

Missing the Masses: responses to the lack of nightlife activities during the pandemic



Cafe Bonaparte, Rotterdam (photo by Vera Bos)

Martijn Mulder February 2021

Due to the Covid-pandemic, all Dutch nightlife activities have been closed since March 2020. The lack of nightclubbing, dancing, drinking and other forms of uninhibited behaviour has had a huge impact on both the social and mental aspects of nightlife visitors. This research on the effects of this lockdown affirms this social and mental relevance of the nightlife economy. 'Going out' is not just fun, it's a basic need in the lives of many.

The city of Rotterdam is a vibrant Dutch city with a characteristic identity. It has for long been Europe's most important port city, resulting in a very international, working class and straightforward atmosphere. After the destruction of the city centre during WWII, the city has been resurrected as a modern, innovative and open-minded city. It's also a city with a remarkable nightlife history: from the vibrant jazz scene in the 1920s and 1930s to the world famous gabber house scene in the 1990s and its current underground scenes in hip-hop, indie and metal music. However, the city's nightlife has been subject to debate in recent years. Nightclubs have had to close their doors and new initiatives have struggled to get

established. This led to a nightlife demonstration in March 2019 and the subsequent foundation of N8W8 Rotterdam (Nightwatch Rotterdam) in January 2020. And then came the pandemic. The Dutch night-time economy was shut down mid-March 2020 and has remained closed to this date. Together with festivals and live-entertainment, the nightlife economy is among the worst affected sectors during the current pandemic. Regular bars, restaurants and cultural venues in The Netherlands were allowed to reopen (under strict regulations and with lower capacity) from June until October 2020, but this didn't include nightclubs. Although this might be justified from a virological perspective, the long-term closure is likely to affect regular nightlife visitors. Both the pre-pandemic discontent about Rotterdam nightlife and the lockdown, support the need for insights into the needs and experiences of nightlife visitors. In 2021 the municipality of Rotterdam will develop a new policy vision for the hospitality and nightlife industry. This research project was initiated, in support of this vision, to better understand the effects of the lack of nightlife activities on its visitors.

In cooperation with several stakeholders (e.g. Municipality of Rotterdam, N8W8) the research team – consisting of Martijn Mulder (senior lecturer in leisure, events and attractive cities) and a group of students from the minor Citybranding, Rotterdam University – designed a survey in order to measure (1) the night visitor's opinion about the nightlife in Rotterdam before the pandemic, (2) the effects of the lockdown of the nightlife during the pandemic and (3) their ideas and dreams about the *night* in the near future. The online survey was published on November 23th and was closed on December 7 after reaching a net number of 524 respondents. The sample was relatively evenly distributed across gender, economic position (employed vs. studying) and residency (inhabitant Rotterdam vs. visitor Rotterdam). The sample shows a slight overrepresentation of younger (18-24) and higher educated (university) respondents. During the term of this survey, there was a partial lockdown in The Netherlands: bars and restaurants were closed and selling alcohol after 8pm was prohibited. During this term, shops were open and there was no curfew. This contribution will focus on the results in relation to the second part of the survey: the effects of the lockdown.

Fig. 1 - To what extent do you miss different elements of the nightlife in Rotterdam during the lockdown?

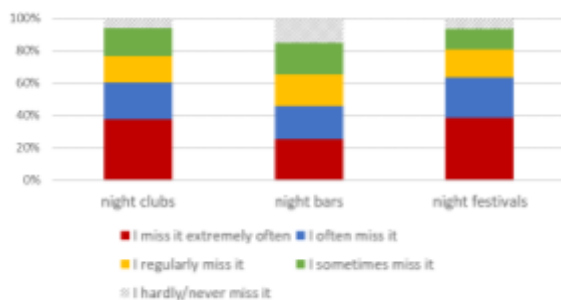
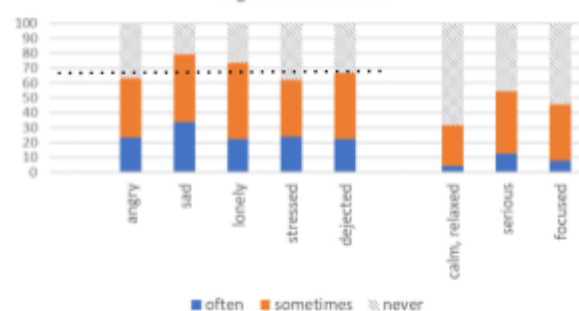


Fig. 2 - To what extent do you experience these emotions or moods as a direct result of the lack of nightlife activities?



The vast majority of the participants were regular nightlife visitors. Therefore, it's not a surprise that visiting nightclubs and events has been missed to a large extent (see fig. 1). Over 90% miss going out to a greater or smaller extent. 60% of all respondents state that they miss going to a club or night event often or even extremely often. We also asked respondents to formulate what they miss most about the lack of nightlife. The input has been coded and divided in themes. The themes could be categorised to three main groups,

corresponding to existing literature on cultural behaviour: personal factors, social factors and factors related to the cultural supply itself. It's the social element that people miss most rather than the supply of night culture itself or the individual sensation of escapism. This is not so much about missing one's own friends ("I still see my friends, even during lockdown", as stated by several respondents) but missing the chance of meeting other people, meeting new people and/or people from other backgrounds. This is also about missing the immersive element of being part of a crowd; blending in with the crowd. These aspects related to social bonding and serendipity were mentioned the most by far, followed by elements such as dancing; having a good time with friends; personal aspects such as relaxation and escapism and the cultural aspect of enjoying the (loud) music ("feel the bass").

We also asked the participants about their mental responses to the closure of nightlife activities, based on eight different feelings, five with negative and three with positive connotations. Figure 2 shows that sadness and loneliness have been experienced in relation to the lack of nightlife by about three out of four participants. Two out of three have feelings of dejection or even depression. We argue that it is likely that this share has increased as a result of stricter regulations (full lockdown, curfew) that were implemented after the survey was conducted. To find out if these feelings of missing-out and these negative mental effects have led to more subversive behaviour, we asked participants whether they have visited illegal parties / raves during the nightlife lockdown. Almost 30% of all participants have visited illegal gatherings, but more than half of these had already attended them before the pandemic. Another 20% of participants, who haven't been to any illegal party, state that they are considering doing so if the lockdown continues.

We argue that the current pandemic and the resulting lockdown has proved the importance of nightlife activities for a city that wants to be mentally and socially healthy. Nightclubs, late-night bars and dance events should not just be regarded as sources of nuisance and subversive behaviour but as an essential sanctuary in (young) people's lives. Nightlife is for many, especially young people, the place where social interaction, discovery and interaction takes place. It is the place where individuals can be themselves, where they can experiment and escape the pressures of everyday life. Any city should cherish that.

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In cooperation with students from the course Citybranding in this university.