

Late night environments: Bar “morphing” increases risky alcohol sales in on-premise outlets

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Abstract

Niche theory proposes that in areas of high alcohol availability, alcohol sales outlets will compete for patrons by diversifying their operating characteristics to provide a diversity of drinking contexts. We aimed to characterize features of outlet operations that contribute to increased risk of alcohol problems across communities. We conducted ethnographic observations in 97 on-premise outlets across six California cities and interviewed staff and patrons in a subsample of these. We observed outlet managers deliberately altering the environments in 17.5% of establishments. These modifications aimed to increase bar/nightclub effects, enabling venues to “morph” (i.e. alter operating conditions from restaurant to bar, or from bar to club) and display environmental characteristics associated with over-service and alcohol-related problems (e.g. more young male patrons, crowding and dancing). Late night morphing was observed in some outlets in most cities and included outlets operating with restaurant licences. Staff and patrons identified morphing as a strategy to

increase alcohol sales in late night hours. Competition for late night customers may encourage business practices that increase the number of alcohol sales establishments operating under risky circumstances. Community alcohol policies and practices should attend to the potential expansion of risky alcohol sales niches in night-time economies.

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