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Something for everyone? Changes and choices in the ethno-party scene in urban nightlife

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Publication date
2011

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

de Bruin, S. (2011). *Something for everyone? Changes and choices in the ethno-party scene in urban nightlife*. Vossiuspers - Amsterdam University Press.
<http://nl.aup.nl/books/9789056296698-something-for-everyone.html>

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Summary (English)

Globalization, commercialization and the growing influence of the media all contribute to the rapid growth of youth styles and cultures and concomitant tastes in music. Moreover, increasing (ethnic) diversity also has a singular effect on nightlife in Dutch cities, with so-called ethno-parties being an example of the regular events organized in popular clubs these days. These parties are arranged by and for a single ethnic group, and in this study I focus on both how growing ethnic diversity influences the organization and programming thereof and how and why young people choose the Turkish, Moroccan or Asian party scenes.

1 Nightlife research

Nightlife research is closely connected to the scientific interest in youth culture, music and the leisure industry. In the 1970s, researchers from the Centre for Contemporary and Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham linked the proliferation of youth culture to both structural changes to society in industrial Britain and associated class relationships. Sub-cultural practices were analyzed as ‘rituals of resistance’, which were utilized by young, working class youngsters in response to the breakdown of traditions and the increasingly capitalist system.

However, primarily due to its almost sole focus on (white male) working class youngsters, and its strong emphasis on structural factors, the research by the CCCS was criticized for a number of reasons. Critics particularly highlighted the existence of separate youth cultures for young women and ethnic youngsters and the importance of buying power when it came to the emergence of youth lifestyles.

As a consequence, in other youth culture studies this criticism was reflected in a shift from a more structural approach to one which emphasized both the agency and the autonomy of young people. This latter approach, which paid attention to consumption choices, has been characterized as ‘post-subcultural’. Such work centralizes the notion that young people’s consumption choices and attendant participation in youth cultures are influenced by their

personal taste, not their class, gender or education. Young people are thus viewed as free agents who make individual consumption choices. Moreover, post sub-cultural researchers focus on the flexibility of young people by emphasizing their capacity to move in and out of different cultural and musical styles. Indeed, in order to capture the fluidity and individuality of the theoretical approach, researchers have actually abandoned the term sub-culture. Instead, new phrases such as neo-tribe, lifestyle, taste-culture and club culture were introduced. These concepts recognized that cultural features such as music, clothing and dancing were the basis for the proliferation and diversity of separate youth scenes.

Yet the post-sub-cultural approach has also been criticized, with a particular concern being that post-subcultural studies pay little attention to social and economic inequalities between groups of young people. Indeed, much post-subcultural research focuses on the nightlife activities and choices of white, middle-class urban youths, meaning that the cultural activities of other social groups (including ethnic youngsters) continue to be underexposed.

Some authors have attempted to reconcile the two methods in a so-called 'integrative approach', in which it is recognized that some young people are more able than others to participate in nightlife. In this approach, analyses of nightlife choices and cultural expression consider both structural factors, such as economic position and ethnicity, and personal factors, such as taste and preferences.

Ultimately, however, the solution that the integrative approach tries to achieve is not particularly satisfying, since none of these scholars shed any light on how this inter-relationship between structural processes and human agency actually takes place. Indeed, much of this work focuses solely on the nightlife activities and behaviour of young people within a scene or club, and by adopting such an approach these scholars largely ignore matters of accessibility to and the programming of nightlife. While it is very likely that the nightlife activities and choices of young people are influenced by door-policies and musical programming, this programming and these door policies are likewise influenced by the nightlife choices and activities of young people. This means that the dynamic interplay between the strategies of the producers of

nightlife and the choices and activities of the consumers thereof are being ignored. What is more, the ethnic component is also overlooked.

2 Studying nightlife

To analyze and adequately explain the nightlife experiences of and choices made by ethnic young people, an integrative approach which centralizes the interaction between the structural strategies of the producers and the personal preferences and agency of the consumers is required. To achieve this, I have developed an analytical model, which I have labelled as the model of structured choice. This model is sensitive to the flexible use of the processes of agency and structure because of the systematic distinction that is made between societal and personal factors.

Societal factors are the social structures of nightlife and are comprised of the strategies used by producers to attract a specific dance crowd through their programming and the accessibility of their clubs. More general societal factors, such as political climate and the regulating role of local governments, are also taken into account.

The personal factors, meanwhile, have been sub-divided into a cultural and a social dimension and two types of restrictions. The social dimension refers to so-called social mechanisms which involve processes of identification and differentiation. It also covers the specific processes of the composition of groups of friends, the social rules of a scene and the social composition of a dance crowd. The cultural dimension, meanwhile, refers to taste in music, dress codes and styles of dance of a particular crowd. Finally, personal factors also relate to three types of restrictions: the regulating role of parents, experiences of door policies, and economic resources, all of which determine nightlife choices negatively. Since the ethnic background of an individual clubber can play a role in all of the different elements of the personal factors set out above, ethnicity is not listed as a separate category.

Use of this analytical model enables the following research questions to be answered:

- 1 How do ethnic minority young people choose which ethno-party to attend?
 - a. How do the producers of nightlife affect this choice?
 - b. How do the personal preferences of the consumers affect this choice?
- 2 How do the choices of a changing urban population affect the supply side of the nightlife market?

3 The results

Ever since the turn of the century, nightlife in the Netherlands has undergone some interesting, expanding and diversifying changes, and contemporary consumers now have much more choice in terms of which bar, dance-hall, movie theatre or club to attend. This expansion has increased competition both between and within the diverse nightlife sectors.

To remain popular and attract consumers, clubs have had to make changes to their programming and organization. One such change is the introduction of what I have called ‘broad programming’. Clubs no longer focus on one particular style of music, but instead feature different styles on different days of the week, for instance ‘urban’ on Thursdays, ‘soul’ on Fridays and ‘clubhouse’ on Saturdays. Moreover, theme parties are also organized regularly by external party organizations which hire a club for a night for their event. These parties have a trendy and recognizable party concept which is promoted by the use of logos, flyers, party merchandise and specific, popular DJs, all of which is advertised on their own websites.

The broad programming and growing tendency of clubs to hire their venues out to external companies have created new opportunities for ethnic event organizations to arrange their so-called ethno-parties in popular clubs. Essential in this process of incorporation is the fact that party organizations have special party concepts which, due to specific music choices, the DJs hired, and other characteristics, attract a particular group of ethnic consumers. These ethnic-party organizations thus create a separate ethno-party scene.

Since every type of party prescribes its own preferred dance crowd, the door policies of clubs have changed along with the programming. Many venues and party organizations have separate dress codes for each type of event, while differences in the social and cultural rules of the parties can also be prominent. Indeed, the social and cultural rules of the regular dance and the ethno-party scenes differ greatly.

An important consequence of the introduction of broad programming is that the image of clubs as institutions has changed, with their original profile becoming blurred and unclear. Different groups of young people with different musical tastes now visit the same clubs. As a result, youngsters no longer identify with a particular venue, instead aligning themselves to party organizations, a specific style of music or popular DJs. Indeed, they now often visit different clubs in different cities to dance at their favourite events.

The ethno-party scenes

The Asian party scene is the oldest ethno-party circuit in the Netherlands, with its heyday being in the mid 1990s. At that time, Asian parties were organized on a regular and frequent basis, took place all over the country, and were generally attended by Dutch-Chinese youngsters.

In the mid-1990s, however, another sub-scene developed under the umbrella term of Asian parties. This was the ‘Indo party scene’, and predominately attracted second and third generation young Indo-Europeans. At the time of the fieldwork, however, these Indo-parties were no longer taking place, while the other Asian parties were also decreasing in popularity. Indeed, in 2006, there were only three organizations left which were arranging Asian parties on a regular basis in popular clubs, and at all of these events the music was a mix of RnB and clubhouse.

In contrast, the Turkish club scene was growing in popularity at the time of the fieldwork. Of the large number of party companies in existence at that time, the four most popular were Turkish party organizations in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. These groups arranged Turkish parties on a regular basis in popular clubs, with the music being predominantly Türk pop, while the audiences were mainly comprised of those of Turkish descent.

The Moroccan leisure scene is the newest player in the nightlife market. Although Moroccan concerts have been taking place since 1999, parties for young people are a relatively recent addition to the nightlife circuit. Most of these parties begin in the late afternoon or early evening and end before midnight. All of them have a no alcohol policy. The purpose of these rules is to make the parties more accessible to young women of Moroccan ancestry. In addition, special 'women's only' parties are also commonly arranged. The audience at all of these Moroccan events is predominantly comprised of young people of Moroccan descent and the music played is a mix of popular Moroccan and Arabic sounds.

In all three scenes, identification with the audience and the organization is crucial. To a significant extent this is achieved by knowledge and acceptance of the social rules regarding flirting and interaction, which differ from the social rules in the regular clubbing circuit. In the Turkish and Moroccan scenes in particular, talking to unfamiliar people of the opposite sex is inappropriate and even harmful to the good reputation of the female clubbers. Moreover, the respondents from the Asian party scene were also very cautious in their responses to questions about flirting and interaction at Asian parties. However, there was an admission that young people who are interested in someone look an individual up on one of the many Internet community sites after a party.

Identification with the cultural rules regarding musical programming, dress code and dance style also played an important part in the ethno-party scene chosen. Indeed, in the Turkish and Moroccan scenes in particular, many young people gave this as their reason for attending Turkish or Moroccan events. In the Asian party scene, however, the music played and styles of clothing worn are very similar to that of regular club nights, with the result being that cultural elements did not play a role in the choices made between these two scenes.

Identification with an ethnic group and ethno-party scene seemed to be strengthened by the ongoing negative media attention paid to ethnic minority youths. Many young people used the terms 'we' versus 'them' when they compared the crowd in their own ethno-scene with that in the more regular clubs. The young people in the Asian party scene predominantly experienced a sense of being

different, which was reflected in their language and choice of words. Meanwhile, for the young people going to Turkish and Moroccan parties, their lifestyle played an important part in their preference for their own ethno-party scene. An interesting result is that in all three groups the respondents who identified strongly with the crowd and the organization of ethno-parties only participated in their own ethnic party scene. These respondents also claimed that their friends come from within their own ethnic group. Respondents with a more ethnically mixed group of friends, however, said that they also went to regular club parties and resented the 'patronizing' social rules in the ethno-party scenes. These particular respondents were predominantly the men from all three scenes and the more experienced women in the Turkish clubbing circuit.

The final factors which play a role in the choice of a particular ethno-party scene are the restrictions imposed on respondents. In general, the women experienced different restrictions to the men. None of the former said that they had had, or expected to have, problems with the door policies of mainstream clubs. Instead, many of these women were restricted in their nightlife choices by their parents. Almost all of those in the Moroccan and many of those in the Turkish scene were only allowed to attend events in the ethno-party circuit. In contrast, the men in all three groups were not restricted in their choices of nightlife by their parents. Instead, many of them did not feel welcome or accepted in the mainstream clubbing circuit. Some of the men in all three scenes also said that they do not feel safe at regular club events, with the reactions of the crowd to their ethnic background being responsible for these feelings. Difficulties with the door policies in the regular club scene were a particular problem for many of the young Moroccan men and some of the young Turkish males. Many of the former said that they were often refused entry to the regular club scene, while many of their Turkish counterparts also experienced the feeling of not being welcome at regular parties. As a result, some of these Turkish men chose to attend the Turkish party scene exclusively.

The details set out above reveal that age, gender and ethnic background are particular influences on the options and choices made by ethnic young people. Furthermore, the extent of this

influence, and whether it created limitations in the nightlife choices made, was different for the three ethnic groups.

4 Conclusions

One of this study's research questions required an analysis of how the choices made by the changing urban population in the Netherlands affect the supply of nightlife. As a consequence, this research concerns the changes that have taken place in Dutch nightlife and how the producers and, more specifically, ethnic party organizations, have promoted new developments in clubbing. What has become clear is that diversity is structurally anchored in clubbing these days. This is evident in the broad programming put on by clubs and the number of different branded styles of parties that are organized. In order to deal with increased competition, exclusivity and innovation have become key terms in the marketing of individual party concepts. Moreover, the need for differentiation to secure a position in a highly competitive field can also be seen in the ethno-party circuits. An important consequence of the new ways in which clubbing is organized in the Netherlands is that 'clubbing' as a night time activity now takes many different forms. Visitors to different clubbing scenes do not share the same 'clubbing culture'. Indeed, all of these separate scenes have different hierarchies of coolness, different social and cultural rules, different door policies and different musical programming. As a result, clubbing has become fragmented, with a variety of meanings, experiences and habits in all of the varying scenes. Moreover, clubs have become places for all sorts of clubbing events and clubbers, but at different times and on different days of the week.

The second of this study's research questions concerns how young people choose which ethno-party to attend. It has become clear that the choices made by ethnic minority youngsters to participate in the ethno-party scene are based on a complex consideration of the personal factors and preferences of the consumers on the one hand, and the opportunities and constraints created by the producers of nightlife on the other. In general, young Asians faced the fewest restrictions in their choice between the ethno-party and the regular club scenes. Accordingly, social factors,

such as partying with friends and acquaintances, determined the decisions they made about participation in the Asian party scene. The young people who chose the Moroccan leisure scene, however, faced many restrictions in their nightlife choices. Indeed, their cultural preferences in terms of music and dance style limited their choices to this scene. This group's nightlife decisions were, however, even more limited by restrictions: for the women these were imposed by their parents, while the men faced restrictions in the form of the limited access they had to regular parties. Meanwhile, in the Turkish clubbing scene, the restrictions and options which determined the decisions made about whether to choose the mainstream or the ethno-party sectors varied greatly among the respondents. Some of the men and women participated in both scenes. In general, however, they attended parties in the Turkish clubbing circuit when they went out with co-ethnics and wanted to dance to Turkish music, while they went to mainstream parties with an ethnically mixed group of friends. Another group of Turkish respondents only participated in the Turkish clubbing scene. Different factors played a different role for each of the individual respondents, such as musical preferences, dress code, dance style, the regulating role of parents (for the women) and the door policies experienced in regular nightlife (for the men).

An in-depth analysis of the three ethno-party scenes and their consumers has clearly demonstrated the importance of including the motivations and preferences of consumers and the strategies of the producers of nightlife in any examination of the nightlife choices made by ethnic minority young people. My work clearly reveals that the post-subcultural approach, with its emphasis on free consumption practices and choices, and which is currently dominant in studies of youth culture and lifestyles, does not adequately explain the actual practices of choice and participation in nightlife by many ethnic minority youngsters. Factors which restrict participation, as well as structures which shape opportunities to express a cultural identity do, however, certainly influence the choices made and the options available.