out because it’s quite expensive.

Sasha [P13, *female*] explains that they desire to reach a specific state of intoxication (see *Chapter 7*) as cheaply as possible, which for many results in at-home drinking, rather than in other NTE venues before the nightclub. Supporting this, many video diaries feature pre-drinking at home, where alcohol is consumed quickly and as part of games, whilst only one involves a non-nightclub NTE space (Figure 6).



Figure 6 is from Jack's [P2] video diary (September 2021). It demonstrates his "night out", beginning at home, then visiting a local pub, prior to a nightclub.

COVID-19 Altered the Meaning of a "Night Out"

Access to NTE spaces changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the meaning of a "night out" changed as people adjusted to the "new normal" (Raab, 2020). I have already asserted that a "night out" must involve particular spaces and take place at specific times; however, during COVID-19, these criteria altered, as students redefined a "night out" to include experiences that typically fall outside of its usual scope.

Nightclubs are the "main event" of a "night out" under typical circumstances; yet, for most of the pandemic, they were closed (Cabinet Office, 2020b). This changed the relationship between other spaces that form the "night out" and the "main event", as people could not attend these spaces (Gordon-Wilson, 2021; 2022).

Efforts were made to transform domestic spaces into something more akin to a “night out” experience, as there was no alternative “main event”. Participants explained that during this time they consumed alcohol (Steve [P29], Matt [P8]), played games (Laura [P24], Megan [P30], Tom [P28]) and decorated their houses to make staying at home feel more like a “night out” (Jasmine [P25], Connie [P26], Charlotte [P27]). They sometimes referred to these experiences as a “night out”, even though it fell short of what they had come to expect of a typical “night out”.

LAURA: My so-called nights out were sitting at the kitchen table playing ring of fire¹⁵ for the 900th time. We just had to make do.

Laura [P24, female] refers to her first-year experiences, which she had pictured involving “nights out” in the NTE, but with these spaces closed, they had to “*make do*” with the home space for such experiences.

When the industry began to reopen, the definition of a “night out” was further confused. At various points in 2021, bars and pubs could open outdoor seating areas with limits on the number of people congregating and social distancing measures in place (Assiter, 2022). This offered an alternative to the home, where students could socialise. It became the “main event” in their “nights out”, not a nightclub as per their typical definitions, but “*better than nothing... better than what [they’d] had before*” (James [P3, male]).

JAMES: It was weird thinking back to it because you looked forward to it like the same as you, kind of, would a nightclub. We knew it would be a while off before we could go to a club so this kind of became the new, sort of, focus of your night. Something we’d typically take for granted like a few beers in a beer garden became like an *event*, like that *was* your night out, there was no going elsewhere after, but it was better than nothing... better than what we’d had before just being stuck inside.

¹⁵ ‘Ring of Fire’ is a drinking game common amongst university students. It uses a deck of cards whereby each has an associated rule to encourage quick consumption of alcohol and mixing of drinks.

James anticipated it the way he would a typical “night out” with a nightclub “main event”. Instead, the “event” was something that, prior to COVID-19, was not considered a “night out”. His altered spatial definition of a “night out” is shaped by the fact that in prior months even these spaces were off-limits. Had lockdown not occurred and pubs remained open throughout, he likely would not have considered beer gardens to be part of his revised idea of a “night out”. His excitement is an appreciation of a step towards normal life.

For others, their concept of a “night out” never truly changed because they were unable to attend nightclubs as they would ordinarily operate.

SUSAN: We didn't go to the seated nightclub [events] because for us... It was more kind of we wanted to remember how it was. Even though they tried so hard, we just kind of wanted it to be how we always remembered it. That wasn't a proper night out.

Not only does she suggest that seated events were not a “*proper night out*”, but the way Susan [P5, *female*] describes wanting to remember the experience “how it was” instead of a new alternative, gives the space a human element, as if discussing a lost loved one. The sentiment was also reflected in wider popular culture at the time: songs like *Marea (We've Lost Dancing)* (Fred Again and The Blessed Madonna, 2021), featuring lyrics like “*This year we've had to lose our space, we've lost dancing*”, were in the charts. The idea of loss is particularly striking when one considers the other ‘losses’ at the hands of the COVID-19 pandemic from jobs and learning, to loss of life (Crossley et al., 2023; Engzell et al., 2021; UKHSA, 2024). It demonstrates her strong feelings that these alternatives would not be a “night out” and emphasises the importance of the nightclub space.

Though the definition was not altered for all, any change in what a “night out” referred to was only temporary. Discussing her anticipation for nightclubs to reopen Emma [P11, *female*] remarked she was “*excited to have a proper night out again*” suggesting the “night out” during COVID-19 was not “proper”. She returned to the original shared understanding of a “night out” involving specific spaces and times, expressly nightclubs.

When NTE venues began to reopen (Assiter, 2022) and students could resume socialising in these spaces. Curfews and other COVID-19 measures (O'Hagan and Westerman, 2021) altered the experiences of the spaces and the timelines associated with a “night out”. With pubs as the “main event”, the timings of a “night out” were affected.

AARON: They started a lot earlier in the nights outside. Like you'd ‘pre’ a lot earlier like 7 or 8 pretty much, as you had a curfew at some points too meaning it also finished earlier.

CHRIS: [...] usually we'd never do afters or anything we'd just go to bed but because your night out shifted earlier we continued drinking back at ours, just with the flat, of course, due to the rules. But yeah we wanted to continue the fun.

The participants both convey a shift in the timeline, moving earlier, due to COVID-19 restrictions. It demonstrates the impact that policy, be it licencing or COVID-19 measures, can have on how a “night out” is defined. Experiences that started and finished this early, under usual circumstances, would not fit the student definitions of a “night out”. The key tenets of the “night out” such as pre-loading, still occurred; the timeline just moved earlier. For Chris [*P7, male*], this shift was also an opportunity to engage in post-loading or “afters” (Engineer et al., 2003), which he never typically did due to being tired. Timings were also influenced by curfews and venue policy to book a timeslot (during Spring 2021), very different to the typical fluid nature of a “night out” (Gordon et al., 2012; McCreanor et al., 2016).

HAILEY: [...] there wasn't just the curfews there was like sometimes limits on how long you could be in a place for. So, you'd have to book time slots and organise people to be there on time so you could make the most of your slot before you were kicked out or moved along.

It could be argued that temporal definitions of a “night out” are also tied to the “main event”. As this changed, to incorporate venues closing earlier (pub beer gardens), or controlled by time-slots and curfews, so did elements like pre-drinks surrounding it.

When nightclubs began to reopen, even as seated events (Assiter, 2022), the timings began to return to those typical of a “night out” (Figure 7).



Figure 7 contains two screenshots from Aaron's [P1] Snapchat Diary (Summer 2021). Timestamps show that even though attending a “seated event”, his timeline is returning to more normal conditions traveling to the NTE at 11:30pm and leaving it at 1:45am.

Conclusions

For the rest of this thesis, a “night out”, or NTE experience, will follow the specific definition and shared understanding conveyed by participants bearing both spatial and temporal aspects in mind. It is an experience that occurs for a significant amount of time, relatively late at night. Whilst it may involve other spaces such as the home or pubs and bars, it must involve a nightclub. However, I also analyse the spaces and times before and after attending the NTE as part of their overall experience. This is what participants mean when they say a “night out” and hence is what will be analysed when they relay their experiences.

I would also like to stress that participants' collective understanding of the term does not suggest that in practice all "night out" experiences are homogenous. Participants in this research share a collective understanding, framed by temporal and spatial definitions, but this is shaped by mainstream clubbing experiences. Alternative NTE spaces and sub-cultures (Gallan, 2015; Hollands, 2002; Moore and Miles, 2004; Weber, 1999) will deviate from this timeline. Nonetheless, the fact participants had a common understanding is important in understanding their experience and how they tie into university life.

The definitions of a "night out" are also subject to change; shifts in the structure of a night out can already be interpreted by comparing participants' timelines with earlier research, demonstrating a reduced significance of the pub. However, more sudden change occurred during COVID-19. The pandemic impacted both spatial and temporal definitions of a "night out", though not irrevocably. Altering the idea, and therefore associated timings, of the "main event" led some participants to temporarily classify experiences that typically would not be regarded a "night out", under this term. What certainly did change was the collective understanding of the term, shared by students. Participants no longer all agreed, or had clear ideas about, what was, or was not, a "night out" under COVID-19 restrictions. It demonstrates that whilst aspects like cultural shifts and licencing can impact these definitions, so, too, can world-altering events like COVID-19.

Chapter 5: The Importance of Space

The *Literature Review* established that space is not merely an inert backdrop or neutral context within which experiences occur but works to shape these experiences. This chapter examines the role of space in shaping student experiences within the night-time economy (NTE), utilising the concept of *Affective Atmospheres*, introduced earlier in the thesis, as a central theoretical framework.

Anderson's (2009) theory of *Affective Atmospheres*, ties affect theory and assemblage theory to conceptualise "atmospheres" as spatial phenomena. They emerge from the combination, or assembling, of diverse socio-material elements and prime individuals to be "affected" in various ways, hence shaping the experience of the space. In the NTE, such assembled socio-material elements can include alcohol, music, lighting, patrons, crowded dancefloors and governance. Each contributes to the emotional and embodied experience of the space (see Bøhling, 2014; 2015; Brands et al., 2015a; Garcia, 2011), affecting the overall NTE experience.

Tutenges and Bøhling (2019: p.16) emphasise the value of affective atmospheres as "a powerful tool for illuminating the complexity of tangible and intangible factors that influence the behaviours and experiences of patrons in nightlife venues". Building on this, I unpack participant experiences considering the influence of the NTE space, ranging from deliberate decisions, such as venue selection, to spontaneous affective responses that are hard to articulate. Michels (2015: p.255) outlines three key dimensions of affective atmospheres: "their spatio-materiality, their sensuality and their (in)stability". These elements offer valuable structure for my analysis.

Guided by this previous work, I explore participants' awareness and affective responses to the atmosphere, as well as the impact of any atmospheric alterations or destabilisations to their experiences. I assert that the NTE space, as an Affective Atmosphere, plays a critical but dynamic role in shaping the affective and experiential dynamics of nightlife. Beyond the atmosphere as a whole, I highlight specific elements

of the NTE spatial assemblage (such as music, lighting and the crowd). Whilst Chapter 7 goes on to consider how these elements shape experiences of risk and pleasure, diversified through intersectional identities, this chapter establishes their central role in co-producing the atmosphere students seek and expect from their NTE experiences.

The Sensed Atmosphere

Michels (2015) notes a key dimension of affective atmospheres is their sensuality, how they affect bodies within the space. The atmosphere primes individuals to behave or feel in various ways, simply through being in the space (Bissell, 2010). As the *Literature Review* covered, there is not one single affective atmosphere (Anderson and Ash, 2015), affecting individuals in the exact same way. Responses become individualised based on personal context including factors like race, sexuality, gender and class (Ahmed, 2008; Bissell, 2010; Böhme, 1993; Brennan, 2004; Löw, 2008).

It is also “sensed”, insofar as an awareness of the atmosphere. Brennan (2004: p.1) remarks; “Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and ‘felt the atmosphere’?”. Yet, due to their phenomenological nature, experiences of affective atmospheres can be difficult to articulate and explain (Duff, 2008). Nevertheless, this does not negate an underlying awareness of a space’s atmosphere. In other research, participants demonstrate their awareness through the use of words like “vibe”, “ambience” or “buzz” (Brennan, 2004; Tutenges and Bøhling, 2019; Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2018). Those in this research are no different, with some even referring to it directly as an “atmosphere”.

MAISEY: A good club has a good atmosphere it lifts up everyone’s moods and is just all-round good vibes, like a good energy about it.

Maisey [P9, *female*] captures the sensuality of the NTE affective atmosphere, through recognition of its presence and her implication that it affects the moods of those within the space with its “*good energy*”. This kind of atmosphere, and affect, is sought out by NTE goers. They look for spaces with the “*right atmosphere*” (Niamh [P19, *female*]) and

make conscious choices in their NTE experiences dependant on the atmosphere they sense. When I ask, “*what makes a good night out?*”, Niamh [P19, *female*] and Max [P22, *male*] are unable to pinpoint exactly what creates this impression, yet they can sense from the atmosphere whether it is “*good*” or “*bad*”.

NIAMH: It’s just like the right atmosphere and stuff... it’s hard to say just one thing because it’s like a sense you get of the atmosphere. You can tell if you should stay [in that venue] or go somewhere else and you can tell if it’s going to be a good one

[...]

MAX: It’s not just one thing, like the music, the crowd, the lights etc. It just gives off a certain vibe, and if its good you stay. But it’s also so clear when its bad, and you either wait it out to see if it gets better or just go somewhere else

They subsequently make decisions, based on these sensed interpretations. For example, whether to remain at that location or visit another NTE venue instead. The atmosphere impacts their NTE experiences by influencing these decisions.

The insights Niamh [P19, *female*] and Max [P22, *male*] provide, also point to the assembled nature of the atmosphere, discussed in more detail later in the chapter. It is made up of a number of social and material elements, working together to shape the experience, “*not just one thing*”. Max [P22, *male*], in particular, acknowledges the dynamic nature of these assemblages. Whether “*good*” or “*bad*”, the atmosphere is subject to change and is constantly evolving and developing through dynamic, ongoing interactions between the components of the assemblage (Bøhling, 2014; McCann and Ward, 2011).

MAX: It’s hard to think about it when I’m not, like, there and in the moment but I’ve had nights go from really *good* to really *bad*. Or I’ve felt like “*this place is a bit crap now let’s move on*”. Like, if the crowd all dies down and people clear out, that kind of kills the atmosphere a bit [...] you can sense a change in the energy of the room [...] everyone’s gone from having a really good, fun time to just something is not quite the same anymore.

It highlights the influence of the atmosphere, shaping the moods and behaviours of those within the space. They are affected by shifts in atmosphere, which, in Max's [P22, *male*] example, goes from a fun, high-energy environment to something more low-energy, or "*bad*". I return to the topic of atmospheric change and destabilisation later in this chapter, but here I want to emphasise that the change he describes reveals how atmospheres affect bodies within a space, generating "particular events and actions, feelings and emotions" (Bissell, 2010: p.273).

Niamh [P19, *female*] and Max's [P22, *male*] claims that a space's atmosphere can make for a good NTE experience is consistent with other research (see Kubacki et al., 2007; Skinner et al., 2005). Savic's (2022: p.548) participants, for example, cite similar experiences, whereby things such as the "social group, and the music, vibe and atmosphere" predicated whether specific venues would appeal to them, based on the experiences they interpreted would result. In this research, participants distinguish between different types of NTE atmospheres, contrasting nightclubs and pubs, noting how these differences shape the types of experience they expect to have.

HENRY: So, I'd say a club has a very different atmosphere to a pub. Like the music and dancefloor and stuff... it gives off a different atmosphere to, like, a pub quiz, for example. I went to one the other week and that's still a nice atmosphere... nothing wrong with it. It was just very *chill*. Kind of almost like a bit cozy, whereas in a nightclub it's more like *wild*. It makes you wanna go a bit wild along with it (*laughs*)

These different NTE locations have differing socio-material spatial assemblages. To name just a few elements: pubs tend to have quieter music, more tables and chairs and are usually more well-lit. Nightclubs, by comparison, have more customers, dancefloors and are predominantly loud, dark spaces with colourful flashing lights. The different assemblages of the space, produce different affective atmospheres, influencing the resulting affects. Although this atmosphere does not wholly determine the experience, it works to shape or scaffold potential experiences people can have within the space. For example, Henry [P14, *male*] contrasts the "*wild*" experience of the nightclub with the "*cozy*" one of the pub. Notably, he does not pick out specific elements of the space that

convey these affects, simply that the space, as a whole, “*gives off*” a detectable atmosphere.

For Henry [P14, *male*], the nightclub atmosphere seems to provoke an almost uncontrollable response, making him want to act in ways shaped by the affects “aroused” (Demant, 2013: p.199) within him. This overpowering quality of affects is a common theme in scholarship: Bissell (2010: p.271) characterises them as “forceful”, Thrift (2008: p.240) refers to an “irresistible impulse to act, regardless of the rationality of the motivation”, and Deleuze and Guattari (1994: p.164) highlights how such affects surpass mere feelings as they “go beyond the strength of those who undergo them”. Immersed in the “*wild*” atmosphere of the nightclub, Henry [P14, *male*] feels himself transformed, shedding his everyday self, to embody the same “*wild*” energy as the space around him.

When exploring the sensuality of atmospheres, it is also important to note that, as parts of the NTE assemblage themselves, customers also play a part in setting, or “staging” (Bille et al., 2015; Edensor and Sumartojo, 2015) the atmosphere. Participants also seemed aware of this.

AARON: Your own mood can also contribute. Like, its good if you’re in the mood to go out [...] But if you’re, like, really not wanting to go, but your mates force you out, it’s probably going to be a bad night

It departs from the earlier perception that individuals are powerless to the affects of a space, uncontrollably affecting their experiences. One’s “affective situation” (Ahmed, 2008) (i.e. mood, levels of intoxication etc.) shapes the atmosphere as well as the impact of resulting affects. It can impact the night out experience as Aaron [P1, *male*] suggests that entering the NTE in the wrong mood or headspace can result in a “*bad night*”. Tutenges and Bøhling (2019: p.20) summarise this two-way relationship, stating: “The atmosphere in venues is therefore at once constituted by and constitutes the patrons”.

Considering the roles that individuals play in shaping the atmosphere's assemblage, it is essential to acknowledge the context of this research. As noted earlier in this thesis, most participants are self-selecting, drawn to the NTE by its vibrant affective atmospheres. Their positive responses to these spaces often reflect this predisposition. Yet, this does not apply to everyone. The aforementioned "affective situation" (Ahmed, 2008) is also influenced by personal preferences and sensitivities. Whilst most participants find the atmosphere enjoyable and invigorating, others, for example Steve [P29, *male*], experience it as uncomfortable or unbearable, highlighting the diversity of individualised responses to collective atmospheres (Seyfert, 2012). Further discussion on this aspect, particularly relating to diversified experiences of risk, is found in *Chapter 7*.

(Un)Stable Atmosphere

As discussed in the *Literature Review*, Michels (2015) conceptualises the affective atmosphere as something fairly unstable, only ever temporarily stabilised through elements like borders. Though borders can be broken or pierced, they help with the "entrenchment" (Shaw, 2014: p.92), or strengthening, of the affects within the bounded space. Interestingly, participants also seemed to refer to the atmosphere's borders and the ways they were affected once they crossed the doors of these bounded spaces, when discussing their NTE experiences.

MAISEY: I just love how it hits you all at once as you go through the doors [...] I just keep thinking... I just want that moment where you've like got your stamp, and you walk in, and the music is playing. You're like having a dance as you walk in and you're like "*yeah this is so fun*" [...] there's no better feeling. You're in the crowd the lights are going, even just the feeling of the loud music

Maisey [P9, *female*], notably speaking at the time lockdown measures were easing (Dunn et al., 2021), captures her excitement through her use of emotive language. Even her imagined return to the NTE gives the impression of a bounded affective atmosphere. Her words suggest she anticipates being struck, or to use Anderson's (2009) phrasing

“enveloped”, by the atmosphere upon entering the physical space of the NTE. She observes that the atmosphere is felt “all at once as you go through the doors”. Upon entering, multiple senses are activated, revealing the assemblage of elements that come together to co-produce the NTE atmosphere: the sight of the lights and crowd, the sound of loud music, and even the visceral sensation of the vibrating bass (see Goulding and Shankar, 2011; Welch and Fremaux, 2017).

Entering into the NTE space is boundary transgression, marked by receiving an entry stamp and stepping inside. Some of the various assemblage elements she mentions, such as “loud music”, will likely be audible outside of the venue. Yet, it is not until she crosses the boundary, entering through the doors, that they coalesce into an atmosphere, affecting her physically and emotionally. Although other research has previously studied the significance of doors to NTE venues as a border, this has often focused on the role of door staff and bouncers and how individuals negotiate the door (see Calvey, 2019; Hobbs, 2003; Rigakos, 2008; Søgaaard, 2014). Maisey’s [P9, *female*] account gives a new insight to the felt affective experience passing through the door, and hence the atmosphere’s boundary.

The resulting affect is not always as positive as Maisey [P9, *female*] describes, though still may be triggered by traversing physical boundaries of the space. Steve [P29, *male*] describes an entirely different perception of the nightclub atmosphere. He does not enjoy nights out and rarely attends the NTE. However, his description of the atmosphere’s affects depicts a notable perceived change in the behaviour of those in the space once they pass the physical boundary and enter.

STEVE: I have described it to my friends before as basically... nightclubs are where all social progress goes to die. Once you step foot into the building, people just act completely different. Men go on sex rampages assaulting women... racial segregation... all sorts that just wouldn’t go on anywhere else. It’s just embarrassing really what they turn into once they’ve gone in.

He makes multiple references to the bounded nature of the atmosphere, observing that people are transformed when they “step foot into the building” and cross the spatial

boundary. Once inside, the atmosphere evokes affects that prompt individuals to “act completely different[ly]” from their everyday behaviours (see also McBride, 2019), a shift he attributes to the suspension of certain social and moral norms beyond this boundary. Although he negatively portrays this rule abandonment, other research frames it as enabling freedom, hedonism, and enjoyment (Hollands, 2002).

Black and queer NTE research critiques this perspective, suggesting that such abandonment, affectual or otherwise, may only be open to predominantly white, straight, gender-conforming individuals (see Adeyemi, 2022; 2019). It aligns with an argument made in the *Literature Review* that whilst affects are collective experiences (Bøhling, 2015; Michels, 2015) they are not in total control, nor universally felt. The affects may be stratified depending on elements of intersectional identities including race, age, gender and sexuality. Atmospheres simply “have a potential to be felt” (Shaw, 2014: p.89) and individuals may sense or translate the atmosphere differently depending on their “embodied dispositions and inclinations” (Tutenges and Bøhling, 2019: p.16; see also Böhme, 1993).

Although participants mostly discussed the borders of the NTE by referring to the physical space, it is also temporally bounded. Even though recent events such as *Day Fever*¹⁶ (see also Krishnan, 2019) have attempted to recreate a clubbing atmosphere during the daytime, most experiences occur late at night and are bounded by the venue hours of operation and licencing regulations (Licensing Act, 2003). In relevant scholarship, the NTE is regularly referred to as a “liminal space” (Griffin et al., 2009; Malbon, 1999) and this means any affect is also liminal, given the atmosphere is temporarily bounded and stabilised. Both physical spatial and temporal boundaries of the NTE contribute to an “entrenchment” (Shaw, 2014: p.89) of the atmosphere, holding it in this particular space-time of the NTE, causing the atmosphere’s affects to be more intense. However, this is only for a particular moment before people “pass into new

¹⁶ Day Fever is a daytime clubbing event that gained traction in 2024, targeted at over-30s. These events tend to finish by 9pm. (BBC, 2024)

assemblages” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: p.360) or the atmosphere collapses as the borders break.

In moments of change, such as at the end of a night out, the atmosphere can become destabilised or “put into crisis” (Michels, 2015: p.261), particularly if these borders are broken. Resulting “affective changes” can lead people to “feel ‘out of place’ within an affective space” (MacLean and Moore, 2014: p.382). Participants refer to this phenomenon, particularly citing auditory and visual changes which destabilise the atmosphere as the venues begin to close.

MATT: The worst part is when you stay until the end, because they just stop the music and turn on the lights. It’s like a really harsh reality check and you’ve got to go outside, and you’ve gone from having a fun time to just like I don’t know... back to reality.

This “*harsh reality check*” Matt [P8, male] refers to, describes his emotional and bodily response to the sudden change in atmosphere. The spatial assemblage is disrupted as there are shifts like the music suddenly stopping and lights turning on when it was previously loud and dark. The former affect, or spell, that the atmosphere held over those in the space is broken quite suddenly. He describes the change in affective atmosphere by comparing the NTE to everyday life or “reality”. This portrayal of the NTE experience as a space-time separate from the everyday, is a key discussion point of the next chapter. However, at this stage in analysis it reaffirms the distinctive affects of the NTE space, where behaviours and emotions are uniquely shaped to create an experience that is very different to other spaces and times in people’s lives.

The hold of an atmosphere over the NTE space-time and any resulting affects are fragile and temporary. In this instance, Matt [P8, male] describes a sudden shift in atmosphere as the temporal boundaries “rupture” (Shaw, 2014: p.93) due to the closing of the venue. Emma [P11, female] echoes this experience of an abrupt break in the atmosphere, further emphasised as she is met with daylight once exiting the physical space.

EMMA: It's the worst feeling when they turn on the lights at the end of the night going from a dark [...] to these bright lights blaring in your face and security shouting at you to move along. It's even worse in the summertime too because you're stepping out into daylight. By that time, it's already getting light you just feel a bit gross and maybe drunk and confused.

Emma's [P11, *female*] contrast of darkness and light emphasises the atmospheric shift, accompanied by a sense of confusion as affectual changes begin to unfold. MacLean and Moore (2014: p.382) similarly describe such confusion as "dissonance and discomfort" occurring when affective states "tip unexpectedly". While participants do not directly reference this, the researchers suggest that these moments can lead to conflict as individuals grapple with the adjustments required by the altered atmosphere.

Matt and Emma's [P11, *female*] experiences illustrate shifts in affect when atmospheric borders are suddenly broken, but destabilisation can occur at any point during the experience, as assemblage elements change (e.g. fire alarm) and it does not require harsh border breaks. As mentioned in the *Literature Review*, the boundaries are also susceptible to "micro-breaks" (Shaw, 2014: p.93) and affects dissipate with greater distance from the NTE space. This dissipation, rather than a harsh break, is experienced by Hailey [P10, *female*]. Within the same focus group as Emma [P11, *female*], rather than describing a sudden break in atmosphere as they leave the space, she notes how elements of the NTE atmosphere pierce through the borders, the affects traveling with her.

HAILEY: One time I went out though, we went to get a kebab after, and they had music blaring and lights going it was better than the club! (*laughs*) People were all singing and chanting and stuff, it was still such a good vibe. Not like the *same* as the club don't get me wrong but still so fun.

The new space, the takeaway shop, retains some aspects of the NTE atmosphere, though Hailey [P10, *female*] concedes it was not quite the "*same*" as the space they had just left. What remains consistent, however, is the positive affect ("good vibes") even after leaving the bounded space. Unlike Emma [P11, *female*] or Matt [P8, *male*], Hailey continues to feel positively affected ("*good vibes*") despite moving away from the original

atmosphere. This suggests that elements of the NTE atmosphere linger with her beyond its physical boundaries. It does not diminish the significance of borders in strengthening the NTE's atmosphere, instead it supports my earlier claim (see *Literature Review*) that the NTE can be understood as a series of epicentres, with affective atmospheres radiating outward and gradually dissipating, and their affects waning with greater distance from the NTE venue (Figure 2). It contributes to a broader “elevated emotional atmosphere” (Collins, 2008: p.243), associated with the nocturnal city, impacting experiences of the wider space-time.

The Assembled Atmosphere

Spatio-materiality, or assemblage, is the final lens through which Michels (2015) suggests affective atmospheres can be understood. Throughout the chapter, I have explored the fact that the atmosphere is an ephemeral configuration of both social and material elements, only ever temporarily held together within the space-time of the NTE, and always subject to change. The specific arrangement of these assembled elements directly impacts the atmosphere, the affects it produces, and the resulting experience of the space. If elements are altered or missing, a different experience results. COVID-19 offers an unexpected, yet interesting case study to exemplify this; pandemic restrictions and regulations imposed on venues (Cabinet Office, 2020b) altered the typical NTE assemblage, while venue closures and lockdowns (Johnson, 2020) prompted efforts to ‘reassemble’ them at home. This final section of the chapter examines these changes to the assembled atmosphere, and the resulting impacts on participant experiences.

Altered Assemblages

During the spring and summer of 2021, nightclubs were able to reopen after a long period of closure (Assiter, 2022; Cabinet Office, 2020b). However, this was in a significantly altered capacity, with social distancing measures and restricted opening times in place. Participants term these pandemic NTE experiences: “*seated club events*” (Tom [P28, male]), in reference to one of the major changes to operations – table service (Cabinet Office, 2020b).

The term “COVID secure” (Cabinet Office, 2020b) was used in policy to encapsulate several physical, social and functional changes made to NTE spaces to comply with reopening guidance. Being “COVID secure” meant venues had to undergo “radical transformations” and “reinvent themselves” to comply with new regulation (Assiter, 2022) that fundamentally reshaped the environment. During these times, many elements of the assembled NTE space remained the same, or to use the phrasing of participants: “*normal*” (e.g. Jasmine [P25, *female*]). It was the same physical space, security still held a presence, licensing regulation still applied, music still played, and patrons still consumed alcohol. Yet, there were also key changes altering the assemblage. Changes included physical elements like signage, tables and barriers; functional shifts, moving to table service and other regulatory changes prohibiting certain activities like singing and dancing.

AARON: It was very different. Firstly, you’re on tables [and] you’ve got to wait for someone to take your order, like a restaurant. You can’t just go up to the bar. You can only leave your table to go [to] the loo, and you have to follow all the one-way systems. They’ve got like arrows on the floor and signs and TVs constantly showing, like, the rules [...] There were less people too. It’s because everyone is sat down. So, to space us all out they’ve got to limit [venue] capacity, like, less people. So instead of it being like, 1000 people in there it was only like 400. That in itself changes the vibe.

Aaron [P1, *male*] reflects on the alterations, highlighting various social and material changes to the assemblage that affected his experience of the space. He notes that it “*changes the vibe*”, suggesting that these transformations not only alter the NTE experience to which he is accustomed, but do so in a restrictive manner, as indicated by his emphasis on what he “*can’t*” do within the modified NTE. His behaviour alters in comparison to a typical NTE experience, due to the new rules and other adaptations to the space. For example, Embley (2020: p.1) reports that “music was limited to lower volumes and DJs were specifically instructed to play less lively tracks than usual, to encourage and sustain static audience behaviours”.

A DJ's ability to shape the NTE atmosphere and influence a crowd is well established (see Edensor and Sumartojo, 2015; Hadfield, 2006; Forsyth, 2009; Forsyth and Cloonan, 2008; Nixon and Possamai, 2014; Tutenges and Bøhling, 2019). Previously, their role centred on cultivating the right 'vibe', elevating both mood and consumption through choices of genre, volume and complementary lighting and visuals, while also maintaining a manageable level of energy to mitigate disorder (see Hadfield, 2006; Shaw, 2010). However, within the context of the COVID-altered NTE, this control takes on a new dimension, oriented towards minimising the risk of airborne viral transmission. Typically, this subtle form of sonic control often goes unnoticed by those on the dancefloor. Yet, when the intention behind it shifted to emphasise health as well as safety, rarely so visible within the NTE, the control became more noticeable. I discuss this further in *Chapter 7*, as Jack [P2, male] recounts a perceived loss of freedom and pleasure as a result of this change to the NTE assemblage.

Participant's *Snapchat* diaries also show the visual extent of the alterations Aaron [P1, male] mentions. His and Henry's [P14, male] diaries (Figure 8 and Figure 9) specifically, show a stark comparison of the same venue, even same place within the venue, during and after COVID-19 restrictions. Figure 8 illustrates several of the physical, functional and regulatory changes mentioned already, from table service to separation via *Perspex* screens. It completely contrasts with the image taken after distancing measures were lifted (Figure 9), a more familiar atmosphere, reflective of a typical NTE experience. The dancefloor, previously housing the tables, is once again filled with hundreds of people near one another.

Despite the need for the NTE space to adapt to regulation, many aspects remained unchanged. Even amid COVID-19 restrictions and social distancing protocols, venues strove to maintain the familiar atmosphere usually provided, relying on many typical assemblage elements in an attempt to recreate this atmosphere. For instance, participants who attended these "*seated club events*" (Tom [P28, male]) commented on how music and lighting, key components of the typical NTE atmosphere, were preserved even under these altered circumstances.



Figure 9 is from Aaron's [P1] (Summer 2021), at Vortex nightclub, when events were socially distanced and the majority of nightclubs in CityX still remained closed.



Figure 8 is from Henry's [P14] Snapchat diary (Autumn 2021). At this time, nightclubs had reopened and were operating as "normal". This is the same venue and room as Figure 9

AARON: If you take all the tables away, the lateness, the lights, the music, the alcohol would have been the same as what it would have been on a normal night.

Despite these familiar elements, the resulting affects were not the same. Rather than mentioning how these elements recreate a typical NTE atmosphere in altered circumstances, participants highlight how they fell short in doing so, as other important assemblage elements were missing.

JACK: The music was just like a regular club which, when you think about it, is weird because like the *point* of a club is to dance but we were sat at chairs [...] we literally could not talk to each other - you couldn't hear anyone [the music] was that loud.

—

FERGUS: Obviously nightclubs etc. are like quite dark and have all the lasers and strobe lights etc. [...] the lights were kind of similar like the same as they typically would be anyway, which is weird considering everyone was just on tables really separate from each other [...] it was still kind of that dimly lit space just no crowd on the dancefloor [...] it was odd, for sure, almost eerie.

Like Aaron [P1, *male*], they both mention elements that make the space seem “*just like a regular club*”. Yet, when assembled alongside those altered by COVID-19 regulations, they are experienced differently. While the music continued to play and the lighting remained vibrant, the lack of a dancefloor and crowd fundamentally altered the atmosphere, rendering its affect “*eerie*” (Fergus [P4, *male*]). The very elements that usually generate energy in the space now felt out of place, creating an atmosphere that failed to meet the usual expectations of the NTE. Jack [P2, *male*] captures this, commenting: “*the point of a club is to dance but we were sat*”. It demonstrates how, even with the retention of some elements, changes to the spatial assemblage led to significantly altered affects and experiences of the atmosphere.

Jack's [P2, *male*] observation that the music felt loud is particularly revealing. As noted earlier in the chapter, music was in fact restricted (to 85dB (Public Health England,

2020b)) during this period, to discourage singing, dancing and ultimately the spread of the virus. Although this remains a relatively high volume, it is considerably quieter than one would typically experience in a nightclub setting. The perception of loudness may have been intensified by the reconfigured spatial layout of tables and chairs, which ordinarily invites conversation but, in this instance, made such interaction difficult because the music still overpowered speech. This dissonance between the expected conversation from sitting at tables and the persistent volume of nightclub music likely heightened his awareness of the sound. Moreover, when large numbers of people occupy a venue, as is usual in the NTE, their bodies absorb some of the sound (see Welch and Fremaux, 2017). With patrons now spaced apart and seated, fewer bodies were present to absorb sound energy, likely making the music seem louder despite the reduced volume. It demonstrates how the various changes to the NTE assemblage made during this period interacted with one another, affecting the experiences of those within the space as they worked in consort. In this example, a change to one aspect, such as being seated rather than dancing in a crowd, influenced others, including the perception of volume, which itself had been altered from the norm.

Participants could sense the overall altered NTE atmosphere during these times, though, as with the typical NTE, they found it difficult to express. Descriptions like "weird" and "strange" were common, capturing the dissonance between what they were accustomed to and what they experienced in this altered space. The palpable change in the atmosphere created a sense of unfamiliarity, confusion, and discomfort in their experience of the space. This was especially emphasised by those who were more familiar with the typical NTE and had come to expect a specific kind of atmosphere in their experiences.

AARON: I think it was just more awkward because of the setting you were in. [...] It's not made for you to all be sat in the middle of the dancefloor on a tables and chairs. It just didn't feel like a night out because (*laughs*) like I've never been on a night out where I've just, like, sat the entire time.

In an attempt to further articulate this new, unfamiliar, atmosphere, Tom [P28, *male*] compared it to other NTE contexts with which he was more familiar.

TOM: I went to one of these “*seated club events*” at [a local nightclub]. You know, when it was just table service. The music was so loud that you couldn't even chat to the person who was across on the table [...] just all the lights and everything were going. It was just *really* weird because it wasn't just, like, that pub environment where you can sit, chat and have a chill and relax, but it also wasn't the dance floor nightclub environment. It was just some sort of weird in between.

He points out that the atmosphere diverged significantly from that of a typical nightclub, given the fact patrons were seated and further apart. However, he also notes that it was equally distinct from a typical pub atmosphere. It returns to the notion that different kinds of NTE venue have different types of atmospheres. Yet, for Tom [P28, *male*], the COVID-era experience felt unlike anything he had encountered in an NTE setting before. Although this “*seated club*” atmosphere shared some elements with other NTE contexts (including the seated consumption of alcohol of a pub, and the lights and loud music of a nightclub) it ultimately created a distinct atmosphere that defied easy comparison.

Suspecting that COVID-19 regulations would result in a different atmosphere, and overall NTE experience, some participants chose not to attend these events at all. Susan and Chris [P7, *male*] discuss the fact that through what they had heard of others' experiences, they deemed they could recreate a better experience at home.

SUSAN: [...] even though they tried so hard [to replicate the experience] [...] It just wouldn't have been the same. [...] At least from the second-hand experiences I've been hearing, it was a bit weird to just kind of go to a club and sit down and typically in a space where you'd be dancing and you know be smashed trying to have a good time.

CHRIS: Yeah I've heard from people that it wasn't fantastic we thought we'd be able to have a much better time doing our own thing here [at home] rather than having a dampened version of a night out.

They directly acknowledge the attempts made by venues to recreate the NTE experience, mentioned earlier in this chapter, through the use of key assemblage elements. However, without even attending, they discern that the resulting atmosphere would not

be the same and the experience would not live up to that of a typical experience. Chris [P7, male] suggests it would be a “*dampened version of a night out*,” encapsulating their shared sense of scepticism.

Reassembling the Atmosphere

Chris [P7, male] argues that his home could provide a better experience than the COVID-altered NTE. It reflects a broader pandemic-era trend, where many sought to recreate the leisure experiences, typically associated with the NTE, in alternative spaces. Although, at the time, Chris [P7, male] had the option of attending the NTE in a modified form, earlier in the pandemic, the widespread closure of the hospitality sector, including NTE venues (APPG, 2021), prompted many to creatively reconstruct these experiences elsewhere. This, once again, underscores the assembled nature of the NTE affective atmosphere, as elements of the typical NTE assemblage were employed in an attempt to *reassemble* it away from the physical space. Djurdjić (2021: p.315) describes this as an act of “spatial approximation.”

One of the best examples of this from participants in this research, was housemates Jasmine, Connie and Charlotte [P25-27]. They utilised elements of a typical NTE assemblage, from lighting and music to decorations, to create a similar atmosphere at home – nightclubs in their own bedrooms.

CONNIE: One time we went full out right at the beginning. [...] We each turned our room into a theme, with decorations we made and had lights and music and a drink that matched the theme. It was an in-the-flat pub crawl, kind of. We really went full out that time, but I think that was a birthday or something.

[...]

CONNIE: It was a lot of effort, but we didn’t have much else to do. We had lights and music and decorations and stuff just like you’d have in a normal club.

CHARLOTTE: It made it more of an event. So did the getting ready and dressing up. It felt like more of a... thing... I guess. More fun.

JASMINE: More normal. Even though, who has a nightclub in their house?

CONNIE: or one with only three customers (*all laugh*)

They reference several changes they made to their homes, attempting to recreate an NTE atmosphere. Unable to borrow certain elements like a crowded dancefloor (they joke their at-home club only has three customers), they turned to elements like décor, lighting and music. These are aspects that have already been identified in this chapter as important parts of the NTE assemblage, contributing to the overall experience.

Not only do their attempts hope to reassemble some form of NTE atmosphere, away from the physical space of the NTE, but they also work to temporarily transform the domestic setting. During lockdown, most people were confined to their homes aside from essential trips and daily exercise (Cabinet Office, 2020c). Conscious attempts to manipulate the atmosphere in this way, allowed the same physical space to shift between its day-to-day use and something Charlotte [P27, *female*] describes as “*more of an event*”. Her phrasing ties in with the notion that nightclubs form “main events” (Room and Livingston, 2009) in the NTE experience, discussed in *Chapter 4*. The “main event” in these experiences was not a different venue, but a different atmosphere, created within their homes to resemble a nightclub.

Another participant, Hailey [P10, *female*], also refers to the efforts made to transform the atmosphere of the home, into something more like the NTE. She specifically mentions that their aim was to make the experience more than simply consuming alcohol at home, which her expression seems to indicate holds negative connotations.

HAILEY: We tried to do a few, like, “*house crawls*” where each room was a different theme and then a few like themed nights, like, you know, fancy dress nights and stuff like that. But once again, it was just you know... we were all drinking to just go to bed. The whole getting ready, ‘pres’, then going *out* out that was all completely taken away. So, we did *try* to make

the most of our situation. Like, making it more than just being sat drinking in the kitchen.

Her remark that they were “drinking to just go to bed” reflects the challenges and altered dynamic of the NTE leisure experience, now confined to the home. Nonetheless, through use of typical NTE assemblage elements, participants worked to elevate their at-home experience, reshaping the atmosphere of the home and attempting to reproduce some of the affects of the NTE atmosphere.

As it was prior to their involvement in the research, these participants did not create video diaries that evidenced their attempts to reassemble an NTE atmosphere at home. Instead, Connie [P26, *female*] and her flat referred to a trend on *TikTok*¹⁷ (Figure 10) whereby many young people were utilising lighting, music, decorations, and alcohol in similar ways to create what they termed “*at-home bar crawls*”, “*quarantine crawls*” or “*room crawls*”. The trend implies that many young people, especially students living with others of university age, attempted to recreate NTE leisure experiences at home in these same ways.

Attempts to recreate or reassemble the NTE affective atmosphere were not only done through use of physical changes to the home space, but also through replicating various parts of a night out experience. *Chapter 4* of this thesis introduced the idea that certain preparatory activities, like getting dressed up, were key facets to a “night out” experience. These were also important in re-creating the atmosphere at home in a way that made the resulting experience feel “*more normal*” (Jasmine [P25, *female*]) or closer to a typical NTE experience.

CONNIE: Well, I did actually get dressed and do my makeup and hair. It’s all part of it for me, part of the fun and stuff. Just to wear clothes I would to a club and do my hair nice.

¹⁷ TikTok is a short-form video social media application that debut in 2016. It is popular amongst young people and at the time of the data collection boasted over 1.5 billion active monthly users worldwide (TikTok.com, 2021)

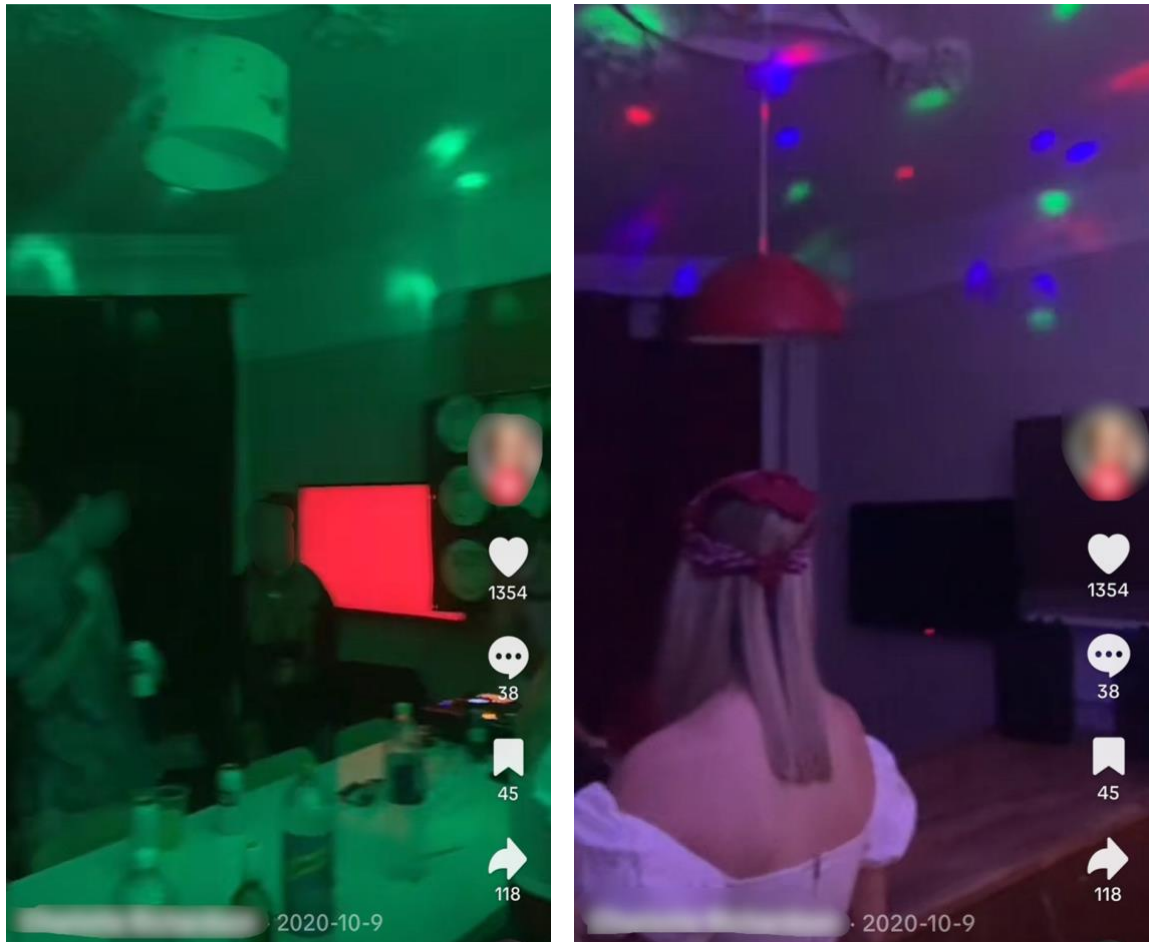


Figure 10 is two screenshots from a TikTok video demonstrating the trend at the time: the “at-home bar crawl”. Changes to the space include lighting, alcohol, decorations, and hand-made signs. Similar videos appear when searching “lockdown bar crawl” suggesting it was a social media trend.

[Source: @Charlricho, permission for use given by the creator]

It is likely that recreating their night out routines helped this new form of NTE leisure to feel more familiar. However, it additionally contributed to the reassembled atmosphere. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, customers are part of the NTE assemblage, they also shape the atmosphere and how those in the space are affected by it. Participants underwent physical (clothing, make-up) and biochemical (alcohol) transformations alongside the physical changes they made to the space, contributing to an altered atmosphere.

It is also important to briefly mention that, during the pandemic, attempts to recreate NTE atmospheres and experiences were not just done physically, at home, but also

online (Gordon-Wilson, 2021; McKinlay et al., 2022). Virtual reconstructions focused less on reassembling material elements of the NTE space, and instead involved transferring the associated practices online (Nofre et al., 2020; Palamar and Acosta, 2021). People played drinking games online (Pakdaman and Clapp, 2021) and attended ‘virtual raves’ and ‘virtual happy hours’, allowing some forms of NTE experience, whilst abiding by restrictions (Goldfarb, 2020; Weaver et al., 2020). Students in this study had similar experiences of attending ‘online events’; they mention taking part in activities, typically associated with NTE locations, that temporarily moved online.

TOM: My flat did an online bingo which involved a few like drinking games as well, but it wasn’t the same as the Bongo’s Bingo¹⁸ events you see in bars and clubs. It was all logistically a bit of a mess.

Although attempts were made to reassemble the NTE atmosphere at home or online, the resulting affects and experiences were not the same. The reality was that away from the physical NTE space, there were many elements they were unable to recreate, meaning it was not possible to replicate.

CONNIE: [...] it wasn’t the same as being in a nightclub, no. Yeah, we danced, and we drank [alcohol] but it wasn’t the same. At no point did I stop and think “yeah *it feels just like being in a nightclub*” or anything like that, I was at home... yeah it may have been a *fun* version of my home, but it wasn’t a *nightclub*.

Connie’s [P26, *female*] alterations to her home may have elevated the atmosphere and transformed the space, yet this was not enough for her to forget that she was in fact at home, not in the NTE. The atmosphere, and resulting affects, did not live up to that of the NTE space. The spatial alterations changed her experience of the home, demonstrating the role space can have in impacting experiences. Yet, the physical space of the NTE remained central to the atmosphere she sought to replicate. Fergus [P4, *male*] also notes a different atmosphere, commenting that even though they carried out many of the same

¹⁸ ‘Bongo’s Bingo’ is a form of bingo played in NTE venues it describes itself as “a crazy mix of traditional bingo, dance-offs, rave intervals, audience participation and countless magical moments” (Bongosbingo.co.uk)

practices as a typical NTE experience, not being out of the home setting, meant it had a “different feel”.

FERGUS: It wasn’t a night out, was it? We never left the flat (*laughs*). It was obviously socialising and on paper some of the same sort of stuff. Drinking and that. But it definitely had a different feel.

Although altered, the atmosphere did not induce the same sort of affects as the typical NTE, impacting behaviours, emotions and attitudes. As with experiences of the altered NTE at “seated club events” (Tom [P28, male]), participants sometimes described at-home experiences as “weird” (Aaron [P1, male]) and “strange” (Sasha [P13, female]). Aaron [P1, male] further notes a change in his behaviour, feeling unable to engage in some of the activities he would typically enjoy in the NTE.

AARON: In one of the lockdowns, we did an online version of Bongo’s Bingo¹⁸ which is like a fun bingo with lots of drinking and dancing and loud music and is a laugh. This one we did drink and stuff but it wasn’t the same there was no way I was just going to dance in my living room! (*laughs*)

He implies that within the NTE atmosphere, actions like dancing would be common; however, a home environment, albeit altered, fails to induce the same affects, and he does not partake in such activity.

It appears that the physical space, rather than a mere reconstruction of its assemblage, plays a crucial role in shaping and setting the atmosphere. Savic et al. (2022: p.545) explains, “assemblages will differ depending on the situation, and so too their affects”. In these cases, the elements participants borrowed from the NTE assemblage to replicate its atmosphere at home or online could not generate the same affects as when “entangled in a night out assemblage, which may involve friends, cultural norms, music, dancing, flirtation, and other elements” (Savic et al., 2022: p. 545). Without being physically present in the NTE, the experience would simply not be the same. Whilst disconnecting and appropriating elements of the NTE assemblage may alter and

enhance the new context, it does not create the same affective atmosphere or experience as the NTE.

The Importance of a Crowd

Participants' reflections on the shortcomings of reassembled or altered NTE affective atmospheres reveal a notable insight: some assemblage elements may be central, even fundamental, to the production of the atmosphere they have come to expect and seek out in the NTE. In many of the participant accounts already discussed in this chapter, the crowd is mentioned as something missing from their experiences. In a nightclub context, patrons are usually in close physical proximity to others, including those they do not know. This is impossible to recreate at home during lockdown or in the NTE with COVID-19 restrictions. It provides one possible explanation as to why these experiences fail to match those of a typical NTE, despite offering a temporary substitute.

Those who attended the “*seated club events*” (Tom [P28, *male*]) frequently commented on the lack of crowd, caused by social distancing measures. Traditional elements of the NTE space, like crowded dancefloors and queues at the bar no longer existed. This impacted the experience of the space, as if being in a crowd, instead of just within the space, was a key pillar of a night out experience. In research by Mazierska and Rigg (2021: p.82), those interviewed also “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”. The “energy”, described here, should be taken as a synonym for the NTE affective atmosphere. It became compromised due to the inability to form a crowd. Jack [P2, *male*] reflects on the central role of the crowd, suggesting that even with many of the same elements in place as it's typical operation, without a crowd the NTE would not be the same sort of atmosphere, nor even one he speaks of positively.

JACK: In general, like, a good night out is when it's quite busy, so lots of people there. It's not great when you go to a club and it's empty. So, like, this [altered NTE] was never gonna be great really was it.

Later in this same focus group they discuss how the lack of a crowd impacted their experienced at seated, socially-distanced events:

AARON: It was yeah, weird... like you felt *exposed* kind of. [...] [It] would usually be packed with people Instead we were just sat with all this... like... open space.

JACK: I'd definitely agree. Exposed is the right word there. Exposed and awkward

[...]

AARON: You're more open to being watched either by like bouncers or other customers. [it] made it a very weird night.

The idea of “comfort in the crowd” is not a new phenomenon (Besta et al., 2018; Hopkins et al., 2019; Neville and Reicher, 2011), for some, it can increase a sense of closeness and solidarity, but it can also assist with lowering inhibitions (Sekiya, 2016). Who exactly is afforded these positive experiences of the crowd is explored in *Chapter 7*. However, in this situation, fewer customers and socially-distanced tables instead of a crowded dancefloor altered their experience in a negative way. Their mention of feeling “exposed” suggests that their inhibitions were raised, the direct opposite affect to the typical NTE atmosphere. Their wording is also intriguing, painting a picture of vulnerability which is particularly interesting given the context of the pandemic. The space made them feel exposed, yet the very reasoning for the social distancing and seated arrangements was to reduce *exposure* to COVID-19.

Crowds were also missing from at-home attempts to recreate the NTE affective atmosphere. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, Connie [P26, *female*], for instance, jokes that her at-home spatial approximation of a nightclub with “*only three customers*”, was atypical, as nightclubs would usually have large crowds. Contrasts were made between the experiences had with larger groups compared to domestic settings with fewer inhabitants.

MEGAN: Well, luckily we were all together last year. It was a good group even if it was small. [...] We'd just drink sat around the table which sound really

sad. My friend lived in like a big flat thing of like 30 people, so it was a very different atmosphere for her, more of a house party with dancing and stuff. But with a few people it was like drinking games in the kitchen.

Whilst her experience was still positive, due to the close friendships she had with her own flatmates, Megan [P30, *female*] notes the different affective atmosphere experienced at her friend's flat. Varying crowd density shaped the atmosphere and produced different affects, impacting the actions and behaviours of those in the space. Whilst those who were amongst a crowd danced and benefitted from an atmosphere that felt more like a "*party*". With fewer people, Megan's [P30, *female*] experience was, in her own words, comparatively "*sad*".

The idea that some assemblage elements may be more crucial to the NTE atmosphere than others, strays from assemblage theory (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) in its initial form. As covered in the *Literature Review*, the theory suggests there is no hierarchy between elements of the assemblage, and that they all contribute to assemble the space. Yet, there seems to be something important about the crowd for an NTE atmosphere. This is not to suggest that simply being in a crowd is the only important factor in producing the kind of atmosphere participants seek out and anticipate from the NTE, but that it seems to play an important role. Without it, even with other assemblage elements remaining the same, it can result in a different experience.

Conclusions

This chapter has focused on the role of space in influencing student NTE experiences, particularly focusing on how such atmospheres are sensed, (un)stable, and assembled. Participants describe how they sense and respond to the atmospheres, which evoke specific affects, impacting their feelings, moods, and actions. Not only do they pick up on the specific atmospheres of different venues, but they seek out particular atmospheres on their nights out.

These atmospheres, and their resulting affects, are only ever temporarily stabilised, due to the ever-evolving assemblages that produce them. In the NTE, temporal and spatial boundaries, like time of day and walls of an NTE venue, offer some stability, also acting to strengthen or “entrench” (Shaw, 2014) the affects the atmosphere induces. However, these boundaries are not absolute, and the atmosphere often “spills over” (McBride, 2019), continuing to influence participants beyond the confines of the NTE.

When the assemblage changes, so does the atmosphere, impacting the experience of the space. Whilst changes can be subtle and still cause a shift in the atmosphere, the pandemic provided two contexts where resulting impacts to student experiences were more overt. Being differently assembled, without key elements that characterise the NTE, or away from the context of the physical NTE space, the resulting atmospheres differently impacted participants’ emotions, behaviours, and sense of satisfaction. Though they may have heightened the atmosphere of the home or welcomed opportunity to socialise once again in the COVID-safe NTE, these were not the atmospheres or experiences that students were used to in the pre-COVID NTE. Yet the very fact they attempted to recreate these atmospheres and experiences in any capacity, demonstrates their value in the lives of these students.

A change to one element of the NTE assemblage, can influence other components. For instance, the lack of dancefloor, instead confined to tables and chairs, led some participants to feel as though the music was “*loud*” (Jack [P2, male]) when, in reality, it was a lower volume to the typical NTE. It emphasises that these social and material elements are a dynamic assemblage, connected to each other to co-produce the NTE affective atmosphere. However, challenging the notion that there is no hierarchy amongst assemblage elements, participant insights suggest that some aspects play critical roles in producing the NTE affective atmosphere. The crowd emerges as a central element in the NTE assemblage, deeply intertwined with the affective atmosphere that students value and have come to expect. The absence of crowds during the pandemic made it difficult for students to recreate experiences whether at home, online, or in altered NTE settings.

Participant insight ultimately highlights the importance of the NTE space, both in shaping students' night out experiences but also in the value they hold in their lives. I have demonstrated that the NTE space is not a mere backdrop; rather it actively shapes experiences that take place within. The next chapter builds on this idea, shifting focus away from space, as the singular lens of analysis, to consider other elements, central in the collective shaping of student NTE experiences.

Chapter 6: More than Space

Building on the previous chapter's focus on space as a key factor, shaping student experiences in the night-time economy (NTE), this chapter broadens the scope to address two additional elements: time and studenthood. Whilst the NTE affective atmosphere influences feelings and behaviours, experiences are shaped by more than spatial dynamics alone. As explored in the *Literature Review*, many existing studies overlook components like time.

Earlier analysis has addressed some interplays between space and time, such as the temporal definitions of a “night out” and the boundaries time places on the NTE atmosphere. This already points to the difficulty of disentangling the two concepts, suggesting that they work together to produce and shape NTE experiences. I expand on this foundation to shed further light on time's critical role. The second additional concept – studenthood – encompasses both identity and institutional dimensions of university life. I describe it thus, to reflect that a student's situation is a liminal stage of life (Holdsworth, 2009; Rutherford and Pickup, 2015; Tomlinson, 2024), or a *phase*, like childhood or adulthood.

Drawing on student participant narratives, I demonstrate how space, time, and studenthood converge to shape student experiences with the NTE. I focus on why, when, and where students engage with the NTE to highlight their collective roles. The analysis culminates in the introduction of “*the nexus*”, a conceptual tool reflecting the deeply intertwined role these three elements play in shaping student NTE experiences.

Why Students Engage with the NTE

The interplay of space, time and studenthood creates a distinctive backdrop that shapes student engagement with the NTE. In understanding their experience, it is important to understand why some choose to engage and how their habits may differ from those in other phases of life. In this first section of the chapter, I explore how the context of

student life, along with expectations and stereotypes, shapes their engagement, influencing their preferences and practices.

It is important to preface this section by clarifying that my intention is not to relay an exhaustive list of students' various motivations for attending the NTE. In fact, many other reasons, like the role of these experiences in friendship-making, are covered elsewhere (see *Chapter 8*). The aspects I discuss here, highlight the role of *more than space*, in setting the stage for student NTE engagement, hence their selection for discussion.

The context of Student Life

Being a student provides a unique life context (or, considering the themes of the chapter, space-time) which I argue is conducive to NTE engagement. This phase is a transitional period for many, characterised by moving away from family and a change in pace compared to the regimented structure of school, or the 9-to-5 working week. Scholars have also conceptualised university life as a “rung on the ladder between youth and adulthood” (Marsh, 2018: p.180), time out from the “*real world*” (Laura [P24, female]) for self-discovery, boundary pushing, growth and experimentation (Seaman and Ikegwuonu, 2011).

It can also be considered a “liminal” period (Holdsworth, 2009; Rutherford and Pickup, 2015; Tomlinson, 2024), given that it is typically confined to three or four years for the average undergraduate. Any influence that student life exerts on aspects of their life, like NTE engagement, is transient. Some participants emphasise the uniqueness of this time, contrasting it with life after graduation, which they refer to as the “*real world*” (Laura [P24, female]) where aspects of their student lifestyle were anticipated to diminish or attract negative judgement (see also Arria et al., 2016).

LAURA: I think students perhaps get a bit of like a free pass. People are a bit like easier on them. Like if they're going out, getting drunk all the time, there's not necessarily judgment from society because “*oh, they're a student... they just do it while they're a student*” [...] Let's say, real world adult went out every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday consistently

and was like hungover the next day, they'd probably get a bit more judgment than the student would.

By labelling others as “*real world adults*”, Laura [P24, *female*] implies that students are not yet fully mature adults, nor subject to the same pressures and expectations this brings. It is as if, instead, students experience an extended adolescence combined with elements of adult independence and autonomy. Their developmental phase, often described as “not quite” adulthood (Settersten and Ray, 2010) or “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000; 2007), provides them with new opportunities to engage freely with the NTE (Ogilvie, 2018) without the restrictions of youth or the scrutiny of “*real world adult*” life.

Laura [P24, *female*] also implies that the context of student life affords students some lenience (see also Conroy et al., 2021; Marsh, 2018; Sykes, 2017) in their NTE engagement, which disappears when they graduate. She frames this tolerance as a temporary privilege that will inevitably expire when students graduate. Students may see this time-bounded “*free pass*” (Laure [P24, *female*]) as motivation to engage with the NTE whilst they are still afforded this leniency. Similarly, Megan [P30, *female*] relays parental advice: They encourage her to make the most of this liminal phase and engage frequently with the NTE, before her circumstances change. The “*real world*” will limit these opportunities, with graduation being the milestone marking the shift (Arria et al., 2016).

MEGAN: When I came to uni my parents basically said to me: “*you might as well have fun now before you are stuck with all them responsibilities*”. Like, if I saw my parents go out and get drunk every Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, I'd go “*What you doing? You've got kids!*”. We don't have anything really weighing us down except from our degree. [...] So, we might as well enjoy ourselves. You only live once, don't you?

Megan's [P30, *female*] NTE engagement is shaped by both parental advice and the perceptions through which it is formed. Their advice emphasises time-sensitivity, highlighting the liminality of student life, which encourages her to “*have fun*” whilst she can (see also Piacentini and Banister, 2009; Riordan and Carey, 2019). She contrasts her situation as a student with the impracticalities of maintaining this level of NTE

engagement post-university, suggesting that they would face greater responsibilities after graduating. Making this point, she echoes Laura's [P24, *female*] suggestion that behaving in such a way in the "*real world*" would attract judgement.

The frequency of NTE engagement, as well as specific reference to mid-week attendance are highlighted by both participants. They imply such patterns change post-university, so they are encouraged to make the most of their student years. Ritchie et al. (2009) who observed drinking behaviours, similarly found a significant shift once students left university. While broader trends in student alcohol consumption may have shifted since Ritchie's research (see also Burgess et al., 2022; Fenton et al., 2024b; Hill et al., 2025; Keyes et al., 2019; Kraus et al., 2018; 2020; Törrönen et al., 2019) there remains a consensus that some form of further change occurs beyond university.

There is a sense that transitioning to life after university and "maturing out" (Lee and Sher, 2018; Windle, 2020) of this NTE engagement is tied to the assumption that they will face greater responsibilities after this time. It is crucial to acknowledge that Megan's [P30, *female*] perception, whilst shared by her parents, other participants in this research, and broader literature (Balloo et al., 2017; Conroy et al., 2021; Gambles et al., 2022), rests on a specific and somewhat idealised construction of the university student that I explored in the *Literature Review* and cover further in *Chapter 8*. This imagined student ideal overlooks the diverse realities of many students who juggle work (Hall, 2010; Neves and Stephenson, 2023), caregiving (Kettell, 2020; Neves and Stephenson, 2023) or other responsibilities alongside their studies. Interestingly, it may well be that the very perception of the responsibility-free student is enough to shape student NTE engagement. In other words, regardless of their circumstances, the widespread belief that student life is less burdened by responsibility may encourage them to prioritise leisure and "*fun*" (Megan [P30, *female*]) in the NTE, as they anticipate more constrained future opportunities.

Expectations and Stereotypes

Studenthood is also framed by societal expectations that influence NTE engagement. Frequent NTE attendance and associated behaviours, such as alcohol consumption have, and continue to be, viewed as typical, acceptable, and even expected aspects of student life (Conroy et al., 2021; Gambles et al., 2022; Murphy, 2023; Riordan and Carey, 2019; Tarrant et al., 2019). Such behaviours, seemingly inexcusable for “*real world adults*” (Laura [P24, female]), are instead casually attributed to “students being students” (Marsh, 2018: p.184). These expectations are held by society, portrayed in the media, and even to some extent perpetuated by universities and students themselves.

The concept of *Freshers’ Week*, for example, is presented as an introduction to university life for new students (Clark and Hall, 2010; Fuller, 2019). Some scholars even highlight its importance as an “initiation ritual to higher education” (Erevik et al., 2018: p.2). Typically sparse on timetabled teaching (depending on degree subject), the week is filled with several nights out and other “alcohol-dominated university social contexts” (Hill et al., 2025: p.4). Many students take part simply “because it is Freshers’ Week” (Fenton et al., 2024a: p.202) and that is what they are expected to do. *Freshers’ Week* conflates university culture with the NTE and sets expectations regarding student NTE engagement from their very first week of university life (Supski et al., 2017).

Later in the thesis (see *Chapter 8*) I discuss how NTE practices feed into what it means to be a student, given the role these experiences are expected to play. Yet, here, I explore this relationship in reverse, as interviewees indicate a prevailing expectation to attend nights out, driven by the perceptions that it is simply something “*students do*” and inherently “*part of being a student*” (Sarah [P6, female]). The expectations of student life influence their NTE experiences.

SARAH: It's sort of deemed, like, normal to go out... its what students do. It's sort of part of being a student is going out. That's sort of the way it's advertised. So, you just do because it's expected.

Sarah's [P6, *female*] behaviour is affected by the expectation that merges NTE engagement with being a student. Mentioning that this is the way student life is "advertised" (Sarah [P6, *female*]) ties in with media and popular culture depictions of young people (Calver and Michael-Fox, 2021; Holton and Riley, 2016). TV programmes like *The Young Ones* (1982), *Fresh Meat* (2011) *Big Boys* (2022) and *Freshers'* (2013) regularly show students' NTE engagement, portraying them as "party animals" and consumers of large amounts of alcohol or drugs. Although students still "occupy the top percentiles of consumption" (Oldham et al., 2020: p.236) despite changes in drinking habits (Fenton et al., 2024b; Hill et al., 2025; Holmes et al., 2022) the stereotype's veracity is irrelevant; it still feeds into perceptions and expectations which influence students' NTE engagement. Sarah [P6, *female*] attends the NTE as it is what she feels she ought to do. First-year students appear to feel this sense of obligation most strongly and even hold these perceptions about student life prior to attending university (see also Hill et al., 2025). Hope [P12, *female*], for example, who does not enjoy attending the NTE, felt as though she must "try it" mentioning specifically that she perceived that doing so "was the expectation".

HOPE: I rarely go out out to clubs. I did a bit in first year especially at the start because that was the expectation [...] you go out, you try it, but it's just not for me and it's not for everyone.

During her first year, Hope [P12, *female*] adhered to the expectations she perceived surrounding university life, leading her to engage with the NTE, as she believed it was a universal part of the student experience. Over time, and once she settled into the realities of being a student, she recognises that not all students attend the NTE and the perception underpinning these expectations was not universally applicable, relieving her sense of obligation. Her experiences mirror findings from the *Students, Alcohol and Drugs Survey* (SOS, 2023), which looked at young people's perceptions of some elements of university life prior to attending, compared to once there. Prior to attending, 54% of respondents thought students "got drunk" all or most of the time. This perception dropped to just 35% once they were at University (SOS, 2023).

When Students Engage with the NTE

Participants demonstrate a wide range of frequency and patterns in their NTE engagement. Some, like Hailey [P10, *female*], have some form of NTE engagement several times a week, whilst others such as Hope [P12, *female*] do so rarely, visiting only at specific times, like the end of an academic term, or not at all. In fact, at the time of her interview, in her final year, Hope [P12, *female*] had not attended the NTE since her first year of university. These patterns are shaped by elements of their university lives, or studenthood, which participants often referenced when describing their typical NTE engagement. Hailey [P10, *female*] mentions her weekly attendance in the context of balancing other university commitments:

HAILEY: Twice a week every week. Every Wednesday and Friday like religiously. [...] My degree is very intense so that was my downtime with my friends. I've got long labs most other days.

Her NTE engagement, from being a regular part of her weekly routine, to serving as a break or reward from the stresses of academic life, reflects the influence of her liminal university experience. Such aspects, echoed by other participants, will be examined in the following sections.

The University Timetable

Participant insight reveals patterns in weekly engagement, shaped by the university timetable. Whilst, as I have discussed, attendance varies between participants, the most popular days for students to attend the NTE are Wednesdays and Fridays, with Saturdays and Mondays also frequently mentioned.

MATT: There's, like, days you go out and days you don't. Like, you find on a Tuesday [the city] tends to be completely vacant [...] but then like on a Monday and Wednesday and Friday people tend to be going out because they just tend to be the bigger nights for the university. You know it'll be busy. You know there will be other students and stuff out. Sometimes they're a bit more tailored to students [...] like sports socials and stuff.

Once again, there is a clear pattern of students aligning their behaviours with what they perceive others are doing or what they believe they ought to do. They go on nights out on these days simply because that is when other students do. Midweek attendance, in particular, is almost exclusive to student populations, who are less restricted by 9-to-5, Monday to Friday, employment or the responsibilities cited earlier in this chapter by Laura [P24, *female*] and Megan [P30, *female*]. I argue elements of the university timetable, encourage, or at least facilitate, greater mid-week student NTE engagement.

Although student NTE habits are reportedly evolving (see Burgess et al., 2022; Fenton et al., 2024b; Hill et al., 2025; Keyes et al., 2019; Kraus et al., 2018; 2020; Törrönen et al., 2019) participants suggest that mid-week engagement remains a defining feature. This is enabled by their university schedules. The weekly timetable comprises compulsory “contact hours” (QAA, 2011), tailored uniquely to each student, consisting of lectures, seminars, labs and workshops. These sessions are a formalised teaching provision, designed to be complemented with independent study. Although the number of contact hours is reportedly increasing (Neves and Stephenson, 2023; Neves et al., 2024), students, on average, have 16 timetabled hours a week, with reported attendance sitting around 13.3 hours (Neves et al., 2024).

Outside of this structure, students have full agency over how they “spend” their “free” (Noonan, 2009), or perhaps more appropriately termed, “unallocated” time. This can include independent study, leisure, sport and employment, the latter of which in recent years has seen an increase due to the cost-of-living crisis (Busby, 2023; Neves and Stephenson, 2023; Neves et al., 2024). As explored later in the chapter, the amount of free time students feel they can allocate to non-academic pursuits throughout their academic careers fluctuates relative to work commitments (Caluzzi et al., 2022). Nonetheless, this free time remains comparatively greater and more flexible than that of those in school or full-time employment. Historically, resulting from this free time, students have attended the NTE more frequently than their non-student peers (see Hollands, 1995). For instance, the *REKOM 2022 Night Index* reports that 33.2% of students attended nights out 2-3 times a week, in contrast to just 18.7% of those in full-time employment (REKOM, 2022b).

Student mid-week engagement also shapes the NTE landscape. Capitalising on their availability during the week, many NTE venues target their offerings to the student market (see Figure 11) through cheap entry, drinks deals and student-only measures in place. These nights are billed as “student” nights and incentivise attendance through giveaways and cheaper drinks than are typically on offer during the weekend. Marketing them in such a way not only promotes student attendance, but at the same time, as Holton and Riley (2016: p.72) points out, excludes or “at the very least discourage[s] non-students”.

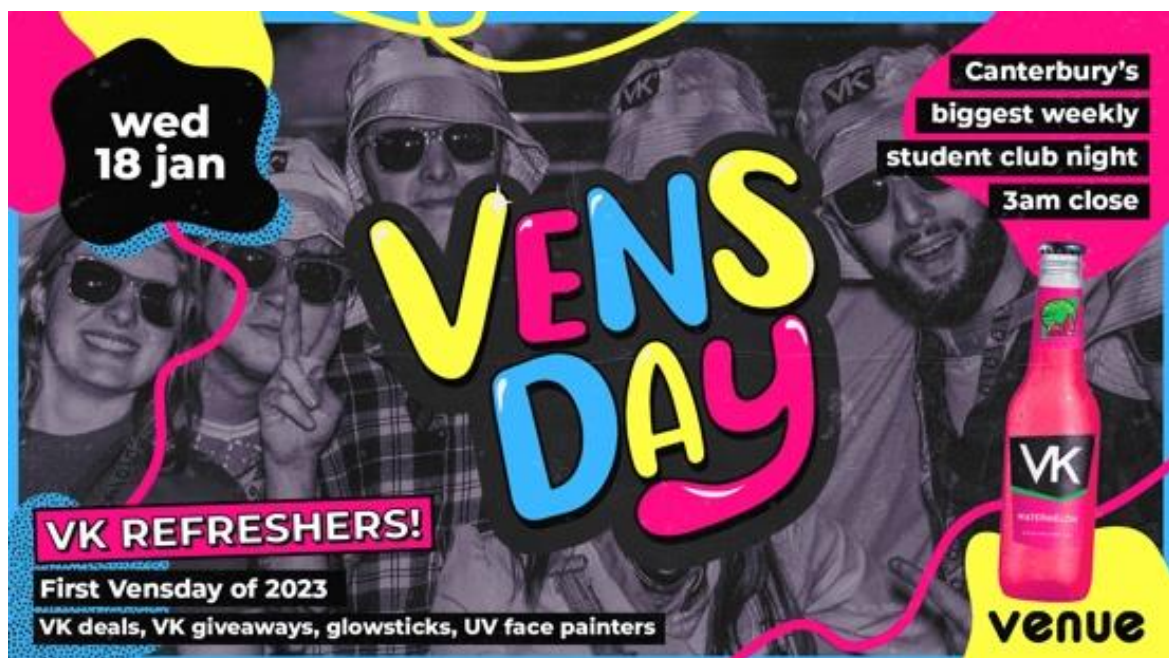
It is unsurprising that venues would cater to students in such a way during these times; It allows for more nights of operation, drawing in the “student pound” (Holton, 2015a) when other young adults may not be able to attend. In fact, the student customer base is often crucial for the survival of these businesses. Nowadays, with students reportedly attending the NTE less frequently than before (NTIA 2023; 2024b; Wood, 2024), mid-week nights out have been most hard hit in their absence, threatening the industry (Gruet, 2024).

In addition to providing students with more unallocated time, which they can choose to spend in the NTE, other elements of the university timetable also encourage this engagement. At many universities, especially those within the Russell Group, Wednesday afternoons are free from compulsory teaching allowing students time to participate in non-academic aspects of university life, such as sports. Teams often build routines around this, competing or training during the afternoon and socialising in the NTE later that evening. Participants confirmed these patterns, including Maisiey [P9, female], Henry [P14, male], Niamh [P19, female], Harvey [P20] and Harrison [P21], who play for university sports teams and regularly attend “socials” (Maisiey [P9, female]) after their matches on Wednesday nights.

MAISEY: We usually go out on a Wednesday because I’ll be playing hockey in the afternoon and then we always have our socials after in *StudentLand*. It helps that I’ve got nothing on a Thursday morning too (*laughs*) I can recover in peace.



Figure 11 shows two examples of the marketing used to advertise student club nights in university areas not involved in this research; mid-weeknights, with drinks deals and themes.
Source: Fatsoma.com



Maisey's [P9, *female*] university timetable allows for her to take part in sport on a Wednesday afternoon, which, as she explains, is routinely followed by a night out. She also highlights the advantage of having no contact hours on Thursday mornings, allowing her to "recover" the next day, presumably from a hangover or lack of sleep. This benefit aligns with a point made in *Chapter 4*, that the time associated with a night out is not only the night itself. This time to "recover", also part of the night out process, is aided by the arrangement and allocation of time in Maisey's [P9, *female*] timetable as well.

Whilst formalised time away from studying is not intended specifically for NTE engagement, there is a culture created around sports and post-match socialising including associated practices like alcohol consumption in team bonding (Fenton et al., 2024a; Partington et al., 2013). This is tied to the NTE, and specifically Wednesday nights.

Venues also tailor their offerings to this element of student life, as mentioned by Matt [P8, *male*] earlier in this chapter. Many venues brand their Wednesday night events as "sports night" (Figure 12) some even sponsored by the Students' Unions directly, cementing the idea it is part of the university culture.

Participants explain that during these nights, the experience would be different, shaped by different aspects including teams wearing university kits rather than typical night-out attire, to the "*rugby lot*" who are "*loud and laddish*"¹⁹ (Aaron [P1, *male*]) impacting their experiences in the crowd. It underscores the interconnections that space, time and studenthood have in working to shape NTE experiences. Not only do aspects like the academic timetable and the culture around university sport influence weekly patterns in students' engagement, but they shape the experiences of the NTE as well as the broader industry landscape.

¹⁹ The phrase "laddish" relates to the negative connotations of "Lad Culture" (see Dempster, 2011).



Figure 12 shows two examples of Wednesday night NTE events, targeted at sports teams, taking place in university areas not involved in this research. They include events sponsored by Students Unions [bottom] and those by promoters, who run events exclusively for students [top]. Source: Fatsoma.com



The Academic Calendar

In the *Methodology*, I touched on the variation in students' NTE engagement and workload across the academic year, which I referred to as 'peaks' and 'troughs' (Figure 13). This variability was one of the key reasons for conducting the data collection over an extended period, covering a full academic year. Features of the academic calendar prompt these NTE engagement patterns, as attitudes towards a night out, and their allocation of free time fluctuate.

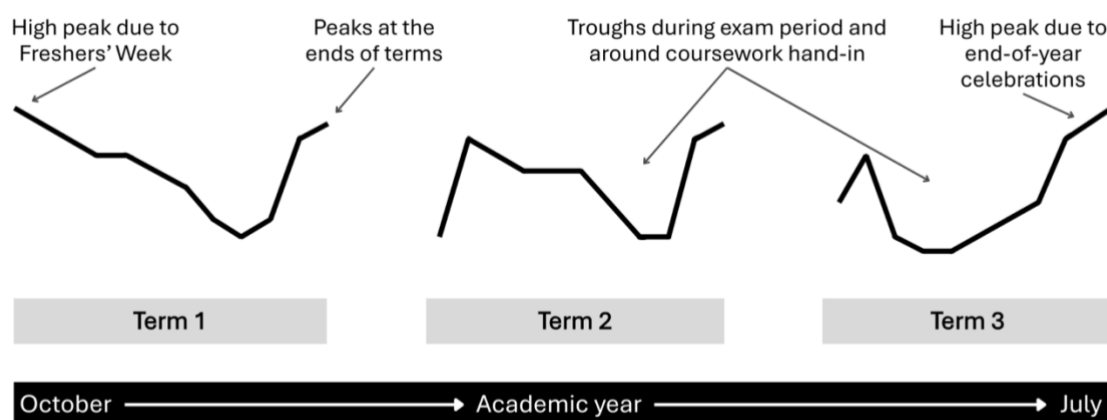


Figure 13 is a rough visual representation of the 'peaks' and 'troughs' of NTE engagement across the academic year, based on anecdotal evidence and insight from interviews and focus groups.

The university attended by participants in this research, structures the academic calendar into three 10-week terms, with breaks from teaching (vacation periods) between. Different times during these terms are linked to varying levels of NTE engagement, with the highest participation typically occurring at the end of each term, when exams are over, or coursework handed in.

SASHA: Uni terms are quite intense like you'll get people staying in because they've got too much on and can't go out, just counting down the days until they can go out again.

Sasha's [P13, female] explanation, exemplifies how student NTE habits are tied to the university calendar and their personal workloads. There are certain times of the year,

where exams or coursework deadlines occur, which result in fewer students attending the NTE, opting instead to stay in, to rest, revise or work. These periods are followed by ‘peaks’ in attendance, shaped by fewer timetabled obligations and a tendency for celebratory nights out, which are explored later in the chapter, influencing their behaviours. During these ‘peaks’, students who never, or rarely, attend the NTE during termtime may also take part in NTE leisure. James [P3, *male*] explains:

JAMES: You get those who go out basically every week like me and my mates, but I’ve always found that if it’s about to be the holidays then those who wouldn’t usually come out sometimes do. I guess, you know, because people are more available, if they’re done with Uni for the term, they’ve not got lectures the next morning, or work to be getting on with

Both Sasha [P13, *female*] and James [P3, *male*] explain that academic life provides obstacles, which prevent some going on nights out during termtime. At the ends of term, these obstacles no longer exist to the same extent, meaning they are now freer to attend the NTE. It reflects Hope’s [P12, *female*] personal experiences of the rare occasions she chose to attend the NTE:

HOPE: I think I only went out just at the end of first term, the end of Lent term, and then I think I went out just after my exams finished, [...] celebrating the end of the year [...] My flatmates did go out midweek, but I wouldn’t do that because I just had stuff to be doing

For Hope [P12, *female*] the end of term provided a scenario where workload and other “stuff” she needed to do decreased, and time freed up to allow for a night out.

The influence of the academic calendar on student NTE engagement patterns reveals some form of relationship between academic workload and NTE engagement. As students experience periods of heightened academic pressure, some respond by decreasing their NTE engagement, reflecting a prioritisation of their studies. As the pressure subsides, they engage more. These rhythms are driven by the placement of periods of workload across the academic calendar. The next section explores, more

deeply, the intricacies and contradictions of the relationship between academic work and NTE engagement.

It is worth also mentioning the vacation periods between the three academic terms and the affects they have on local NTE spaces. As Figure 13 illustrates, the pattern in engagement, with its ‘peaks’ and ‘troughs’, is not represented by one uniform line throughout the year but split into three, marking each academic term. Participants did not discuss their vacation-period NTE engagement. Those who referred to these breaks indicate that many students, especially domestic students, often depart university during these times, leaving *CityX* to return home. Whilst they may engage with the NTE elsewhere, these emigration patterns shape the NTE of *CityX* in their wake (Allinson, 2006; Holton and Riley, 2016).

My first-hand experience of visiting and working in a range of NTE venues during these times can attest to a perceptible attendance drop. It reaffirms the important role that student customers play for these venues. During vacation periods these spaces change as they cater to lower numbers and non-student clientele. The city’s nightclubs, *Glitter* and *Vortex*, operate in a reduced capacity, often one room, where they would typically open multiple. Meanwhile *StudentLand*, tailored exclusively to students, closes during this time. It demonstrates another way that student life shapes the whole local NTE industry, not only students’ engagement with it.

University Work and NTE Engagement

As trends across the academic year show (Figure 13), student NTE engagement fluctuates with university demands, often increasing when workloads lighten. However, I suggest the relationship between workload and NTE engagement is more nuanced than merely oppositional. Sometimes, times of greater workload and pressure are conducive to NTE engagement. Insights from COVID-19 are also included to illuminate pre-existing dynamics and reveal how the relationship between workload and NTE engagement was altered during this time.

Competing Priorities

Weekly and yearly student NTE engagement trends indicate that there is some level of competition between academic demands and NTE engagement. Although students have flexibility in allocating their free time, periods of increased workload or academic pressure create a perceived obligation to dedicate this time to their studies, rather than attending the NTE.

SARAH: I guess you've got to dedicate a fair bit of time to a night out, which is more of a realisation to me, now I'm in the later stages of uni. [...] A night out isn't as appealing when you have to think "*Oh, I can't really do that because then I won't be able to work tomorrow, and I'll be behind*". That's why I don't really do that anymore I need that time to work. So, I'm usually sensible and stay in.

Sarah [P6, female] perceives that academic pressures are rising as she progresses towards the end of her time at university. As a result, she feels less able to attend the NTE than previously and is more aware of the time that a night out involves. There is an ongoing push-and-pull between NTE engagement and academic work, as she views time spent on one is time directly taken from another. Closer to graduation, the pressures of academia outweigh her desire for NTE engagement. Labelling her decision to stay in and study as "sensible", frames her free time as a resource to be "spent wisely" (Noonan, 2009) within these temporal negotiations.

MATT: It messes up my work routine. That's my time where I'm productive and get my work done. Even if it's not that specific time of day I'd be going out, it's still the lack of sleep and stuff. It's a waste. If you go out until 4am on a Wednesday night, Thursday, you're not going to be able to do a full day of studying. You might not fall behind based on one night out, but I just hate not being productive.

Matt's [P8, male] NTE engagement conflicts with the patterns of his university life, which he believes have knock on impacts to his academic productivity. As such, NTE engagement becomes a "waste" of time. His comments that "*you might not fall behind based on one night out*" suggests that it is not only a lack of free time that forms a barrier

for NTE engagement, but also the pressures and obligations students put on themselves to succeed (see Caluzzi et al., 2021).

Batchelor et al. (2020) yielded similar findings, where participants facing academic pressures either completely chose to forgo some leisure experiences, felt guilty for doing so, or spent the leisure time worrying about academic commitments. The authors emphasise that participants did not suddenly lack free time but were impeded by “the sense” that they “*should* be using [their] time ‘productively’, ‘getting stuff done’” (Batchelor et al., 2020: p.98, emphasis in original). It mirrors Sarah’s [P6, *female*] concern that she “*needs that time to work*”. Such attitudes have been referred to as “temporal anxieties” (Leccardi, 2012) about what they ought to be doing to achieve personal success, affecting young people’s leisure (Batchelor et al., 2020; Chatzitheochari and Arber, 2012; Woodman, 2012). Temporalities of the past, present and future become intertwined: they recall time “wasted” on nights out of the past, which prevented them from studying; they consider the possible consequences of underperformance on their future; and as a result, they choose to spend their present time in a manner they view more “*sensible*” (Sarah [P6, *female*]) and “*productive*” (Matt [P8, *male*]).

A “Break” from Work and the Mundane

Although academic workload and NTE engagement may seem at odds, for some participants, the NTE space-time is a welcomed “*break*” [Maisey P9] or “time out” (Caluzzi et al., 2021; Riordan and Carey, 2019) from the responsibilities, pressures and even mundanity of academic life. I use “space-time” here to reflect that NTE is a different physical space to the everyday student spaces of university, but also a time, carved out, away from timetables and routines discussed throughout this chapter.

TOM: I go out because it’s fun. Like some days you’ve been in the most boring lectures, and you can just sit in in front of the TV and continue the boredom or get some mates together and have a big night out.

The “*fun*” and sense of enjoyment Tom [P28, *male*] hopes to receive from NTE experiences, contrasts that of the everyday university space-time, often stressful or mundane. It aligns with findings from Smith (2014: p.118) that individuals whose lives are “characterised by monotony and drudgery” are likely to “invest specific meaning into participation in the NTE” as a separate space-time, providing the fun and excitement as a contrast. Bøhling (2015: p.135) similarly found that, through experiences in the NTE, young people felt “transported away from the restraints and imperatives of school and work and into a freer and more playful time-space” which was further facilitated by the consumption of alcohol, to boost their mood. Tom [P28, *male*] seems to engage with the NTE for this very purpose, as if the experience would offer some form of cure to his boredom, induced by academic life. It mirrors wider research suggesting that young people use their leisure experiences as “not merely a matter of escaping everyday life” (Tutenges, 2023: p.113) but a “counter-balance to reality” (Moore and Miles, 2004: p.507).

Breaks become particularly important for some students, when pressures and workload rise, or their day-to-day lives become especially boring. It defies the notion that increased workload results in lower student NTE engagement as NTE experiences become a tool to unwind when university pressures become too much.

MAISEY: For me, it’s just kind of important to have a bit of fun... a bit of a break. Like when uni gets a bit intense we can just like all hang out, and maybe get a bit drunk and just see friends, have a dance.

Maisey [P9, *female*] sees NTE engagement as a way to recharge amidst “*intensities*” of university life. While some students experience a tension between nights out and academic commitments, she does not suggest any perceived negative impacts. Instead, she views these breaks as beneficial, helping her navigate the varying demands of university life.

Closures during COVID-19 underscored the importance of NTE engagement as a break from university pressures. With students confined to one physical space, at-home

reconstructions of the NTE (see *Chapter 5*) became attempts to replicate the “time out” that NTE engagement typically provides.

MEGAN: We just drank because there was nothing else to do. You’d finish uni, close the laptop and it’s like *that* was the next part of the routine, cracking open the gin (*laughs*). We couldn’t go out to let loose, so, I guess, just drinking in the kitchen kind of replaced it.

TOM: Yeah, I have to agree. We were living and doing uni in the same four walls, we couldn’t go out the way we usually would. So, just a few drinking games with the people in your flat was our way of trying to kind of you know have fun, away from that.

Although restricted to “*the same four walls*” (Tom [P28, *male*]) the pair mention they were able to create a space-time “away from” university work, as a break. With access to both university and NTE spaces restricted due to COVID-19 regulations, they utilised associated practices, like the consumption of alcohol, as a means of creating and managing space and time. It was more than just a tool to “*pass the time*” or “*have fun*” (Tom [P28, *male*]); it also served to differentiate and demarcate the space-times of university and leisure, even within the same physical location. Other research has examined the general role alcohol can play in youth “time out” (Batchelor et al., 2020; Caluzzi et al., 2021; Measham and Brain, 2005). However, this unique form of space (and time) making adds a new layer to this role. As lockdown provided new heights to life’s monotony, the breaks became regular features, part of their “*routine*” (Megan [P30, *female*]).

Celebration and Reward

In general, celebrating was a key motive for a night out for many participants. Whilst it is unsurprising that they would spend time in the NTE to celebrate things like birthdays, celebration was also often tied to workload and academic achievement. This further complicates the relationship between NTE engagement and university work.

FERGUS: I always like to go out to celebrate finishing exams or if I get good results back. It's like celebrating your hard work but then also sometimes the *results* of your hard work too. You can go out and celebrate and reward yourself.

Fergus [P4, *male*] attends the NTE both to reward his "*hard work*" after completing coursework or exams and to celebrate the "*results*" of his efforts when he receives his grades. It highlights that celebration can be tied to both the academic achievement but also personal effort, regardless of outcome. Although some students may reduce their NTE engagement in the name of academic achievement, when this is completed, they reward themselves with attending the NTE.

Students do not need to wait, as Fergus [P4, *male*] did, for submission or results to celebrate academic achievement and effort. Maisiey [P9, *female*] explains that occasionally, simply accomplishing a step towards a greater goal may warrant a celebratory night out.

MAISEY: Sometimes if you've just ticked something big off your 'to do' list, got a lot of work done or handed something in, you go out as a bit of a reward.

Whilst for Fergus [P4, *male*] the celebration is tied to hard work paying off, for Maisiey [P9, *female*] it could be something more every day, like completing a task. It shows that although the relationship between NTE engagement and workload is not straightforward, nor universally agreed by students, the two concepts are certainly intertwined. Time plays an important role here as the time these students spend in the NTE acts as a reward for time they have dedicated to their studies. Given the patterns in workload across the academic year, with coursework deadlines and exams falling at specific times, symbiotic patterns are created from these instances of celebratory NTE engagement.

COVID-19 highlighted the importance of NTE experiences in students' celebration and self-reward processes. Deprived of these experiences, some participants expressed a sense of disappointment at being unable to mark their achievements in the way they typically would.

SASHA: When my [coursework group] won a competition in lockdown, we actually discussed how we'd all have wanted to go on a night out to celebrate like normal and how sad we were that we couldn't.

Sasha [P13, female] frames NTE engagement as a “normal” response to academic success, closely linked to the intense workload that it precedes. Time that they previously felt obligated to dedicate to their studies over NTE engagement is now time they have earned back to celebrate.

The relationship between workload and NTE engagement is therefore more complex than initially portrayed. Whilst annual patterns in student NTE engagement reveal a trend that students attend the NTE less in times of heavy workload or greater pressure, such experiences are also used as an important tool by students, as a break or time out, and as a means of celebrating hard work and success. Workload and pressure still shape NTE engagement in these instances too, though the two entities do not work against each other, but complement each other as part of the university experience.

Time spent as a Student

Patterns in student NTE engagement evolve throughout their academic careers. Participants explain that engagement typically peaks during the first year and subsequently diminishes as they progress through university, consistent with other research on NTE engagement (Arria et al., 2016; Bewick et al., 2008; Chatterton, 1999; Holton, 2015a; 2017) and associated activities like pre-loading (Gant and Terry, 2017). Chatterton (1999: p.122) presents this change as an “unlearning of students’ rites and a distancing from the student infrastructure”.

Higher levels of first-year NTE engagement can, in part, be attributed to the role the NTE plays in helping students to settle into university life (see *Chapter 8*). As mentioned earlier, events like *Freshers’ Week*, which serve as an introduction to university, are strongly linked to the NTE. Although, this engagement is also influenced by the perceived differences in workload and academic pressures that students experience as they progress through their studies. Participants often note that grades earned their first year

“don’t count to your degree” (Laura [P24, female]). In fact, they are only required to pass to move on to their second year, where things become more *“serious”* (Matt [P8, male]) as these grades have a direct impact on their final degree outcomes (see also Wilcox et al., 2005).

LAURA: I think, if you're a first year, you probably go out a bit more because honestly, first year, as much as it's important, the grades don't count to your degree. So, I think people tend to go out a little bit more, because they're like, *“Well, I can justify getting a slightly lower grade”*

Laura [P24, female] emphasises the relationship between workload and NTE engagement, explored earlier in the chapter; she conveys a sense that NTE engagement competes with academic performance, as if spending more time in the NTE would result in lower grades. She draws parallels between going out *“a little bit more”* and receiving a *“slightly lower grade”*, indicating her perception that the former directly causes the latter. First-year students tend to perceive fewer consequences, even though they still believe there is a detrimental link between nights out and academic performance. Students in later years appear to be more affected by this belief and adjust their NTE engagement in accordance with the increased sense of academic pressure, contributing to their reported decline in engagement.

After first-year, not only do marks *“count”* (Laura [P24, female]) towards their degrees, but students explain that workload increases, correlating with reduced time spent in the NTE.

MATT: In my first year, I was going out a lot more than I currently am. I think that's possibly due to the fact that first year doesn't count towards your transcript. I think in my second year, it hadn't quite sunk in that it *mattered* and counted, especially in first term. So, I was going out quite a lot not realising that, like, it's serious now [...] Then it started to sink in a bit more. It's harder and more work. [...] I did start to knuckle down a bit more after that.

Even when his grades began to “count”, Matt [P8, male] still attended the NTE regularly, until he felt the workload increase in terms of both volume and rigor. After this point he started to “knuckle down”, focusing more on his studies and attending the NTE less frequently. It seems that for academic workload to impact NTE engagement, the student must feel a degree of pressure. First-years, whose grades have no impact on their final degree, and those in later years who have not yet confronted the, now “serious” (Matt [P8, male]), workload, are less affected than those already attuned to academic pressures.

Donna [P16, female], in contrast, exhibits an early awareness of the academic pressures and increased responsibilities associated with changing workloads, despite being a first-year.

DONNA: I go out quite a bit, maybe once every two weeks [...] I am doing reasonably well in my course. I think I found a decent balance currently, but I know that that's going to change as like we come to exams or next year [...] I'll need to focus more on my studies than the other stuff.

She anticipates a decline in her NTE engagement as academic pressures rise during exams and in subsequent years of study. This aligns with the observed engagement patterns across the year (Figure 13), discussed earlier in the chapter; academic pressure not only increases as students advance through university years, but also at key times of year, like exam season.

Interestingly, COVID-19 seemed to temporarily alter the prioritisation of university work over nights out. Typical trends indicate a lower NTE engagement at times with higher workload, yet the potential reopening²⁰ of the NTE appeared to outweigh these academic pressures.

²⁰ At the time of this focus group, the full reopening of the hospitality industry operating as it did prior to COVID-19 measures, was scheduled for 21st June. Instead, “Freedom Day” as it became known (Morton, 2021a) actually took place much later on the 19th of July.

EMMA: They're saying everything is opening again on the 21st of June but, like, although we've got an exam on the 22nd and 23rd I still think I'm going to go out on the 21st because I'm *not* missing out on that first night. If we are finally getting it back I'm there I can re-sit I don't care

HAILEY: you can't re-sit a night out (*both laugh*)

Even at a point in the year where academic pressures and workload were at their peak, Emma [P11, *female*] wanted to prioritise this NTE experience. The reopening of the NTE was an important unmissable experience in her eyes, for which she is willing to put her academic success at risk, giving it priority over her exams. Although nights out usually have lower priority than academic work, the inability to have such experiences during lockdown led to a temporary priority revaluation. She mentions the option to “*re-sit*” exams, usually a second chance, not to be taken lightly, after initial exam failure (Ricketts, 2010). Comparatively, Hailey [P10, *female*] jokes that “*you can't re-sit a night out*”, reflecting the unmissable landmark event of “Freedom Day” (Morton, 2021a).

Participants explain, aside from the increased workload and academic pressures, other factors contribute to the general decline in NTE engagement after first year. They indicate that while they once attended regularly, the novelty wore off, and for some, NTE experiences even became boring, leading to lowered engagement.

HENRY: You find, a lot of people, especially towards the end of uni in the later years, find it a bit repetitive. They don't necessarily tend to enjoy going to them as much because it's sort of like overexposure to the same stimulus every single time, same music same people and everything, so they go out less.

The overexposure to which Henry [P14, *male*] refers, is exacerbated due to the limited NTE offering in *CityX*, with only three nightclubs. The experiences become “*a bit repetitive*” (Henry [P14, *male*]) and affect their experience of the NTE space. The NTE loses its appeal, meaning that students who regularly attended throughout their earlier years, feel less inclined to engage later on.

MEGAN: First year 100% I was out all the time. Now I feel a bit like an old woman. I just don't enjoy it anymore now I'm not 18 anymore.

SASHA: I wonder whether part of it is like an age thing, because when I'm speaking to people from my course, who are quite a bit younger, it seems like it's just... quite cool. It's foreign to what they've been, kind of. allowed to do before, especially the ones who are like just 18 or 19. I think that you do get to a point that, maybe, you do grow out of it a little bit. Because the novelty wears off.

Both Megan [P30, *female*] and Sasha [P13, *female*] refer directly to age, and its impacts on NTE engagement, rather than simply academic year. Sasha [P13, *female*], for instance, was just finishing her first year at the time of her interview, yet as an older student, she had a different outlook than her coursemates. Both indicate one can 'age out' of the NTE's appeal, hence a decline in engagement.

The inability to attend the NTE during COVID-19, appeared to restore a sense of excitement and novelty for Sasha [P13, *female*] and others already familiar with these spaces. There was a sense that, prior to lockdown, these experiences had been "*taken for granted*" (Hailey [P10, *female*]).

SARAH: I was actually so excited! I felt like I was 18 again or something and everyone was in the same frame of mind. Like, everyone was looking to have an amazing night after being cooped up so long

HAILEY: I was so excited to get back out there. I just wouldn't take it for granted anymore. It was taken away from us and that was awful so maybe I appreciate it even more now.

Both Sarah [P6, *female*] and Hailey [P10, *female*] each separately describe the renewed sense of excitement that NTE experiences provided post-COVID. Sarah [P6, *female*] describes a feeling similar to when she was younger, linking to the idea that nights out tend to lose their appeal with age, whilst Hailey [P10, *female*] vows to not “*take it for granted*” or let it lose its appeal again, for fear of it being “*taken away*”. Even if it was “*a bit repetitive*” (Henry [P14, *male*]), life without NTE experiences seemed to be a worse alternative. That year, REKOM, a big name in the nightlife industry, reported attendance figures that had “out-performed all forecasts” as customers had an “enormous appetite” to return to the NTE (REKOM, 2022a). However, their subsequent figures (REKOM, 2022b; 2024) suggest this enthusiasm was not sustained, tied only to the initial excitement of the end to COVID-19 measures.

Where Students Engage with the NTE

Finally, elements of space, time and studenthood work together to impact where students engage with the NTE and their perceptions of space. Many of the spaces of a student night out have already been discussed in this thesis, from the spatial definitions of a “night out” (*Chapter 4*) to the affective atmospheres of various venues (*Chapter 5*). I build on the discussion to focus on students’ perception of NTE spaces as spaces for “them”. Regarding them in such a way influences the relationships they have with them and ultimately impacts their experience of the NTE space.

“Student” vs. “Local” Spaces

To facilitate idea generation and discussion, as a warmup activity in interviews and focus groups, some participants were asked to talk about the areas of *CityX* they associate with student NTE engagement, with a map of the city as a reference. They pointed out bars and nightclubs highlighted as venues they believed students frequent. Although this was not a primary data collection method, it generated unexpected insights: without prompt, participants also identified spaces they tended to avoid and that “*aren’t really for students*” (Megan [P30, *female*]) by comparison. These spaces were referred to as “local” spaces, not for students but for residents of *CityX*. Their distinction between

“student” and “local” spaces, suggests an underlying sense of segregation, shaping how students navigate and experience the city, and where they engage with the NTE.

This categorisation or “zoning” of space (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Pötschulat et al., 2021) is also evident in how participants discuss various NTE venues. Some spaces are described as “*a bit more local*” (Maisey [P9, *female*]), while others were deemed “*quite studenty*” (Ali [P23, *male*]) implying that whilst some venues may be one or the other, the majority may sit on a wider student-local spectrum.

JASMINE: Some places, you know, where the locals go, the students don’t really touch them. But other than that, the reality is a lot of places serve a mix [of student and local customers] they are just kind of slightly more sort of one or the other. Take ‘spoons²¹ for example, that’s quite a student space I’d say because its cheap and well... loads of students always go there on their nights out. [it] just has like this... student feel. But plenty of locals go in too. I guess what I mean is it doesn’t have to be *student-only* like *StudentLand* in order to be kind of seen as “student”, you see?

Jasmine’s [P25, *female*] description of a space having a “*student feel*”, especially as she cannot identify what it is, gives the impression that students within the space, and her connection to the student lifestyle, influence the affective atmosphere (Anderson, 2009) which impacts her experiences and perceptions of the space. However, perceptions of venues as “student” or “local” do not mean they exclusively serve these groups of people. A space may become perceived as “*studenty*” (Max [P22, *male*]) for a variety of reasons; from aspects marketed and tailored towards students, to simply having a larger proportion of students as their customer-base. There is also a sense that such perceptions are shaped by peer influence; they are guided by other students on which “local” spaces to avoid, and encouraged to attend others, popular amongst students. It explains why participants, even though new to university life (e.g. David [P18, *male*] and Max [P22, *male*]), had already formed spatial perceptions, despite their limited familiarity with *CityX* at the time of this research. Such social learning processes (see

²¹ Jasmine [P25] is referring to *Wetherspoons*, a chain of pubs operating nationwide, known for selling inexpensive drinks (jdwwetherspoon.com)

also *Chapter 8*) reinforce perceptions of spaces as either “student” or “local”, irrespective of the actual demographics they serve, and often in the absence of individual experiences in the space.

Beyond classification as “local” or “student”, participants convey a deeper sense of territoriality or ownership as they referred to these “student” spaces as “*our spaces*” (Fergus [P4, male]) or “*for us*” (Jack [P2, male]). It creates the impression of a “divided city” (Hollands, 1995), as students “*don’t really touch*” (Jasmine [25])), or avoid, areas dominated by locals and “student” spaces are “no go zones” (Hubbard, 2013: p.268) for local residents.

Student perceptions frame locals as the “Other” ironically rendering them “out of place” (Aden et al., 2010) in parts of the city. This dynamic is not a unique feature of *CityX*. Other research has explored the relationships between students and locals, also referring to them as “town and gown²²” (Addie et al., 2014; Aden et al., 2010; Holt, 2010; Lazzeroni and Piccaluga, 2015). As *Chapter 8* will go on to explore, these constructions of the “Other” are often tied to social class, with certain assumptions made regarding the working-class local, compared to the predominantly middle-class “typical student”. For instance, Fergus [P4, male], to this effect, terms one of the “local” spaces as “*rough*”, a negative adjective with well-documented ties to the working-class and their spaces (Burns, 2017; Maynard, 1989; Nayak, 2006).

Students interpret and navigate spaces differently based on whether they perceive them as “student” or “local”. As *Chapter 7* will explore further, “local” spaces are frequently viewed as riskier, impacting student experiences of the space, as this perception influences their behaviours and attitudes. In contrast, “student” spaces are generally viewed in a more positive light, even when aspects of their socio-material assemblage might be considered undesirable in other contexts.

²² The terminology relates to the academic gowns worn by students, traditionally during graduation (Martin et al., 2005).

MEGAN: *StudentLand* is honestly shit, if you think about it. It's an old warehouse or something but it's cheap and we love it. It's shit but also great it's... our... sort of space.

Although material elements may be considered unappealing, her sense of ownership for this “student” space transforms them into something to be cherished.

MATT: In student clubs [the music is] all cheesy and like uncool [...] but its all good fun when you're drunk. I prefer non-cheesy music but there's a time and a place for it, and a Wednesday at *StudentLand* is certainly that place!

Like Megan [P30, *female*], Matt [P8, *male*] describes aspects of the space negatively, labelling the music as “*uncool*”. Yet, as a “student” venue these elements are reinterpreted as aspects they seem to cherish and enjoy. At different times, or in different spaces, these elements would be unappealing, yet for *StudentLand* they are discussed affectionately. There is a sense that both time and being a student impact the affective atmosphere (Anderson, 2009) of the space, along with other assemblage elements like the impact of intoxication (i.e. “*when you're drunk*”). Elements that might traditionally contribute to a negative experience (e.g. being “*shit*,” “*cheesy*,” or “*uncool*”) are reframed through the relationship students have with the space, to become embraced.

Becoming a “Student” Space

Although students distinguished between “student” and “local” spaces, when mapped out, the city appeared largely integrated, blurring these distinctions. Perhaps due to *CityX*'s size, or its limited NTE offering, neither students nor locals could assert exclusive ownership over large areas or venues. Participants acknowledge that other university cities are more segregated:

MAX: *CityX* is pretty mixed as its only small. I have friends who live in other cities and there are these proper little student neighbourhoods where like the bars clubs and restaurants around will basically be for students if not like exclusively then just because that's where they live. [...] But yeah *CityX* is weird because whilst there's some “studenty” areas it's not as like obvious.

The few exceptions to this were one or two local pubs, labelled “*dodgy*” (Laura [P24, female]) or “*rough*” (Fergus [P4, male]) by participants and actively avoided as a non-student space, and *StudentLand*, the student-only nightclub. The former became a “local” space through students’ “self-segregation” (Holton and Riley, 2016) practices, whilst the latter is “student” due to entry policies. It is important to acknowledge that these perceptions are also tied to the aforementioned constructions of the working-class local, with undertones of associated prejudice. To label the spaces “*dodgy*” and “*rough*” is to, in effect, label locals as such. This is explored further in *Chapter 8*.

MEGAN: What I like about *StudentLand* is it is really for the students. Only students go there, locals aren’t allowed and even the people who work there and stuff, they’re all students.

Not only is *StudentLand* marketed specifically to students; with cheap drinks, low entry fees and mid-week themed nights, like those discussed earlier in the chapter (Figure 12), it only permits student clientele. The fact, as Megan [P30, female] mentions, they only employ students, also adds to the sense of student exclusivity in this space. Even if locals wanted to attend, they are prohibited from doing so. This is policed through showing proof of student identity at the front door.

JASMINE: You have to show your student ID to get in [...] It’s not that strange though, lots of student-only clubs do it and you’re showing your actual ID for proof you’re 18 anyway.

Jasmine [P25, female] explains that whilst presenting her university ID card is unique to this venue in *CityX*, it does not feel unusual for her. Since she is already required to show identification for age verification under licensing regulations (Licensing Act 2003), adding her university ID alongside it does not seem “*strange*.” The policy preserves the venue as a “student” space, by reducing the student identity to a physical object – an ID card – that serves as a mechanism for spatial control. Their student identities shape the experience of the NTE space as it determines access.

Measures to maintain *StudentLand*'s exclusivity extend beyond entry policy. The "*StudentLand* Bus" transports students directly from the university to the venue, meaning that those who live on campus never really exit the "student" space, despite travelling across the city. David [P18, *male*] refers to this experience as remaining within a student "*bubble*" (see also Sykes, 2017).

DAVID: There's actually a bus that gets you from campus specifically for the club.

DONNA: Yeah the *StudentLand* Bus!

DAVID: Yeah so you're picked up from where all the students live and taken to where all the students party, we are very much in a bubble (*laughs*).

Having a clear "student" space, that they can inhabit and feel a sense of ownership towards, is argued to be particularly important for first-years who are establishing themselves as students (see Holton, 2017). They engage with the NTE from within this bubble, attending "student" spaces that are defined by additional processes such as the bus and venue entry policy.

Spaces are not always perceived as "*studenty*" (Max [P22, *male*]) through such clear-cut processes, they are often more subtle and involve processes like "informal colonisation" (Chatterton, 1999: p.120) of space. Prior research discusses a form of gentrification that occurs when students move to and cluster in certain areas – "studentification" (Chatterton, 2010; Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Hubbard, 2008). This is less formalised than showing student ID to be granted admission, yet it is still a process of socio-spatial segregation and marginalisation, resulting in "student" spaces.

The concept suggests that businesses are drawn to areas occupied by students, to cater to them (Chatterton, 1999). For example, Headingley in Leeds, Jesmond or Heaton in Newcastle, and Fallowfield in Manchester have business and services drawn in by the potential of the "student pound" (Holton, 2015a: p.32) as they are heavily populated by students. Max's [P22, *male*] quote from earlier in the chapter, describing the student

neighbourhoods of his friends' university cities, refers to the results of these studentification processes.

These spaces become student spaces, simply because they are set up in areas occupied by the students. They do not have the same entry policies as student-only spaces, though students will likely form much of their customer-base given their proximity to student dwellings. In fact, Laura [P24, *female*] describes her experience of attending a pub near where she lives as “*taking over*” a space she would otherwise consider “local”:

LAURA: I do think in general pubs in *CityX* are more for the locals, but I live in quite a studenty area and the pub at the end of our road does a pub quiz on a Thursday and that's basically all students. Like, we take over completely.

Notably, the night she mentions, which is popular amongst students, falls mid-week. It reinforces arguments made earlier regarding student weekly patterns of NTE engagement. Their timetables and free time allow for mid-week engagement and the venues adapt to suit student customers during these times. It gives the impression that such perceptions of space may be also tied to time.

Time-limited claims to space

Whilst there was no absolute spatial segregation in *CityX*, participants explain that many venues which serve both students and locals, are perceived variably on different days of the week. The same venue may be considered a “student” space on certain days whilst “local” on others. Any perceived claims to space or sense of student territorialisation are therefore also affected by time.

ALI: *Vortex* is technically open to the public, so you do see kind of different groups... different age ranges [...] You'll have a mix [of student and local customers] especially on a weekend. Weekdays... not so much... not so many locals, it's mostly students then and that changes the vibe

JACK: Some are more for locals and others that are more for us. Other than *StudentLand* which is obviously just for students, you'll find [with] other clubs, you only really get students in there mid-week. On the weekend, locals go in there so it's not really as popular for students.

FERGUS: There's, absolutely, like, *our* spaces in town, like, kind of... *dominated*, I guess, by students even though it's not like *exclusive* to us, like *StudentLand*. Like... *Vortex* for example on a Monday. You know it's not really exclusively for us, but it is going to be... *majority* students.

Fergus [P4, *male*] acknowledges that in shifting to a "student" space, the venues become "*dominated*" by students, outnumbering the local clientele. It is no surprise that this domination occurs mid-week, aligning with student NTE engagement patterns discussed earlier in the chapter. Locals are more likely to be burdened by 9-to-5, Monday to Friday, working responsibilities, impeding their NTE engagement on these days and resulting in a student-majority crowd. On the weekends, students are aware of a strong "local" presence in these venues, so many opt for alternatives.

Shifting from "student" to "local" alters the experience of these venues, despite other elements remaining the same. Ali [P23, *male*], for example, cites a change in "*vibe*". It ties in with discussions in the previous chapter (*Chapter 5*), implying that time and people within the space (i.e. students or locals) are part of the assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988), influencing the space's affective atmosphere (Anderson, 2009).

Time also has an impact on the relationships participants have with "student" spaces. As their time as a student is limited, once they graduate their access to spaces exclusively for students is revoked. This in turn affects their NTE engagement as they may find alternatives less appealing.

SARAH: The majority of the time, if I go out, I would only go to *StudentLand* whereas if I obviously graduate, I'd no longer be a student and I'd have to go to a club just for the public. Which I'm not too keen on, well... very often at least.

However, Sarah's [P6, *female*] opinion was not shared by all. Participant insight reveals that as they progress through their academic careers, over time, their relationships with "student" spaces seems to alter.

JAMES: I go to clubs with a mixture of people, especially now I'm older. I don't want to just be surrounded by 18-year-old students. If it's just students, it tends to be... (*laughs*) I don't know, it's just not for me anymore. I prefer a mixture of people, so I go for the venues with a mix.

CHARLOTTE: I think student-only feels a bit safer at first and is a nice sort of intro to clubbing in first year. But at the same time, now, I like the idea of being able to get to know people who aren't just from university.

James [P3, *male*] and Charlotte [P27, *female*] describe the appeal of "student" spaces during the early stages of their academic careers, being in the safety of their student peers. Remaining in the student "*bubble*" (Daniel [P15, *male*]) is common for first-years for this reason and explains their preference for these "student" spaces. Yet, with time, as they age and progress through their years at university, they "*branch out*" (James [P3, *male*]) to locations that also serve local customers.

JAMES: We've now branched out a bit, we go to the places we find near us. Like, in second year we found a pub near us with £2 pints. If we'd just stuck to, you know, where the students go we wouldn't have found it. You just sort of walk around and find places the more you're comfortable in the city I guess.

James [P3, *male*] goes on to explain that part of this exploration, impacting where students engage with the NTE, is tied to being more familiar with the city than before. In *CityX* students typically live on campus in their first year and move into the city for subsequent years of study. He mentions visiting spaces near his house, that are not typical "student" venues, which he otherwise would not have visited, reflecting the change in his levels of comfort towards the city.

These findings are similar to research conducted by Holton (2017: p.74), who asserts that, after first-year, student geographies broaden, “opening up” the city, beyond the spaces they attended during their first year. Crucially, he notes that the spaces they select as they branch out can be considered “quasi [non]student spaces”. He defines these as: “night-time social spaces, often run by student-friendly promoters, in which students can socialise inconspicuously among non-students while remaining in the relative security of their peers.” (Holton, 2017: p.74).

Although I discuss elements of student community and identification in greater detail in *Chapter 8*, it seems this change in approach to NTE venues is tied to their student identities, or studenthood. Attending student-only spaces and remaining within the bubble (David [P18, male]) is important for first-year students who are establishing their sense of identity as students. They are in the process of learning how to be a student, so attend spaces known and frequented by other students. They also position themselves against the local “other”, and hence avoid “local” spaces, to strengthen their sense of student identity. But beyond this, as they move off-campus and into the city. They no longer need to remain within this “bubble” to consider themselves a student. They can distance themselves from “student” spaces without it impacting their sense of belonging within the student community.

Conclusion

By exploring why, when and where students engage with the NTE, this chapter has highlighted the roles of space, time and studenthood (defined earlier in the chapter) in shaping these aspects of their NTE experiences. I build on the discussion from *Chapter 5*, to acknowledge that whilst space is important, it is not the sole influential factor. Time and studenthood also play essential roles.

Student life represents a unique time-bounded context, influenced by stereotypes, expectations, institutional factors, future pressures and the process of establishing oneself as a student. Space, time and studenthood all feed into this context and affect

student perceptions, behaviours and attitudes, ultimately impacting their NTE engagement. As these aspects change, as they near graduation, face greater workloads, and become more familiar with their city, so does their engagement.

Throughout the chapter, I make multiple references to space, time, and studenthood. Notably, these elements are not discussed in isolation. It would be challenging to separate the three elements and demonstrate their individual impacts on shaping the NTE experience, because, in reality, they do not work alone. Even in *Chapter 5*, when I highlighted the role of space and the NTE affective atmosphere (Anderson, 2009), time was also referenced. It highlights that, whilst looking beyond the role of space is important, focus should be applied to the collective influence of these three elements, in shaping the student NTE experience. With this in mind, I propose conceptualising their combined effect as a “nexus”.

Revisiting The Nexus

The influences of space, time and studenthood cannot be fully understood in isolation. As this chapter has shown, they continuously interact with one another to shape student NTE experiences. I propose that it is useful to conceptualise this interrelationship as a “nexus”, which I already briefly introduced in the *Introduction*. This offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding how student NTE experiences are (re)shaped and (re)produced. Closing this chapter, I revisit this conceptualisation expanding upon the framework further.

The nexus highlights how these three elements are held together as part of a dynamic constellation, more than the sum of its parts. They are deeply intertwined, and changes to one aspect affects the others, rippling through the structure to have wider-reaching implications on student NTE experiences as a whole. The nexus captures this interdependence and is therefore a useful framework for capturing the fluidity and dynamisms of these experiences and their collective construction through space, time

and studenthood (refer back to Figure 1 in the *Introduction* for an illustration of the nexus).

Beyond its internal dynamics, the nexus is also susceptible to external changes in the broader social, political and economic landscape. My research frequently illustrates how COVID-19 disrupted the nexus, reshaping elements of space, time and studenthood, to alter the experience of a night out, but also its very definition (see *Chapter 4*). Likewise, recent pressures, such as the cost-of-living crisis (Institute for Government, 2022), influence components of the nexus, shaping the broader NTE experience. It highlights that while the nexus provides the internal structure for understanding student NTE experiences, it remains vulnerable to external pressures.

In subsequent chapters of this thesis, the nexus will serve as a key analytical framework that foregrounds the essential roles played by space, time and studenthood. Specifically, it is used to explore the dynamics of risk and pleasure in student NTE experiences, as well as considering their broader connections with student life. It ultimately serves to deepen understanding into the role these experiences play in what it means to be a student today.

Chapter 7: Student Experiences of Risk and Pleasure

In the previous chapter, I introduced the idea of *the nexus*: a theoretical framework for understanding the interconnected roles of space, time and studenthood, in shaping students' night-time economy (NTE) experiences. By taking an intentionally broad approach, I demonstrated how these three elements influence the *why*, *when* and *where* of student NTE engagement. This chapter narrows the focus, using the nexus to explore the lived experience of this engagement. Acknowledging that capturing every aspect of participants' NTE experiences in a single chapter would be impractical, discussion centres on risk and pleasure.

Not only do risk and pleasure feature heavily in participant narratives of the NTE, but they also serve as overarching terms, encompassing several sub-topics from safety and governance to intoxication and friendship. I intentionally couple them in my analysis, as, despite being quite different concepts, student accounts of the NTE make them difficult to separate, intertwined as part of the NTE experience. Though risk can certainly occur at the expense of pleasure, the two cannot be considered mutually exclusive (Blackman, 2011; McBride, 2019). In fact, prior research has suggested they go “hand in hand” (Jayne et al., 2006: p.464) in the NTE, as the “seductions of transgression” (Hobbs, 2003: p. 46) form part of the pleasure.

The nexus can help us to understand participants experience of risk and pleasure affecting their perceptions of the NTE and their behaviours, as they seek to maximise pleasure and minimise risk. Highlighted in the previous chapter, the nexus is susceptible to perturbation from external forces, impacting the NTE experience. In this chapter, I illustrate this further, exploring the impact of COVID-19 on the experience and very understandings of NTE risks and pleasures.

Risk and Pleasure in a Student Context

Before unpacking participant experiences of risk and pleasure, it is important to situate these concepts within the wider lives of students. Just as the previous chapter demonstrated the role of studenthood in shaping overall NTE engagement, it too uniquely shapes student experiences of risk and pleasure, particularly related to expectations, autonomy, liminality and lenience. These circumstances distinguish students' experiences of risk and pleasure from those of other young people, covered elsewhere (see Abidi; Hennell et al., 2021; Sykes, 2017; Willoughby et al., 2021).

Students are often stereotyped as “dangerous young people who irresponsibly and selfishly seek pleasure and display a lack of respect and care of others” (Pennay, 2012: p.402). However, I, like other critics, dispute this overgeneralisation (Greene et al., 2000; Lupton and Tulloch, 2002), suggesting instead student risk engagement is more nuanced, tied to autonomy and informed choice (Blackman, 2011; Fry, 2011; Graham et al., 2018; Woodrow and Moore, 2021).

For many students, university represents a key step towards independence, as they move away from home and navigate life without parental oversight and authority. Their newfound autonomy allows them to make choices (Fry, 2011; Graham et al., 2018; Woodrow and Moore, 2021) about the risks they take and the pleasures they seek. For some, this is the first opportunity they have to engage with the risks and pleasures of the NTE, for others the experiences are transformed through this added layer of freedom university life provides:

TOM: [Going on a night out is] really different at uni, a new experience *entirely* because you've not got like parents and stuff its just more *free* I guess you can do what you want without them nagging.

Whilst it would be reductive to claim that all NTE experiences involve risk engagement, it is the autonomy to navigate risk and pleasure on his own terms that leads Tom [P28, *male*] to feel “*free*”. With increased personal agency now he is at university, he is able to make independent choices about his NTE engagement, unconstrained by parental

“*nagging*”. Studenthood has reshaped his experience of and engagement with risk, pleasure and the NTE.

In *Chapter 6*, I unpacked some of the expectations and stereotypes tied to studenthood, alongside the idea of a “*free pass*” (Laura [P24, female]) for students as they are afforded lenience to frequently engage with the NTE. Here, I develop this notion further as a degree of lenience is also applied to student risk-taking, particularly surrounding the consequences for engaging in risky, or even dangerous and violent behaviours in the NTE.

CHARLOTTE: I don’t know how true it is, but I’ve heard that for a lot of stuff at *StudentLand* they don’t report it to the police they report it to the university deanery, which is obviously lower stakes in terms of consequences and stuff. [...] It’s not like *real* trouble. [...] you maybe receive a fine or ‘slap on the wrist’ so people don’t take it that seriously.

Whether or not *StudentLand* reports such instances to the police, the very belief they do not means that there are “*lower stakes*” (Charlotte [P27, female]) perceived for student risk-taking. Consequences are taken less seriously, promoting engagement with risky behaviours before they enter the “*real world*” (Laura [P24, female]), with real consequences. Her perceptions may also not be that far-fetched, as research by Marsh (2018) suggests universities provide a “safety net” as their pastoral provisions allow leniency towards risk taking (see also Carlisle, 2017; Sykes, 2017). Staff, for example, report transgressions back to the university rather than the police, lessening the associated consequences (Marsh, 2018). It means that students who engage with risk, or behave in dangerous ways, may not face the same consequences as other young people who do the same, due to the environment the university fosters. Marsh (2018: p.184) explains “students are being given license to act in particular ways, reinforcing the idea that behaviour that may be deemed misdemeanours from nonstudents... is reinterpreted as just ‘students being students’”. The risk is reframed through studenthood, and perceiving they face few or no consequences, encourages participation with risk.

In their pleasure-seeking NTE experiences, students take risks, are at risk, and are portrayed as posing risks to others (Blackman and Rogers, 2017a; Woodrow and Moore, 2021). Understanding their experiences of risk and pleasure in the NTE requires consideration of this context. University life presents a unique environment marked by its liminality, institutional frameworks, and societal expectations. Together, these elements promote and encourage risk engagement for pleasure, positioning both as key aspects of the student NTE experience, and distinguishing students' experiences from those of other young people.

The NTE – A Space-Time of Risk and Pleasure

The NTE is regarded as a space-time inherently connected to both risk and pleasure, shaping experiences that occur within it. Such associations stem from lived (or even learned (Brands and Schwanen, 2014)) experiences, but also the notion that specific NTE characteristics create an atmosphere of risk and pleasure. In this portion of the chapter, I explore aspects that contribute to this atmosphere (Anderson, 2009), highlighting how they are shaped by the space-time-studenthood nexus. Although discussed individually, these elements operate collectively within the broader assemblage, contributing to the NTE affective atmosphere explored in *Chapter 5*. These dynamics create associations between feelings of risk and pleasure, and the NTE space-time. I begin by discussing these overarching associations.

It is unsurprising that the NTE is associated with pleasure, as it is frequented for the very purpose of leisure and enjoyment. Many participants mention positive and pleasurable times they have spent in such spaces. Moreover, *Chapter 5* unpacked that the NTE is generally associated with “*good vibes, good energy*” (Maisey [P9, female]) with an atmosphere reflective of this. Its reputation as a space and time for pleasure motivates attendance and is just one reason why participants express they were excited to return after the pandemic. Despite these associations, the space-time of the NTE is also associated with heightened risk. This reputation is evidenced in the concerns raised by my University Ethics Committee, discussed in the *Methodology* chapter. NTE patrons are

framed as “risk-takers” (Hennell et al., 2021; Rigakos, 2008), as well as being more *at risk* than in other forms of leisure, in different spaces, at different times (Abidi; Brooks, 2008; Hutton, 2016; Le et al., 2022; Wadds, 2015). Its reputation has also been affected by its portrayal in planning, policy and licencing, as some unruly thing to conquer, control and regulate (Herrick, 2011; Talbot, 2006). Participants echo these associations, informed by their experiences of crime and disorder, but also the belief that the space-time is simply connected to risk.

HAILEY: I’d definitely class [the NTE] as a risky space, yeah. There’s so many instances you see of actual fights or sexual assaults or spiking and things. Even if it’s not happened to you, you know that [it happens]. But also, the clubs themselves, they’re dark, they’re crowded even if it’s not the actual... sort of... you know... criminal activity you see, there’s certainly the chance for it, just because of the environment that’s created, and people act on that.

AARON: It’s just part of the experience really... unfortunately. You don’t always feel *at risk*, it’s just you know entering into those areas at night and stuff, there’s *potentially* going to be more risk or trouble and what not, than your average day.

Hailey [P10, *female*] describes her perception as being shaped by instances of crime and disorder, even though she has not directly experienced them. She cites characteristics of the NTE space-time that heighten the likelihood of these behaviours, thereby increasing risk. The key idea participants convey is that the space-time is associated with the potential for various risks, therefore they perceive it to be risky. Yet, as Aaron [P1, *male*] observes in the quote above, this is not always a conscious focus during their experiences. Their insight suggest that behaviours, attitudes and emotions are all affected within the NTE upon “*entering [these] areas at night*” [Aaron P1], in ways that may differ or be less significant in other spatio-temporal contexts. It aligns with suggestions made by Wüllenweber and Burrell (2024: p.4), that the NTE “is an example of an environment with both spatial and temporal elements that can transform it into a crime attractor or generator” (see also Cozens and Greive, 2011). Whilst the authors

refer specifically to crime, space and time work to shape the generalised experience of risk.

The NTE also provides opportunities for, and even encourages, risk-taking; Hailey [P10, *female*] notes that “*people act on*” the influence of the atmosphere. Her point links back to one made by Steve [P29, *male*] discussed earlier in the thesis (see *Chapter 5*), where rules and social codes are abandoned within the NTE time-space (Goulding et al., 2009) as people engage more with risky, or even criminal behaviours, which would be subject to greater judgement in other contexts (Smith and Raymen, 2018).

STEVE: [...] Once you step foot into the building, people just act completely different. Men go on sex rampages, assaulting women... racial segregation... all sorts that just wouldn't go on anywhere else.

However, it is not just the attitudes of the individuals engaging with risk that alters, but also the tolerance of others in the space towards them.

FERGUS: People kind of get away with stuff they wouldn't on your average day too [...] it's like different levels of what you choose to let slide, I guess.

The NTE is therefore a complex space-time, the resulting atmosphere (Anderson, 2009) is not “mono-affectual” of either risk or pleasure but aligns with discussions from earlier in the thesis, that multiple atmospheres can co-exist within a space at a given time (Anderson and Ash, 2015). Participants encounter atmospheres of both risk and pleasure in the NTE. The specific components of the spatial assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) they identify as contributing to the atmosphere, tend to contribute to both dimensions. In the sections that follow I discuss elements of the space that participants refer to in their accounts demonstrating their perceptions of the NTE as associated with both risk and pleasure.

An Assemblage of Risk and Pleasure

There are elements of the NTE assemblage that contribute to its association with risk and pleasure. In the sections that follow I briefly unpack some of these elements. However, it is important to emphasise that they do not operate alone, but work in consort to contribute to an atmosphere, affecting students' experiences of the space-time.

Music

In earlier chapters of this thesis, I have begun to explore the key role played by music in students' NTE experiences, from being part of what makes a "good" experience (Max [P22, male], Chapter 5), to being involved with the very definition of a night out (Hope [P12, female], Chapter 4). The affect induced by music is described by some as a "musical force" (Bøhling, 2014: p.372) that stimulates the crowd on the dancefloor, affecting their moods, actions and even movements as they dance rhythmically to its loud beats (see Demant, 2013; Forsyth, 2009; Welch and Fremaux, 2017). It is associated with pleasure in the NTE as the mood or tone it affects on the dancefloor is generally positive, one of excitement and ecstasy (Bøhling, 2014; Goulding and Shankar, 2011; Welch and Fremaux, 2017). Whilst some studies emphasise the use of drugs as a way for patrons to deepen their connection to music and atmosphere of the NTE (Bøhling, 2015; 2014; Hunt et al., 2010; Moore and Miles, 2004), others describe participants "getting high on the music" (Goulding and Shankar, 2011: p.1448, my emphasis added), framing it as a source of pleasure in its own right. Participants describe instances where they experienced a "boost" (Hailey [P10, female]) to their mood due to the music in a venue, or even a specific song being played.

NTE patrons, like Maisey [P9, female], can also derive pleasure from the sensuous experience, the sound of the music and the feel of the loud bass (Goulding and Shankar, 2011; Todd and Cody, 2000).

MAISEY: I love the feeling of being on the dancefloor *physically* feeling the music... the bass vibrating through you

Later in the chapter, I explore the pleasures of being part of the NTE crowd, yet music also enhances this experience. A common narrative, especially where there is a dancefloor or at music-driven events, is that music ‘brings people together’, as if the affective power of sound is inherently unifying (Green, 2021; Garcia, 2011; Schiermer, 2021; Vitos, 2017). Particularly in the NTE, the sound of the music dominates the room, so their experiences become more unified than if customers were holding individual conversations, to the backing of quieter music (Welch (Welch and Fremaux, 2017). The cohesion is not solely social, but also physical. Many of the participants explained that one of the things they enjoyed about their NTE experiences was the opportunity to dance with friends (e.g. Susan [P5, *female*], Maisey [P9, *female*], Ali [P23, *male*]), enhancing feelings of intimacy as they move as one to the songs being played (see also Hayward and Hobbs, 2007; Goulding and Shankar, 2011).

However, music is also associated with risk in the NTE. Beyond known health risks of frequent exposure to loud music (Febriyanto et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2014; Wattman and Joseph, 2019; Williams et al., 2010) music is both a means of controlling risk and a potential “catalyst for disorder” (Forsyth and Cloonan, 2008: p.58). Certain genres may encourage this more than others.

TOM: some music can really like rial up [the crowd] ... not like a full on mosh pit or anything but it can get everyone going

Whilst he notes it may not always be this extreme, Tom [P28, *male*] refers to an aggressive style of movement (“*mosh pit*”), involving pushing into one another, which is often associated with high-energy music like punk and metal. Although these genres are less common in the mainstream NTE venues of *CityX*, his observation illustrates how different types of music can still provoke potentially risky situations on the dancefloor. Other research has similarly explored how music with hypersexualised lyrics can loosen the norms around social touch, generating potential risks for those in the space. Peterson and Anderson (2012: p.3) describe that their participants “succumb to the libidinal forces of the music and their desire to join bodies”, as if it is somewhat unavoidable. This can be pleasurable and add to the sense of crowd intimacy and

togetherness that I discussed earlier in the chapter, but equally it can raise the risk of misunderstanding, unwanted advances, and conflict (see Garcia, 2011).

It is important to note that whilst music can contribute to risk, the impact is not equal, with some groups affected more acutely than others. Stirling (2016: p.134) explores this through the lens of gender, arguing that the “gendered musical attachments” and “sensibilities that accompany the music”, including social codes and atmospheres of the venues, can lead women to avoid certain spaces based on the risks they perceive, as signalled through music policies (see also Ahmed’s concept of “away-ness” (2010)). An example of this Drum and Bass, a genre that, while attracting some female attendees, is often associated with “maleness” (Koren, 2024; Maalsen and McLean, 2016), prompting some women to distance themselves or avoid spaces where it is played. A similar attitude was demonstrated by Hailey [*P10, female*] in this research:

HAILEY: When they play ‘not nineteen forever’ I tend to head to the bar. It’s not even like a rowdy song or anything I just know there’s this one particular society... Men’s Hockey or Lacrosse I think... that just go absolutely mental to it. [...] like even swinging [their] tops round their heads

Even though she refers to a specific song rather than a genre, she withdraws from the dancefloor. She distances herself in an effort to avoid greater risk, responding to actions associated with this music, that she explicitly links to gender.

Deducing risk in this way, based on music, ties to notions of “music profiling” (Hadfield and Measham, 2009: p.223), most often explored in relation to race and ethnicity. It assumes levels of risk based on assumptions made regarding the likely demographics for different musical genres (see also Moloney et al., 2009). Venues themselves manage perceived risk through music policy, based on these assumptions (Almeida, 2022; Hadfield and Measham, 2009; Koren, 2023; May and Chaplin, 2008; Søgaaard, 2017; Talbot and Böse, 2007; Wicks, 2022). This is criticised by many scholars who highlight the hypocrisy of playing and celebrating “Black music while keeping young Black men off the guest list” (May, 2015: p.38). It suggests that although there is a common narrative about the unifying affects of music, echoed by participants in this research, it may in fact

obscure underlying realities of social segregation, inequality and exclusion (Koren, 2024; 2023; Rodgers, 2018).

Light, Darkness and The Night

The NTE is impacted by temporal and spatial elements associated with lighting, that contribute to its association with both risk and pleasure. NTE experiences occur late at night and in venues that are often dimly lit. In this section I discuss light, darkness and the night, together as participants often speak about ‘the darkness of the night’, rather than separating the intertwined assemblage elements.

Lighting, or lack thereof, can enhance an atmosphere (Brands and Schwanen, 2014), be that one of risk or pleasure. NTE space-times, especially nightclubs are typically dark spaces (Figure 14). The rhythmic colourful lighting, and lasers (Figure 15) can amplify the pleasurable, energetic and uplifting atmospheres (Duff, 2008) whilst the darkness adds to the perceived sense of risk.

In the continuation of Maisey’s [P9, *female*] account introduced earlier in the chapter, which began with the bodily sensation of loud music, she turns to lighting as another sensory element that heightens the pleasure of the NTE affective atmosphere:

MAISEY: [...] all the lights and all the colours flashing [...] Sounds weird, but even closing my eyes and picturing that, at this point, is a weird serotonin boost.

Even during the period where nightclubs were closed, she recalls how these NTE assemblage elements affect her and contribute to the pleasure of the experience. For Susan [P5, *female*], on the other hand, lighting can also enhance perceived risk, given an inherent cultural and social association between darkness and danger (see Hobbs, 2003).



Figure 14 is two screenshots from Henry's [P14] Snapchat Diary (January 2022) in StudentLand. The venue is very dark with only a few occasional lights.

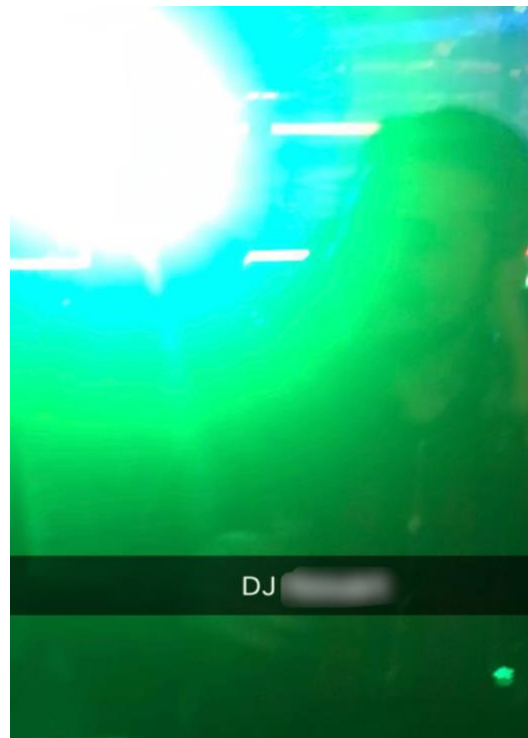
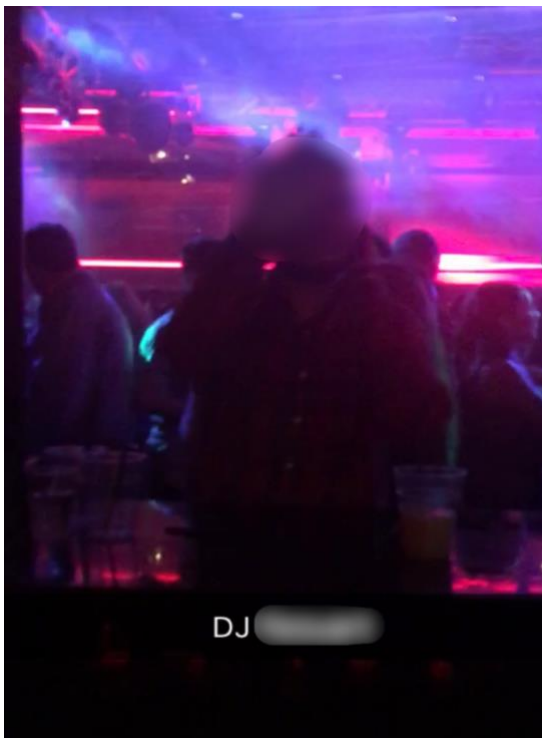


Figure 15 is two screenshots from Megan's [P30] Snapchat Diary (February 2022) of her friend [name redacted] pretending to DJ. It demonstrates the colourful flashing lights in the nightclub as the image of her friend is obscured by a sudden bright flash.

SUSAN: It's a strange one because they're quite dark places... aside from all the flashing lights et cetera. Visibility is quite limited, and I think you associate darkness with danger like... *inherently*. When you're a kid you're scared of the dark. When you're watching a horror film, you turn the lights off to set the tone and make it scarier. You choose the well-lit path on a walk home to avoid the dark creepy one. It's not even that there's that underlying creepiness here, because you do have all the people and the upbeat music and the colourful lights all going but it is still risky.

Using terms like “creepy” and “scarier” she conveys the role that limited lighting can contribute to an atmosphere of danger (see also Brands et al., 2015a). Although she mentions other aspects can offset this within the NTE (e.g. people and upbeat music), the darkness still has an effect. The resulting atmosphere is not necessarily one of immediate danger, but the possibility of it, hence, an atmosphere of risk.

Darkness and light also impact anonymity. Participants explain that lack of visibility, afforded by the dark NTE space, conceals identity as it becomes harder to identify individuals in the low lighting. This contributes to risk as people's behaviour alters to the perceived lack of accountability, resulting from the inability to be identified. For some, this is liberating as, for the duration of their time in these settings, they can express themselves as they wish, experiment with new identities, and temporarily behave in uncharacteristic ways. Others note that this adds to the perception of the space-time as risky, as it promotes and masks transgressive behaviour and criminal activity, concealed in the darkness.

TOM: You get a lot of like aggression and fights I guess but also like groping and well... to be honest sexual assault [...] I feel like it's literally the perfect environment for all that stuff to go on because you know, the flashing lights you can't see anything, you can't hear anything. There's no accountability. If it happens you may not be able to tell who it was, or if you can the security then can't find them in this dark crowd, with everyone jumping about [occasionally] lit up by lasers and strobes.

SASHA: With nightclubs I think the thing is that I think people feel like they can get away with a lot that because you're in this kind of like dark and dingy environment and where [rule breaking is] almost deemed as okay, just because you're [on a night] out. But it wouldn't be acceptable in, like, just an average room, in broad daylight.

Their accounts build upon the discussion in *Chapter 5*; behaviours are altered in the NTE space-time as patrons are affected by the atmosphere (see also McBride, 2019). However, the implication here is that people's behaviour alters, specifically in response to the awareness of altered accountability and visibility, opting to engage further with risk as a result. They feel they can “*get away with*” (Sasha [P13, female]) activities and behaviours that would be unacceptable in other contexts, as they know they are concealed in the darkness of the NTE. Darkness' role in this process is particularly emphasised, as Sasha [P13, female] distinguishes the unique atmosphere of the NTE from other contexts. She contrasts the types of behaviour one might expect in the NTE with those in other spaces (“*just an average room*”) and highlights how different lighting levels, comparing “*dark and dingy*” to “*broad daylight*”, further shape these experiences. This also highlights the role of time, specifically the night.

NTE experiences generally occur late at night into the early hours of the morning. During these hours the space-time is transformed (Hadfield et al., 2009). This impacts the perceptions of risk and danger, both for participants and in other studies (Edensor, 2013; Nofre and Garcia-Ruiz, 2023; Shaw, 2015). Hobbs (2003: p.44) highlight a “deeply embedded” societal perception of the night as “a time of danger, fear and sin”. It conveys a relationship between time, the NTE, the risks to which people are subjected (danger), and those in which they partake (sin). Participants voice these perceptions, comparing experiences of similar environments in daytime hours.

HAILEY: I do completely get that night-time is just a bit riskier... That's actually just made me think. I don't tend to walk home alone at night and though I don't think it would bother me, especially a well-lit road, I'd also never let my friends do it. [...] Like, if I went for coffee with them in the day, I wouldn't even think about parting ways to head home but at night, that's just out of the question. We'd all stick together or get a taxi.

HOPE: You associate the night a bit more with crime and stuff, generally. But in the daytime, an old man walking towards you doesn't make you slightly anxious on the inside. At night, a dark figure approaching can have you on edge a bit.

Hailey's [P10, *female*] perception of the night as risky causes her to adjust her behaviour. She notes her attitude is different in other daytime contexts which she does not seem to associate at all with risk. Though she had not previously paid much attention to her change in actions, something about the night causes her to perceive the context as risky. Hope [P12, *female*] directly associates the night with crime and disorder, and therefore risk. Though her examples were hypothetical, the added element of time, and by way of this darkness, alters the experience to feeling more at risk. It demonstrates the role of time in adding to a sense of risk in the NTE, subsequently impacting individual experiences and behaviours.

Though it is associated with risk, the night is also a source of pleasure and freedom for participants. *Chapter 6* explored how participants view NTE experiences as a break or "time out of time" (Presdee, 2000: p.33). This offers pleasure in the form of escapism, freedom and the chance to experiment with alternative identity performances and risk. The focus group extract below demonstrates the students' awareness of this night-time performance and the pleasures it generates.

SUSAN: I always joke there's Susan, then there's *clubbing* Susan or drunk Susan or whatever. Like an alter ego.

SARAH: It's true she's a different person at night (*laughs*)

SUSAN: Yeah, but like I think that's maybe normal? You dress different you are a bit more confident.

SARAH: Dutch courage²³ (*laughs*)

SUSAN: No. I'm like freer when I'm on a night out. Like, that's *my* time so I'm going to have fun.

Whilst they joke about the “*alter ego*” and speculate the elements that contribute to this (Sarah [P6, *female*] suggesting alcohol), Susan [P5, *female*] describes the pleasure these experiences give her. The night carves out an environment where they can break away from the mundane everyday life of university, utilising (the often risk-related (White, 2013)) pleasurable leisure practices. Susan [P5, *female*] is possessive of this time as an opportunity for freedom in choosing her leisure activities which bring her pleasure and contrast the order and control of university (see *Chapter 6*). This view is also expressed by Sasha [P13, *female*] as she calls her NTE experiences an “*allotted time for fun*”.

SASHA: It's kind of an allotted time for fun, you put all the stress away and then just have a good time before returning to the next day. Plus, you better make it worth the hangover!

The fleeting nature of NTE experiences is also mentioned to as she refers to less-than-pleasurable experiences that follow, like hangovers.

Considering light, darkness and the night, demonstrates the role of the nexus in shaping the NTE experience, particularly the components of space and time, though they cannot be divorced entirely from studenthood. For example, it is the context of the NTE experiences within Sasha's [P13, *female*] broader, stressful university life, that makes them all the more pleasurable. Part of the wider assemblage, space (darkness and light) and time (night) influence the affective atmosphere, priming students to behave or feel in certain ways for the duration of their NTE experiences. In other contexts, like “*broad daylight*” the affects are different, and hence the experience of risk and pleasure.

²³ “Dutch courage” refers to a general increase in confidence gained from consuming alcohol (Renner et al., 2018) supposedly stemming from the use of gin by Dutch troops during the Thirty Years' War (Smith, 2023).

The Crowd and Customers

People within the NTE space-time also contribute to a sense of risk or pleasure, as they are also part of the assembled affective atmosphere (see *Chapter 5*). Participants mention aspects like the crowd and customer-base as elements that also impact their experience. Spending an NTE experience with a “good group” (James [P3, male]) of friends could make a night out more fun, whilst strangers, and the potential of unwanted attention from others, posed a risk. The crowd is an important part of student NTE experiences, considered by some an essential assemblage element in (re)creating the NTE atmosphere students have come to enjoy (see *Chapter 5*). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that students refer to the crowd when talking about pleasurable NTE elements.

For some, the crowd is a measure of a “good atmosphere” (Max [P22, male]) and what would likely be an overall pleasurable experience. Participants therefore opt for venues they view as “busier” (Jack [P3, male]). This parallels research by Tutenges (2015: p.293), finding NTE goers “shun the half-empty venues”, preferring crowded places “where they can come into close contact with both known and unknown peers”. The sense of “crowdedness” amplifies the pleasurable affective atmosphere and enhances other contributing NTE elements, including the sensory (music, lighting etc.), social (being amongst friends or peers) and chemical (alcohol and drugs etc.). Ali [P23, male] explains that these combine with the crowd to co-produce an experience of “joy”.

ALI: It’s being present with friends and dancing and singing. Also the feeling of being amongst everyone, being in a crowd. As much as I said before that the crowded space can be a kind of potential risk, it’s also incredibly fun to just be in a crowd. It’s something I can’t really describe or explain why, but being amongst everyone on the [dance] floor brings me a lot of like joy.

He struggles to put into words the phenomenological effect of being in the crowd beyond its association with positive emotions. The affect arises from the crowd’s combination with elements like dancing and being with others, rather than just dense population. It reinforces the idea that the entire NTE assemblage, and the individual’s place within it, are key to shaping these experiences.

As part of a shared experience with others, a positive emotional charge, or collective “effervescence” (Durkheim, 1995; Hopkins et al., 2016; Tutenges, 2023), is experienced, reflective of the mood of the atmosphere. This charge is also said to amplify as crowd size increases (Tutenges, 2015; Wellman et al., 2014) as people are more likely to be drawn in and influenced by the heightened emotions and energy of the larger group. In the densely populated NTE, a pleasurable atmosphere is therefore intensified. Ali [P23, *male*] conveys that being amongst the crowd creates a sense of togetherness, comfort, safety and community (see also Besta et al., 2018; Hopkins et al., 2019; Neville and Reicher, 2011); pleasures which can be exaggerated by other elements of the space, like music. It demonstrates the affect of the entire assembled atmosphere (Anderson, 2009), even if participants only vocalise and pick out certain parts when discussing their pleasure.

The pleasures of crowd membership, or feeling of “communitas” (Crabbe, 2006), are particularly emphasised by participants as they refer to student crowds; a point I return to later in the chapter. Hailey [P10, *female*] and Emma [P11, *female*] particularly stress the importance of being physically immersed in these crowds.

EMMA: There’s just something really important and I guess... nice about being in the crowd and being surrounded by your peers and we’ve missed that.

HAILEY: Yeah literally rubbing shoulders with everyone.

Notably, their discussion took place during the context of COVID-19 as lockdowns were first being lifted, when they were unable to be physically present in the NTE or with their student community. Hailey [P10, *female*] highlights the importance of physical presence amongst her peers, using the colloquial metaphor (“*rubbing shoulders*”) in a literal sense. Being in the crowd, in the NTE, students experience pleasure, physically present as part of their community. It demonstrates how space and studenthood combine to influence student NTE experiences.

Whilst the crowd is a crucial NTE element associated with positive, pleasurable experiences, it, like other elements discussed in this chapter, is also linked to risk. Like

darkness, participants note that a crowd can conceal actions. This both encourages risky, or even criminal, behaviours and also makes individuals feel more at-risk amongst the crowd. This is highlighted when comparing scenarios of sparser crowds or where social distancing measures prevent them.

AARON: I think if it's less busy, you're not going to worry as much. Because even though [sexual assault and other violence] can still happen the same amount, you don't worry as much because there's not that many people to think about.

JAMES: Yeah, and it's less concealed, isn't it? If there's not a big crowd of people, it's easier to identify the troublemakers.

AARON: And I think that comes down to, like, the visibility of it. If you think about it, if you're in the crowd, you're more hidden, especially below, sort of, shoulders. You get the people who will do like random, like, grabbing people's arse and stuff... It's more hidden than if someone hit someone over the head with a bottle. But in a crowd [...] stuff can be concealed.

Risk is reduced in a smaller crowd as there are fewer people to carry out risky actions that make others feel at-risk. Additionally, it also becomes easier to “*identify troublemakers*” (James [P3, male]) who engage in such behaviour, with increased “*visibility*” (Aaron [P1, male]), mirroring earlier discussion on darkness and light. Being more visible without a crowd also ties in with Aaron’s [P1, male] experiences of feeling “*exposed*” or “*watched*” at socially distanced events, without a crowd, that I discussed in *Chapter 5*. It demonstrates how COVID-19 can re-shape both risk and pleasure by impacting the space-time-studenthood nexus.

Participants also explain that crowdedness could result in unpleasurable experiences when people were “*in your space*” (David [P18, male]).

DAVID: Sometimes, the busyness isn't great. Like if you're queueing for ages at the bar, all squished up together, with people in your space, that's not a nice experience.

DANIEL: Yeah. Sometimes people like push past you too, especially if they've been waiting a while. Like, physically barge past you. That can lead to like more anger and maybe even fights.

Whilst David [P18, male] mentions a crowded queue for the bar is "*not a nice experience*", Daniel [P15, male] takes this further, acknowledging it can pose a risk, potentially leading to aggression and violence. This is not an isolated perspective; similar accounts have been mentioned in other studies and policy for years (e.g. Homel and Tomsen, 1993; MacIntyre and Homel, 1994; Subramanian and Verma, 2022). Daniel's [P15, male] description implies that aggression and violence are somewhat expected outcomes within crowded spaces, regardless of individual intent. Similarly, Thrift (2008: p.240) notes that such affective responses to spatial stimuli are an "irresistible impulse to act, regardless of the rationality of the motivation". The various embodied affects of being in the crowd like this have the potential to facilitate violence and aggression.

FERGUS: I've seen plenty of fights start in crowds when people are too in each other's space or pushing past each other. Even if the initial push past wasn't meant, at all, in an aggressive, or "*I'm going to start on you now*", sort of way.

Fergus [P4, male] suggests violence could unfold without warning, as if the crowd (and other elements of the assemblage like alcohol) were a catalyst in creating the risk. Misinterpreted actions (e.g. pushing past someone) could escalate quickly into aggression and fighting. The volatility of the atmosphere is exacerbated by the crowdedness, adding to the overall sense of risk experienced in the space-time.

Intriguingly, there appears to be no clear boundary between scenarios where "*literally rubbing shoulders*" (Hailey [P10, female]) turns to "*people in your space*" (David [P18, male]); and pleasure turns to risk. Perceptions of space-within-space may play a role, as the crowded dancefloor tends to be pleasurable whilst the crowded bar is not. Nevertheless, there is no consistent pattern among participants; some express feeling "*claustrophobic*" (Hope [P12, female]) or more vulnerable in spaces where others feel euphoric. It highlights the dynamicity of NTE experiences, shaped through the space-

time-studenthood nexus, as well as the individualistic or context-dependent ways that patrons can respond to the atmosphere.

Participants also indicate that experiences of pleasure and risk are not just shaped by the crowd size, but by who makes up the crowd. Other customers in the NTE space-time can influence perceived risk and pleasure. In *Chapter 6*, I explored the affinity participants hold towards student-only or “*studenty*” (Max [P22, *male*]) spaces in their NTE engagement. This is also tied to feelings of risk and pleasure. Emma [P11, *female*], quoted earlier in this chapter, conveys the importance of “*being surrounded by your peers*” as a source of pleasure in her NTE experiences. Contrastingly, several participants mention presence of others, specifically “*locals*” as contributing to perceived risk in their experiences.

SUSAN: For me, I prefer *StudentLand* because it's students. Whereas, if you go in to *Vortex* you get them... umm... Yeah... I was going to say *strange locals* (*all laugh*)

[...]

SARAH: I think I know what she's trying to say. The fact that they... you know, they're non-students [...] They don't think like us, you know. I think they just come across very on a different level. Like... I don't know how to say this without sounding like...

SUSAN: No. I know what you mean.

MAISEY: See, we could all say some very bad things about the locals.

CHRIS: There's, almost, this big, kind of, divide between, like, the locals and the student community... I think it's just hard to, maybe, put it into words. You just know to stay away.

MAISEY: I'm just going to say, like, with students, you get like the 18 to mid 20s like us, whatever. When you go into *Vortex*, they'll be like middle-aged men, then trying to speak to you and its yeah... (*grimaces*).

SUSAN: Yeah! That's what I meant by strange.

SARAH: They're a bit creepy at times as well.

Beyond simple spatial preference, participants construct the non-student local as a potential risk to others “*like them*” (Maisey [P9, *female*]). It is particularly revealing that they use the same adjectives (e.g. creepy) for “locals” as they do night and darkness, that I discussed earlier in the chapter (Susan [P5, *female*]), positioning locals as equally risky. This leads some, like Chris [P7, *male*], to “*stay away*”, reflecting how students’ NTE experiences are shaped by studenthood. Spaces like *Vortex* and *Glitter*, NTE venues that attract both locals and students, are seen as riskier precisely because of their presence.

The experience is also shaped by time: mid-week the spaces feel safer with a mostly student crowd, whereas weekends see a rise in local attendance, correlating with increased perceived risk. This perception of “locals” as risky is also both time-limited and intertwined with the liminality of student life. They view themselves as distinct, even though they, too, will eventually take on a non-student identity. In *Chapter 8* I explore this dynamic further as not only do perceptions of the local as a “risky other” shape experiences in the NTE, but they also serve to strengthen in-group relations (Tajfel and Turner, 2004) between students.

From crowded dancefloors to the social makeup of the customer base, those who populate the NTE space-time contribute significantly to its associations with risk and pleasure; however, these elements do not operate in isolation. The aspects I have discussed, highlighted by participants, form part of a broader assemblage of social and material elements that combine to form the NTE affective atmosphere, connected to risk, pleasure and often both simultaneously, leading participants to draw associations. Discussing these elements separately is not to suggest they operate alone, away from the wider spatial assemblage, but to reflect the difficulty of effectively articulating affective atmospheres in their entirety (see discussion on this in *Chapter 5*). Participants naturally identify elements that contribute to the atmosphere of risk or pleasure (e.g. lighting and the crowd). Discussing them separately provides opportunity to explore how each is shaped by components of the nexus, such as the darkness of the space, the time of the night, and studenthood, which distances them from the “risky local”.

Negotiating Risk and Pleasure

Having established that the NTE space time is associated with both risk and pleasure, I now turn to explore how participants manage their experiences, shaped by time, space and studenthood. Their insights suggest they are not passively affected by this atmosphere but take steps to actively negotiate or curate their experiences, enhancing the pleasures and mitigating the risks. Interestingly, these steps are not often consciously driven by thoughts or risk of pleasure; rather, they form part of participants' routines, or ritualised, engagement with the NTE. I unpack just some of these rituals, and how they impact student experiences of risk and pleasure in the NTE. It is not an exhaustive list, nor are they the only ways participants note they respond. They mention a variety of conscious ways they, or other students, address risks that arise in the NTE, including watching or covering drinks, choosing "non-provocative" outfits and avoiding certain people or places. These are all behaviours that are altered in response to perceived risk as it arises. Instead, I choose to focus on routinised negotiations within student NTE engagement, shaped by space, time and studenthood, as they aim to enhance pleasure and mitigate risk.

I use the term "negotiating" rather than managing, as I note the "edgework" (Lyng, 1990) involved, as students strive for a balance, hoping to engage in some level of risk for the purposes of pleasure, without straying into a danger zone. This boundary negotiation unfolds both metaphorically, as they push the limits of their risk-taking in pursuit of pleasurable experiences, and spatially, as they enter the space-time linked with risk and pleasure. Unpacking these negotiations, I use More and Burgess' (2011) concept of the "risk ritual", outlined in the *Literature Review*. It helps to conceptualise participants' actions as second nature, rather than a response to risk. I extend their concept to cover *pleasure rituals* as I contend the two are deeply intertwined within the NTE experience. Space, time and studenthood are discussed throughout as they collectively shape the experience of risk and pleasure, including the dynamic boundaries between the two.

Planning and Preparation

Chapter 4 explains that, for participants, the concept of a “night out” begins at home, prior to entering the NTE. Enhancing pleasure, minimising risk and negotiating the boundaries between, also begins at home, through planning and preparation for their night out. I previously unpacked students’ preparatory activities forming part of their NTE experiences. This included aspects relating to performance of self like “*getting ready*” (Sarah [P6, *female*], Emma [P11, *female*]), priming the body through eating more (Chris [P7, *male*]) and “*pre-drinking*” (James [P3, *male*], Jack [P2, *male*], Hailey [P10, *female*] etc.). Not only do these elements help to “kick-start” the NTE experience for participants, but this “ritualised preparation” (Goulding et al., 2009) helps them enhance pleasure.

SUSAN: I just *love* absolutely dragging out the getting ready process. For me that’s an enjoyable part of the whole thing anyway [...] but it also like *boosts* the night’s enjoyment too. Like... if I’ve spent ages making sure I look good, I feel good and I think that adds to the night. I kind of go in more confident and have more of a good time.

Part of the pleasure Susan [P5, *female*] experiences in the NTE relates to self-confidence and “*feeling good*”. She invests time to achieve an enhanced pleasure in her experiences. This is both in the moment, as she gets ready, and also impacts her once in the NTE. These actions are a well-ingrained part of her NTE routine, but they also enhance the pleasure she experiences each time.

Within the same focus group, Sarah [P6, *female*] explains that part of the pleasure stemming from these preparatory activities comes from being with friends: they discuss the night ahead, including past experiences and anticipating what is to come. This is a source of pleasure in the moment (Goulding et al., 2009; Measham, 2004; Szmigin et al., 2008) but it also generates excitement about the night ahead. Sarah [P6, *female*] describes how the “*build up*” adds to the pleasure experienced later in the night:

SARAH: You just *know* it’s going to be a good night when you’re all getting ready together, making plans about where you’re going, who you’re seeing,

and all that and just getting, sort of... excited about it. Like, the build-up adds to it and makes for a really great time too.

Such activities were considered a routine part of their NTE experiences, yet upon closer analysis they also serve a function; they begin to unlock and enhance pleasures later experienced in the NTE space-time. Participants also describe that planning and preparation are used as tools to mitigate risk. Szmigin et al. (2008: p.364) argue that through planning a night out, risk and pleasure can be managed, as individuals anticipate “what might go wrong” and plan for these potential eventualities. This is demonstrated in participants planning how they will get home at the end of the night and planning for the possibility their group may be separated.

JAMES: What’s good, that me and my mates do, is we always plan, like, certain areas where we will meet, if we get split up. I guess, it’s more relevant in like festivals or huge venues, but works in other places too. Like, “*see that pillar? If we split up meet back there*”. Either planning for it if we intentionally split up, or prepping for it in case that accidentally happens.

The plans James [P3, male] mentions are spontaneous, often improvised, or in response to how the night unfolds, which, as I have already explored is dynamic and can shift from ‘good’ to ‘bad’ on short notice (see *Chapter 5*). They may only decide to meet by a specific pillar when they pass by it. Knowing they have a plan as part of their night out, provides a sense of comfort to them and reduces the perceived risk of being separated or alone in the NTE space-time (Hennell et al., 2021; Koleczko and Garcia Hansen, 2011; Nicholls, 2017; Philpot et al., 2019; Rigakos, 2008).

Preparing their travel home is also an important element to reducing the perceived risk.

NIAMH: Its one less thing to worry about when you’re drunk if you know how you’re getting home. So, whether it’s the *StudentLand* bus²⁴ or just a taxi like discussing that, getting a ticket in advance or like mentioning it to your friends, you don’t have to worry at the end of the night.

²⁴ The *StudentLand* Bus is a transportation provided by *StudentLand*, funded by the Students’ Union at the University. It transports students from campus to the nightclub and back again at the end of the night, for free.

Such plans may be particularly important for first years and those new to *CityX* or the NTE in general. It is another example of how time influences the experience of the NTE. Niamh's [P19, *female*] plan does not need to be rigorous, perhaps just involving a brief discussion about what they might do, rather than actioning it. Yet doing this, eases her mind regarding potential risks at a time of night where individuals may be more vulnerable, due to intoxication.

Participants' preparatory steps are like the concept of "risk rituals" (Moore and Burgess, 2011), which I extend to also consider *pleasure rituals*; they become part of the student NTE routine, rather than measures taken with risks, or pleasures, specifically in mind. They make the students "feel more in control when in fact the risk is still present" (Moore and Burgess, 2011: p.117). Whether or not their initial conception stemmed from a response to risk or pleasure, this function is now secondary. Simply being a part of their NTE routines is now their primary function.

Looking out for oneself and others

Moore and Burgess (2011: p.120) assert that risk rituals stem from the idea of "manning one's defences", as customers often take measures to ensure their own safety in the NTE, rather than only relying on other forms of authority or governance. Sometimes, these practices are done with the risk in mind. They are aware of a perceived or potential risk and adjust their actions accordingly. Yet, as Hailey [P10, *female*] explains, for some it becomes part of the NTE routine, a risk ritual.

HAILEY: Personally, I'm not on edge about spiking because ever since I've first gone out, I was always told "*cover your drinks*". It was never that I'd had a [bad] experience and responded to it. [...] I don't really think about it. I just do it. [...] it's almost a bit like second nature now like it doesn't necessarily take something going on to trigger that and you be like "*okay, I need to actually remember to look after myself*". It's kind of like built in behaviour and like habits. I just enjoy myself and don't worry about all that.

Rather than a response to a bad experience or perceived risk, Hailey [P10, *female*] manages her safety in the NTE through actions that have become "*second nature*". She

does not think about the risks that may arise without such safeguards, nor does she seem to view them as precautionary measures, more “*habits*”. It demonstrates how the reputation of the NTE space-time as risky, has shaped her behaviours. She responds to potential risks without thought. Although she does not refer to gender explicitly, such “*built in behaviour*” is not neutral. Kern (2020) argues, women are socialised to anticipate danger and internalise vulnerability within environments such as the NTE. The precautions to which Hailey [P10, *female*] refers, though routinised to the point of becoming “*second nature*”, exemplify gendered “safety work” (Ahmed, 2017; Campbell, 2005; Pain, 1997; Whitzman et al., 2013), wherein women undertake emotional and physical labour to mitigate risk. Although her habits appear unthinking, they reflect a broader social conditioning through which women and others at risk learn to adapt to these environments to “*look after*” themselves.

As well as looking out for oneself, participants explain that it is important to look out for the wellbeing of the entire social group. One way to do this is mitigating risk by avoiding separation. The strategy is based on the concept of “safety in numbers,” offering reassurance that “a collective presence makes us less vulnerable to impending dangers” (Scarso and Thompson, 2022: p.6).

DONNA: I think it’s about sticking together where you can, not letting anyone wander off or leave on their own. Late at night especially drunk, you know, you’ve got to just stick together kind of. It’s safer that way, you can look out for each other.

Although Donna [P16, *female*] points to factors, like alcohol, that she feels heighten risk in the NTE space-time, the “safety net of friends”, as termed by Andrejek (2021: p.761), offers a degree of reassurance and security, minimising potential risks.

Warnings to stay with the group and avoid “*wandering off alone*” (Ellie [P17, *female*]) are given by parents and peers with experience in the NTE.

ELLIE: That was one major thing my mum said to me coming to uni “*don’t you go wandering off alone when you’ve had a drink and don’t leave your friends by themselves either*”.

Being within a group serves two functions; avoiding the risk of being alone, as well as extending the concept of “manning one’s defences” (Moore and Burgess, 2011: p.120) to “look out for” the group collectively.

SARAH: If I’m out with the girls, I’m never going to leave their side, you know. I’m never going to leave any of them alone because it can be unsafe. There’s like the whole like joke about, like, “*girls travel as packs*” but it’s not because we’re having a laugh, it’s because we know... that’s the safest way to do it.

Sarah [P6, female] acknowledges the stereotype of females in the NTE, enacting this risk mitigation strategy. However, she underscores this humour with an awareness of the particularly gendered risks that she and her friends may face (see Du Preez and Wadds, 2016; Green and Singleton, 2006; Nicholls, 2017). Many of the participants believe strongly that females are inherently more at risk in the NTE space than males. Though notably, the NTE spaces to which they refer, are predominantly mainstream, heterosexualised spaces. Their discourses reflect this, focusing on heterosexual binary constructions of male and female experiences.

Additionally, their strong feelings on the matter could also be influenced by relevant stories that dominated the news and popular culture at the time of the research, such as the abduction and murder of Sarah Everard¹⁰. This prompted various social media discourses and wider conversations around experiences of personal safety, especially for females. Although research suggests males also face risk in the NTE (Marsh, 2018; Moore et al., 2021; O’Brien et al., 2009; Swann, 2021), participant discussions were dominated by gender. Females spoke of being vigilant to greater risks they face, and males emphasised a need to protect their female friends.

Sarah's [P6, *female*] account departs from the concept of "risk ritual" as she is very much aware of the risks in her actions and choices in the moment. However, this was not always the case. One common ritualistic tactic, participants describe, is the tendency for females to remain together, even when going to the toilets. Such spaces, considering their function, are typically designed for privacy²⁵. Although they were aware it happened, not all male participants could relate to this ritual. James [P3, *male*] and friends question the reasoning behind it, in jest.

JAMES: And they always go to the loo together too. Like, what do they even do in there?

FERGUS: Actually, that's a good point. Maybe they just talk about us.

JACK: Or want an excuse to get away! (*all laugh*)

This humour, though seemingly light-hearted, reveals a deeper gendered misunderstanding of a central feature within women's "urban survival toolkits" (Kern (Kern, 2020: p.60) – friendship. In Kern's (2020: p.60) view, the "power of female friendship is typically either underestimated, undermined, or ignored altogether", yet these friendships are crucial mechanisms through which women navigate and claim space in environments that are not designed with their safety in mind. The 'pack' behaviour, described by Sarah [P6, *female*], illustrates the value of friendships as a form of collective resistance and mutual protection. When the male participants question or joke about such practices, it exposes how the gendered distribution of risk, safety and fear remains asymmetrical within the NTE. What women perform as safety work is read by men as sociability, underscoring the invisibility of their labour in managing risk. For women themselves, however, these acts are rarely framed in overtly political or safety-oriented terms. Instead, they are considered routine elements of a night out, not regarded as linked to danger, but simply as "*something you do*".

²⁵ Much debate surrounds the value of women's toilets as "safe" or "women-only" spaces (see Jeffreys, 2014; Jones and Slater, 2020; Ramster et al., 2018). It is therefore important to clarify that my discussion does not assess the actual safety of these spaces, but rather explores the rituals, meanings and practices participants ascribe to them as a way of managing perceived risk.

EMMA: I don't know. It's just something you do, isn't it? Like, you get in, get a drink, have a bit of a dance then one of you needs the toilet and you all go. I'd go up to the bar alone if I was the only one getting a drink, but I don't know, you kind of expect someone to come with you to the toilet. And it's nice to have a chat too.

Emma's account further illustrates the ritualisation of behaviours within the NTE, enacted out of habit rather than as a conscious response to immediate risk. While women may mentally distinguish between spaces that are more or less risky, in a 'mapping' of fear and risk (see Kern, 2020; Valentine, 1989), these geographies subtly shape movement without always being at the forefront of attention. For example, Emma [P11, female] differentiates between spaces-within-spaces of the NTE, such as the bar, a public, visible space, and the toilets, a more private, enclosed space. These distinctions guide her actions, yet the behaviour itself has become second nature. Going to the toilets together with her friends, like other "risk rituals" (Moore and Burgess, 2011), is less about consciously managing danger and more about habitual patterns of social participation.

Within this routine, the practice also carries social and pleasurable dimensions. Sprague (2018) argues that despite being overlooked as a "non-place" (Augé, 1995), women's toilets hold cultural and social value. These spaces are connected to ideas of kinship, identity, tradition and ritual. This is echoed in popular culture depictions of the space. In their song, *What the Girl's Bathroom Is For*, British girl group, *Remember Monday*, describe shared experiences, friendship, support and "a place where it all feels better", reflecting the positive and comforting value of the spaces within the broader NTE experience. Many female participants also express the pleasures involved in such experiences, reflecting Sprague's (2018) insights. It further cements it as part of the routine, rather than a risk response.

MEGAN: I actually love spending time in the girl's loo. Like, it's part of my night now, because it's such a nice and positive atmosphere, which is pretty wild when you think about the actual surroundings. But there's a lot of solidarity amongst women there. It just makes you feel really good.

LAURA: Yeah, someone will be having a bad night and go in crying, maybe about a boy or something. Next minute, they've got three strangers, who also don't know each other, giving them a pep talk, cheering them up and getting them ready to go back out there and have a good night.

Megan [P30, *female*] and Laura [P24, *female*] highlight the pleasures involved in these experiences including friendship, solidarity, boosts to self-confidence and support from strangers. At times, particularly when the night out is less enjoyable, these ritual-based interactions can transform the experience, enhancing the pleasurable aspects and providing a space and time away from the riskier spaces elsewhere in the venue. Though the suggestion behind staying as a group is borne out of associations with risk whilst alone in the NTE, sticking with your group, whether on the dancefloor or going to the toilets, is built into student NTE routines. This ritual has become a source of pleasure for some and could therefore be considered a *pleasure* ritual.

The Edgework of Risk and Pleasure

Risk and pleasure within the NTE are two highly intertwined concepts. Managing both involves a degree of “edgework” (Lyng, 1990) as part of the very pleasures of the NTE come from engaging with risks. Students negotiate the boundaries between heightened pleasure and risk, in a manner that has been called “a controlled loss of control” (Measham and Brain, 2005: p.273) or “calculated hedonism” (Featherstone, 2007; Szmigin et al., 2008). Although this thesis wishes to de-centre alcohol, participant intoxication offers an illustrative example of this boundary negotiation. However, it is the ways in which students use intoxication to navigate and manage their broader NTE experiences, rather than the act of intoxication itself, that are of primary interest.

I preface this analysis by acknowledging that managing intoxication does not solely regard alcohol. Participants rarely mentioned the consumption of drugs, but this does not negate its application to the negotiation of risk and pleasure. Pennay (2012), for example, found young people match particular drugs to consumption settings. They time their use to manage or control the desired, pleasurable, outcomes, whilst also avoiding

zones of risk. I simply focus on the consumption of alcohol, as the main form of intoxication to which participants referred.

Alcohol is used to enhance pleasure in student's NTE experiences; drinking-to-intoxication is described by Demant (2013: p.200) as part of the "sensations of joy and happiness" in the NTE, whilst Fry (2011: p.65) explains it is an "essential 'pleasure' commodity". It is not without risk, but the idea of "playing with fire" and engaging with the risk, is argued to be part of the pleasures involved (Crabbe, 2006).

Students must negotiate the boundaries between risk and pleasure in their drinking habits. Whether noticing it or not, the students manage their alcohol intake in an attempt to maximise this pleasure. The goal is to reach a state of intoxication whereby pleasure is enhanced and maintain this for as long as possible without becoming "too sober" (Harvey [20]) or too intoxicated.

Participants convey clear ideas about levels of desirable or unacceptable drunkenness (also observed in other research MacLean, Pennay, & Room, 2018; Zajdow & MacLean, 2014). This helps them form boundaries between the "zones" of risk and pleasure as well as indicating a "sweet spot" (Charlotte [P27, female]) for which to aim. This is a form of edgework (Lyng, 1990) as students monitor their consumption to avoid these risks whilst aiming for a "good level" (Aaron [P1, male]) (see Batchelor et al., 2020; Burgess et al., 2022; Månsson et al., 2024; Szmigin et al., 2008).

AARON: You need to be on that good level of drunk and then everyone's just happy and having fun. Cross that line and things go bad.

The boundary could be crossed by becoming too intoxicated. This could reduce the pleasure experienced for them as well as those they were with and also place them in a zone of risk. Arron [P1, male] warns, "*cross that line and things go bad*". The risks include the negative consequences of drinking like vomiting, risk of injury and hangovers (McBride, 2019) and the relationship between intoxication and aggression and violence (Barton and Husk, 2012; MacLean and Moore, 2014).

Below the desired level of intoxication, one risks being “*too sober*” (Harvey [P20, *male*]); an unpleasurable experience. For this reason, Harvey [P20, *male*] intentionally consumes alcohol in advance of his NTE experiences.

HARVEY: See, this is why we do pre-drinks first, because we’ve got to be on that right level for the club. Without it, it’ll be shit. Like, if you’re too sober [...] It’s a good way to get to that level, without wasting loads [of money].

His approach links to the perception of engagement with the NTE being “calculated hedonism” (Featherstone, 2007; Szmigin et al., 2008) as despite the outcome being tied to pleasure, behind-the-scenes, decisions are often rational and considered, aiming to achieve a balance between enhanced pleasure and risk mitigation. Their insights convey influences of time and studenthood within their edgework. Their lives as students feed into the habit of “pre-drinking” to save money (tying in with Sasha’s [P13, *female*] comment from *Chapter 4* about being “*poor students trying to save money*”) influencing their NTE rituals. They also must manage their intoxication, timing their consumption to maintain the correct “*level*” (Aaron [P1, *male*]) and avoid attending the NTE too early, before intoxication has taken affect.

Negotiating this boundary is dependent on the individual. For Ali [P23, *male*], it is a risk to lose control in any form. He makes specific reference to “*balancing*” between levels within which he’s comfortable and risk “*territory*”, highlighting the boundary between risk and pleasure.

ALI: I don’t drink because I like being in control [...] I don’t like being in potentially vulnerable situations. So, even just kind of teetering into that territory, for me, is something I see as risky. It’s like a balancing act, inside my head. But, because I can have fun without drinking, I don’t see the point.

For most participants it is less clear-cut, though still within personally-defined limits (Measham, 2004; Pennay, 2012).

CHARLOTTE: There's a sweet spot for sure. Like, you need to be drunk, basically. But the right level of drunk. [...] Sober, it's just really awkward and not as fun. My issue is, though, I never know when to stop. I'm going past that level every single time (*laughs*).

CONNIE: Yeah you don't want to end up too drunk. That'll ruin your night too and probably those out with you. You'll end up hungover and stuff.

JASMINE: Not even that. Like, the drunker you are you could wander off or fall and hurt yourself [...] drunk guys always get in fights too.

Charlotte [P27, *female*] and her friends discuss the desired intoxication level “sweet spot” and the alternatives that lie either side. Like Harvey [P20, *male*] she mentions risking awkwardness if sober as well as her experience struggling to negotiate the other end of the boundary. Connie [P26, *female*] and Jasmine [P25, *female*] explain that further consumption beyond this “sweet spot” could place you in a zone of risk, outweighing the enjoyment.

Not everyone is able to successfully negotiate the boundary. Charlotte [P27, *female*] admits she surpasses it regularly by becoming overly intoxicated. Consuming above this ‘tipping point’ may be more common amongst those newer to drinking, like first year students (see Murphy, 2023). It relies on experience and “knowing one’s limits” (Ayres and Taylor, 2020). Newer students may have more limited self-awareness and lack the social and cultural knowledge required to manage their intake in such a way. This also demonstrates the influence of time. In this case, time spent attending the NTE or consuming alcohol to learn “one’s limits”. This ‘learning’ is explored in greater detail in *Chapter 8*.

Dynamic Edgework

It is crucial to acknowledge that the negotiation involved in NTE pleasure and risk is dynamic. The space-time-studenthood nexus is never static it is constantly (re)shaping the NTE experience, meaning associated risks and pleasures are always changing. Consequently, the ways students enhance pleasure whilst mitigating risk must also be

dynamic. Decisions and behaviours must adapt in response to these changes and external influences to maintain some form of perceived control. Their edgework is adjusted as the boundaries between risk and pleasure change. This is why Månsson et al. (2024) propose, rather than viewing the NTE experience as a “controlled loss of control” (Measham and Brain, 2005: p.273), it should be framed as a “controlled attainment of control.” This better reflects dynamic responses to the environment in an effort to mitigate or avoid risk. Such responses could be made in relation to the level of perceived risk and assessments made about the trade-off between pleasure and risk mitigation.

James [P3, *male*] and friends discuss dynamic changes to their edgework. Without explicitly talking about how they adapt to risk, they discuss situations where their negotiation of risk and pleasure is altered. For instance, how Aaron [P1, *male*] modifies his own alcohol consumption when the over-intoxication of his friends puts them at risk.

JAMES: You’re the one who looks after us lot. He’s like a F***ing god mate! It’s like you’re just there in like a puddle [of vomit] and he’s just like “*you ok man?*” coming to the rescue [...] just like making sure you’re ok.

AARON: Yeah. But that’s intentional. If I can see these guys are too smashed, I hold back and start on the water because I know I’ll have to babysit your arses in the next 10-20 minutes (*laughs*).

Sometimes the responsibility of looking after an intoxicated friend outweighs the enjoyment of the NTE experience. This, too, is a dynamic negotiation balancing risk to the group and personal pleasure. As the males continue the discussion, it becomes apparent that choosing whether or not they look after their friend Simon (who, coincidentally, is regularly overly intoxicated), is another example of their dynamic edgework.

JACK: You told him like “*if you’re going to be a mess [...] I’m not dealing with it tonight.*” [You] shouldn’t worry about it because like he’s got himself into that position he can deal [with it].

JAMES: We basically said to him [...] *“If you do it again, I’m just going to leave you.”*

Although remaining as a group was a risk ritual, looking after Simon, becomes too great a responsibility and risks forfeiting their personal experiences of pleasure. They also consider the level of risk they believe Simon faces in their negotiations. They believe he can “handle himself” compared with others.

JACK: That also begs an interesting point of if it was a girl, it would be a *completely* different situation.

JAMES: Yeah. Completely. You wouldn’t leave them.

JACK: With like Simon, as we said, we’ll just sort of leave him to it. He can handle himself, he’s a big lad [...] but if it was a girl, I feel like it would be *way* different, because she’s instantly more vulnerable than he would be, or at least in my eyes.

Simon, as a male, is perceived as more capable of handling risks that arise in the NTE, whereas female friends are considered more vulnerable. They suggest that, unlike with Simon, if they were accompanying a woman, they would not leave her to face these risks alone, implying a form of duty of care over her. Their comments echo Duncan et al.’s (2022: p.56) findings that the protection of women in the NTE is often considered “an ‘obvious’ male responsibility” (Day, 2001; Sandberg and Tollefsen, 2010). It aligns with Connell’s (1987) concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: a dominant ideal of manhood marked by strength, assertiveness, fearlessness and guardianship (see also Fileborn, 2016a; Kavanaugh, 2015). By preforming this protector role men actively *do* masculinity (West and Zimmerman, 1987), reaffirming their gender identity while simultaneously reproducing rigid hierarchies that depict women as weak and dependent. Yet, the same masculine traits valorised in this “protective paternalism” (Kavanaugh, 2015: p.250) are often implicated in the very dangers women face in the NTE (Grazian, 2009; Kovac and Trussell, 2015; Murnen et al., 2002; Oesterle et al., 2018). After all, the threat from which men intervene to “rescue” women, often originates from other men (Duncan et al., 2022: p.56).

The attitudes of the males in this focus group also represent a benevolent sexism that, while appearing courteous or protective, positions women as fragile and dependent upon men for their safety (Chan and Rigakos, 2002; Lennox, 2022; Stanko, 1997). As previously discussed in this chapter, this framing obscures the agency many women exercise through responsibilised risk strategies and everyday “safety work” (Campbell, 2005; Sheard, 2011). Feminist scholars, such as Young (2003), Rader (2008) and Brooks (2017), argue that these forms of “protection” often impose additional social costs on women by limiting their autonomy, spatial mobility, and sense of belonging within the NTE (see also Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Jewkes et al., 2015; Kern, 2020). Ultimately, they sustain gendered power relations.

However, I cannot simply write Jack’s [P2, male] comments off as sexist, but culturally inherited. These ideas about men as protectors are deeply woven into the social fabric of the NTE and reinforced through wider cultural narratives. Night-time safety campaigns frequently reproduce this protector/protected binary, targeting or depicting women even when they are not the explicit sole audience (Brooks, 2017; Brown, 2014; Sheard, 2011). They often call upon men to act out this protector role. For example, the Wales Violence Prevention Unit’s *#SafeToSay* initiative, launched in 2021, which sought to encourage men to act as “active bystanders” (Good Night Out, 2021; Walker et al., 2023), implicitly reaffirms men’s role as protectors. Although well intentioned, such interventions rely on a male-protector imaginary that reinforces binary oppositions between protector and protected, strength and weakness, and bravery and vulnerability (Campbell, 2005). In doing so, these campaigns reproduce conventional gender hierarchies rather than addressing perpetrator behaviour or the structural conditions that sustain these gendered risks. It is also important to recognise that these dynamics do not operate uniformly across all women and men. Performances of protection, risk-taking, and vulnerability vary across intersecting identities such as race, sexuality, and class, shaping who is seen as needing protection and whose safety is prioritised in the NTE (Adeyemi, 2022; Crenshaw, 1991). It is therefore unsurprising that the men in this research draw upon these same tropes, expressing a perceived duty to protect their female friends while assuming that their male peers can “handle” themselves.

Returning to the participants' discussion, however, it becomes evident that gender is not the sole determinant of perceived vulnerability. It appears that Simon's physical presence within the space also played a part in his perception as being less vulnerable:

JAMES: He's just you know... big. Like I've always felt relatively safe in a lot of places, but I think that's because I'm big too. I feel less threatened by people because I'm bigger. It dictates a lot of my experiences I think.

The space that Simon and James [P3, *male*] occupy within the NTE, intersects with their gender, structuring perceptions of their capability to assure their own personal safety. The link between his size and reduced vulnerability illustrates how masculinities are not only performed, but inscribed on the body (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Physical embodiment becomes a key axis through which safety and risk are negotiated. However, this embodiment did not need to be purely physical. One could take up space based on their standing within the student or NTE communities, reducing their perceived vulnerability to risks within the space.

JAMES: If you're a regular, or work in the industry, or you're just... *known* to security, you feel like they've got you're back a bit more. They're more likely to treat you nicely and you won't find trouble.

JACK: BNOCs²⁶ too, as well, you know. They know them, they know their faces and everyone else kind of knows them too, so people are like less likely to be, kind of, rude [...] You're less likely to experience any of that, if people know you a bit more, they feel like you're their mate or something if they recognise you from around. Even if they don't know your name directly.

Having a big personality or being known within the industry, or amongst students, informs negotiations of risk and pleasure. They are seen to face fewer risks as people like bouncers "*have got [their] back*". The effect on risk is comparable to the sense of safety and comfort found being amongst friends or within the imagined student community (as discussed in the *Literature Review*). This can also be understood through the nexus,

²⁶ BNOC refers to "Big Name on Campus": a popular individual, well-known or even notorious amongst student peers. The term is more of a joke than a serious social status, but often reflects a big personality.

whilst being a “*big lad*” means James [*P3, male*] and Simon take up more physical space within the NTE, elements of studenthood (e.g. being a “*BNOC*”) also shape their NTE experiences of risk.

Changes to Risk and Pleasure in COVID

In the previous chapter, I explained that the nexus can become perturbed by external factors. Such forces can alter how space, time and studenthood shape the NTE experience. Here, I illustrate these disruptions, focusing on the impact of COVID-19. I demonstrate that whilst time, space and studenthood work together to shape NTE experiences, like those of risk and pleasure, the nexus is still fragile and subject to change.

COVID-19 was a new risk that needed to be navigated. The virus had a high transmission rate, spread through close contact or touching contaminated surfaces (Kaur et al., 2021). Although most cases mimicked cold-like symptoms, there was the risk of more severe health outcomes like pneumonia and respiratory failure, or even death (Hallett, 2024). Whilst some were considered more “at risk” than others (e.g. older adults and those with pre-existing health conditions (Hallett, 2024; Public Health England, 2020a), the virus posed a risk to all.

Altered Perceptions

COVID-19 added to the perceived risk of the NTE. Although any form of public space ultimately became riskier, crowded and poorly ventilated environments, like many NTE spaces, posed greater risks of virus transmission (Iwanicki and Dłużewska, 2023; Kang et al., 2020). Governmental restrictions were placed on such spaces, from complete closure (Johnson, 2020) to social distancing measures (Cabinet Office, 2020b; Dunn et al., 2021; Public Health England, 2020b). However, unlike other sectors, particular spaces of the NTE, like nightclubs, were among the last to reopen, in part, due to their existing association with risk (Nofre et al., 2020). Already considered risky spaces, they became even riskier, and this was reflected in policy considerations for their reopening.

Already briefly mentioned in the *Literature Review*, a report by the Welsh Government (Janssen et al., 2020) on reopening nightlife, focused its considerations heavily on violence rather than risk of COVID-19 transmission:

- *Social distancing may lead to queues and crowding outside venues, which can be associated with violence.*
- *Restrictions on service such as table service may lead to groups buying in rounds, which can increase intoxication and risk of violence*
- *Hygiene and face coverings may lead to conflict between people who do/do not follow the guidance.*

The same attitude was not applied to shops, restaurants or even other NTE settings like bars, despite them also serving alcohol and being spaces for social gathering. The perceived risk of reopening parts of the NTE was considered too high for much of the pandemic, whilst other locations reopened, many nightclubs remained closed (APPG 2021; Jones and Comfort, 2020). Even after reopening, stricter measures were imposed on nightclubs compared to other spaces, specifically venues which “open between 1am and 5am, serve alcohol during this period, have a dance floor” (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021). It shows their perception of risk was not only linked to the space but also the late-night timeframe.

COVID-19 also altered how students were perceived; discourse around their behaviour and rule-breaking presented them as a risk to others. They were seen as responsible for “causing the spread” (Nofre et al., 2023), heightening the threat of illness to the wider community. Whilst the validity of these stereotypes and assumptions was debated at the time (see Faramarzi, 2020; Horner, 2020), and have also been critiqued by academics (see Bengtsson et al., 2021), news headlines circulated villainising young people and students (Chalmers, 2020; Slawson, 2020; Vittozzi, 2020). Even UK Health Secretary at the time, Matt Hancock, publicly implied young people ignoring rules were responsible for a rise in cases (McShane, 2020). He warned that though their demographic may be less likely to experience severe symptoms, they could still contract the virus and pass it

to those who might: “don’t kill your gran” (Chalmers, 2020), a phrase that implied young people were breaking the rules.

HOPE: I think the stereotypes of students are really awful. We're getting blamed left, right and centre for everything at the minute. You know, the rising COVID. We're “*not getting the jabs*”... but we *can't* get the jabs because we're not eligible for them. [...] we get a bit scapegoated for stuff [...] We don't deserve all of the, sort of, blame that we get.

Hope [P12, *female*] explains the criticism students received, that she deemed unfair. Whether due to media portrayals or genuine rule-breaking, students were perceived as the 'risky other' from whom locals kept their distance (e.g. McIntyre, 2020). It is role reversal compared to students' typical avoidance of “locals”, highlighting how COVID-19 reconfigured elements of the typical NTE experience.

Space-Time Changes

COVID-19 forced the closure of NTE spaces and imposed strict regulations to limit virus transmission, transforming how they functioned. Making sure the spaces were “COVID secure” (Cabinet Office, 2020b), disrupted the usual space-time dynamics. “Radical transformations” (Assiter, 2022) to implement social distancing and rule changes, designed to mitigate the risk of catching COVID-19, ended up altering the experience of other risks and pleasures in the NTE.

Regulations meant no crowds and limited movement, with people restricted to their group's table and required to follow one-way systems (Figure 16) when mobile. Hailey and Emma [P11, *female*] articulate that this contributed to their feelings of safety and lowered risk.



Figure 16 is two screenshots from Aaron's [P1] Snapchat Diary taken Summer 2021. It shows two examples of the one-way system he captured on his way back from the toilets to his assigned table.

EMMA: I would definitely say I felt a lot safer on the COVID nights out. Just because, I'm thinking back to like pre-COVID times, you know, like, when you're in the crowd. I feel like there have been cases where you've been like groped or things like that. And I feel like because it was just the members of staff, bringing drinks to the table, there was, kind of, no concern for any spiking. I guess it did feel... less chaotic and a lot safer.

HAILEY: I would completely agree. Just because, like, in COVID times... Obviously, everything was like very segregated, and you were in your own separate groups, so there was really no coming into contact with anyone. Security was very strict with the one-way systems and segregating people, preventing people from crossing over from different groups, which then obviously played a role in stopping people interacting with you in ways that you obviously wouldn't want to.

They explain that social distancing worked to mitigate several perceived risks of the space-time, discussed earlier in the chapter, from the dangers in a crowd to being able to avoid unwanted interaction with the risky other. Segregation of groups into tables provided heightened visibility (especially in combination with stricter security), and essentially the opposite environment to the added risks posed by a crowd. Not only was there physical distance between them and others who may pose a risk, but security and staff actively maintained that distance. There was no chance of being concealed in the crowd as there was no crowd.

The crowd is also a source of pleasure and its absence was felt during pandemic NTE experiences. Hailey [P10, *female*] and Emma [P11, *female*] also discuss the pleasurable elements they missed out on, unable to experience the collective “effervescence” (Durkheim, 1995; Hopkins et al., 2016; Tutenges, 2023) of being physically close to peers.

HAILEY: Well, there’s the whole “*girls bathroom*” thing you know. Like, bumping into strangers and just kind of having this sense of solidarity. It’s just really sweet, and I’ve missed that because you can’t do that. You can’t even go [to the toilet] as a group anymore.

EMMA: Or even just bump into strangers and stuff either.

HAILEY: It’s quite... *isolated* in your little groups.

They explain a lack of connection with other people in the space, a stark contrast to the typical conviviality of the NTE space-time (Assiter, 2022). Their experiences demonstrate how changes to the space-time can alter risk and pleasure. They also imply that ritualistic elements of their NTE experiences, used to negotiate risk and pleasure, were altered as well. They were unable to perform rituals that typically mitigated risk and enhanced pleasure, such as sticking with a group, due to measures in place like one-way systems (Figure 16). Regulations also impacted pleasure as it affected the freedom they experienced in such spaces. They were unable to act as freely as in the typical NTE, which is a source of pleasure.

JACK: Right when we entered, we got a lecture of like “*oh don't do this*” [...] It set the atmosphere from the start to be like “*you know we're still in COVID. It's still a thing, don't act like it's not*” kind of vibe [...] It was at the forefront of your mind, from the beginning. You weren't able to escape it because of all the signs and bouncers telling you not to do things. We were just, like, bombarded with the rules and constant reminders and stuff. It was literally the first thing that we got told on the night out, so it set the tone.

Rules, their enforcement, and physical manifestations of them (Figure 16) reminded customers that the risk of COVID-19 was still present. This altered the NTE atmosphere and conveyed a sense of order and lack of freedom, not typically present in the NTE.

JASMINE: Usually, we can go anywhere we want [...]. We get the freedom of choosing what we want to do, like dance and stuff, and where we want to go and, like, when we want to leave [...] We just got ushered straight to a table, ordered not to get up unless going to the toilet and kicked out at the curfew time.

The lack of freedom to behave as they wanted, or as they typically would in the NTE is evidenced in video diaries (Figure 17). Jack [P2, male] videoed the area surrounding him in the nightclub, including a group of his friends (sat separately due to rules on group size), who were dancing at their own table.

JACK: They were actually really told off because they were dancing. Even though they weren't leaving their like assigned space, the bouncer and another member of staff came and made them stop.

Video diaries also capture the “*constant reminders*” (Jack [P2, male]) mentioned earlier. He took pictures of signs displaying the rules (Figure 18) and although light-hearted in tone (“Boris says no dancing”) they still give clear instructions. Whilst Aaron [P1, male], panning to show the room, captured staff wearing face coverings (Figure 19).



Figure 17 is a screenshot from Jack's [P2] Snapchat Diary taken Summer 2021. It captures a group of females, Jack's friends, stood up and dancing at their table, during a seated nightclub event. Though it is not captured in the diary, Jack later explains that they were "told off" for these actions.



Figure 18 is also from Jack's [P2] video diary. It shows two signs relating to COVID-19 regulations NTE venues were required to enforce to maintain social distancing.

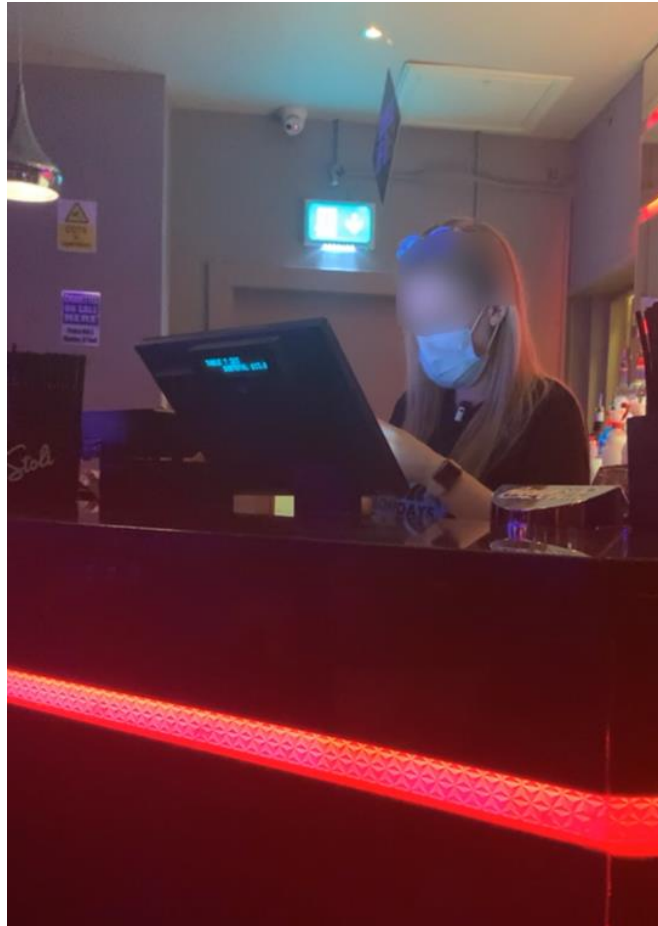


Figure 19 is from Aaron's [P1] Snapchat Diary taken Summer 2021. It shows a member of staff serving at the bar wearing a facemask. This was a requirement at the time. The background also shows signage stating: "CCTV in operation"

Interestingly, in the creation of their diaries, Jack [P2, male] and Aaron [P1, male] also captured other rule related signs, without specifically picking up on them. Nightclubs must display signs regarding CCTV (Data Protection Act, 2018) and many also display *Challenge 25*²⁷ posters, drugs policy or house rules (Figure 19). These elements are all involved in governing and controlling the NTE space-time, yet their attention was drawn only to those related to COVID-19. This is perhaps due to their novelty and increased relevance at the time, but highlights the baseline, unnoticed governance of the typical NTE.

²⁷ *Challenge 25* is a policy to help enforce legal age restrictions on the sale of alcohol, through proactive ID checks on those staff deem to be under 25 years old.

It is also worth highlighting that his way of describing the rule enforcement (“we got a lecture”) contrasts with what is expected on a night out. He uses terminology reflective of their everyday experiences at university. This is significant when considering that students view the NTE as an escape or “time out of time” (Presdee, 2000: p.33) from their day-to-day lives (see *Chapter 6*). Perhaps this regimented version of the NTE with limited freedom, is not so different from the everyday mundane university lives they seek to escape, resulting in less pleasurable experiences. It demonstrates how COVID-19 re-shaped the space-time-studenthood nexus, impacting, and re-framing experiences of NTE risk and pleasure.

Negotiation Changes

COVID-19 not only altered and disrupted the perception and atmosphere of the NTE space-time but also had impacts on students’ edgework and the ways they negotiated risk and pleasure in their experiences. With new risks and altered contexts, the steps students took to enhance pleasure and mitigate risks adapted.

Alcohol was still used to enhance pleasure, though its potential to enhance risk also remained. This required management and boundary negotiation. Policy reflected this risk-potential as, during summer 2020, venues were permitted to only sell alcohol accompanied by a “substantial meal” (Cabinet Office, 2020a). It is likely that this was to avoid intoxication which may have resulted in flouting of COVID-19 regulations. In fact, Emma [*P11, female*] recollects an intoxicated abandon of social distancing rules, when staff were no longer there to police behaviour:

EMMA: I found that when everyone was kicked out at the same time, it was like even though the security had taken all those measures during the night to prevent us from mixing or wherever. As soon as we were all kicked out onto the street, at the exact same time, *everyone* was mixing. We shouldn't have been coming into contact with each other at the time but... You've obviously had a lot to drink... all rational thought just goes out the window.

Alcohol consumption had to be managed in new ways if they were to remember and abide by distancing rules. Participants also mention they consumed more alcohol than during typical nights out, citing its use to combat unpleasurable experiences in this altered space-time, from awkwardness to boredom.

MEGAN: It kind of like encouraged you to drink loads more because [...] that was almost like the only thing to do [...] you were, kind of, like... just sat there. All you can do is drink so... you do.

TOM: We felt like we drank so much more than we normally would. It helped make it less awkward too, I guess.

Typical NTE activities that brought about pleasure, like dancing with friends, could not be carried out. Instead, they consumed alcohol to reach a pleasurable level of intoxication and combat the undesirable effects of the altered NTE atmosphere. COVID-19 altered the space-time which in turn altered their negotiation of risk and pleasure within it.

Though students were unable to perform some of their typical NTE rituals, due to COVID-19 regulations, they also faced a new form of negotiation and edgework: the level of risk they were willing to engage with, for the purposes of socialisation and pleasure. It was especially the case during lockdowns where people were ordered to stay at home and avoid meeting up with anyone outside of their household and the NTE was closed. Woodrow and Moore (2021: p.477) argue “exclusion does not eradicate the desire for leisure, nor does the regulation of space prevent leisure practices”. Students still desired to socialise and have fun (see Holm-Hadulla et al., 2021). For some that was worth the risk of breaking the rules and potentially catching the virus or even a potential source of excitement (Roberts, 2020).

HARRISON: I was speaking to someone actually who said they did enjoy the sort of illegal parties that were thrown because it was this kind of a rush

and excitement when the porters were chasing you or you had to hide [...] and that all sound like a laugh to be honest.

TOM: There was quite a lot of big gatherings late at night [...] everyone just used to go drinking there. I don't think we went to many of them, maybe one [...] If you want to make friends, not only have you got to drink, but you've got to go into a massive group of like 200 people who've probably all got COVID and get ill. It's not really worth it.

Tom [P28, *male*] explains that some chose to take this risk, as it was worth it to make friends, especially for those residing on campus, new to university life. There were many risks involved in such activity, risk of catching COVID-19 or being caught by those enforcing the rules but also risk of missing out on making friends if they didn't attend. Individuals had to negotiate these competing risks, weighing them up. Whilst Tom [P28, *male*] mentions he may have attended at least one of these illicit gatherings, he ultimately decided that, for him, it was not “worth” the risk. However, many students and young people did continue to socialise under these restrictions (Lashua et al., 2021; Roberts, 2020; Woodrow and Moore, 2021).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated that the nexus, and its interconnected elements of space, time and studenthood, influences risk and pleasure in the NTE. Studenthood provides a context that frames NTE experiences, including elements of university life and perceptions of students that set them up to engage with risk, often without some of the same consequences as other young people. Elements of space and time shape the NTE as a space associated with heightened risk but also increased pleasure. The atmosphere is not “mono-affectual” (Demant, 2013: p.196) and even specific elements like the music, crowd or darkness can induce experiences of risk and pleasure simultaneously. Who is at risk and where they feel safe is also influenced by their student identities, as well as other intersectional elements of their identities, like gender and ethnicity.

Students are not passive to the NTE atmosphere; they regularly negotiate risk and pleasure in their NTE experiences. Some of the measures they take, become second nature and regular, ritualistic parts of their NTE experience, straying from their initial conception in response to risk or pleasure. As intertwined concepts, the boundary between risk and pleasure must be negotiated. Students regularly engage in edgework to balance risk-taking for pleasure, without straying into a zone of danger. This has to be dynamic, a controlled attainment (Månsson et al., 2024) rather than a “controlled loss of control” (Measham and Brain, 2005: p.273). The work to ensure personal safety, or that of others, whilst also maintaining pleasure, is not experienced equally, and it also fluctuates depending on aspects of their own identities as well as those of others in their group.

The nexus offers a framework for understanding the complexities of risk and pleasure, providing deeper insight into student NTE experiences. It also helps explain how significant changes, like those brought by COVID-19, redefined and changed the ways risk and pleasure were experienced, by altering space, time and student dynamics.

Chapter 8: Nightlife and The Student Experience

In the preceding chapters, I explored how students experience the night-time economy (NTE), shaped by a complex interplay of factors (space, time and studenthood) which I refer to as “the nexus”. This chapter builds on that foundation to explore how these experiences, shaped by the nexus, contribute to what it means to be a student, forming a reciprocal relationship (Figure 20). The analysis focuses on the micro-practices embedded within students’ NTE practices through which students ‘become’ and understand themselves as students. Earlier sociological work, particularly ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; 1996; Turner, 1974), established the importance of attending to the minutiae of everyday life to reveal how social order is made meaningful through everyday practice. I draw lightly on this to highlight how students make sense of and reproduce everyday student life through routine engagement with the NTE. This focus on the everyday is extended through more contemporary work on performativity, which understands identity as continually produced and reproduced through the repetition of acts that cite shared norms and expectations (Butler, 1990; 1993). Taken together, these frameworks help situate students’ NTE experiences as part of the everyday production and performance of what it means to be a student. Drawing on participant insight, I address four key topics: transition, becoming, belonging, and the overarching idea of the “student experience” to unpack how student life is navigated, learned, imagined and shaped by collective expectations, developed through their NTE experiences.

While I have previously demonstrated how being a student shapes the NTE experience (see *Chapters 6 and 7*), this chapter focuses on the role of these experiences in shaping student life. By critically exploring the NTE’s role, I contribute to existing discussion of its importance within student life, offering fresh perspectives via the nexus framework.

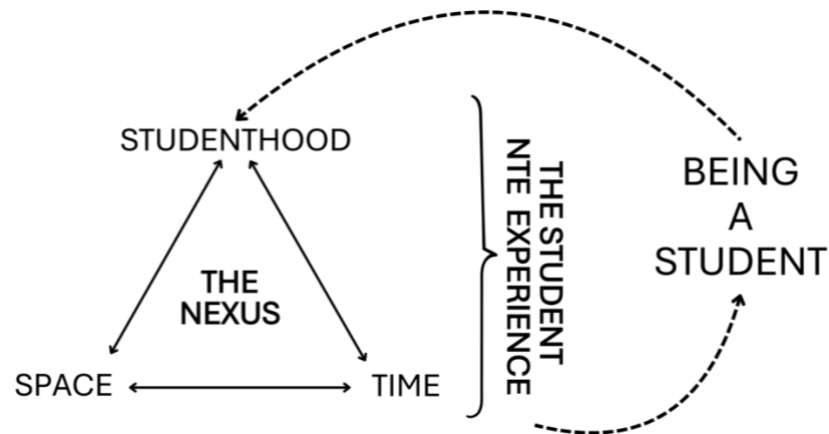


Figure 20 is a diagram representing the reciprocal relationship between NTE experiences, shaped by the nexus, and being a student. This relationship is explored throughout this chapter.

The Transition to University

Student transition to university is characterised by newfound independence, uncertainty and the challenge of establishing connections as they adapt to their new environment. Riordan and Carey (2019: p.34) likens this experience to “Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole before Wonderland”, highlighting the thrill of curiosity and adventure, but also the disorientating nature of change.

NTE experiences, shaped by the nexus, play a crucial role in this period of transition. Participant insight reveals that students specifically use NTE experiences during this time as a tool to navigate change and adapt to university life (Fenton et al., 2024a; Measham and Brain, 2005; Szmigin et al., 2008), contributing to our understanding of what it means to be a student. Without such experiences, either through choice or at the hands of COVID-19 measures, students risk a difficult transition (Scanlon et al., 2007).

Navigating Change and Uncertainty

As students transition to university, they navigate the challenges of leaving their previous lives and adapting to a new context. For many, this involves moving away from home and leaving established social networks and support systems (Kelly et al., 2024; Wilcox et al., 2005). Participants explain this may be a “fresh start, a real opportunity to, kind of...

reinvent myself" (Ali [P23, male]); however, transitions can also be a time of stress and uncertainty (Iyer et al., 2009; Meisel and Barnett, 2017), due to these changes. NTE engagement, along with other leisure and social activities (see Denovan and Macaskill, 2016; Iwasaki and Mannell, 2000), can act as a coping strategy. Although participants do not refer explicitly to stress, some imply these emotions through phrases like: "*a lot going on*", "*awkward*", "*tension*" and "*weirdness*". Students NTE experiences are used as a temporary escape. Jack [P2, male] notes that it is how they "*coped*".

MATT: Its tough. There's a lot going on during that time. You're away from home, trying to learn how to do laundry and cook and stuff yourself. You're living with people you've not lived with before. Having a few drinks and going out is a way to break the ice and ease that transition to this, you know, entirely different environment. Especially on that first day. You're this sheltered 18-year-old. That social drink and night out just breaks the ice, gets everyone speaking and makes you feel a bit more... I don't know... settled. Before that it was just *proper awkward*.

JACK: For me, the first ever thing I did at uni was go out. Like within like a few hours. It's like everyone was like "*oh hi! Nice to meet you! Let's get drunk now!*". I think that's how we coped with like the weirdness of it all like there's a huge life change and our answer is "*Let's get drunk and go out!*"

Navigating the shift from a "*sheltered*" life with his parents to university, Matt [P8, male] uses NTE experiences as a temporary escape. Consideration for the nexus of elements that shape students' NTE experiences provides deeper insight into their role. The experiences offer a brief space and "time out" (Caluzzi et al., 2021; Riordan and Carey, 2019) from the stress and discomfort of transition. They are temporarily transported, sometimes in a non-literal sense (e.g. pre-drinks in halls of residence), due to the contrasting pleasurable affects of the night-out atmosphere (see *Chapter 5*). The escape helps them to feel "*settled*" (Matt [P8, male]). These accounts also exemplify the everyday meaning-making that students use to render new situations intelligible and construct a sense of "*settled*" order amid change.

Participants highlight the role of alcohol during these experiences, which has been identified as a “social lubricant” (Gambles et al., 2022; Riordan and Carey, 2019). However, the nexus provides a more comprehensive lens, drawing attention to the temporal, spatial and studenthood factors that shape students’ engagement, enabling them to use NTE experiences as tools to “cope” (Jack [P2, male]). Furthermore, Sasha [P13, female] claims that drinking is not an essential component within these experiences. Her transition-related “anxiety” was eased through active participation in a range of NTE events, emphasising the broader NTE experience, rather than alcohol consumption.

SASHA: I went to loads [of NTE events]. I think I pretty much did everything that was on the menu for the first few weeks. And that really helped push me to, sort of, get more involved and speak to people [and] break down that anxiety of coming to university. Getting involved with events, whether you’re drinking or not. Just, like, being present [...] it makes a *huge* difference for people trying to settle in at uni.

The use of NTE experiences to cope with, or manage the challenges of, university transitions, reflects themes explored in *Chapter 6*. Whether dealing with academic pressure, the mundanity of university life, or the uncertainties of change, students seem to consistently rely on NTE experiences. Shaped by time, space and studenthood, these experiences provide a crucial space and “time out” (Caluzzi et al., 2021; Riordan and Carey, 2019) from other aspects of university life.

Establishing (and Maintaining) Friendships

NTE experiences play a well-documented role in friendship-making (Barnes, 2017; MacLean, 2016; Meisel and Barnett, 2017). When starting university, these experiences are especially important, as new friendships replace their reliance on old or familial support networks, allowing the student to adjust (Buote et al., 2007; Wilcox et al., 2005).

MAISEY: In that first week, everyone’s just talking to everyone. [...] you’ll go to different flats, and everyone welcomes you in even though you don’t know each other yet. I think everyone has the mind set of, like, “*I know nobody*,

let's try meet some friends". Then, even if you're not drinking, just gathering in the kitchen, before people go out, is important because that Freshers' Week mixing, with everyone, is how you meet your connections.

Without existing "*connections*" to rely on, Maisiey [P9, *female*] indicates students use settings like drinking in student halls as opportunities to socialise with a wider group, in the hope of forming friendships. There is a sense these social networks of friends must be quickly acquired (see also Brown and and Murphy, 2019) as a means of survival (Kyne and Thompson, 2020; Ogilvie, 2018). Notably, she feels social bonding appears to stem from shared presence in the space and engagement in NTE practices rather than alcohol. This is echoed by Daniel [P15, *male*]:

DANIEL: 'Pres' is a really good way of getting to know people and settle into the company of these new people, before going to the club. Like, even if you're not drinking much, or maybe you're not one for going out, just being in that environment and involved in that part of the night out is important I think.

Their insight differs from prior research, emphasising the role of alcohol in establishing these early connections (Brown and and Murphy, 2019; Hepworth et al., 2016; MacLean, 2016) implying alcohol helps in "speeding up the process" (Ogilvie, 2018: p.111). Instead, NTE experiences and spaces are involved in their friendship-making.

MATT: The number of friends I've made from going on nights out is just *ridiculous*. And then you've got the friends you meet through friends you meet on a night out too. It all plays a really big part of, like, forming that network of people at uni.

HAILEY: There's loads of people that you, sort of, recognise from your course but then haven't really spoken to them and you'll see them in the club and just be like, "*Oh! I know you!*" and then you make, kind of, friends that way.

Matt [P8, *male*] and Hailey [P10, *female*] suggest that the NTE offers a space for friendship-making, that other university contexts, like lectures, do not. Through these experiences, a broader “*network*” (Matt [P8, *male*]) forms as students extend their friendship circles by inviting others to join their nights out. However, some scholars question the longevity of friendships forged in the NTE (Barnes, 2017; Smith, 2014), a view shared by some participants.

MAX: You do definitely meet lots of people going out, but I wouldn’t necessarily say they’re all my *friends*. You’ll say “*hi*” when you see them out but, to be honest, you probably don’t even see most of them outside of the nightclub setting anyway, or you probably won’t even remember them.

SUSAN: I do have a few people who I’ll run into in a club and spend the night with dancing and acting like we are like *lifelong best friends* or something. But I never see them outside of that environment. Sober me wouldn’t consider them close friends (*laughs*).

Again, emphasis is placed on the spaces and times of students’ NTE experiences. Max [P22, *male*] and Susan’s [P5, *female*] friendships are forged through the interconnected elements of space, time and studenthood forming ephemeral experiences in the NTE. Though in the moment they may behave as “*lifelong best friends*” (Susan [P5, *female*]), when the night out ends, so does the friendship. The friendships that survive must be “bolstered” (see Smith, 2014: p.158) by additional contact beyond the NTE.

MAISEY: Meeting people on nights out is great. But I always add people on Snapchat when I’m out. I don’t do that with people I meet in lectures. We follow each other on socials and then start to create, like, an *online* friendship, after the night out and develop a *proper* friendship from that starting point.

The NTE is separated from other university spaces, with Maisiey [P9, *female*] referring to her altered behaviour during NTE experiences. It acts as a “*starting point*” (Maisiey [P9,

female]) to forming friendships which become more meaningful when accompanied by further communication.

An Introduction to University Life

Earlier in the chapter, I discussed Sasha's [P13, *female*] engagement with a "menu" of NTE events, helping her "settle in at uni". This "menu" refers to her timetable for *Freshers' Week*. The NTE plays an important part in this as the timetable (see Figure 21), mediated by student groups, the Students' Union, or the University, is often saturated with bar crawls, club nights and other "alcohol dominated social contexts" (Hill et al., 2025: p.4). There is a sense that this introduction to student life is, essentially, an introduction to the NTE.

FERGUS: You're away from home for the first time and going out every single night of the week, whether you want to or not. That's the first introduction you have to any form of social life at university, so maybe that's why people start to think that being a student is all about going out.

LAURA: It's good to get you used to the uni culture, and to [...] make you more comfortable going on nights out. [...] I think it serves the purpose to, like, help you settle and ease you into what uni is.

The emphasis on NTE experiences during this week and the perception that "nights out" are "*what uni is*" (Laura [P24, *female*]) conflate student life with NTE experiences. Fergus [P3, *male*] suggests this sets expectations regarding student NTE engagement from the very first week of university (Supski et al., 2017). Laura's [P24, *female*] phraseology is particularly interesting, as she implies an overarching culture of which one must become part to consider themselves a student. Although the existence of such a culture will be discussed later in the chapter, it aligns with other research and positions *Freshers' Week* as a crucial time period for new students: an "initiation ritual to higher education" (Erevik et al., 2018: p.2), or "rite of passage" (Van Gennep, 1960), with NTE experiences playing an important role.

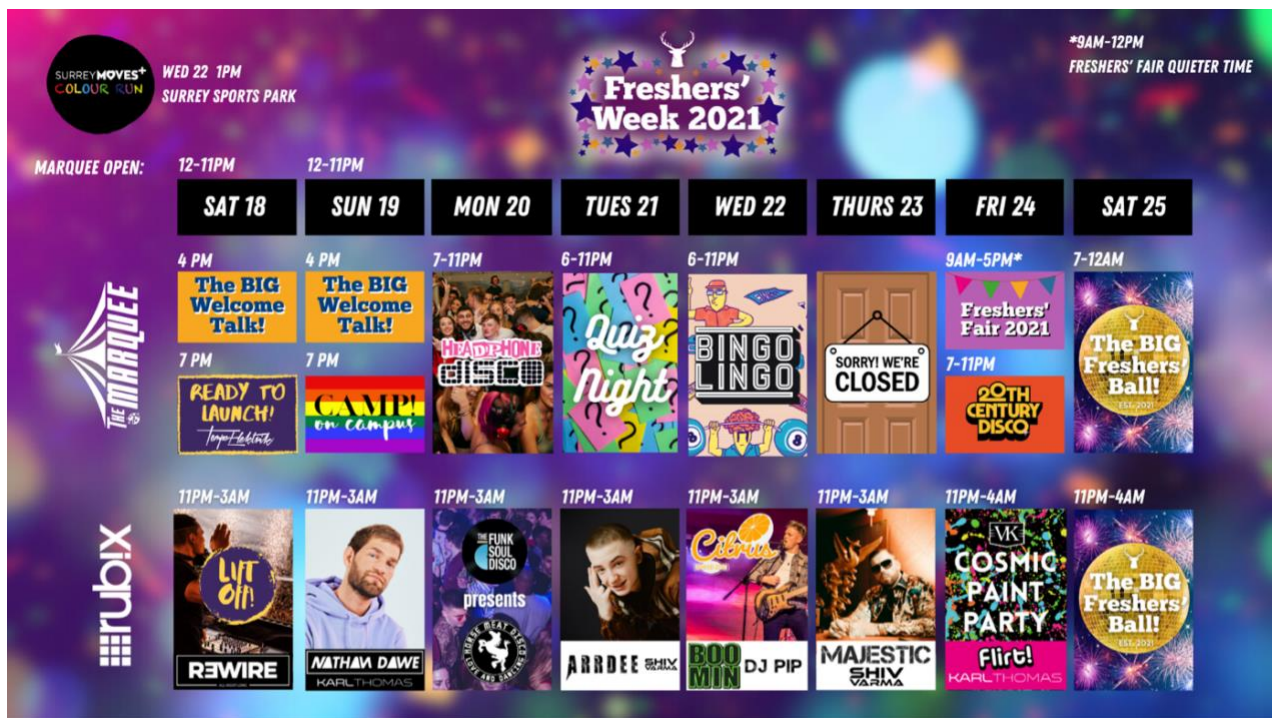


Figure 21 contains examples of 2021 Freshers' Week timetables, for universities not involved in this research. Despite featuring information sessions like "The BIG Welcome Talk" the majority of the focus is on NTE experiences marketed to students as "unmissable". Source: Facebook.com



Participants suggest experiences within this first week not only help them “settle” (Laura [P24, *female*]) but set them up for the rest of their university lives. Ali [P23, *male*] also suggests it is here they first learn the value and centrality of NTE experiences to student life.

ALI: It set the tone for my uni experience [...] But also for the average student in general, it sets the tone and not only for the whole week not only for the whole [first] year, but for the entire uni experience [...] Because you discover it’s a big part of your social life and non-academic time.

Framing NTE experiences as shaped through the nexus, deepens understanding of the significance of *Freshers’ Week*. For instance, he has no timetabled teaching, meaning students are not ordinarily burdened with academic obligations. Students’ social context is also distinctive within this time, as they rapidly adapt to change, prioritise “acquisition of peer networks” (Brown and and Murphy, 2019: p.225; see also Supski et al., 2017) and engage with the NTE driven by expectations of student life, simply “*because it [is] Freshers’ Week*” (Fenton et al., 2024a: p.202, emphasis added).

ALI: It’s the fact that everyone is new. After that time, you have other priorities like lectures and stuff, so it’s the perfect time to go out, meet people, try new things. [...] I’d like to think I’d have been brave enough to try [going out] for the first time outside of Freshers’ but I think in reality it would have been too intimidating at that point. Like, just the circumstances made it easier for me to try.

MAISEY: I felt like everyone was their biggest, most confident, friendly versions of themselves. You just know that, to survive, you’ve got to get involved and make friends.

Participants acknowledge the different attitudes and behaviours students exhibit during this week. Making friends and immersing themselves in university life, becomes linked with the NTE. Maissey’s [P9, *female*] belief that this approach is essential for “*survival*” at university, highlights the important role such experiences play in “successful” transition

and minimising negative outcomes like student attrition (Allaire, 2022; Buote et al., 2007; Kyne and Thompson, 2020). Once the week ends, the NTE experiences alter and the opportunities for assimilation and “*trying new things*” (Ali [P23, male]) reduce. This view is reinforced by second-year participants who, due to the pandemic, missed out on typical *Freshers’ Week* experiences, and, hence, these opportunities.

MEGAN: We were also with the new freshers from the year below it never felt like our year could just socialise and have that sort of “*welcome to uni*” experience. The attempt to include us was a bit half-arsed anyway, but we’re with people younger than us, who are getting an *entirely* different experience of what uni is like than we did. It just felt *weird*.

CHARLOTTE: When I went to my first social in Freshers’ Week of second year, I did get a bit of a grasp of what it was like being a fresher but [the first-years] all seemed so much more excited. [Second-years] I spoke to, basically said it feels a bit *wrong* to be going out and meeting people for the first time, while we’re in second year. We should already have done all this.

Even though attempts were made to include them in *Freshers’ Week* 2021, the second-years felt out of place. Time plays an important part as they emphasise the importance of the first-year context of these NTE experiences. Further along in their university timelines than the first-years, their NTE experiences are altered and seem to offer less support than they do for new students (e.g. they imply they missed out on the “*welcome to university*” and friendship-making opportunities). This is corroborated by those in later years of study, sympathising with those who “*missed out*” (Ali [P23, male]).

ALI: I do feel bad for them because Freshers’ Week is the best week of the year. It’s a key thing that they missed out on, bonding and making new friends with people who are in the same boat. It’s not the same online.

FERGUS: My cousin is like completely outside of the whole uni stuff with him going to lectures and stuff via a laptop [...] I don’t think he’s been really able to make friends at uni in the same way I did. That’s not how uni life should

start. I hope, now things are opening up a bit more, he puts himself out there and he can be a student in the same way I was in first year [and] have those same experiences I did.

HAILEY: I'd be gutted [if it were me]. Those poor first-years were just in their rooms the whole time missing out on like the most important part of uni or attempting it through zoom.

They place great importance on times like *Freshers' Week* as part of the wider “student experience”, a theme I return to later in the chapter. Missing out on these experiences they imagine that first-years struggle to make friends and miss “key” (Ali [P23, *male*]) experiences which they deem essential to wider university life. Just as explored in *Chapter 5*, the NTE physical space is crucial in these experiences. Participants explain how online alternatives fell short in replicating the in-person experiences they had during their own Freshers' Week.

The risk of non-engagement

Research has begun to explore the social challenges non-drinkers may face at university, especially during times of transition (Caluzzi et al., 2022; Conroy and De Visser, 2014). At university, drinking is viewed as a “norm” (Gambles et al., 2022) and those that deviate may be positioned as “black sheep” or “unsociable” (Conroy and De Visser, 2014: p.544) especially given the role alcohol consumption plays in facilitating student social connections (Tarrant et al., 2019).

Participants generally mirror these perceptions, which motivated their consumption, and associated NTE engagement. Their insights reflect a degree of pressure to engage with the NTE and consume alcohol especially during this transitional phase to avoid such “detrimental social consequences” (Gambles et al., 2022: p.251).

SASHA: I think I'd feel quite scared of being the person who doesn't want to go out, especially the younger version of myself. I've never been, like, a big

drinker, but you almost feel compelled to do that, so you're not left out at the start.

This research deviates from other work as the emphasis is on the necessity to attend the NTE not the pressure to consume alcohol. There is no need to consume alcohol as part of an NTE experience; this is reflected in changing student consumption habits (Burgess et al., 2022; Fenton et al., 2024b; Hill et al., 2025; Keyes et al., 2019; Kraus et al., 2018; Kraus et al., 2020; Törrönen et al., 2019). Ali's [P23, *male*] experience as a non-drinker, demonstrates his awareness that failure to participate in these experiences could result in social isolation.

ALI: It's not about drinking. It's about still being involved and being where people make these connections. So, I think if I'd even just left [attending the NTE] until later on at uni, rather than in that first week, it would have been harder to integrate myself. I'd have felt a bit left out and it would have been harder as I'd be a bit isolated.

During COVID-19, many at-home attempts to replicate NTE experiences returned to alcohol-centric activities, as typical experiences within the NTE space-time were unfeasible. Some participants felt more obliged to consume alcohol or they "*wouldn't have as much of a chance of making friends*" (Megan [P30, *female*]). Simply being involved within the space was no longer enough to constitute an NTE experience that could help students to integrate.

MEGAN: Last year, if you didn't drink, you wouldn't have as much of a chance of making friends, I'd say. Because everyone would be sitting around a table, playing drinking games. If you weren't involved, you wouldn't have anything to speak about. I know people who just sat in their rooms because they didn't get involved in the drinking element. If you don't drink you've got nothing really...

STEVE: Yeah I agree. I come from a community that doesn't really drink. I don't want to say I was *pressured* or *coerced* but if I wasn't drinking, how else was I meant to socialise with people? I couldn't see people in lectures or societies. I'd sit and think, "*if I don't go to the kitchen and get involved with the drinking games how am I meant to make any friends?*"

Non-drinking students faced social and spatial isolation, often avoiding spaces where NTE-related activities would take place. Steve [P29, *male*], a former non-drinker, assumed he would have the opportunity to form friendships in other contexts, like lectures and societies. With COVID-19 also impacting these spaces and times, he felt pressure to drink to become involved in these at-home experiences.

The NTE provides a space and time for friendship-making and navigating change, especially during times like *Freshers' Week*. Without these experiences, through personal choice or as a result of COVID-19, students may face greater challenges in adjusting to university life as they “miss out” on “key” (Ali [P23, *male*]) transitional experiences. Unpacking NTE experiences through the nexus, improves insight into their significance, during the transition to university. The atmosphere, physical space, times of change, first-year context, university culture and social expectations all influence these experiences as an important part of student life.

Becoming a Student

Becoming a student is not automatic (Cheeseman, 2018) but a process that requires students to “learn the rules of the student game” (Chatterton, 1999: p.120) and adapt their sense of self according to a social imaginary (Cheeseman, 2010; Gale and Hodge, 2017). The construction of a “typical student” (Cheeseman, 2018; Grozev and Easterbrook, 2024; Lane and Gibbons, 2007; Sabri, 2011) is central to this becoming, as it acts as the ideal they strive to reach (Rutherford and Pickup, 2015), even if only performed temporarily (Chatterton, 1999; Cheeseman, 2017; 2018; Holton, 2017), also acting as a benchmark to measure their experiences against (Pötschulat et al., 2021; Sykes, 2021).

Whether learning or performing the student identity, NTE experiences, shaped by nexus elements, play an important part. Covered in the *Literature Review*, NTE spaces act as “stages” (Goffman, 1971) where aspects of the student self can be temporarily performed; within them, through peer interaction, students learn how to *be* a student.

The construction of a “typical student” is also tied to expectations of NTE attendance. In this section of the chapter, I explore the central role of NTE experiences as students learn how to be a student.

The “Typical Student”

As mentioned in *the Literature Review*, references to a “typical student” describe a student archetype, connected with specific socio-economic characteristics (i.e. white, middle-class, and young), traditions and lifestyles (i.e. hedonistic, responsibility-free, moves away from home to attend university). Many of these are aspects of studenthood I discussed in *Chapter 6* as influencing NTE engagement, providing both opportunity and expectations to students. It is therefore unsurprising that NTE engagement is also frequently attached to this student archetype (Cheeseman, 2018; Gambles et al., 2022; Holton, 2017).

The term creates a homogenised view of students based on outdated and oversimplified generalisations which fail to acknowledge the evolution of the student population (i.e. through Widening Participation initiatives (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003)). However, this research is not focused on the legitimacy of the term and whether a “typical student” truly exists or accurately represents the modern-day student body. Instead, its relevance lies in exploring how these social imaginaries shape students’ behaviour and perceptions of themselves and others, including those who define themselves against this archetype.

Participants recognise the notion of a “typical student”, and some even adopt the term. They position themselves in relation to the perceived socio-economic attributes and lifestyle elements they associate with this ideal (Sykes 2021), with particular emphasis on the NTE.

MATT: I think, if you ask basically anyone in the country, what their, sort of, cliché idea of a student is, there’s just this picture of a young person, maybe 18 or 19, who goes out as much as they possibly can, nurses a hangover

and then cracks on with some work [...] That was my situation for the first couple of years.

Matt [P8, *male*] feels strongly about common characteristics that students share, particularly highlighting the central role NTE experiences play in his construction, arguing that it is a dominant view. As his experience matches with this conceptualisation, it legitimises his identity as a student (see also Pötschulat et al., 2021). However, resonating in such a way with the “typical student” ideal is not the reality for all participants. Some feel they do not match lifestyle choices or other identity markers. The concept of the “typical student” is still important in these cases though, as it forms a benchmark for who they feel they ought to be as students. Not fitting this archetype, leaves some feeling as though they are “doing uni wrong” (Cook et al., 2022: p.9) or “missing out” (Holdsworth, 2006; Reay et al., 2010; Sykes, 2021).

SASHA: Not that I’d say I’m even one myself, but I’d say the typical student is, like, straight out of school or 6th form and not many responsibilities. They most definitely drink and go out and stuff [...] I fit certain parts of that. I like to go out and I’m young, I guess, at heart and can certainly be the life of the party when I need to be. But there’s sometimes that feeling [as an older student] of “*should I even be here?*”. I think students my age, or getting close to my age, also feel a bit the same. And responsibilities-wise I have a kid, so I’m not responsibility-free in the way most students are.

Sasha [P13, *female*] refers to several characteristics of the “typical student” persona, mentioned already in this chapter, including age, responsibilities and tendency for NTE engagement. It emphasises how deeply-rooted these specific social imaginaries of the student ideal are. She experiences some dissonance between her circumstances and this archetype, particularly on account of her age and role as a mother. This disconnect leads her to question her legitimacy as a student.

Although she notes aspects of her lifestyle that diverge from the “typical student” archetype, she also acknowledges areas of alignment. Her discussion of her NTE engagement is particularly interesting in this regard. She states: “I’m young [...] at heart and can certainly be the life of the party when I need to be” implying that her sense of self

as a student is context-dependent and time-limited. She temporarily aligns herself with other “typical students” within her NTE experiences through performance. Goffman’s (1971) ideas about self-presentation come to mind; The NTE space functions as a “front stage” upon which she temporarily adopts traits of a “typical student” to fit in with the crowd (see Hepworth et al., 2016; Riordan and Carey, 2019).

The necessity to be the “life of the party” implies this performance may be a way to compensate for other aspects of her everyday (“backstage”) self that do not fit with the notion of the “typical student” and could impede her ability to fit in with others. This compensatory aspect is also reflected in research by Fenton et al. (2024a: p.1018). Their study found that participants who did not consume alcohol felt pressure to become “known as social persons” (i.e. heightening their social presence to compensate for their lack of alcohol consumption). This effort was deemed necessary to remain included in these social practices and avoid being perceived as the “black sheep” in contrast to the prevailing “typical” ideal. For Sasha [P13, *female*] becoming a student is related to the spaces and times of her NTE engagement, allowing her to “*fit certain parts*” of the “typical student” construction during these experiences. Such repeated enactments of student norms exemplify the performative nature of identity work in the university context, where belonging is achieved through doing and re-doing the practices recognised as ‘student-like’. In their research Attenborough and Stokoe (2012: p.6) term this as the “practice of ‘doing-being-a-student-amongst-other-students’.”

Sasha [P13, *female*] is not the only participant to experience a sense of disconnect from the archetype. With NTE engagement tied to the construction of a “typical student”, those who do not or rarely engage with the NTE, may be positioned as “*not typical*” (Hope [P12, *female*]). Moreover, some, like Hope [P12, *female*], lean into this difference, defining their experience as students in contrast.

HOPE: I’m somewhat typical in terms of my involvement in societies and the fact I study. I go to the library like every other student. But I would also say I’m very *not* typical too, because I don’t go out. Most students do. But I would much rather stay in, watch a film with my PJs on, I’m not about all that drinking and such.

By viewing herself as “*not typical*” due to her lack of NTE engagement, Hope [P12, *female*] underscores the centrality of NTE engagement as part of the social imaginary of a “typical student”. However, she adopts behaviours that emphasise her misalignment. Whereas Ali [P23, *male*], who does not drink, continues to engage with the NTE, and Sasha [P13, *female*] temporally performs characteristics of the “typical student”, Hope [P12, *female*] distances herself from this part of the student imaginary. Rather than merely recognising her atypicality, she deliberately positions herself in opposition, by emphasising the antithetical activities and spaces she chooses, over NTE participation. This mirrors Lane’s (2007) research on social comparison to “student prototypes”, where some accentuated their nonconformity, creating further distance in opposition to dominant notions.

Participants reflect upon the origins and perpetuations of these “typical student” characteristics, particularly how it became closely tied to NTE engagement. They note that students, like Hope [P12, *female*] who stay home rather than attending the NTE, receive less media attention, leaving their experiences overlooked.

JACK: For a lot of students, the typical student culture *is* going out. Obviously not every single student does, but the vast majority do so, that’s why it ends up being associated as a thing students do.

JAMES: Yeah. You don’t hear about the kids staying in playing dungeons and dragons²⁸. [...] You end up hearing about the ones going out getting pissed all the time making headlines.

Although Jack [P2, *male*] acknowledges that, in reality, not “*every single student*” attends the NTE, its widespread popularity reinforces a link with “*typical student culture*”. James [P3, *male*], on the other hand, points to media representations of students that serve to perpetuate these associations. He argues that as student NTE engagement is more

²⁸ *Dungeons and Dragons* is a fantasy role-playing game originating in the 1970s (Gygax and Arneson, 1974). It is likely that James [P3] has chosen this as an example given the stark contrast that stereotypes of those who play this game offer in comparison to those of drunk students in the NTE who frequently receive negative media attention. Curran (2011: p.44) explains the stereotype of these gamers is “anti-social male teenagers who are largely more interested in technology than in their own personal appearance”.

frequently depicted in the media (e.g. Duell, 2019; McManus, 2018), the associations between the two becomes stronger, while other, less prominent forms of student leisure go largely unnoticed. It ties in with arguments made by Blackman and Rogers (2017b: p.85) that such portrayals are “a deliberate distortion of social reality through narratives derived from fictional popular culture”, that is, TV shows like *Fresh Meat* (2011), portray students as those who frequently attend the NTE, so news media report on those students who match this portrayal.

Such expectations of student life influence behaviours surrounding the NTE (see *Chapter 6*) as a form of “self-fulfilling prophecy” (Cheeseman, 2010: p.79). James [P3, male] points out that it is not just the existence of these media stereotypes, but their prevalence that contributes to the depiction of a hedonistic “typical student” who frequently attends the NTE, subsequently impacting student behaviour. Regardless of whether these constructions of a “typical student” are valid or representative, they still remain central to the process of becoming a student. They act as a benchmark, an aspirational ideal or something to be performed when social context requires. It encourages students to uphold certain ideas about student life, even when their own realities differ (Sykes, 2021) and this relates to their NTE engagement, shaped through space, time and studenthood, as a key aspect of what a student is.

Learning to be a Student

Beyond the dominant constructions of a “typical student” ideal or archetype, participants also highlight other shared understandings of student identity, including common norms, traditions and cultural aspects of student life. These ways of being are learnt through peer interaction, passed down between generations of students as they learn how to be a student from those with more experience of university life (Groves and O’Shea, 2019). Becoming a student is to “learn the rules of the student game” (Chatterton, 1999: p.120) and orient oneself to what is learnt. Acquiring this knowledge is “obligatory for students wishing to engage with student culture” (Cheeseman, 2018: p.16) and central to becoming a student. Those without these resources may face

challenges integrating and surviving university life (Kyne and Thompson, 2020; Mountford, 2017).

Key spaces of student life, including accommodation (Cheeseman, 2018; Holton, 2015a) and the NTE, are important sites of this learning as they gain knowledge on social norms of student life and university traditions. Through relationships with other students, they also learn how to navigate the NTE *as a student*, including where to go, how to get there, and how to behave. Gaining this knowledge is particularly important for their NTE experiences in new, unfamiliar settings. These lessons also contribute to the formation of the student NTE engagement patterns and practices I discussed in *Chapter 6*, such as which spaces are deemed “*studenty*” (Max [P22, male]).

AARON: A lot of it is passed-down knowledge. When you first start going out, one of your mates will have an older brother or sister who’s been out loads before and they’ll tell you what’s what. Then same when you get to uni, you’ve got people from societies who are older and stuff, they show you where to go. You learn the student places to go and stuff from them.

Temporal factors like age and the time spent in the NTE contribute to the accumulation of knowledge and experience which is “*passed down*” (Aaron [P1, male]). While students gain practical insights for navigating the NTE, these interactions also teach them about student life, given the intrinsic connection between NTE engagement and the “typical student”.

Participants also reflect on the *Freshers’ Rep* system, established by their university, as a formalised mechanism of this knowledge transmission. Students in their first year of university are assigned second or third-year students to guide their induction to university life, including NTE engagement.

MAISEY: This uni has a Freshers’ Rep system where they just, like, assign your flat to someone a bit older with more experience who can show you the ropes and you can ask questions to. It’s like everyday stuff like “*where’s this*

building?” but also more like niche stuff like “where’s the cheapest pint or the best post-night-out kebab?”. You follow their guidance a lot at the start.

Maisey [P9, *female*] explains how these relationships are important for learning aspects of student life. This peer influence is particularly important during times of transition as students adapt “by ‘remoooring’ their identity to new social supports” (Scanlon et al., 2007: p.237), learning to become students like them. As Maisey [P9, *female*] indicates, the knowledge that *Reps* pass on, may regard practical information about the university, but also cultural norms and social insights regarding the NTE and informal aspects of university life. The NTE experience is thus both a key element of what new students learn and the space-time in which this learning takes place.

Participants explain that relationships with their *Reps* and other sources of knowledge extend beyond the first week at university, and that becoming a student is a “*social learning curve*” (Laura [P24, *female*]) that develops with experience of university life and the NTE. Nevertheless, *Freshers’ Week* stands out as an important period for this learning to take place. It is a time where students know the least about what it means to be a student, having no experience of university life. It is also a time associated with frequent NTE engagement, more so than any other time within the academic calendar, providing ample opportunity to learn through these experiences.

LAURA: I think you can learn anytime but I think Freshers’ Week is such a unique experience to be able to. [...] You have the *Reps* helping you and no one expects you to know exactly what it’s like to be a student, or to go out all the time. You’re probably going to be in a Freshers’ T-shirt, so you physically stand out as a new person. You’re, kind of, expected to not know this stuff then [...] [after this time] people might be a little bit more impatient with you. As the weeks pass you get used to uni culture [...] it’s like a social learning curve.

These early NTE experiences are shaped by lowered social expectations and physical markers (e.g. Freshers T-shirts) that Laura [P24, *female*] implies signify the comparative lack of knowledge new students possess and illicit patience and understanding. At other points in the academic journey gaining this knowledge becomes more challenging as

some of these conditions alter. It underscores the importance in considering how time impacts students' NTE experiences. This process highlights how the everyday knowledge involved in student life is not formally taught but achieved socially through interaction, resonating with ethnomethodology's (Garfinkel, 1967; Turner, 1974) focus on how ordinary actors reproduce and collectively sustain shared realities.

In COVID-19, the typical *Freshers' Week* did not occur, meaning opportunities to learn from peers were more limited.

HENRY: We did have *Reps*, but they couldn't come into our house, and we couldn't go and meet them, so we didn't really get much like help or advice from them... the odd text. When it came to learning about uni life, it was like "*let's push them in right at the deep end and see if they can swim on their own*".

Restrictions meant that Henry [P14, male] was unable to learn from his peers, and through NTE experiences, in the same way other students typically do. With no access to the NTE and *Reps* unable to visit their homes, opportunities for social learning were significantly curtailed, carried out online. The metaphor of learning to swim is particularly apt. Just as new swimmers rely on instructors and are supported by flotation aids, first-year students depend on guidance from peers and key times and spaces of learning like *Freshers' Week* and the NTE. However, during COVID-19, restrictions deprived them of both *Reps* and the structured support these NTE experiences provide (see Lips, 2021), leaving them to navigate the challenge of becoming a student largely "*on their own*". Henry's [P14, male] experience is mirrored by Steve [P29, male] who did not even appear to be assigned a *Freshers' Rep* at all.

STEVE: Our flatmate, who is in third year, talks about how uni paired them up with second and third years to try help them and teach them about university. Not like academic stuff just, you know, someone to ask dumb questions to. We never got any of that. Well, some rubbish "*Welcome To Uni*" talk. We kind of had to figure it out on our own just like going in blind essentially.

Steve [P29, *male*] refers explicitly to the learning process of becoming a student, and the role peers can play in this transition (*“third years to teach them about university”*). He emphasises the informal nature of this learning (*“someone to ask dumb questions to”*), distinguishing it from other structured institutional approaches like a *“Welcome to University”* talk, taking place in a lecture hall, or likely, in their case, online. Unlike his flatmate, in a later stage of university, Steve [P29, *male*] had to navigate this transition himself describing how he *“had to figure it out”* himself *“going in blind”* without the benefit of others’ experience.

The knock-on effects for those who began university during COVID-19, without these peer-learning opportunities, is evident in their expressed anxiety about NTE engagement once the industry reopened. For them, part of learning to be a student, is learning how to navigate the NTE. Not only did they miss out on opportunities to experience the NTE, and have fun, and make friends, but also these key learning opportunities, leaving them feeling *“behind”* (Connie [P26, *female*]).

JASMINE: I was anxious because you don't know anything. Plus, you know everyone surrounding you already knows what it's like, and what to do and, like, how to do it. And I'm just there like *“this is all new to me!”*. You get the hang of it, but I did feel embarrassed - a second year whose never even been on a night out.

CONNIE: There's still loads of stuff I'm still behind on. Especially like the practical stuff of like where certain rooms are on campus or even like where's good to go to get cheap drinks or where does a good pub quiz.

Whilst they were able to gain this knowledge later in their university careers, they felt *“embarrassed”* (Jasmine [P25, *female*]) to be doing so. Connie [P26, *female*] explains that she is still in the process of learning some aspects of being a student, even though well into her second year, defying her expectation that this would be learnt earlier. The aspects she describes as still learning (e.g. where to get cheap drinks), mirror those Maisey [P9, *female*] said she learnt during her first year, as discussed earlier in the chapter. The contrast highlights the significance of early NTE experiences at the

beginning of university as key learning opportunities. These were lost for those who began university during COVID-19.

Being “*behind*” (Connie [P26, *female*]) as a result of this delayed learning, is also reflected by Harrison [P21, *male*]. Despite being a first-year, he is considered in a similar social position to those who did not have the same peer-learning opportunities as he now does and hence have not gained the experience and knowledge to advance beyond the “*fresher*” title.

HARRISON: In societies, you call anyone who’s basically new a “fresher”, not because they’re a first-year, but because they just don’t have, like, the experience of uni life or how the socials work. I’m a first-year so, obviously, I’m a *Fresher*, but loads of the second years are considered that too. Because the socials were on Zoom, they didn’t, like, *earn* their place properly [...] so like more than half the club is considered *new*.

He gives the impression that there is a level of knowledge about student life that must be acquired during the first year of university. Without these learning opportunities, some find themselves in their second year, yet socially positioned no differently than those just beginning university.

The knowledge gap of those who began university during COVID-19 is highlighted by Laura [P24, *female*] who became a *Freshers’ Rep*, even without having learnt about parts of student life herself.

LAURA: In second year, I was a Rep, and I had so many people ask me questions I had no idea about, because I’d not experienced it or ever had the opportunity to ask, myself. I was just like “*okay... I’m going to point you in the direction of a third year because me and the other second years are probably clueless*”. Especially about going out and stuff, because I hadn’t been out.

This may well have caused knock-on effects for those learning to be a student in the years following COVID-19. Those who had not fully become students, in the same way as those

before them, were expected to share cultural norms, traditions and elements of student life, despite not yet possessing that knowledge themselves.

Cheeseman's (2018) research, though conducted before COVID-19, highlights the consequences of disrupted structures of knowledge transfer and opportunities to learn student life. Without them, aspects of tradition and culture, including those tied to NTE experiences, break down. Although the data collection timeframe of this research does not extend far enough to explore participants own accounts of the longer-term effects of this disruption, there is indication that elements of student culture and tradition, particularly relating to NTE experiences, have been impacted. Traditional pillars of the student social calendar, such as *Extravs*²⁹, no longer take place due to decreased popularity. These events, linked to the NTE, used to sell out in minutes, given their significance within the university culture. In this research, they are only referenced by participants in their later years of study (e.g. Maisey [P9, *female*]), suggesting that newer students have not learnt the cultural significance these events once held. The absence of these NTE-related events during COVID-19, as well as other opportunities for learning, created a gap in the knowledge passed down to new students, leading to the erosion of their significance, and altering part of what it once meant to be a student at this university.

The nexus framework deepens our understanding of NTE experiences as integral to the process of becoming a student. Beyond leisure, the NTE experiences offer a space to shape and perform their identities in relation to the dominant constructions of the "typical student". They also serve as informal learning environments where new students can learn how to be a student from peers. This process, seen as a "*learning curve*" (Laura [P24, *female*]), unfolds over time, tied to university progression, time spent in the NTE, and key times like *Freshers' Week*, playing a crucial part. Shaped by the

²⁹ "Extravs" were large festival-like events, taking place across the university campus at various NTE venues, at the end of each academic year. They previously attracted hundreds of students, through themed fancy dress, entertainment provisions (such as live music) and cheaply priced alcohol. Alongside *Freshers' Week* they used to be mentioned as key parts of the year by the University and Students Union, who organised them. The equivalent at other universities would be events like Summer or Graduation Ball.

interplay of space, time and studenthood, NTE experiences become fundamental to what it means to be a student. When disrupted, the meanings and processes of becoming they foster are similarly perturbed.

Belonging as a Student

Whilst participants discuss becoming a student in relation to individual perception and identification, they also acknowledge the importance of “fitting in” with the wider student community (Cheeseman, 2017; Mountford, 2017; Scandone, 2017). This collective form of identification is still shaped by the same homogenised view of students and their culture, woven throughout this chapter. A student’s sense of belonging comes from their interpersonal relatedness to this wider collective.

In broader terms, the NTE, and drinking practices, are commonly linked to belonging and sense of community (Cheeseman, 2018; Hollands, 1995; Sforzi and Bianchi, 2020). The NTE is a space for shared leisure experiences bringing people together through collective participation, and in turn, fostering a sense of collectivity (Denovan and Macaskill, 2016; Hutchinson et al., 2003). *Chapter 7* discussed the pleasurable experience of the sense of “communitas” (Crabbe, 2006) that stems from being in a crowd of peers, as an affectual sense of belonging (see also Dimou and Ilan, 2018), tied to the NTE atmosphere. Here, I explore the student community as an Imagined Community (Anderson, 1983) and how it is developed through students NTE experiences. I suggest that the nexus provides a useful lens to develop our understanding of this process and nuances of the idea of community, tied to both space and time.

The Imagined Student Community

Participants highlight the central role of NTE experiences in developing a sense of belonging at university. Harvey [P20, *male*] refers to his NTE engagement at key times of year like *Freshers’ Week* as well as frequent weekly attendance with his rugby team.

HARVEY: You feel part of that community, like, all going out together on nights out, all hungover the next day, all in the same boat together [...] Even down to wearing the Freshers T-shirts... that's like a physical representation of you, being part of this new community. Like when we go out in the rugby ties now it's a symbol of that... sort of... *student community*.

The commonality of the shared experience, such as being “hungover the next day”, coupled with clothing that acts as a symbolic uniform, reflecting shared values (see Mountford, 2017), contributes to his sense of belonging, seemingly solidified as he spends more time in the NTE.

Harvey [P20, *male*] describes his rugby team as a “*community*”, likely shaped through group interaction at training and social events. However, he also refers to the “*wider student community*” as if it were based on the same kind of social interaction and shared grounding. In reality, the extent to which the student body constitutes a community exists largely in “the realm of the imaginary” (Quinn, 2005: p.11; see also Dawson, 2017; Wilding, 2022). That is, students do not share a collective identity; rather, they are unified solely by the label of being “one who studies” (Cheeseman, 2017: p.141). As introduced in the *Literature Review*, the student community can be understood as an *Imagined Community* (Anderson, 1983). Its members experience a sense of affinity based on this shared aspect of their identities, even though they do not know one another personally and their connections do not persist beyond the university setting.

Within the spaces and times of his NTE experiences, Harvey [P20, *male*] feels this connection to other students, though he does not make it clear whether this exists beyond this context. The imagined aspect is also tied to time as Kenyon (2000: p.28) points out that the community “formed over one week at the beginning of the academic year, rarely exist[s] for more than 12 weeks at any given time and disperse[s] equally quickly at the beginning of vacations”. It mirrors the temporal patterns of student NTE engagement discussed in *Chapter 6*. Outside of termtime, and their NTE engagement, the student community completely breaks down, highlighting that the connections were superficial, or imagined, to begin with.

Participants regularly reference this imagined community, as I have explored also in *Chapters 6 and 7*. They use phrases like “*we’re part of the same community*” (Sarah [P6, female]) and feeling “*connected to others at the uni*” (Chris [P7, male]). In their NTE experiences they mention that “*there’s just something nice about being surrounded by your peers*” (Emma [P11, female]) and that they can “*see faces in the crowd you’d see on campus, whether or not you know them*” (Aaron [P1, male]). The association that Emma [P11, female] and Aaron [P1, male] feel to those around them in the NTE is not to do with genuine social connection, but a sense of familiarity solely based on their commonality as students.

“Us” Vs “Them”

The sense of a student community, imagined or otherwise, is strengthened through the distance they create between themselves and outsiders. In *Chapter 6*, I explored how the social dynamic between students and “locals” in *CityX* affects students’ use of space and how they perceive the city’s NTE venues. Whether NTE spaces operate a student-only policy or are regarded as “*studenty*” (Max [P22], Ali [P23], Laura [P24]) through processes of “studentification” (Hubbard, 2008), students’ relationship with space impacts their NTE experiences. However, at this point in the analysis I reflect on this as a two-way relationship whereby students’ NTE experiences act as a space-time to magnify these relations, strengthening the collective student identity, by distancing oneself from the “out-group” (Tajfel and Turner, 2004).

Theories of self-identification (see Ethier and Deaux, 1994; Proshansky et al., 1983; Tajfel and Turner, 2004) stress the importance of not only identifying oneself with others who share common attributes but also creating distance from those outside this group (see also Anderson and Knee, 2021). Participants’ language creates an “us” (students) versus “them” (locals) binary (Chatterton, 1999; Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Holt and Griffin, 2005). Although the notion becomes complicated when considering students may also be locals (see Holdsworth, 2009), student perceptions “collectively lump non-university residents into a whole” (Aden et al., 2010: p.282), framing them as the “other”, which serves to strengthen their collective identification.

Attempts to create this distance are evident in how participants discuss non-students as “*strange*” (Susan [P5, *female*]), “*creepy*” and that they “*don’t think like*” (Sarah [P6, *female*]) students. The adjectives they use are negative, painting a picture of the “other” who is not only different, but lesser than students. They emphasise difference whilst highlighting imagined similarities between students. For example, discussing her NTE experiences in student-only nightclubs compared with other NTE venues Sasha [P13, *female*] says:

SASHA: It’s almost, like, kind of a community sense, because obviously, you’re all part of the same student community, in that building. Whereas in other night clubs in town, you won’t have anything at all in common with some of the other customers in the nightclub.

The suggestion that there is no common ground between students and locals, albeit far-fetched, adds to the social imaginaries of each group and creates distance between them. Social class also plays a role in these constructions, linking back to the middle-class “typical student” archetype. Consequently, locals are positioned as the working-class “other”, subject to, often prejudicial, stereotypes (see also Aden et al., 2010; Holt and Griffin, 2005; Mountford, 2017; Scandone, 2017; Shildrick et al., 2009). Sarah [P6, *female*] suggests that locals are “*on a different level*” to students which could have direct ties to class. This was also seen in earlier discussion, as NTE spaces typically frequented by locals were described as “*dodgy*” (Laura [P24, *female*]), “*rough*” (Fergus [P4, *male*]) and to be avoided.

Students’ interaction with locals in the NTE, reinforce the distance they seek to create, yet also highlight the imagined nature of these distinctions, as they struggle to articulate them. This became evident during a focus group: after some participants expressed negative views about locals, I asked whether they felt they could distinguish a student from a local if standing next to them at the bar, and whether certain characteristics or traits would aid this identification. Initial confidence that distinctions were “obvious” waned when they were asked to elaborate.

CHRIS: Honestly... probably not actually now you've said that.

SUSAN: What? Yeah. It's very obvious... (*pauses*) I can't really say *how* but you just *know*.

[...]

SUSAN: Uhm... [...] Students... (*pauses*) I couldn't tell the difference between a [university student at my university] and a student from [another local university] that's more difficult. But students and locals, sure.

SARAH: I guess what she's saying... it's not that clear cut to be able to say this is student, this is local but like sometimes it's an age thing, right? Sometimes the way they speak or dress or sort of like brash-y sort of way of being.

Whilst Chris [P7, *male*] immediately reflects on the fact the differences may not be as distinct as he once thought, Susan [P5, *female*] maintains that differences between the two groups are “*obvious*”. She changes topic when unable to specify defining attributes. Sarah [P6, *female*] later weighs in, trying to articulate the understanding her and Susan [P5, *female*] share about locals, though she admits it is not “*clear cut*”. There are classist undertones to the elements she mentions regarding accent, clothing, disorder (Durante et al., 2017; Mountford, 2017; Shildrick et al., 2009) and generalised “laddish masculinities” (Phipps, 2017: p.817) tied to the working class. Their NTE experiences, particularly when they share the NTE space with locals, serve as an opportunity to emphasise this difference, develop imaginaries of the “local other” and strengthen the connection between students.

These constructions are flawed, revealing their basis in the imaginary. Not only does Sarah [P6, *female*] ignore the existence of mature students, when mentioning age as a defining factor, but she also fails to consider the reality of socio-economic compositions of *CityX*, and the university she attends. Whilst working-class individuals make up a considerable segment of *CityX*'s population, the middle classes form the majority (by

over 10% (ONS, 2021)³⁰). Straying from the white, middle-class stereotype of the “typical student”, the university’s population is more diverse: Around 15% of students come from socio-economically deprived backgrounds, and approximately 18% are from Black or Asian ethnic minority backgrounds. Various Widening Participation initiatives also plan to further enhance diversity (*X University*, 2025). These realities underscore that relying on socioeconomic stereotypes of either students or locals to define them as a group is neither valid nor accurate, strengthening the argument that a unified student community is an imagined concept. It is important to note that I am not suggesting that aspects like class do not influence individual student experiences or sense of belonging, simply that they cannot be used in such basic terms to construct either “student” or “local” generalised identities.

COVID-19 and the Community

Sense of belonging changed during the pandemic, with reported drops in those who felt part of the student community during this time (Blake et al., 2022; Dickinson, 2021; NUS 2020) and an increased sense of isolation (Kelly et al., 2024; Sutcliffe and Noble, 2022). Without key space-times, like the NTE, even existing “community networks” were at risk of “destruction” (Nofre, 2023: p.2).

SARAH: For me, it kind of both made and broke that sense of community. I felt much closer to those in my flat, but the wider community, like other students and the uni, I don’t necessarily feel as connected as I did previously.

—

CHRIS: When you can’t go out and see different people on nights [out], you almost lose that sense of community, instead stuck in your own bubbles. It’s difficult to feel part of the like bigger whole.

³⁰ Based on Approximated Social Grade (ASG), formed from 2021 census data on characteristics of the Household Reference Person (HRP). Notably, within these groupings what may be termed “Elite” or “upper-class” is grouped with “upper middle-class” and “underclass” is grouped with “working-class” making absolute differentiations between middle and working classes impossible

HAILEY: I feel like there is like a big cultural or community value to like nightclubs isn't there? Like clubbing and meeting everyone [...] I feel separate from the rest of the uni because of that. I still chat to my friends but the sense of everyone being together... that community isn't there without those experiences.

Sarah [P6, *female*] reflects on the opportunities that the pandemic provided to strengthen connections with those in her immediate circle, in the shared space of their flat. Yet, with COVID-19 restrictions limiting access to the NTE, all three participants report a breakdown of the community they once felt part of. Hailey [P10, *female*] and Chris [7] emphasise the value of the NTE as a shared social space, where being around those outside of their friendship circle, or "*bubbles*" (Chris [P7, *male*]), but still within the student sphere, created a feeling of closeness.

Those new to university during this period also experienced challenges in developing a sense of belonging and feeling part of their new university community. The attempts made by the University to recreate social activities (e.g. pub quiz) that would typically take place in NTE settings, demonstrates their perceived value under normal circumstances. Participants note that these experiences often fell flat (see *Chapter 5* on the importance of the physical NTE space in these social interactions).

SASHA: We had a weird, pre-recorded quiz. The fact it wasn't even live, made it even stranger and less natural. I joined in for something to do but it was the first and last.

MEGAN: I attended an online pub quiz. It was alright but I think the intention was to speak to other people [...] and feel like there were others out there, other than your flat and people on online classes. It didn't really work. We only talked to each other [in the flat].

Physical, and in Sasha's [P13, *female*] case, temporal separation had impacts on their sense of community. Without being in the NTE space with their peers, they felt no

connection to the wider community. Megan [P30, *female*] even notes she did not communicate with anyone else on the online platform, furthering the sense they were not connected.

Participants in later years of study strongly feel that beginning university under these circumstances would have impacted their sense of belonging as a student.

ALI: I would have just felt, like, not *part* of the uni. Not really a student. If that makes sense? Especially as I know some people didn't even *come* to uni... they didn't even set foot on campus for a while, I think.

Feeling “*part of*” (Ali [P23, *male*]) the community meant engaging with the spaces associated with being a student, such as the university campus and the NTE. Without these, participants remained students in a literal sense, attending online classes and working towards a degree, but their lifestyles diverged from the lifestyles and experiences they expected. Consequently, they struggled to feel connected to their peers or as if they belonged within the student community.

When the NTE reopened (Morton, 2021a) aspects of belonging and sense of community began to repair through students NTE experiences:

AARON: You couldn't do anything out of your immediate circle before. You felt close with them, but not the wider student body. But now you can go out to a nightclub with people you don't see every day, like your sports teams, and see faces in the crowd you'd see on campus, whether or not you know them, and just feel a bit more *involved* in student life.

Having these experiences, when he was able to do so, contributed to Aaron's [P1, *male*] sense of belonging, generating a greater sense of community than during lockdown. This community restoration seemed to begin soon after students were able to return to the NTE. Sasha [P13, *female*], describes her first post-COVID night out experience:

SASHA: I had such a good time! It definitely made me feel like a *proper student* again and *part* of the uni, more integrated into the university community.

Belonging to the wider community is important to students, whether imagined or in contrast to an ‘out-group’. NTE experiences, shaped by space, time and studenthood, provide an opportunity to foster this connection. Without them, both new and returning students felt detached from the community.

Exploring NTE experiences as shaped through the nexus, provides insight into this aspect of university life. Whilst being a student shapes the NTE experience (as explored in *Chapters 6 and 7*), these experiences also reinforce belonging. The NTE provides a physical and affectual space for collective leisure where students can connect with peers and cultivate a sense of community, favouring student-only venues and distancing themselves from “locals”. Repeated NTE engagement, throughout their university careers, strengthens these bonds, even though they are temporary, tied to the transient nature of student life, impacted by vacation periods, and imaginary, based solely on being a student. During COVID-19 without these crucial experiences, at least in their usual form, students felt less connected to their peers. This led to a diminished sense of belonging and implications for their overall “student experience”.

The Student Experience

As participants reflect on the role NTE experiences play in what it means to be a student, they consistently refer to the “student experience”. Explored in the *Literature Review*, “student experience” is far from a novel concept and has long been employed in policy, practice, university marketing materials and quality evaluation (Matus et al., 2021; Pötschulat et al., 2021; Sabri, 2011). Although it is criticised as a “fuzzy term” lacking analytical precision, its frequent use among participants in this research, particularly in connection with the NTE, warrants further exploration.

“Student experience” essentially encapsulates students’ expectations of university life; while there may be individual nuances to this, there is a generalised shared understanding that dominates, tied to the same social imaginaries that construct the “typical student” and imagined community. It is a homogenised view of student life

(Holton, 2017; Sabri, 2011) which does not take into account the experiential inequalities associated with gender (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013), geographic location (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018), class (Mountford, 2017; Reay et al., 2010), ethnicity (Scandone, 2017), and many other social divisions (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). However, its significance lies not in veracity, but its shared understanding.

Participants convey a strong expectation to attend the NTE as part of the “student experience”, whether or not they are able to fulfil this requirement.

SASHA: I’d say before I had my daughter, the first time around, I was definitely having you know the typical student experience because I was going out all the time and had more in common with the other students. It’s a huge part of the uni lifestyle and overall experience of it all so at least I got a little bit of that.

SARAH: When you think about being a student and that... university experience [and] what to expect. I think nights out are something that you think of as part of that.

MATT: For most people, it’s definitely a massive part. But I think I was maybe having *too much* of the student experience in my first couple of years (*laughs*). A few *too many nights out*, maybe.

Matt’s [P8, male] insight is particularly interesting. Though humour, he implies that “*too many nights out*” equates to “*having too much of a student experience*”, highlighting the NTE’s role in his understanding of the concept. Although student life comprises numerous non-academic aspects, he prioritises NTE engagement as if it were the primary defining factor. These associations between NTE experiences and the “student experience” are formed prior to students attending university (Chatterton, 1999; Gambles et al., 2022; Matus et al., 2021).

MEGAN: It's one of the things, even before you get to [CityX], that you hear people talking about, is the nightlife and the other events that they have on. [...] So then, you're almost like *having* to do it, *having* to have those experiences... It just felt like a rite of passage that we have to do.

Having heard about the local nightlife prior to her arrival, Megan [P30, *female*] makes a conscious effort to attend, ensuring she fulfils her expectations of the “student experience”. Universities help form the connection between NTE experiences and the “student experience” (Gambles et al., 2022; Fuller, 2019); one does not have to search far on their web pages regarding “student life” or the “university experience” to come across mentions of nightlife, NTE venues, and pictures of crowded dancefloors or students in fancy dress.

Crucially, participants view this collective perception of the “student experience”, tied to NTE engagement, as some form of goal. They interpret their own lives as students through its lens and adapt their lifestyles as a means of achieving it. Having a “student experience” is something to work towards, tied to how they will look back on their university experience post-graduation. Failing to fulfil this expectation, or not aligning their lifestyles with the generalised ideal, they “*miss out*” (Daniel [P15, *male*])

MAISEY: I've been so busy, but one of the main parts of my uni experience is, like, the social aspects... the societies, the nights out and that type of thing. [They're] part of my weekly routine, but also, like, what I will, no doubt, look back and remember most about my time here. So, I wouldn't change it.

DANIEL: There were parts I had to miss out on because of work. Like, I started my job in Freshers' Week. I worked in a bar, and they were quite good with me. They understood it was my first week of uni, and it was important I had some of this... *proper uni experience*. But I do feel like, because I had to work, I did miss out on a bit at the start. But, you know... I needed money too so (*laughs*).

Maisey [P9, *female*] reflects a proactive approach to fulfilling her interpretation of the “student experience” across her entire time at university. She dedicates her free time to

aspects like NTE engagement and involvement in university clubs, like the Dance Society, valuing these as aspects essential to the overall university experience. Daniel [P15, male] reflects a more passive approach where he “*missed out*” on elements of the experience due to the work schedule dictated by his employers. He implies that the “student experience”, and the expectations students have of this, begin as soon as students arrive at university. Early experiences like *Freshers’ Week* are central to this, also seemingly acknowledged by his employers. This further demonstrates a connection between the “student experience” and NTE experiences, given their prevalence within this week. He notes how his employment forced him to “*miss out on*” aspects of this as it overlapped with times other first-years would be having these critical NTE experiences.

The Student Experience During COVID-19

When obstacles arise preventing students’ expectations being met, they feel their “student experience” is threatened. Participant experiences during COVID-19 are a prime example. With NTE venue closures and social life moved online the “student experience” was affected (Dickinson, 2021; Townsend, 2023). Surveys conducted at the time (e.g. Neves and Hewitt, 2021) reflect that students’ expectations of university life were not met, with the percentage of those who viewed their experience as “worse than expected” double that of pre-COVID results. Given the important established role of the NTE within the “student experience” participants feel as though they “*missed out*” (Maisey [P9, female], Charlotte [P27, female]).

CHARLOTTE: I think, once I had that experience, it made me feel more disappointed that we didn't get that experience. It does feel like I've missed out on a big chunk of like the uni experience that I've got to like make up for now.

MAISEY: I think it definitely did feel like I missed out. It was big events like end-of-year celebrations and *Extrav²⁹*. I was so excited for that throughout the year, and then that got cancelled and then didn't happen again in second year. The big events that are really like crucial to the student experience, that we all anticipated, were the ones that were harder to go without.

As a newcomer to both university and NTE experiences, Charlotte [P27, *female*] only fully realised how much of the “student experience” she had missed out on when she could attend NTE events. Maisey [P9, *female*], familiar with these experiences, not only emphasises their importance, but also highlights how specific large events serve as key pillars of the “student experience”. Their significance is realised when they “*go without*”. Whilst the importance of key events like *Freshers’ Week* has been covered, her insight references other key roles NTE experiences play within the “student experience”. In *Chapter 6* I explored how NTE experiences provide students with a way to celebrate their academic achievements, from submitting coursework to receiving results. The “*end-of-year celebrations*” (Maisey [P9, *female*]) are examples of this. It also begins to shed light on the experiences of those in final-year, not just celebrating a single assignment or exam, but the completion of their degrees. COVID-19 deprived them of these key experiences without opportunity for students to “*make [them] up*” (Charlotte [P27, *female*]). Sarah [P6, *female*] and Emma [P11, *female*] also highlight the impacts to the “student experience” for those who graduated during COVID-19.

SARAH: Nights out really do play a part in, like, the experience. People who have, sort of, done their last year of uni, through the pandemic, have missed out on that *last night out* to finish their time at uni. There’s no “*oh, wish I could have done more studying in the library*” its “*I wish I could have had another night out*”.

EMMA: It was just kind of an abrupt end for [third years]. Like, not even a chance to see some friends ever again, without those last nights out and everything cut short. It’s not how the uni experience should end.

NTE experiences are a way for those in final-year to conclude their university experience and begin the transition to post-university life. Without them, they feel they miss out on a crucial part of their “student experience”, leaving it “*cut short*” (Emma [P11, *female*]) (see also McKinlay et al., 2022).

A Paid-for Experience?

Participants' discussions of the "student experience" that they missed out on during COVID-19, reflect wider debates as to whether students are customers and the "student experience" as something to be purchased similar to a concert, holiday or other paid-for experiences (Mark, 2013; Pötschulat et al., 2021). This brief section explores how participants view themselves as customers and how considering the nexus provides new contributions to these existing debates.

As explored in the *Literature Review*, the idea that students are paying customers at university has long been debated (see also Adisa et al., 2023; Finney and Finney, 2010; Xu et al., 2018). Many universities see their students as paying customers with vested interests, reinforced by their engagement in marketing practices to recruit new students, like customers to any other form of business (Chapleo and Reader, 2014; Guilbault, 2016). Students also view themselves as customers (Bunce and Bennett, 2021; Saunders, 2015; Tomlinson, 2014; 2017), particularly in a context where they do not get the experience they had anticipated (Ballantyne, 2012; Patfield et al., 2021). This became evident as participants referred to various fees they paid, associated with university enrolment, that they deemed "*not worth it*" (Steve [P29, male]) given elements of the "student experience" they missed out on during COVID-19.

MEGAN: Usually, you've got your social life, nights out, societies. We had nothing. What was I paying for? To sit in my flat?

STEVE: I can't help but think that we've been hard done by, in a way. Especially given that we have to pay tuition fees and other fees to the uni for what was, essentially, *nothing*. [...] it's quite upsetting... not worth it.

TOM: You pay 40 quid for basically a quiz. And then and that was basically it.

MEGAN: [Freshers' Week online is] not what we were meant to get, it's something, but it's not what it should have been.

Aligning with the student-as-customer view (Finney and Finney, 2010; Ng and Forbes, 2009; Xu et al., 2018), they believe they paid fees, whether directly or through student

finance, to an institution that is not providing the experience or service they expected. This was particularly the case for those new to university life, who held high expectations of *Freshers' Week* and the role it would play in their “student experience”. Using phrases like “*we were meant to get*” (Megan [P30, female]) and “*being hard done by*” (Steve [P29, male]) suggests not only an expectation to receive these experiences at university, but a sense of entitlement³¹ to them as they have paid for the “student experience”. Similarly, Hailey’s impression that these experiences were “*taken away*” indicates that they were something she paid for and was due, as part of the “student experience”.

HAILEY: For me, clubbing was a massive part of the student experience. It’s just a big part of university life and it was just taken away... we were just left with lectures and socials on *Teams*.

For Hailey [P10, female], going “*clubbing*” is an important part of studenthood. Not being able to spend time within these spaces meant she did not get the “student experience” she anticipated and feels she paid for. Loss of NTE experiences, meant the “student experience” was diminished. “*Just*” lectures and online social interaction were not enough.

Acknowledging that NTE experiences, central to the “student experience” for which students believe they pay, are shaped by elements of the nexus, contributes new perspectives to student-as-customer discourse. Physical space is central to the NTE experience (see *Chapter 5*), though these spaces operate beyond university governance. In *CityX* the closest institutional link is *StudentLand*, owned by the Students’ Union rather than the University. With such key aspects of the “student experience” shaped externally, the notion that the “student experience” is part of a paid-for, university-provided service is challenged.

Considering how both NTE and the “student experience” are shaped by time and studenthood also adds new layers to understanding. University life is finite and there is

³¹ See Morley (2003) for more discussion on entitlement in higher education

limited time within which the “student experience” can be achieved. When they “*miss out*” (Sarah [P6, *female*], Daniel [P15, *male*]) on experiences they deem essential to this process, they strive to “*make [them] up*” (Charlotte [P27, *female*]). It is as though spending a certain length of time in the NTE fulfilled a predefined “student experience” based on cultural expectations of what student life ought to entail. It reinforces a transactional mindset, with NTE experiences viewed alongside academic aspects of university life as part of a standardised product or service for which they pay. COVID-19 intensified this perception as they were unable to receive what they had understood to be the “student experience”. Their dissatisfaction is tied to their financial and emotional investment, which highlights tensions between their expectations and the universities responsibility to fulfil them. The pandemic therefore provides opportunity to consider whether or what universities should be accountable for in shaping the “student experience”.

A Roast Dinner?

In closing the discussion on the “student experience” and the role of the NTE within this, I would like to draw attention to a quote from Hope [P12, *female*] who does not typically engage with the NTE herself. It is important to acknowledge that although NTE experiences, are conveyed as key parts of the “student experience”, based on dominant constructions and expectations of student life, not all students engage. Her “*metaphor*”, though I suppose grammatically a simile, aligns with several themes discussed in this chapter and the wider thesis, as well as signifying the individualistic reality of each students’ experience.

HOPE: It's like, to use a metaphor, when you have a roast dinner. The meat is studying, the most important part. But it's not the *full meal*, you know? Potatoes are my ballroom dancing and friends I've made through that. Vegetables this year is my volunteering and other add-ons making it more well-rounded. And then, for clubbing... like, you might... I don't know... enjoy having pigs in blankets with the Christmas dinner once every so often, but it's not the whole thing. You can do without it.

Her take on this is interesting to me for a number of reasons. Firstly, it positions academia as the main part of the “student experience”. Although exploration of the term has generally focused on extra-curricular activities and social life aspects (Pötschulat et al., 2021), the main reason that students attend university is to acquire qualifications. “*Studying*” is supplemented by other aspects of university life, including involvement in university clubs and societies; in fact, there is an expectation that the experience, involves more than just the “*meat*” or it is not the full “student experience”.

Extending her metaphor, it ties in with space, key spaces of university life like the library, student halls, and the NTE, are where the experience is shaped and lived, just like the spaces of preparing and enjoying a roast dinner. It also links to debates as to whether students are customers, for instance ordering this roast dinner in a restaurant, or co-producers (Clayson and Haley, 2005; Xu et al., 2018) involved in creating, or cooking, the experience. Her choice to compare NTE experiences to “*pigs in blankets with the Christmas dinner*” links to the relationship between NTE experiences, time and celebration (see *Chapter 6*). These are aspects she has occasionally tried, yet do not feature in her day-to-day “student experience”.

Though she does not frequently attend the NTE, claiming she can “*do without it*” as part of her broader experience, she acknowledges its importance for many other students. It signifies that NTE experiences form an aspect of the “student experience” that may not be to everyone’s taste. Although there is a collective sense of what the “student experience” should involve, based on shared understandings and expectations of university life, it remains up to the individual to construct their own experience.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have examined the broader influence of NTE experiences in shaping what it means to be a student today and how interpreting these experiences as shaped through the nexus, adds new layers of understanding. By focusing on the micro-practices that make up students’ everyday lives, the analysis shows how ‘being a student’ is

continually learned, performed and reinforced through repeated, routine everyday interactions within the NTE. Whether or not participants individually engaged with the NTE, there is a shared recognition of the central role these experiences play in student life. They help students transition to university, learn and adhere to expectations of student life, and develop a sense of belonging, making them integral to the “student experience” that students have come to expect.

The NTE’s role as part of a generalised student identity, both individual and collective, was explored. What matters is not necessarily whether these experiences accurately reflect modern university life, but that shared understandings of students and university culture exist. These collective perceptions provide a framework through which students can position their experiences, define their lifestyles and differentiate themselves from others. As a result, some students attend the NTE simply because it is widely regarded as a fundamental, expected, part of the “student experience”.

Participant experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic further highlight the vital role NTE experiences, shaped by space, time and studenthood, play in student life. When denied NTE experiences, due to lockdowns or venue closures, many struggled with the transition to university, learning aspects of student culture, and feeling connection to the wider campus community. This ultimately led to a widespread sense of having “*missed out*” on a key aspect of “the student experience”.

Analysis moves beyond the existing discussion regarding the role NTE experiences play in what it means to be a student, to focus on a more nuanced understanding of these experiences. Considering the nexus of spatial, temporal and studenthood shaping, enhances understanding and codifies the significance of NTE experiences within modern student life.

Chapter 9: Conclusions

This thesis set out to enhance understandings of student Night-Time Economy (NTE) experiences, and to consider their broader role within modern student life. Although heavily influenced by Cultural Geography, the research lends itself to multiple fields of research from Sociology to Cultural Studies. It demonstrates the value of an interdisciplinary approach to understanding student NTE experiences, and the productive dialogue that can emerge when these disciplines intersect.

It is a particularly relevant topic as both the NTE and higher education have faced challenges and change in recent years, and their futures remain uncertain (NTIA 2024a). Exploring the specificities of student NTE engagement, offers valuable insight into the experiences of a significant segment of the NTE's customer base (REKOM, 2022a; 2024), often overlooked in favour of broader categories of youth. Moreover, considering the role these experiences play within university life, sheds light on students' own understandings of the "student experience" beyond academia; increasingly relevant in the context of rising tuition fees and growing concerns around value for money (Department for Education, 2024; Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2023).

My review of existing literature highlighted a lack of student-specific research on NTE experiences, and a focus on alcohol when considering how these experiences intersect with student life. By centring student participant voices, and incorporating their insights, I addressed this gap. Whilst previous studies have often subsumed students into the broader category of "young people", I have demonstrated the necessity to consider students as a distinct social group, arguing that their "studenthood" is a key element that shapes their NTE experiences.

The main research question was: *How do students experience the night-time economy, and what role do these experiences have in what it means to be a student today?* To address this, I drew on insights from thirty undergraduate students from CityX, whose backgrounds and degrees of engagement with the NTE varied widely. The data, collected

over 10 months, was used to explore several core themes related to the overarching research question: how students define and experience the NTE, the ways in which space, time and studenthood shape those experiences, and their broader significance as part of university life.

COVID-19, though certainly a challenge, provided an opportunity to explore what previously would have only been a hypothetical: *student life without the NTE*. As venues were closed and the nation was subject to numerous lockdowns (Dunn et al., 2021: see also Figure 3), students were unable to have the same sort of NTE experiences. I therefore was also able to consider the effects of COVID-19 on the above sub-themes, exploring how the meaning and experience of a night out was redefined and how their absence highlighted the role they play in student life.

Whilst the starting point of the thesis was an interest in the spatial dimensions of the NTE, findings revealed that understanding students' NTE experiences in their full complexity cannot be done through space alone. The thesis ultimately serves to develop the concept of the nexus, as a conceptual framework, to understand the influences of time and studenthood, in interconnected combination with space. Insights based around *CityX* were not intended to be generalisable, but illustrative of this framework. It contributes new layers of enhanced understanding to the significance of these experiences within student life.

In this final chapter, I synthesise the research findings, particularly drawing on the nexus as the key theoretical contribution. The findings are positioned at the intersection of several academic fields which do not often ordinarily come into dialogue. I highlight further contributions to NTE scholarship, youth studies, and higher education research, alongside innovative advancements to ethnographic methodology. Reflections are provided on the strengths and limitations, particularly considering lessons that can be learnt for future research in this area. Suggestions for future research are made both in response to these lessons and limitations, but also for further application of the nexus as a conceptual tool in other contexts.

Synthesis of Findings

Space

The findings of this research have built on existing scholarship, primarily within Cultural Geography, that sees space not just as a passive backdrop, but as something that actively shapes social experiences. Drawing on assemblage theory (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) and the concept of affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009), this research examined the NTE space as a dynamic composition of social and material elements, including lighting, crowds, alcohol and music. These elements coalesce, forming an assembled atmosphere with the potential to affect those within the space, influencing behaviours and feelings. Whether going “wild” along with the atmosphere (Henry [P14, male], Chapter 5) or noting shifts in their engagement with, and tolerance towards, risk (Fergus [P4, male] and Steve [P29, male], Chapter 7), participants evidenced these altered behaviours and attitudes in the NTE. I proposed that rather than neatly bounded by space and time, as theory suggests (see Michels, 2015; Shaw, 2014), these atmospheres ought to be understood as epicentres from which gradual affectual decline extend (Figure 2).

The atmospheres (or “vibes”) were sensed by participants, even if they could not always put this into words. They also noted how different venues had different kinds of atmospheres. The affective atmospheres were also shown to be both fluid in their formation and unstable, capable of shifting and altering the tone of the night out on short notice. A crowded dancefloor could be a source of pleasure, fostering positive energy, intimacy and belonging, but could also, just as quickly, tip into claustrophobia, aggression or perceived risk. Alongside this, the spaces were shown to be complex, not one-dimensional or mono-affectual; multiple atmospheres co-existed, overlapped, contradicted and affected different people differently. In this way, affective atmospheres proved central to understanding student NTE experiences, as well as the associations between the NTE and both risk and pleasure. Students are not simply passively affected by these atmospheres; their insights suggested they negotiate aspects of their NTE experiences, responding to the atmosphere to minimise risk whilst maximising pleasure. Sometimes these forms of edgework involved the use of specific spaces, like the

women's toilets. They were often a source of pleasure, and a refuge from risk, tied up in participants' NTE rituals of risk and pleasure.

Notably, findings also extended the boundaries of what "counts" as part of the NTE experience. Beyond the "main event", domestic spaces, like student halls, emerged as central to students' NTE experiences. It is within these spaces they begin their ritualised planning, preparation and consumption of alcohol. Other spaces, like the pub, were found to have decreasing relevance within a student night out, but the home space was fundamental and should be included when researching the NTE. However, this research has moved beyond this solely spatial focus, by shedding light on two additional dimensions that are crucial to understanding the student NTE experience: time and studenthood.

Time

Participant insights indicated that time frames the NTE experience, involved in the definition of a "night out" and a boundary to the affective atmosphere. The very term *night-time* economy, is reflective of this, making it all the more surprising, perhaps even ironic, that time is given such little attention in existing research. It also served to transform the NTE, becoming a space-time of risk and excitement separate from the everyday. As such, NTE experiences were viewed as a "time out" or break, contrasting the mundanity and boredom, or remedying the pressures of academic life. Its liminality provided a temporary departure from their daytime selves, whether engaging with risk, performing an alter ego (Susan [P5, *female*], *Chapter 7*) or simply an opportunity to become more in touch with their student identities (Sasha [P13, *female*], *Chapter 8*).

Time also structured participant NTE engagement, creating patterns that correspond with the rhythms and timings of student life. Engagement was shaped by students' "free", unstructured, time, and the nuanced relationship between workload and NTE engagement (not just competing, sometimes complementary). These patterns also changed over time, both due to the liminality of student life, meaning they eventually

must enter the “*real world*” (Laura [P24, female], Chapter 6), but also as they progress through their academic careers, which comes with changed workloads, and priorities.

Studenthood

Student life is a unique period, encapsulating a context-specific identity and lifestyle, and influences of the university institution, all tied up into one phase of life. I adopted the terminology “studenthood” to cover these components, highlighting student life as a stage of life, liminal and fleeting, like adulthood and childhood. However, studenthood has clearer boundaries, tied only to the years spent as a student.

Students saw themselves, and were seen by others, as occupying a liminal life-phase, with greater agency than adolescents and fewer responsibilities than adults. Their NTE engagement was also framed by expectations and stereotypes of what a student should do and be. This influenced participant engagement with some only going on nights out, as it is what they perceived students ought to do. It also shaped student risk-engagement, as they were encouraged to prioritise pleasure, before entering the “*real world*” (Laura [P24, female], Chapter 6), facing fewer perceived consequences, protected by the “safety net” (Marsh, 2018: p.181) of student life. First-year students appeared particularly affected by this framing; they had even fewer responsibilities as their work “*doesn’t count*” (Matt [P8, male], Chapter 6) towards their degrees, and graduation felt more distant. It ultimately set student lives apart from those of other young people who are not afforded the same opportunities or contexts for NTE engagement. Their student identities also influenced how they navigated the NTE, many were drawn to student-only venues or spaces that fostered a sense of belonging among others “*like them*” (Maisey [P9, female] and Sarah [P6, female] Chapter 7). This created distance between the student and local populations of CityX.

The Nexus

Across these findings, a key insight becomes clear: none of these elements operate in isolation. They are deeply interconnected. Their dynamic interplay and mutual shaping

are ultimately what led me to develop the nexus concept. Whilst chapters of the thesis may have analysed their impacts separately, this was purely to assist with clarity, allowing for a deeper analysis. Even summarising the roles of space, time and studenthood in the preceding paragraphs, I have touched on overlaps between the elements. For instance, affective atmospheres are not simply spatial but unfold across specific times and are influenced by student life. Additionally, aspects of the NTE experience, like risk-taking and pleasure-seeking cannot be fully explained without taking into consideration contributory spatial and temporal qualities, and the contexts of student life that influence their engagement. In other words, student experiences of the NTE space are shaped as much by who the students are and the temporal rhythms and liminalities of their life, as they are by the physical space itself.

Space, time and studenthood are deeply interconnected, held together in a dynamic constellation which I termed “the nexus”. Changes to one aspect affect the others, rippling through the structure to have wider-reaching implications on student NTE experiences as a whole. I propose that the nexus can be used as a conceptual tool, or framework, to enhance understandings of student NTE experiences, as it demonstrates how they are shaped through the combined, interrelated, influence of space, time and studenthood. The framework also aids understandings of how students manage their experience: negotiating risk and pleasure within the NTE, and the broader significance NTE experiences play in student life. The latter will be addressed further, later in this chapter.

COVID-19’s Impact

COVID-19 altered this research: providing challenges and opportunities alike. It also demonstrated how student NTE experiences, shaped by space, time and studenthood, are susceptible to change. The pandemic, and associated policy, regulation and social-distancing measures, changed the experience and very meaning of a night out. Temporal and spatial definitions, which were previously shared understandings, were no longer uniform and became confused due to curfews and venue closures. The phrase “night out”, previously only reserved for specific spatial and temporal contexts, became used

to refer to at-home NTE experiences and other spaces not ordinarily associated with the term. Without access to the physical space, many moved NTE experiences online or attempted to reassemble the atmosphere at home.

When NTE spaces reopened they were altered, both physically and socially, with new rules and adaptations to its layout and operations. Participants explained that this altered the experience, with many emphasising it did not live up to the “typical” NTE. It reveals how the space-time-studenthood nexus is susceptible to external forces, influencing how it shapes student NTE experiences. COVID-19 exemplified just one example of this perturbation though I indicated the impacts of other aspects of the broader social, political, economic and environmental landscape, like the cost-of-living crisis (Institute for Government, 2022).

The NTE and Student Life

The second part of the research question was to explore what role student NTE experiences play in what it means to be a student. In *Chapter 8* I turned to view the role of these experiences, as shaped through the nexus of space, time and studenthood, within the broader context of student life, arguing the nexus framework enhances understandings of the role they play. These experiences intersect with student life in many ways, playing important roles in transitions, establishing oneself as a student and fitting in with the community, albeit imagined (Anderson, 1983). When students could not have these experiences in their typical capacity, during COVID-19, there was indication that these aspects suffered: participants felt disconnected and inexperienced. There was also suggestion of knock-on effects to university NTE culture, as events like *Extravs* no longer take place.

Findings also revealed that NTE engagement is strongly associated with university life, and student culture, regardless of individual participation. Whether or not individuals conformed to this ideal, shaped their self-perceptions in relation to constructions of the “typical student” and whether they felt they were having the “student experience”. The latter is particularly significant as a “buzz-word” that features in university marketing

materials and policy. In COVID-19 the emphasis students placed on NTE experiences as part of the broader “student experience” became even more clear as without them, many felt they were “*missing out*” (Hailey [P10, female]), *Chapter 8*) or not receiving the service or experience they were “*paying for*” (Megan, [P30, female], *Chapter 8*).

The attempts participants made to replicate NTE experiences at-home, during the pandemic, was testament to the significance they hold within student life. Students value these leisure and social experiences, so sought to reassemble the NTE atmosphere at home, though with altered resulting affects and experiences. Universities also organised online *Freshers’ Week* activities, hoping to emulate the NTE, highlighting that their value is perceived even at an institutional level.

Nexus-thinking contributed new layers of enhanced understanding of student NTE experiences to existing discussions on what it means to be and belong as a student and whether students are customers of the university. Utilising the framework, I highlighted the reciprocal relationship between student life and the NTE: through studenthood, it both shapes and is shaped by students’ NTE experiences.

Contributions

The contributions of this thesis are multi-fold: spanning the fields of youth studies, higher education, and NTE research. It brings forward fresh empirical insights, proposes a novel approach to data collection and, most significantly, develops a new theoretical framework, the nexus, which captures the complex, interrelated dynamics that shape student NTE experiences. In the sections that follow I explore these contributions in more detail.

Empirical Contributions

This thesis contributes to studies on the NTE by centring first-hand student accounts of the NTE experience in its entirety: moving beyond a focus on NTE spaces or alcohol consumption. It highlights the emotional and affective dimensions of the NTE by focusing

on how students *experience* these spaces, rather than simply observing their behaviours within them. It also builds on existing research to highlight the value of the domestic space as an integral part of these experiences, particularly communal spaces within student halls, as it is here that students begin their NTE rituals. Plans are made, drinks are consumed, friendships are formed, and students prepare for their nights out within these spaces. They are more than a prelude to a night out, but very much part of it. Their student lives also add to this significance, for instance framing their at-home consumption of alcohol, Sasha [P13, female] states: *“We pre-drink because we’re poor students trying to save money”*.

Importantly, this thesis also captures a unique historical moment for the NTE, by exploring the impact of COVID-19. It sheds light on how students and the industry adapted to restrictions, with students attempting to recreate the experiences at home or online, and the industry reopening in altered formats (e.g. “seated events”). These perspectives, which extend beyond examining the economic impacts on the industry, offer a glimpse into how the NTE was reshaped during a global crisis. At the time of writing, this is yet to receive much scholarly attention and perhaps, given the unique, time-bounded nature of the period it captures, never will.

Fresh perspectives are contributed to higher education and youth studies as the research focuses on the NTE leisure experiences of students, rather than young people more broadly. It demonstrates how complex this non-academic aspect of student life is and the importance of NTE experiences, shaped by space, time and studenthood, within student life. It reinforces the relevance of dominant and generalised constructions of a “typical student”, not as wholly representative of the modern-day student body, but as an aspect that shapes student experience. Students share these generalised understandings, tied to expectations around NTE engagement, and use them as a benchmark to match, compare or define their experience against.

The thesis also contributes to discussions on the commodification of university, and the idea that the “student experience” is a paid-for good or service. COVID-19 revealed that nightlife forms part of the experience students expect of university, and the impacts

should this expectation not be realised. Without them, they “miss out” on aspects of an experience they believe they are due, having paid tuition fees. It demonstrates that students are invested in their university experience both emotionally, in terms of it living up to their expectations, but also financially as they pay fees.

Methodological Contributions

A further contribution of this thesis lies in its methodological innovation, adapting research methods for the context of the global pandemic. I draw on early discussions, towards the beginning of the pandemic, regarding this adaptation and contribute my own experiences of “pivoting” online because of COVID-19. The lessons learnt extend beyond the pandemic, offering broader insights into online data collection. Researchers who seek to conduct discussion-based methodologies through online platforms, may find particular value in the insights I gained, including the importance of warm-up activities and fostering rapport over time without in-person contact.

This research also introduces innovative forms of data collection. In particular, it explores the use of *Snapchat* as a tool for participant video diaries. This relatively novel approach has received limited attention in academic research, likely due to concerns around ethics and data security. I engage with these concerns directly, offering practical guidance to navigate them and apply the method effectively in the field. Though in an ideal research scenario the diaries would have been undertaken by more participants, providing more data for analysis and discussion; I demonstrate that *Snapchat* is a useful research tool. In studies involving young people, *Snapchat* offers particular value due to its popularity and familiarity among this demographic. Capturing content via the app would likely feel second nature as they probably already use it themselves, making it well-suited for documenting everyday experiences. In the context of the NTE, *Snapchat* is especially effective. Filming on their own devices, the data collection is unlikely to stand out from typical social behaviours of NTE patrons. This thesis not only demonstrates the method’s potential but also critically engages with the ethical and practical challenges involved, offering a starting point for other researchers seeking to responsibly employ this tool in their own research contexts.

Theoretical Contributions

The main contribution of this research is the novel conceptualisation of *the nexus* as a framework for understanding student NTE experiences. This framework moves beyond viewing the experience as shaped by space alone, to bring space, time and studenthood together as co-constitutive forces. These elements form a dynamic and interconnected constellation, where the influence of one cannot be understood in isolation from the others. The dynamic interplay also means that a shift in one element can ripple through the nexus, altering the entire experience. Together, they function as more than a sum of their parts, (re)shaping and (re)producing student NTE experiences.

Beyond the internal dynamics, the framework considers how the nexus is also susceptible to external forces. My research demonstrated this in relation to COVID-19, though the impacts of other events, like the recent cost-of-living crisis can be conceptualised in this way too. Not only does it enhance our understandings of student NTE experiences, but as a concept, the nexus can be applied beyond this research: offering a transferable framework for examining other dimensions of students' lives. Future research could apply the nexus to other contexts to explore how student experiences are structured through these interwoven dynamics, rather than analysing them through a purely spatial lens.

Limitations, Reflections and Directions for Future Research

In this penultimate section of the thesis, I reflect on the research process: acknowledging its limitations whilst also recognising the significance of what was achieved under extraordinary and challenging circumstances. Rather than undermining the value of the findings, these limitations are framed both as a point of departure for future research and to highlight the resilience and adaptability required to conduct research in times of disruption. Suggestions for future research also extend the proposed theoretical framework, the nexus, into new contexts. Whilst there are aspects I would change were a similar scenario to arise again, the research ultimately offers valuable

insights into a moment few studies were able to capture, contributing to our understanding of student experiences and the NTE landscape during COVID-19.

Although I have explained that participant insights were not intended to be generalisable, the context of the data collection still warrants reflection, as I look back on this research. The narrative data is grounded in the context of *CityX*. This is a small English city where students dominate for the months that university is in session. Its NTE is both limited and mainstream, and whilst this meant that I could gather overlapping accounts of the same spaces, research conducted in larger cities, with a more diverse nightlife, may yield more varied or different insights. In fact, this could be a point of departure for future research, investigating a different city, conducting comparative research between *CityX* and other locations, or applying the nexus framework to other non-mainstream NTE contexts.

As discussed in the *Methodology*, although participants span a range of backgrounds and relationships to the NTE, the majority were white, heterosexual, young and regularly attended the NTE. Coincidentally, this matches the construction of a “typical student” I discuss throughout the thesis. Notably participant recruitment and attrition provided challenges during the pandemic and whilst I believe that data was able to capture a range of experiences, I would strive for greater diversity, were I to conduct the research again. In particular, it would be useful to hear further from students who do not attend the NTE. Future research could seek to hear more from these students, as well as those not represented in the participant sample. This includes those intentionally excluded based on the research design, like international or postgraduate students, as well as those unintentionally absent, such as students who are also “locals”. Research could explore how their experiences do (or do not) apply to the nexus framework and how other intersectional elements of identity may also intersect to shape the student NTE experience.

In the *Methodology*, I outlined many of the benefits and downfalls of each form of data collection used in this research, arguing that the multi-method approach, at times, allowed for one method to address the downfalls of others. Careful consideration was made in the selection, justification and adaptation of each method used. However, I wish

to return to this discussion as I reflect on the research as a whole. Conducting research during the pandemic was a challenge, in fact it is something I refer to as “messy” (*Chapter 3*). It demanded adaptation, creativity, flexibility and resilience. Whilst online forms of data collection may not have offered the same depth or nuance as traditional in-person forms of ethnographic methodology, they were the most viable option available at the time. These methods had their flaws: they may not have yielded the same richness of data, and issues like recall bias and participant selectivity were real. Yet, these are offset by the significance of capturing insights during an extraordinary historical moment. I believe it was more important to collect meaningful data during COVID-19 under imperfect conditions, than delaying the research in hopes of returning to face-to-face methods. The resulting research provides rare and valuable insight, especially given how few studies at the time focused on student experiences or those of the NTE.

Final Reflections

Through this research, I have contributed to and deepened understandings of student NTE experiences. Student nightlife has been shown to be about more than being drunk and having fun: it has a broader significance within student life. At a time when students are increasingly questioning what they get in return for rising tuition costs, and the “value for money” (Jones et al., 2020; Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2023) of their university experiences, exploring this significance feels especially timely. It also comes at a time when the NTE is particularly vulnerable, with calls made to the government for support in ensuring its future (NTIA 2024a). Though this research was not intended to be policy-facing, it highlights that student NTE experiences remain significant within student life and to overlook them is to ignore part of what it means to be a student today. It would be prudent for both local and governmental policies to better support the NTE, given this centrality.

Ultimately the student NTE experience is complex: it is, at once, a space-time of freedom and control, of pleasure and risk, serving as both a reward and a hindrance for university

workload. It involves, amongst other things, performance, learning, belonging, and negotiation, tied to university life. Within these experiences, students are not passive, rather they engage with, and shape, the affective atmospheres they encounter. Through the nexus of space, time and studenthood, we can begin to grasp these complexities and better reflect the lived realities of the experience. The framework offers an enhanced understanding, enabling a more comprehensive and meaningful re-conceptualisation of what it means to be a student today.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Participant List and Basic Information

P Code	Pseudonym	Year (start of research)	Gender	Attends NTE?	Notes	Discussion Code
P1	AARON	3rd of 4	Male	Yes – regularly (≥ 1 a month)	Gave up alcohol in 2022 and goes out less as a result. Integrated master's student.	FG1, FG4, FG5, I10 & Diaries
P2	JACK	3rd of 4	Male	Yes – regularly (≥ 1 a month)	Integrated master's student, goes out "fairly regularly"	FG1, FG4, FG5 & Diaries
P3	JAMES	3rd of 3	Male	Yes – regularly (≥ 1 a month)	Only took part in one focus group. From Bristol and discusses comparisons to "home" a lot. Prefers "events" especially related to music	FG1
P4	FERGUS	3rd of 3	Male	Yes – often (≥ 1 a week)	Moved to London during research, prefers non-mainstream clubbing, goes out often	FG1, FG5
P5	SUSAN	3rd of 3	Female	Yes – regularly (≥ 1 a month)	Only in one focus group, goes out frequently but to mainstream local clubs	FG2
P6	SARAH	2nd of 3	Female	Yes – regularly (≥ 1 a month)	Goes out frequently though in her final year discusses going out less. Re-sat her first year so had <i>Freshers' Week</i> with the others from this interview though they will graduate sooner than her.	FG2, I8
P7	CHRIS	3rd of 3	Male	Yes – often (≥ 1 a week)	Only in one focus group, goes out a lot, specifically every Wednesday with the Rugby team	FG2
P8	MATT	3rd of 4	Male	Yes – often (≥ 1 a week)	Went out a lot at the start of the research but had a summer internship which changed his perspective and priorities for his final year of study	FG2, I9

P9	MAISEY	2nd of 3	Female	Yes – regularly (≥ 1 a month)	Goes out regularly with her flat and as part of the Dance society.	FG2, I5
P10	HAILEY	3rd of 4	Female	Yes – often (≥ 1 a week)	Goes out a lot to socialise and struggled not being able to do so under lockdown. Integrated Masters' student. Friends who she used to go out with graduated so goes out less in her final year but still regularly	FG3, I4 & Diaries
P11	EMMA	3rd of 4	Female	Yes – often (≥ 1 a week)	Identifies as part of the LGBT+ community and discusses importance of NTE in that. Also works in the local Students' Union nightclub so has deeper insight.	FG3 & Diaries
P12	HOPE	3rd of 3	Female	Rarely (≤ 2 a year)	Only took part in one interview before graduating. Was heavily involved with Ballroom society prior to COVID-19 but lost contact and didn't return after. Does not really go out, expressed she had only been to a handful of socials on nights out. Doesn't drink alcohol through personal choice and prefers to socialise with friends at her house or others' houses.	I1
P13	SASHA	1st of 3	Female	Rarely (≤ 2 a year)	Mature student. Lives away from university and has a small child. Began university as a Fresher in 2018 before intercalating due to pregnancy. Goes out rarely now but did “first time round”.	I2
P14	HENRY	2nd of 3	Male	Yes – regularly (≥ 1 a month)	Part of the running and athletics society so goes out with them regularly though is trying to consume less alcohol now	I3 & Diaries

P15	DANIEL	<1 (First year in 2021)	Male	Yes – often (≥1 a week)	Only in one focus group. Works in a local bar. Was a first year post-COVID lockdown. Disruption to his A Levels/leaving school and parts of first year	FG6
P16	DONNA	<1 (First year in 2021)	Female	Yes – regularly (≥1 a month)	Only in one focus group. Post-COVID first year but took a gap year so had been to a nightclub in their final year of college	FG6
P17	ELLIE	1st of 3	Female	Rarely (≤2 a year)	Only in one focus group. Identifies as part of the LGBT+ community.	FG6
P18	DAVID	<1 (First year in 2021)	Male	Rarely (≤2 a year)	Only in one focus group. Works at a local bar in CityX.	FG6
P19	NIAMH	1st of 3	Female	Yes – often (≥1 a week)	Only in one focus group. Part of multiple sports societies so goes out with them a lot. COVID-19 first-year so "wants to get involved in everything"	FG7
P20	HARVEY	<1 (First year in 2021)	Male	Yes – often (≥1 a week)	Only in one focus group. First year student post-COVID, part of the Rugby society. On the weekends works at the SU nightclub.	FG7
P21	HARRISON	<1 (First year in 2021)	Male	Yes – often (≥1 a week)	Only in one focus group. First year student post-COVID, part of the Rugby society, goes out regularly for socials and at the weekend with friends.	FG7
P22	MAX	<1 (First year in 2021)	Male	Yes – often (≥1 a week)	Only in one focus group. Goes out a lot with his flat and friends. Not part of any societies but explained he may join in second year. Just wanted to get "settled" first.	FG7
P23	ALI	2nd of 3	Male	Yes – regularly (≥1 a month)	BAME student who does not consume alcohol due to personal choice. Still likes to go out regularly	I6

P24	LAURA	1st of 3	Female	From time to time (≤2 a term)	“COVID Fresher”, occasionally goes out. Identifies as part of the LGBT community. Was a <i>Freshers’ Rep</i> in 2nd year.	I7, FG9 & Diaries
P25	JASMINE	1st of 3	Female	From time to time (≤2 a term)	“COVID Fresher”, occasionally goes out. Works part time so doesn't have much free time to go out as much as she would like	FG8
P26	CONNIE	1st of 3	Female	Rarely (≤2 a year)	“COVID Fresher”, occasionally goes out when her flat go out. She doesn't really like going out	FG8
P27	CHARLOTTE	1st of 3	Female	Yes – regularly (≥1 a month)	“COVID Fresher”, she likes to go out and would like to meet more people who also enjoy going out so she can do this more	FG8
P28	TOM	1st of 3	Male	From time to time (≤2 a term)	“COVID Fresher”, works in a bar at the University and as a result says he is quite cynical of the NTE	FG9 & Diaries
P29	STEVE	1st of 3	Male	Rarely (<2 a year)	BAME, “COVID Fresher”, hadn’t consumed alcohol prior to university for religious reasons. He explains "COVID changed that" though he still doesn't like going out to nightclubs	FG9
P30	MEGAN	1st of 3	Female	Yes – regularly (≥1 a month)	“COVID Fresher” very vocal about the downsides/negative experiences of nightclubs	FG9 & Diaries

Appendix 2

Research Poster



CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS

*How do experiences of student night-time leisure spaces contribute to what it means to be a student today?
& How has this changed as a result of COVID-19?*

Are you a full-time LU student?

Whether you are a student who goes out every week or you couldn't think of anything worse than going to a nightclub, **YOU** are needed for research into the role nightclubs play in student leisure time!

 **Lancaster University**
Arts & Humanities Research Council

 **University of Salford**
MANCHESTER

 StudentNTE@lancaster.ac.uk
or see the website for more info & to get involved!



Scan Me

Appendix 3

Information Sheet and Consent Form



Participant information sheet

Project title: How do experiences of student night-time leisure spaces contribute to what it means to be a student today? How has this changed as a result of COVID-19?

My name is Molly King [REDACTED] and I am a PhD student at Lancaster University. I would like to invite you to take part in my PhD research about student experiences of nightclub spaces and the wider night-time economy.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?

The study aims to look at how students interact with and behave within night-time economy settings, such as nightclubs and bars. It will evaluate if such experiences are important in forming what it means to be a student today, in modern society. In particular it will look at the ways such contributions have changed or altered as a result of the impacts of COVID-19 to the hospitality industry and social distancing regulations. My interest is not to judge or assess the behaviour of participants, but simply to discuss their experiences of night-time leisure both before and since COVID-19.

Why have I been invited?

You have been invited to take part as you are an undergraduate student at Lancaster University. As part of the research I will be using a case study methodology whereby participants will provide data as individual “cases” and I will use this for in-depth analysis.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you choose to take part you will be asked to engage in a number of different aspects of the study: individual interviews, focus groups, observed **virtual/online events** and video diaries. These will all occur at various agreed times of the year (snapshots) and will all take place within one year (365 days). Engagement in all parts of the study is not required.

I'll now describe each format of your participation and engagement:

Individual interviews

Individual interviews would last a maximum of 30 mins will be conducted one-to-one, at the time of your choice over Microsoft Teams as a recommended Lancaster university platform for communication and research. Initially, this will just be to gauge your personal habits with regards to ‘going out’¹ and the ways it has been impacted by COVID-19. If you do not or did not go out, your input is still needed as I still want to hear from students who do not wish to participate in such activities as to why. Following this, at agreed

points within the year (365 days not calendar/academic) we will follow up to discuss the changes as well as typical activities that may have occurred around that time (i.e. Extravs – the college parties at the end of the year).

Focus groups

Alternatively to interviews (or in addition to) there is an opportunity to be involved two focus groups lasting around an hour each, taking place in line with the ‘snapshots’ throughout the year. These will also take place via Microsoft Teams (names will be changed to protect identity in the transcription stage). I ask that when you participate in the focus groups you also agree not to reveal the identities of the participants or share any information discussed outside the group, helping to maintain this confidentiality.

Observations and video diaries via Snapchat

Observations and video diaries will be conducted on an Ad Hoc basis, ideally in line with the ‘snapshots’ but when suitable events occur. You will not be involved in the observation stage but in the absence of in-person observation (as a result of COVID-19 restrictions) participants who are willing are also asked to create video diaries of any form of ‘night out’. This can include attending nightclubs and bars as well as house parties (although they are advised to pay attention to governmental advice and determine their own risk).

Video diaries will be created by you, taking pictures and video clips (adding text if you wish) using the photo-messaging app Snapchat. Unique accounts will be made for the purposes of the research so participants’ personal accounts will not be monitored. ‘Stories’² will be created by you, the participants, covering anything you deem relevant, interesting and representative of your night, in pictures, text and videos.

These will be then screen recorded by myself, as researcher, and saved in password protected folders for analysis at a later date. With your permission, pictures and videos may be utilised in the thesis paper and presentations. However, anonymity will be preserved through face-blurring (I’ll be using the app MovStash³ – allowing me to edit videos with automatic face tracking to blur faces after downloading them to my device). Participants will be responsible for following the terms of service of the app Snapchat (accessible here) and agree to only share the videos with the researcher (i.e. not to post them on their own social media accounts) to ensure anonymity of all involved.

As such a mutual confidentiality agreement will be signed below, that also includes not revealing identities of anyone participating in focus groups, if you choose to participate.

All data will be made anonymous, and conversations and observations confidential. However, if I, the researcher deem serious and significant harm being caused to yourself or others I reserve the right to break confidentiality to report it to the relevant authorities. The researcher also is not responsible for any of the participants actions and is not there in a caregiving capacity.

An up to date source of information on the governmental COVID-19 guidance can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>

¹ ‘Going out’ refers to the night out and typical behaviour and activities you’d engage in. If you do not or choose not to go out this does not mean you are unsuitable for the research. I would still be interested to gain your insights.

² a photo or video you post to your very own stories section (or feed) of your account, which is visible by you and all your friends. In this case it will only be visible to the researcher as new accounts will be created for the purposes of the study.

³ More info on the app can be found here - <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/movstash/id1058281885>

How will the data be recorded/captured?

Interviews and focus groups will be held over the platform Microsoft Teams. Within the platform there is a recording function which automatically generates a transcript. I will double check this transcript as sometimes the software has errors in picking up words or phrases, edit pseudonyms in place of names and export the transcripts. From there the original recordings will only be held for 12 months as a backup, stored separately from the transcripts. The transcripts themselves will be stored for the university recommended 10-year period in password protected files.

As mentioned above I will screen record your Snapchat stories on my own device or simply log in to the account after your use to download the 'Stories'. These will be immediately edited using MovStash to blur out faces and maintain anonymity. The originals will be deleted, and the edited versions will be stored separately from other data relating to your interviews or focus groups in password protected folders, also deleted after 10 years as standard practice.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?

By participating, you will help us understand the modern realities of the student experience, often overlooked in policy and decision making. Findings may in turn inform such change by providing a greater understanding of what it means to be a student today, thus indirectly benefiting you and future students. It also provides insights into the ways COVID-19 and subsequent restrictions have impacted student leisure experiences. This might have some wider impact, for example in terms of policy and support provided to students.

Do I have to take part?

No. Any involvement is completely voluntary. Whilst your involvement would be appreciated you are under no obligation to take part.

What if I change my mind?

If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw your participation within 14 days from the first involvement (1-on-1 interviews, focus groups or video diaries). If expressed at this time, all input will be removed, and you will no longer be required to attend other aspects of the research. Once the first phase has passed your contribution to the focus group discussion cannot always be withdrawn completely, given that your input is intermingled with that of other participants. Where possible, input will be removed, however all input will be reported anonymously, so your identity will be protected.

Should you wish to withdraw please email me ([REDACTED]). I will not ask any questions and I will endeavour to extract any ideas or information you have contributed to the research and destroy them.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Whilst there are no direct disadvantages to taking part, the time commitment (i.e. taking part in all interviews, focus groups and nights out) may be time consuming so I will ensure to fit these around your studies and other commitments, working with you to find optimum times for these. Additionally, in interviews and focus groups sensitive topics may naturally arise. I have provided below some resources which may be relevant in relation to sensitive topics that may arise should you feel as though you need them. At the end of your involvement in the research I will also provide you with a debrief and further resources based on conversations that arise. Providing such resources is not an indication that sensitive topics will definitely be discussed, but is standard practice within such research.

Counselling Services

- Uni Counselling Service - <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/student-and-education-services/counselling-and-mental-health-service/>
- Your University College also has a welfare team which may be more readily accessible

Local Addiction Support

- Change Grow Live - <https://www.changegrowlive.org/inspire-north-central-lancashire/lancaster>
- Inspire - <https://inspirenorthlancs.org.uk/>
- We are with you - <https://www.wearewithyou.org.uk/services/lancashire-for-young-people-lancaster/> (for those under 25)

Sexual Harassment/ Misconduct Support

- Lancashire Victim Services - <https://lancashirevictimservices.org/>

COVID-19

Whilst the research involves attending nightclubs and bars, it is important to stress attendance is not compulsory. Government guidelines and regulations will be followed and the risk assessment for the research updated accordingly, however if you do not feel comfortable attending a nightclub when and if this part of the research arises, given the potential dangers of being in busy enclosed spaces, you do not need to attend such spaces.

If you would like more up to date information on the government guidelines, please see the following: <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>

Will my data be identifiable?

Prior to, and after the interview, only I, the researcher conducting this study, will have access to your personal details. As soon as I have completed the four parts of the research, I will anonymise your data, referring to it using a pseudonym or participant number. Due to this, the data you provide will not be identifiable. Additionally, as mentioned above any video or pictures used will have faces of those in the shot blurred out.

I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution.

Mutual confidentiality agreement

By agreeing to take part in the research you are also agreeing that all videos you take and download as part of the Snapchat video diaries will never be shared with anyone or posted publicly. This also includes that your phone is password protected. I also agree that I will not share them further than my supervisory team and I will use face blurring technique (through MovStash) for any research publications and/or presentations.

How will I use the information you have shared with me and what will happen to the results of the research study?

I will use the information you have shared with me only in the PhD thesis or any publications related to my PhD research, and will be used for research purposes only. Snapchat videos, if relevant may be used in presentations however in this instance I will use software to maintain anonymity (face blurring, voice distorting etc.), hence I'll do my best to protect the identities of anyone involved in the provided videos.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes, so that although I will use your exact words, you cannot be identified in publications.

How my data will be stored

Your data collected from all data collection methods/formats explained above will be stored on password-protected computers and through a service called OneDrive, which is encrypted secure cloud storage supported by Lancaster University. I will store copies of the transcribed data securely for the University-recommended length of up to 10 years. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information.

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact me or one of the additional contacts below:

[Redacted contact information]

Additional contacts:

Prof Anne Cronin, PhD Supervisor, Department of Sociology, Lancaster University:

[Redacted contact information]

Prof Anne-Marie Fortier, PhD Supervisor, Department of Sociology, Lancaster University:

[Redacted contact information]

Dr Karenza Moore, PhD Supervisor, Department of Criminology, Salford University:

[Redacted contact information]

Professor Imogen Tyler, Head of Department, Department of Sociology, Lancaster University:

[Redacted contact information]

Thank you for considering your participation in this study.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Name of Researcher: Molly King

Institutional Affiliation: Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, UK

Title of Project: How do experiences of student night-time leisure spaces contribute to what it means to be a student today? How has this changed as a result of COVID-19?

Check boxes as appropriate

- ☒ I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the study (& attached video diary guidance if applicable). I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
- ☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw within the guidelines specified above.
- ☐ I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, publications, or presentations by the researcher, including the video diaries created through Snapchat on my 'nights out' in the video format with blurred faces (using MovStash) and distorted voices.
- ☐ I understand that my name will not appear in any reports, publications, or presentations as the researcher would use pseudonyms.
- ☐ I understand that the researcher is not responsible for my behaviour and I am aware of the instances where confidentiality can be broken.
- ☐ I have read and understand to the mutual confidentiality agreement. I agree not to share any data I collect with external parties other than the researcher, or reveal the identity of other participants in the focus group if I participate in it, and that in turn my videos will be blurred and used only under the condition as stated under 3.
- ☐ I agree to use a password protected phone for my Snapchat video diaries
- ☐ I agree to take part in the study. Specifically Interviews, Focus Groups & Video Diaries via Snapchat (delete as appropriate)

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Molly King
Researcher

Date

Signature

Appendix 4

Data Collection “What ifs”

What-ifs and the responsibility of the researcher

In response to concerns from the Ethics review board, specific ‘What ifs’ were hypothesised, with ways to address each occurrence.

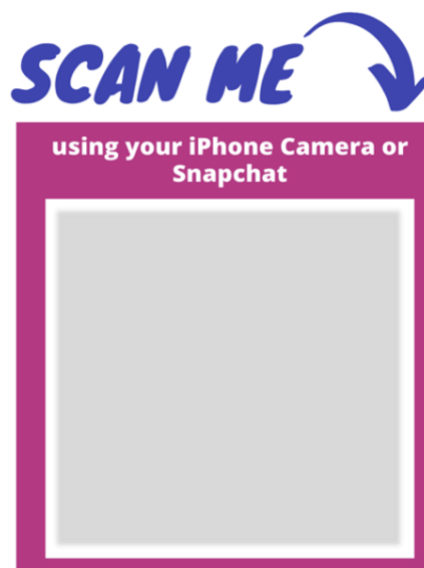
What if...	Responsibility of the researcher
... there is an increased risk of catching COVID-19 due to attending a crowded area?	<p>With more people mingling in crowded spaces it is thought the risk of transmission is increased due to sheer volume. Should venues be open it is because the government have deemed it safe enough to do so with regulations in place (i.e. social distancing).</p> <p>I am not forcing nor encouraging participants to attend crowded venues (and will provide them with up to date guidance) simply to record their experiences if they plan to attend anyway. Participation in my project will not cause a participant to contract COVID-19 but I will advise they have track and trace apps turned on to aid government initiatives.</p>
... participants break COVID regulations and guidance?	<p>Research in criminology regularly has to negotiate viewing rule breaking and maintaining confidentiality. I will follow a similar approach as I have mentioned before only breaking confidentiality if I believe immediate serious harm to be caused.</p> <p>Whilst breaking rules increases the risk of transmission immediate serious harm does not fall into this bracket so I will not break confidentiality.</p>
... alcohol consumption causes injury, violence, sickness, lack of control/awareness?	<p>For some, alcohol consumption is a typical part of a nightclub experience. The researcher is not responsible for participants and therefore cannot control participant drinking behaviours, however security and staff are trained to deal with such scenarios.</p> <p>Whilst not wanting to breach confidentiality, if I believe serious harm to themselves or others was caused, upon viewing the outputs the next day, I could provide participants with resources. This aligns with NACDA guidelines.</p>

<p>... participants use or film others using illegal substances?</p>	<p>Whilst drug consumption may be illegal it does occur within the night-time economy. All venues in the local area have a “zero-tolerance policy”, so staff and security will be on high alert.</p> <p>Additionally, as such activity usually takes place discretely (for example within the toilets) it is likely that video diaries will only capture the potential after-effects as opposed to the consumption itself.</p> <p>Whilst not wanting to breach confidentiality, if I believe serious harm to themselves or others was caused, upon viewing the outputs the next day, I could provide participants with resources. This aligns with NACDA guidelines.</p>
<p>... participants capture their involvement in, or other illegal activity?</p>	<p>All licenced venues are governed by strict policy. Staff are trained to deal with and be on the look out for any form of transgressive behaviour from drink spiking to aggression.</p> <p>In the highly unlikely event that a participant clearly captures</p>

Appendix 5

Information Cards

How do experiences of student night-time leisure spaces contribute to what it means to be a student today? How has this changed as a result of COVID-19?



Research is currently being conducted by Lancaster University Sociology Department. Participants have been asked to record video diaries of their experiences in the app Snapchat in the absence of observations due to COVID-19.

If you are captured in the video, please be assured that all identities will be kept anonymous – using the app MovStash to blur faces. However, if you are still unhappy with being on the video please feel free to ask the participant to delete this segment of the diary.

Further information about the research, how the data is kept and stored, anonymisation techniques and ways you can get involved as well as my contact details can be found by scanning the QR



