Title: A Sociological Understanding of Music Venues

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Introduction

Music venues are hubs of cultural expression. They provide a shared space where in which communities can come together and collectively engage in celebrating music, its artists and the spatial locations they reside in. The purpose of this research was to find how music venues can express the cultural production and reproduction of a city as a means to preserve their historical venues, or build the spatial character of a cluster. To conduct this research my group wanted to understand how large and small venues co-exist. First, we conducted a spatial analysis to find which natural venues clustered together and came about the distinction between specialized and generalized venues. Specialized venues such as the Rex Hotel Jazz Club, cater to jazz music lovers, consumers, and producers; while generalized venues like Meridian Hall cater to the whole community by housing concerts, theatre performances and even fun kid days. Based on venue capacity and genre, we found that specialists tend to have a larger capacity with more frequent events which counterbalances the smaller capacity of generalist venues with less frequent events. In addition, we argued that the longevity of a music venue may come from its historical contexts, economic strategies and environments, or niche-clustering. We found that it is several things such as resource partitioning amongst venue owners, zoning laws and regulations from 'invisible actors', as well as the attempts to create a unique authentic space that can continuously captivate its audiences.

Background

Music venues can bring together like-minded people looking to build their social capital. Experiential management is a concept within sociology that builds on ideas of how individuals seek out experiences to build their social capital and personal interests. At a macro-level music venues effectively mobilize identity that draws certain audiences and crowds to their business. We wanted to ask to what extent music venues compete with one another, whilst standing apart from spaces that may offer the same thing. This sparked the distinction between a generalist and a specialist venue based on genre. Generalist venues were defined as spaces that catered to a wider audience by playing Top 40 hits. Specialist venues were defined as spaces that catered to a specific genre of music, or experience that you could not get in other places such as Jazz or country music. The competition amongst these spaces is bound to differ. Cities have shown preferential treatment towards clusters that have built an economically reliable reputation. Carah et.al (2021) found that the niche-interests and business interests are consistently debated to find what would be most profitable to the owners, shareholders, performers and audiences Sociologists such as Peter Lugosi understands that music venues are symbolically laden, emotionally charged spaces that can provide multidimensional experiences and the geographical location of music venues plays a large role in their legitimacy, as well as the spreading of social and cultural capital amongst the surrounding businesses. The very infrastructure of a music venue has significant impacts on the aesthetic atmosphere of a culturally active city, and we wanted to contribute to the sociological understanding of how music venues, and their clustering, play a role in the cultural production and reproduction in downtown Toronto.

Methods

      Our research began with finding about 90 music venues using google searches and yelp lists, from which we catalogued and entered into a mapping site to show the patterns of clustering in downtown Toronto. The clustering we found is based on five characteristics; first, the capacity would distinguish small venues (<100), and large venues (600+), second the genre defined as specialist or generalist, third the venue was categorized as either music specific (only providing music) or multi-purpose (theatre, hotel occupation, barber shops), fourth the frequency of events would tell us how often a venue had to be 'in business to maintain the upkeep of their business. Based on this coded information we found 4 significant clusters, each venue was colour coded based on capacity. Pink is 600+ (largest venue), Orange is 300-600, Blue is 100-300, and Green is <100 (smallest venue). From the 4 clusters, we were able to identify Queen St West, the Annex, Old Toronto, and King St. East.

Findings

      We decided to compare the venues within the clusters based on capacity. All clusters had many different venue capacities, but they were often quite a distance from one another. In Queens St West, The Cameron House is a small intimate location that has been providing a rich cultural capital to the cluster since 1981, but that becomes quite characteristic of music venues on queens street. The Great Hall had been established in 1889, and The Horseshoe Tavern had been established in 1947; it became clear that there is a historical atmosphere to this cluster that makes these venues reliable experiential spaces. The event frequency of those more historical spaces tended to coincide with their size; spaces with a capacity of 300-600, or 600+ had a lower rate of monthly concerts. This could be due to the business upkeep and the revenue/profit gained

for each event which can impact how we understand competition amongst these businesses. The issues a venue may face varying on the cluster; the annex is surrounded by universities and colleges, and may not have many issues with marketing or attracting an audience, but they suffer from noise complaints and other disturbances. Zoning and regulation issues or the socio-economic location of the music venue can have rippling effects on the 'invisible actors' that keep a venue up and running. For example, Cold Tea was unable to withstand the economic demands of the COVID-19 pandemic, and despite their 10-year relationship with the landlords, they were unable to open up a second location. The findings present to us how, from an operating perspective, music venues that we have observed all have advantages and disadvantages that make them credible, authentic and unique social spaces. Most pointedly the identity-based competition, to be true to their niche, there are many ways venues try to stand out, having rooftop BBQs or barbershops. Their ability to coexist is possibly due to larger venues being generalists by holding concerts or tours and finding other ways to build their revenue by being multipurpose. Whereas smaller venues can hold more events, thus building their revenue by celebrating a shared hobby or culture throughout the week, instead of seasonal events.

Conclusion and Recommendation

  The goal of this research was to better understand the sociological impact music venues had on the cultural production and reproduction of a city. We found that four clusters had built a reputation for gathering people together to enjoy and consume music in various ways. Some venues had historical reputations that solidified their position as key cultural actors in the city, whereas others were able to use the socioeconomic demographic around them to promote engagement with their businesses. Smaller venues are more likely to cluster together because

they have committed to a niche that allows them to co-exist with others. Most of the venues we have found are categorized as a generalist, but they vary based on event frequency. We were unable to find strong evidence that capacity and event frequency were associated with one another. The ability to share resources between venues like relying on other eateries for incoming audiences, or providing a multipurpose experience where the capacity was related to unused spaces, like wedding spaces or meeting convention halls. Our research found a macro-level understanding of music venues based on clustering patterns, venue capacity, and event frequency. Future research could dive deeper into generalist venues, and how they compete with one another, given that they have no niche that they are adhering to, rather the open public.