

Bartenders as street-level bureaucrats: theorizing server practices in the nighttime economy

Author(s)

Kristin Buvik & Sébastien Tutenges

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Abstract

Most Western countries have laws that prohibit the serving of alcohol to intoxicated and underage patrons in nightlife venues such as pubs and nightclubs. Despite laws and the implementation of server training programs, several studies have shown that intoxicated patrons are still likely to be served. This think-piece article attempts to shed new light on the tendency among bartenders to overserve patrons. Based on a selective review of the literature, we argue that future research on bartenders is in need of theoretical development and guidance as well as more rigorous cross-national comparisons. We propose that Michael Lipsky's theory of street-level bureaucrats can deepen our understanding of bartenders and their serving practices. Bartenders may be conceptualized as street-level bureaucrats whose jobs are characterized by continuous interactions with different citizens asking for their attention and services. We argue that, just like street-level bureaucrats, bartenders have to deal with numerous people and their demands, and must make swift decisions based on their own discretion. Bartenders are encouraged by their

managers to sell as much as possible, but at the same time they are supposed to obey the law against overserving alcohol to intoxicated and underage patrons. Previous research provides many examples of how bartenders develop shortcuts and bend rules in order to make their jobs more manageable and deal with the contradictory pressures they experience. The paper provides theoretical tools to understand how and why bartenders develop routines that are different from those intended by policy makers.

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