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Mandatory Identification Bar Checks: How Bouncers Are Doing Their Job

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Abstract

The behavior of bouncers at on site establishments that served alcohol was observed. Our aim was to better understand how bouncers went about their job when the bar had a mandatory policy to check identification of all customers. Utilizing an ethnographic decision model, we found that bouncers were significantly more likely to card customers that were more casually dressed than others, those who were in their 30s, and those in mixed racial groups. We posit that bouncers who failed to ask for identification did so because they appeared to know customers, they appeared to be of age, or they took a break and no one was checking for identification at the door. We found that bouncers presented a commanding presence by their dress and demeanor. Bouncers, we posit, function in three primary roles: customer relations, state law management, and establishment rule enforcer.

Keywords

Bouncers, Bars, and Identification Checks

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The behavior of bouncers at on site establishments that served alcohol was observed. Our aim was to better understand how bouncers went about their job when the bar had a mandatory policy to check identification of all customers. Utilizing an ethnographic decision model, we found that bouncers were significantly more likely to card customers that were more casually dressed than others, those who were in their 30s, and those in mixed racial groups. We posit that bouncers who failed to ask for identification did so because they appeared to know customers, they appeared to be of age, or they took a break and no one was checking for identification at the door. We found that bouncers presented a commanding presence by their dress and demeanor. Bouncers, we posit, function in three primary roles: customer relations, state law management, and establishment rule enforcer. Key Words: Bouncers, Bars, and Identification Checks

In the United States, it is illegal to purchase alcohol if one is under the age 21. Still, issues related to the consumption of alcohol are considered by many as the most pressing problem among youth—especially on college campuses (Wechsler, Davenport, Dowdall, Moeykens, & Castillo, 1994). There are two primary outlets for alcohol sales. On site outlets, such as bars and restaurants, have alcohol for sale in the establishment while off site outlets market alcohol. Off site venues include liquor stores and other establishments that sell alcohol to the general public. Much past field research employs pseudo-patrons, "customers" sent into establishments by researchers or law enforcement officials to check compliance with the law; however, less field work aims to better understand how well bars comply with alcohol laws (Forster, McGovern, Wagenaar, Wolfson, Perry, & Anstine, 1994; Grube, 1997; Lewis, Paine-Andrews, Fawcett, Francisco, Richter, Coople, et al., 1996; Montgomery, Foley, & Wolfson, 2006; Preusser, Williams, & Weinstein, 1994; Wolfson, Toomey, Forster, Wagenaar, McGovern, & Perry, 1996). Our work, utilizing observational methods, explores how well bouncers enforce mandatory identification checks in bars.

Factors That Shape the Likelihood of Being Carded

Being "carded" is oftentimes used as a slang term for requesting identification from patrons ordering alcohol. McCall, Trombetta, and Natrass (2002) emphasized the importance of the decision to request identification because of the consequences associated with making an error and allowing the purchase of alcohol by a minor.

Besides personal, financial, and social consequences tied to the sale of alcohol to minors, establishments may lose their liquor license. Researchers have examined how the type of establishment, physical attractiveness of the customer, kind of items purchased and training programs shaped the likelihood of being asked for identification when buying alcohol. Lang, Lauer, and Voas (1996) found that the *venue type* shaped the likelihood of being carded. Women were more likely to be carded in nightclubs; however, male customers were more likely to be carded in hotel bars. Wolfson et al. (1996) argued that bars in general were less likely to require customers to produce any type of identification compared to off site establishments like liquor stores. Preusser and Williams (1992) found that chain stores were more likely to ask customers for identification when purchasing alcohol compared to other retail establishments. Exploring how the physical *attractiveness* of a customer shaped the likelihood of being carded, McCall (1999) found that bartenders were less likely to ask for identification if the customer was physically attractive. Grube and Stewart (1999) found that *purchasing behavior*, specifically what one purchased along with alcohol, shaped the likelihood of being carded. When minors purchased alcohol, diapers, and bran cereal, they were less likely to be asked for identification than those who aimed to purchase alcohol with chips or candy. Notably, Howard-Pitney, Johnson, Altman, Hopkins, and Hammond (1991) found that employees who were trained by a responsible alcohol-service *training program* were no more likely to ask for identification from customers under the age of 30 than those establishments that had no training policy in effect.

Thombs, Olds, and Snyder (2003) argued that survey data, which often relies on self-reported information about drinking behavior, limits our understanding of this problem. Nevertheless, self-reported drinking behavior among minors remains high and contributes to health problems including alcohol-related accidents (NIAAA, 2002). Boyd and Faden (2002), Cooper (2002), and Dowdall and Wechsler (2002) maintain that it is important to develop field research designs that allow a different insight into actual behavior. Few studies have examined the prevalence of identification checks at bars—one option for the on site sale of alcohol. In this work, we utilize field research methods to observe how bouncers examine identification at bars that have a mandatory identification policy check of all customers. As Lister, Hadfield, Hobbs, and Winlow (2001) wrote, it is the bouncer that bar customers “experience as the primary agent of social control” (Hobbs, Lister, Hadfield, Winslow, & Hall, 2000). DeMichele and Tewksburg (2004) argued that bouncers are responsible for maintaining social control, and rule enforcement, at establishments like strip clubs and bars. Still, bouncers are afforded enormous discretion with regard to identification checks in bars. Few informal or formal guidelines exist that relate how such individuals behave (Lister et al.). Hobbs, O’Brien, and Westmarland (2007) explored the entrance of women bouncers into bars in the United Kingdom; however, the stereotypical imagine of bouncers is that of a male with an imposing presence (DeMichele & Tewksburg; Lister et al.). Homel and Tomsen (1993) and Walker (1999) argued that door security is most in need of regulation. From the perspective of the establishment, Lister et al. note that there is an economic incentive not to be too aggressive in regards to security because such behavior is bad for business. Our work aims to better understand the behavior of the bouncer in a bar setting. We utilize the field method in the role of participant observers.

Methodology

The sample was selected purposefully. Initially, we discussed different types of bars that served alcohol in the larger Hampton Roads region in Virginia. The decision was made to focus on bars that were housed on a street in a region that aimed to revitalize the urban area. Next, all bars, on one main street, were identified. Calls were made to the manager, typically the ABC manager, to see what types of identification policies were in place. The goal of these conversations was to obtain information about policies regarding the serving of alcohol in these establishments. We did not alert the establishment that they might be included in an observational study. As a group, we discussed ethical and privacy issues tied to doing observational research in a public place. We agreed to leave an establishment and return on a different night if others known to the researchers were present; however, this did not happen during the course of our work. We were careful not to identify establishments or patrons in this work and aimed to be cognizant of broader ethical issues surrounding the consumption of alcohol, especially since most patrons were driving.

Guidelines for identification checks varied between these establishments from identifying all customers, to triple tiered systems of enforcement (bouncers, bartenders, servers), to time specific policies and finally a few that had no specific guidelines on identification checks. The decision was made to observe identification behavior at four bars that utilized bouncers at the door and *required a check of all customers regardless of age*. By focusing on the behavior of the bouncer, we have a clear understanding of whether or not this individual actually asks for identification from all customers. Because bouncers were typically used at these bars only on busy nights, we decided to observe such behavior on a Thursday, Friday, or Saturday evening in March. During this time, only individuals who are of age should be allowed entrance into these establishments.

After obtaining human subject approval from the College of Arts and Letters, teams of paired observers were formed, in order to ensure better reliability, and these teams went into two of the four selected bars. Four sets of pairs observed bouncer behavior for 30 minutes per establishment on two separate occasions. Therefore, we collected a total of four hours of bouncer behavior. Initially, the bars were monitored to see how it was best to observe the behavior of the bouncer. After this investigation, it was decided that researchers would either sit at the bar with a direct view of the door or observe the bouncer's behavior from outside the establishment depending on where they felt they had the best vantage point of the bouncer. Each field research team made the judgment call on where it was best to observe bouncer behavior on the night of data collection. Again, observers did not identify their purpose while in the public setting nor was any observer, in this study, "discovered" by bar employees during the period of observation.

We adapted insights from Geertz (1973) and aimed for a thick description of the bouncer's behavior. In other words, observers wrote detailed field notes about the bar, the behavior of the bouncer(s), and the bouncer's interaction with customers entering the establishment. Going into the field, we aimed to observe this behavior as if for the first time. Some field notes were jotted down and then, once researchers left the field, a complete set of notes was recorded. Researchers noted the physical layout of the bar,

where the bouncer was located, and ascriptive (demographic) characteristics of the bouncer and customers. Field researchers then aimed to understand the minutia of detail in how bouncers proceeded to do their job—namely asking for identification from all customers entering the bar. In addition, one observer from each team utilized an ethnographic decision model (EDM) and noted the bouncer's initial decision point, on whether to card or not, and how this varied by different ascriptive characteristics of the customer as well as other conditions. As Ryan and Bernard (2000) write, EDM's are qualitative, causal analyses that “predict behavioral choices under specific circumstances” (p. 787; see also Mathews & Hill, 1990; Ryan & Martinez, 1996; Young, 1980). These decision tree models are typically utilized on simple yes/no types of behavior with interview data (see Ryan & Martinez); however, we argue that EDMs were appropriate in this type of field work as well. Our goal was to build some grounded theoretical understandings from initial EDM information in order to test its “postdictive accuracy” (Ryan & Bernard, p. 789). Typically, as Ryan and Bernard note, EDMs predict more than 80% of the behavior being modeled. Half way through the project it appeared that there was little variation in whether or not bouncers asked for identification on entering the bar. Therefore, we did not test grounded theory in this way.

In our ethnographic decision model, we observed the following behavior. First, we wanted to know if the bouncer checked, or failed to check, the customer's identification. In addition, we coded for the customer's observed gender (male/female), observed race (white, black, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, other), whether or not the identification was in hand, whether or not the bouncer examined the identification carefully or casually, if the customer was dressed casually rather than in a dressy manner, their age (under 20, 20s, 30s, 40s), whether they came into the bar alone or in a group, the size of the group, the gender composition of the group (all male, all female, of mixed), the racial composition of the group and the bar. Again, observers worked in pairs. There was little disagreement regarding how to code data for the EDM. Whenever observers had questions about the appropriate coding of one of these variables, they came to an agreement through discussion. The vast majority of the time, coders agreed on how to code the variables outlined above; however, some differences emerged around dress. During the period of observations, we further discussed, as a group, what it meant to be dressed casually or dressed up. After these discussions, coding progressed more smoothly.

Virginia law states that there is no legal requirement for customers to show identification; however, establishments may verify the customer's age by asking to see official picture identification (Virginia.gov, 2008). In order to properly check an identification, one is advised to have the customer remove the identification from their wallet and then have the responsible party *feel* the identification (in order to sense whether or not it has been altered) and *look* at the identification (to see if the photo matches the customers with regard to height and weight, verify that the seal is in place, ensure that the date of birth is in line with the person in front of them and that the expiration date is valid; Virginia.gov). Legally, it is important to check identification *and* to carefully evaluate the quality of this identification. Penalties for not complying may be severe. For example, if an establishment with an ABC license sells alcohol to a minor, they may be fined up to \$2,000 and/or their license may be suspended for up to 25 days, assuming this was a first offense (Virginia.gov).

Analysis

First, we explore an ethnographic decision model in regard to how ascriptive characteristics of clients shape the likelihood of being carded. Then, we explore emergent themes from our heavy description of observed bouncer behavior. In total, there were 4 hours and 317 observations of specific bouncer behavior. In most (77%) cases, bouncers asked clients for identification to enter these bars. While this may appear to be a high compliance, we *only* observed bars where there was an official policy of asking for identification from all clients. The majority (59%) of those who entered these bars were men and most (64%) were white. Approximately a third (32%) of clients were black, less than 1% were Asian, and 4% were persons of a multiple racial category. No Hispanic or Latino individuals were observed. Approximately a third (33%) of clients had their identification in hand as they approached the bouncer. Notably, when bouncers looked at the identification of the customer, the majority (70%) of bouncers looked carefully and thoroughly at the identification produced. These bouncers either took the identification in hand and examined it or looked at the patron and the identification in order to determine its validity. The others looked at the identification more perfunctorily—a quick glance. The vast majority (81%) of customers were dressed casually. The vast majority (79%) of clients appeared to be in their 20s, fewer (17%) were in their 30s, and the rest (5%) were in their 40s. The vast majority (81%) came into the bar in a group. Half (51%) of all groups included both women and men. We observed more all male groups (32%) than all female groups (18%). Approximately half (55%) of groups were all white; however, 22% of groups were comprised of all black and the other 22% of groups consisted of mixed race individuals.

We wanted to see if the bouncer checked identification or not. We explored to see if this behavior varied by background variables. We found that gender, race, whether or not one was part of a group, or what the size of that group was, did not significantly shape the likelihood of the bouncer checking identification. Not surprisingly, those individuals who had their identification in hand were almost always (99% of the time) checked. We did some simple chi square tests to see if identification checked varied by whether or not the patron had the identification in hand, dress, age, gender, and race. For those who did not have identification in hand, 70% were asked for identification ($X^2 = 29.98$; $p = <.0001$). Of those who were casually dressed, the vast majority (83%) were asked for identification; however, only 65% of those who were dressed well were asked to produce identification ($X^2 = 8.15$; $p = .004$). Those who appeared to be in their 30s were most likely (89%) to be asked for identification. Only half of those who appeared to be older, in their 40s, were asked to produce identification while 76% of those who appeared in their 20s were asked for identification ($X^2 = 10.00$; $p = .007$). Gender and race did not significantly shape the likelihood of being carded if customers were looked at individually; however, differences in the racial composition of a group significantly shaped the likelihood of being carded. Virtually all (95%) of those in mixed race groups were carded as well as the vast majority (80%) of those in groups composed of all whites; however, only 45% of those in groups composed of all African American customers were asked for identification ($X^2 = 15.06$; $p = .001$). Finally, we found that there was a differences in the likelihood of being carded by the bar itself. Bouncers at two bars asked the vast majority of customers for identification (87% and 76% respectively); however,

bouncers at the other two bars only asked 69% of customers for identification ($X^2 = 11.16$; $p = .01$). Because we observed differences in the likelihood of being carded by the racial composition of the group, we decided to explore if the race of the bouncer shaped carding behavior. We found that more (87%) black bouncers checked for identification compared to white bouncers (only 72% checked identification) ($X^2 = 9.01$; $p = .003$). Unfortunately, our sample size does not allow us to see if significant differences exist in the likelihood of customers being asked for identification by both the race of the bouncer and the race of the customer. Future work might address this relationship. Next, we aim to identify emergent themes from our observation of bouncers in order to better understand carding behavior.

The Street and Bars

On the street, the “scene” was very busy. Night life was thriving—there was a theme party at a nearby establishment. On one occasion, there was a local film crew on the street. Though there was significant car as well as pedestrian traffic, many individuals, of varying degrees of inebriation, were crossing in the middle of the street in front of oncoming traffic. Many of the cars on the street were newer models, often playing loud music. Most of those on the street appeared to be a young college crowd. During several observations, police cars would pass slowly and inspect the area.

Typically, the bars were crowded. The bar “was crowded and noisy, when the doors to the bar opened voices from inside the bar could be distinctly heard.The music in the bar was loud/popular dance/rap music.” One bar was a sports bar with numerous televisions of all sizes displayed throughout the establishment. Other observers described the bar they entered as “trendy” with modern lighting and a huge fish tank along the wall by the entry door. Another bar, observers noted was “sophisticated” and to some extent romantic. Along the ceiling an exposed large pipe ran “horizontally across the medium sized room—the grey and black granite looking counters at the bar were illuminated by candles contained within frosted glass candle holders.” Only one bar in our sample appeared to be extremely casual both in terms of the dress of customers as well as the dress and presentation of the bouncer. Typically, the bars designated how customers were to line up to enter the establishment. For example, “the line to get to the bar consisted of a velvet rope about four feet from the wall and about seven feet long; this lead to the bouncer who checked ID and often opened the door for patrons.” When there was not a line to get into the bar, the bouncer was typically positioned by the front door functioning as the initial gatekeeper for the establishment.

The Bouncer

All of the bouncers observed were male. At five of the eight bars observed, bouncers worked alone; however, in the other three establishments they worked in teams of two. One of these teams was composed of black men, another of two white men, and the third of a white man (who appeared to be the lead bouncer and the only one checking identification) paired with a black man. Among the lone bouncers, three were white men and the other two were black men. All bouncers, save one, presented themselves in a position of authority by dressing in all black. At the one bar observers deemed most

casual, the bouncer, a white man, appeared to be much more lax in checking identification compared to the other bouncers. The outfit worn by most bouncers was not a uniform; however, the color was black. How bouncers dressed, their position at the door and their demeanor allowed others to easily identify their role at the bar. We labeled this “projecting authority” or a spirit of “commanding presence.”

Observers described one bouncer as “dressed in black attire who had below shoulder length hair that was tied back neatly in a pony tail. He was a heavy set white male who looked to be around 25 years of age. He stood in front of the left door.” At one bar three individuals stood outside the front doors yet within moments “it was clear that two of the black gentlemen were bouncers and a third gentleman was a valet.” Yet another bouncer was described as “a tall black male about 30 years old wearing dark clothes and a heavy jacket.” The commanding presence was noted at another bar where the two bouncers on duty outside, at the door, “were white males, mid-20s, wearing dark clothing and black leather jackets.”

Field observers noted differences between bouncers who appeared to take the task of looking at identification seriously and those who did not. For example, one “bouncer was frequently using his cell phone, smoked at least one cigarette during the observation period and flicked the cigarette butt on the street.” This bouncer also had frequent conversations with a “couple of the members of what looked to be the club’s wait or kitchen staff.” Another bouncer appeared to be distracted “at one point the bouncers were talking with male patrons and letting females go in with being Id’d.” Some bouncers appeared to know some customers and did not request identification. Bouncers conveyed this by hugging and/or kissing customers as well as eye and hand contact. On other occasions; however, bouncers would simply allow individuals to simply walk in and there was no presumption that a relationship existed between the two. Sometimes individuals were not carded because “both bouncers seemed to go inside, probably to get warm.” Thus, when bouncers failed to ask customers for identification it was because they appeared to not be taking their job seriously, or they were distracted, they appeared to know the customer, or because they left their position at the door and a back-up bouncer was not available to take charge. Still, we were surprised and impressed that bouncers asked most customers for identification and that the bouncer would look at such identification carefully. In other words, the bouncer did not just glance at the identification and return it to the customer. For example, “every time someone produced identification the bouncer would take it in hand and inspect it--look at the individual, back at the ID, and give it back.”

Three Emergent Roles: Customer Relations, State Law Management, and Establishment Rule Enforcer

Bouncers, we argue, assumed three basic roles: customer relations, state law management, and establishment rule enforcer. In their role as a customer relations person, they presented as a formidable presence yet they appeared to engage patrons in a friendly manner. We never observed a bouncer being rude to a customer even when some customers were denied entrance into the establishment. In their role as state law management, we observed that most bouncers seemed to be properly identifying customers attempting to enter the bar. Most looked at the identification and took a good

hard look at both the identification and the individual. Data from the EDM showed that most (77% of all cases) identification was checked and the vast majority (70%) of bouncers, when they looked at identification, gave the identification a careful and hard look. This behavior, we argue, would satisfy legal requirements for properly checking identification before entering a bar.

Bouncers played the role of establishment rule enforcer in that they ensured that patrons met the dress code standards of the establishment. Most of those turned away from the bars appeared to be denied entrance because of dress than because of lack of proper identification. Only one bar displayed a dress code; however, bouncers appeared to turn away some customers they deemed to be inappropriately dressed. Some patrons were asked to remove “beanie” or ski-type hats and patrons were required to wear baseball hats with the visors facing the front of the face. Being with earshot, researchers heard this, “an African American male paid the cover to get into the bar and was asked, by the bouncer, to remove a knit winter cap he was wearing. The man removed his hat without hesitation and entered the bar.” Some customers who wore jersey type shirts were turned away from the bars—some of whom appeared later in a different, more acceptable, dress. Again, bouncers performed this role in a way that was not antagonistic to the customer. It did appear that on several occasions bouncers would discourage those deemed not to be dressed appropriately by requesting that they pay a fee to enter the bar—a fee that was not asked of other patrons. This technique may dissuade those the bouncer deems not suitably dressed from entering the bar without confronting them directly about a dress code.

Most of the individuals who entered the bars were in their early to mid twenties. Since our observation was focused on the behavior of bouncers, we cannot speak to behaviors these young customers may engage in on leaving the bar. We do know that most customers entered the area by car. How many of these individuals will leave by car, and how many will benefit from having a designated sober driver, is beyond the scope of the present work. At the level better understanding whether or not alcohol is being served to minors, we argue that most bouncers are performing a valuable role in ensuring that underage individuals do not enter on site establishments where alcohol is being served.

Discussion

We must note several limitations of our work. By focusing on the behavior of the bouncer, we did not observe whether or not bars actually served alcohol to minors. Especially for those individuals that were not carded, we do not know whether or not the bartender or server asked for identification. Again, our focus was solely on the behavior of the bouncer. We also do not know if the bouncer knows certain “regular customers” and does not ask for identification from these individuals each time they come into the bar. These individuals may well have been carded at some point; however, during our period of observation we did not observe the bouncer asking for identification. Further, we only observed on weekend nights. Clearly, our work must be viewed with these limitations in mind.

Notably, significant differences emerged in our EDM with regard to the customer’s age, dress and the racial composition of the group with whom they entered the

bar. We found that bouncers were most likely to ask for identification from those in their 30s, and 20s; however, only half of those who appeared in their 40s were asked for identification. Since age is a difficult variable to determine, our results here must be viewed with caution. Still, we found it curious that more of those who appeared to be in their 30s were asked for identification than those in their 20s. It is less surprising that fewer of those in their 40s were asked for identification. We must imagine that the bouncer believed these individuals were clearly over the age of 21 and for this reason, at least in part, failed to ask to see their identification even though the bar had a 100% identification policy in effect. We also found that customers who were dressed casually were significantly more likely to be carded compared to those who were well dressed. Perhaps bouncers respond to visual cues which signal that the potential customer was of age including observed age and dress.

Most (81%) of those in our sample entered the bar as part of a group. Among these individuals, we noted significant differences in the likelihood of being asked for identification and the racial composition of the group. If one was in a mixed racial group, they were most likely (95% were asked for identification) to be carded. However, less than half (45%) of those in groups composed of all African Americans were asked to produce identification compared to 80% of those in all white groups. We also know that black bouncers were more likely to ask to see a customer's identification compared to white bouncers. Again, we encourage further research to better understand how carding behavior is shaped by the ascriptive characteristics of both the bouncer and the customer. We also posit that black bouncers may be more likely to check identification than white bouncers because they may feel more responsibility to demonstrate that they are performing the job well—a feeling more white bouncers may take for granted. Further work may also want to address race, gender and age stratification apparent in these bars. We observed that most bouncers and bartenders were male yet most of the wait staff was composed of young females. In their work Hobbs, O'Brien, and Westmarland (2007) found that women were entering the role of bouncer in bars. Clearly, gender differences among bouncers is an area in need of further investigation.

Finally, in terms of policy recommendations to ensure that all customers are carded when entering an on site establishment that sells alcohol, we suggest that establishments have more than one bouncer on staff and that these individuals be trained in the proper procedures regarding carding behavior. Bouncers, like any other employee, need breaks. If an establishment does not have a person who can take over when the bouncer takes a break then customer's have the opportunity to freely enter bars. When an establishment has a 100% identification policy in effect, bouncers must be trained to ask for identification regardless of whether or not they know the customer, how they are dressed or if they appear to be of age. Given that bouncers are less likely to ask for identification from customer's who are dressed well compared to others, these individuals may elude identification—just like the customer's in Grube and Stewart's (1999) study who bought alcohol with diapers and bran cereal. Training bouncers to card all customers regardless of how they appear, especially with regard to dress or age, would address the gaps we observed in failing to ask for identification when entering an on site establishment that sells alcohol.

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