TO DRINK OR NOT TO DRINK.

A Reflection of how Alcohol affects Networking.

KXB201
Tobias Weston
n8324352
The Issue.
Creative work almost always involves the cooperation of many skilled people. As creators ourselves, we know that producing a consumable piece of entertainment also involves people from across various industries. Maintaining an efficient workflow requires individuals to have a constant network of professionals for which they can use to complete and further their projects. For myself my network has mostly been constructed from peers at university however I have also spent years working in creative hubs such as QPAC and the Powerhouse, providing events for producers and creative workers to build their networks. I have seen how some individuals find it overly easy to build connections whilst others struggle. I’ve also noticed the overly powerful effect alcohol can have on these events. I believe networking events sometimes struggle to equalize the pressure of work responsibilities and social life balance. Most event providers consider alcohol a requirement, and at the creative network events I’ve attended I have always consumed some alcohol. As the ultimate goal of a networking event is to assist individuals to build their network it seems strange that alcohol would be so ingrained in the process. As we know alcohol doesn’t assist in brain function, it is more than likely that the culture of drinking at network events has simply developed over time. Studying a duel a degree I have also seen many events in the business school which are very similar in nature. It is also for this reason I believe developing my understanding and own stance on the relationship between alcohol and networking activities is important.

My Awareness.
Prior to studying in KXB201 I completed most of the other core subjects in the entertainment major for the creative industries. I also completed all the business degree core subjects and subjects in the finance and marketing majors. Throughout these studies the importance of team work, collaboration and networking has always been emphasized. When I attended business networking events that were linked to the university I never felt the need to consume alcohol, I felt that the students and key speakers attending these events were more professional. At the creative industry faculty events I felt there was less professionalism among students however I didn’t account this to alcohol consumption but
more so to different social culture. Based on my studies I had always considered networking opportunities to be more work and career focused rather than chances to socialize with peers. As a hospitality worker I saw people using celebration as a networking opportunity and it was in these instances where alcohol was more heavily consumed. I always assumed that alcohol was a tool used to relax people and make the sometimes uncomfortable process of networking easier, it was clear to me that there was always a sweet spot in terms of consumption. The point where people found it very easy and relaxing to collaborate could easily be surpassed to a point where consumption wasn't in control and the event turns into a social gathering. In most cases, events were intentionally setup so that this would happen.

**My Encounters.**

It was only once I attended the Big Sound conference where I first personally experienced the susceptible effect alcohol had on the event. I had attended the event with another musician with the aim of meeting musicians and professionals only to enter an event of intoxicated people with whom we were immediately dissociated. I enjoy drinking socially but I know that after 2 or 3 drinks I won’t have the focus to remember names, businesses or new ideas for that matter. This however I felt was the expectation at this event, at the time I remember using the idea of “show business” to justify the behavior but since then I feel the culture ruined an excellent opportunity for many.

Other times I have observed events where instantly after key speaker finishes the men charge for the bar. To me this seems to suggest that the alcohol is more of a motivator for attendance to relax and socialize. I don’t think anything the speaker said would have been effectively retained by these men, and again to me suggests further issues with the place of alcohol in networking and our culture. When observing these events it was clear to me that the alcohol culture differed greatly between industries, usually the men I observed “charging” were coming from business backgrounds whereas people from the creative industries generally all consumed at the same level. This also suggests to me that job stress may play a role at networking events as well.
The Effect in the Real World.
The idea of networking is challenging for people as it is essentially based around cultivating relationships for intrinsic incentive. Basically the more connections an individual has the more they will be able to accomplish. I think because in the western world alcohol is ingrained in social culture it is provided to make participants at networking events feel less self-motivated in a social environment. The problem is counterproductive however as many employers require individuals to participate at these events. If I didn’t drink or participate in the social norms I would find it difficult to connect with others and build the required relationships. The pressure to be the “company man” is where I think the separation between work and life becomes unclear. If your employer requires you to socialize then consuming alcohol is almost just as required as well.

I also think that creativity is being developed in these relationships based on an alcohol powered engine, and entertainment is sometimes mirroring this. The think the circle of college party movies such as “Project X / American Pie” has started attracting younger and younger audiences, this is an issue I assumed creators would have considered prior to production. Furthermore movies such as “Wolf of Wall Street”, which years ago would have been considered too debaucherous for screen, are not only doing exceptionally well but also receiving awards form the industry. I think attitudes within the creative industry for what is considered socially acceptable have shifted.

What about the Industry.
I have always thought that entertainment has benefited from diversity, however I now think that networking events where drinking is prominent would struggle to form a balanced network group of truly diversified individuals. Based on studies conducted in Europe social drinking within work groups caused cultures of inclusion towards alcohol consumers and social marginalization against those who did not (Nesvag & Duckert, 2015). Assuming network events are of similar nature, this would suggest that attendees who don’t consume alcohol suffer some social separation from those who do drink. For many people not consuming alcohol isn’t just a personal choice, religion, background, health or any number of reasons which have no relation to their creative professionalism place them
on the outside of social expectation. A whole range of people may not have the chance to network simply because alcohol separates them socially. Furthermore it’s been shown that especially within drinking cultures people lose their individuality and resist differing from group norms (Livingstone. et al, 2011).

Other alcohol related issues such as gender bias, alcohol fueled masculinity boost and personal status also cause separation within the alcohol consuming cohort additionally damaging the ability to build diverse networks (Lyons & Willott, 2008). Many attendees feel pressured to participate in the social norm of consuming alcohol with others because they believe prospective employers see value in this (Kyzer, 2012).

On a different note I also think that networking events that that are more social then work based are actually damaging as the line between relaxing and enjoying yourself is constantly crossed when opportunities arise to gain connections. Jowett (2016) talks about the “grazing” instinct, and how it is important that work and life are separated for strong mental health. Drinking whilst networking is basically the same as drinking while trying to work, it makes for a more stressful career.

My Future.
My concerns for my future are mostly focused on the issue of narrowing attitudes within the various industries rather than the challenge of navigating network events sober. My understanding of social inclusion and exclusion has been developed and I believe I would simply be able to attend events and consume nonalcoholic beverages and still be included in social proceedings. I also would attend events with more professional preparation, I would research backgrounds of possible attendees and current topic information, and I would also make sure I carried business cards and a notebook. I believe the social side of these events is ultimately unlikely to change and therefore it is something I should still be aware of and consider prior to attending every time.

I still place and see huge value in building networks for business and creativity however I see that the current method is floored in that cuts out various participants for different reasons. As networking is important in both my study areas I think I will maintain the same professional practice when I attend all networking events regardless of focus. I will
be more aware that because of the presence of alcohol within the industry social culture will be affected.

On a personal level I feel I will be able to overcome social exclusion if I chose to not to drink at networking events. I feel however that I should contribute to a change in culture so that the industry can mature and gain the benefits of being fully diversified.

The solution to me seems easy, simply not serving alcohol at events would stop the social exclusion occurring however this is unrealistic as alcohol is ingrained into our culture especially when celebrating. I would prefer to attend networking events in the morning or around lunch, I would also suggest that events be included as work place activity so that professionalism stays as high as possible. This would also create an underlying sense that I'm still working rather than socializing or relaxing.

I also think that it would be beneficial to run networking events that are presented as alcohol free so as to highlight the culture within the industry. I personally would prefer to attend these kinds of events as I think the relationships I develop with others would be more stable and the people attending would be again be very different.
Reference List


doi:10.1177/1368430210392399

doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11199-008-9475-6

doi:10.1080/14759551.2015.1021800