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GOING ALONE: THE EXPERIENCE OF SOLO EVENTGOERS AT MUSIC EVENTS IN THE UK

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This article seeks to better understand the solo eventgoer experience at UK music events. There is an established market of solo consumption in general and a growing trend of eventgoer's choosing to attend music events alone. Fifteen in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with solo eventgoers. Data analysis has identified that while solo eventgoers attend alone, socializing remains important. Eventgoers escape from existing social ties, which enables a deeper immersive experience. Overcoming the barrier of attending alone provides opportunities for freedom and flexibility in the experience. Overall, the study provides insights for event managers in the design and management of music event experiences for their solo attendees. Moreover, this article has theoretical implications in that the case of the solo eventgoer has not been critically explored in the events management literature.

Key words: Alone; Barriers; Escape; Freedom; Immerse; Music events; Social; Solo consumer

Introduction

This study focuses on music events and the phenomenon of solo eventgoers. Research shows that 54.4% of festivalgoers attend festivals alone or with one other person (Perron-Brault et al., 2020, p. 6). The New Musical Express (NME) has reported that a study by DICE found 65% of young people aged 18–24 have attended a music event on their own (Trendell, 2017). An exploration of online social media platforms demonstrated that a number of UK music festivals have pages and discussion boards dedicated to individuals attending festivals and music events alone.

Recently, academic research has looked at the experiences and choices of solo consumers, specifically diners in the hospitality industry (L. Brown et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2020), the motivations for solo travel (Yang, 2021), and the anxieties and support networks associated with traveling alone (Karagöz et al., 2021). However, to date, the case of the solo eventgoer has not been critically explored in the events management literature. To address the gap in knowledge this research study aims to

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critically explore the experience of solo eventgoers at UK music events.

Music concerts and festivals create a sense of belonging that bring people together (Gibson & Connell, 2016). Existing research emphasizes the sense of community that surround music festivals and events (A. E. Brown, 2022, 2023; Gelder & Robinson, 2009). It is evident that when individuals attend live music events, they gain positive experiences as a result of the music and the opportunity to build relationships (Lamont, 2012). It is suggested that music concerts and festivals "provide an environment for eventgoers to gain positive psychological and social benefits from immersion in a musical experience" (Ballantyne et al., 2014, p. 66). Indeed, the interrelationship between immersion in music and well-being is well established. Bowen and Daniels (2005) found that although the music does matter, more general factors such as socialization were also an important part of the experience. Furthermore, authors such as Gelder and Robinson (2009) and A. E. Brown (2022, 2023) indicated that in addition to music, the atmosphere and surroundings and the chance to socialize and meet new people is just as important for music event attendees.

According to Packer and Ballantyne (2011) attending music concerts and festivals allow individuals to gain a sense of meaning and identity and to socially integrate with individuals who have similar interests. Furthermore, it is implied that engaging in music concerts and festivals enables "a type of construction of meaning that has impact on the audience's actions and understanding of themselves" (Karlsen & Brandstrom, 2008, p. 364). Here music events provide an environment that is conducive to positive psychological outcomes as attendees develop or reflect on their understanding of themselves, presenting the opportunity to cultivate new expressions of self-identity.

While much of the above discussion is on the motivations of individuals, the general events and festivals literatures are often categorized and segment groups of event attendees. Here the notion that attendees are going together is implicit and there is limited research on the motivations and experiences of subsects and outlier groups like the solo eventgoer. More generally, the case of the solo consumer has been explored by Goodwin and Lockshin (1992), who suggest in order to capture this growing market segment, organizations need to be adaptive, and to provide innovations in service markets that are responsive to solo consumers and unique consumption patterns. Recently, academic research has looked at the experiences and choices of solo consumers specifically diners in the hospitality industry (L. Brown et al., 2020; Choi et al., 2020). Outside of commercial attributes of market potential and customer satisfaction, research in related disciplines have explored the motivations for solo travel (Yang, 2021), the anxieties and support networks associated with traveling alone (Karagöz et al., 2021), and meanings associated with solo consumption (Yang et al., 2019).

The specific aim of this article is to critically explore the experience of solo eventgoers at UK music events. To achieve the aim, an exploratory approach is taken where research inquiry is open ended, and topics and themes are emergent from the data. However, our research and discussions are guided by themes apparent in the literature on solo consumers from adjacent fields of leisure and tourism. Areas of inquiry include solo consumers' independence and freedom of choice and forms of socialization. By delivering insights into the experience of solo eventgoers, it is anticipated that the findings will be beneficial for industry first by providing a wide-ranging overview on the behaviors and experiences of solo eventgoers, and secondly by making recommendations on how event organizers and planners can best accommodate solo eventgoers, be that through event design, environment, or supplementary services.

Literature Review

Solo Consumer

The rise of the solo consumer is regarded as an outcome of broader demographic and technical changes that have resulted in a greater amount of people either by choice or by circumstance living alone (Esteve et al., 2020; Klinenberg, 2013). In Putman's (2000) essay *Bowling Alone*, solo consumption marks a societal change as people disengage with civic society, they are less likely to join organized groups and societies, preferring solo pursuits instead. Globally there is a significant rise in one person households (Kim & Choi, 2018). In

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the UK, for instance, statistics demonstrate that 8.3 million people live alone (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Studies often focus on family and social support for elderly people living alone and the effects of loneliness on individual well-being (Victor et al., 2000; Yeh & Lo, 2004). Younger people living alone have been classified as either "sad and lonely" or "selfish singles," the trend sometimes being negatively associated with a selfish individualism (Jamieson & Simpson, 2013). Ratner and Hamilton (2015) discussed the act of engaging in hedonistic public activities like an event alone; focusing on the solo consumer they explored how patrons may feel inhibited from attending alone due to perceived negative inferences by others such as a lack of social connectedness. Indeed, anticipating loneliness has consistently been regarded as a constraint to experience for solo consumers (Goodwin & Lockshin, 1992; Her & Seo, 2018). However, studies have also explored how going alone can facilitate positive features including freedom and independence of choice (Bianchi, 2016; Yang, 2021).

Recently research on leisure and travel has unpacked the constraints and freedoms of solo consumption by focusing on two key areas of interest: solo traveling and dining alone (L. Brown et al., 2020; Yang, 2021). Solo travel has long been associated with exploration and freedom of both itinerary and of self (Bianchi, 2016; Elsrud, 2001). Solo travel is often regarded as a liberating travel style that permits freedom of movement (Yang, 2021). Indeed, solo travel is self-determined and without the constraints that are associated with traveling with others such as choosing when and where to go. A key motivation for and outcome of solo travel is that of transformation and personal growth, including an increased sense of confidence and independence (Bianchi, 2016; Osman et al., 2020; Wilson & Little, 2008). Positive factors that signify the importance of solo travel and consumption are related to meaning making (Kirillova et al., 2017) and the expression of self-identity (Seow & Brown, 2018).

However, alongside the apparent freedoms, associated risks and constraints are prominent (Karagöz et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018). Solo travel risks are categorized as physical and psychological and a number of studies discuss the apparent vulnerability of female solo travelers (Gao et al., 2020; Wilson & Little, 2008; Xu & Liu, 2018). In a recent critical review of solo travel research, Otegui-Carles et al. (2022) pointed out that the majority of contemporary studies on solo travel have focused on women traveling alone. Karagöz et al. (2021) demonstrated that travel risks impact negatively on solo females' intentions to travel. Elsewhere studies have indicated that by setting aside perceived risks, solo travel impacts positively on self-exploration and female empowerment (Harris & Wilson, 2007; Nikjoo et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018). Further exploring the link between risk and female solo travelers, Yang et al. (2018) indicated that Asian female solo travelers perceive risk of sexual harassment and discrimination across a number of physical spaces including public spaces, public transportation, and private spaces. Travel risks are mitigated by female solo travelers by adjusting their spatial practices—for instance, avoiding isolated areas, destinations perceived as unsafe, and by dressing down. Studies on solo travel have demonstrated the importance of support structures and solo travel is rarely done in isolation; indeed, meeting new people, being part of a group, and interactions with other travelers are all important aspects of the experience (Su et al., 2020).

Solo Marketing Strategies and Implications

Studies on dining alone have to an extent focused on a perceived social stigma of eating out alone and the negative emotions experienced by solo diners, in particular feelings of loneliness and stress (L. Brown et al., 2020; Chang, 2020; Kim & Choi, 2018; Shin et al., 2018). Significantly, this body of knowledge offers perspectives on how the service provider might mitigate negative feelings associated with eating alone in order to provide a more welcoming and inclusive service encounter. Kim and Choi (2018), for instance, studied groups of diners with a high eating alone (HEA) and low eating alone (LEA) frequency, concentrating on perceptions of self and others. This study demonstrated that LEA diners associated emotions of sadness and loneliness with self and others in relation to solo dining, whereas those that ate alone regularly (HEA) held no negative emotions and considered dining alone a normal part of everyday life.

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The authors concluded that it is dangerous for eating establishments to use images that may heighten loneliness as an emotion in advertising including group activities and socializing. In Her and Seo's (2018) study, crowded environments exasperated feelings of not being part of a group as solo diners anticipated negative evaluations of themselves from other customers. Offering welcoming signals such as communal tables or designated areas, or furnishing smaller tables or seats at the bar are two examples of how solo consumers might be better catered for.

Focusing on similarity cues, Shin et al. (2018) delineated between solo diners with high and low self-esteem, indicating that the use of similarity cues can backfire and rather solo consumers with high self-esteem should be targeted with self-enhancing slogans. L. Brown et al.'s (2020) study focused on the anxieties of tourists dining alone; the stigmatism associated with being alone in a public setting is considered as stressful, particularly during peak dining times such as evening service. To mitigate negative emotions solo diners sometimes ate outside of peak times or they used props such as books, travel documents, checked smart phones' news and social media as a means of easing their discomfort. Similarly, Lahad and May (2017) demonstrated that by territorializing space and time, solo diners were able to temporally take hold of so-called "with" spaces like the restaurant dining area. Interestingly, it is noted that service providers should avoid terms such as "just you" when greeting solo diners. Indeed, rather than demonstrating pity or ambiguity towards the solo consumers, restaurateurs might consider strategies to capitalize on the burgeoning trend of eating alone, such as the reconfiguration of spatial layout or the creation of dine-with clubs. L. Brown et al. (2020) suggested two strategies to cater for the solo diner: a "Go Solo" strategy that facilitates solo dining with inclusive environments and a "Go Plural" strategy that includes activities and configurations that bring diners together. In their redefinition of commensality and astheticization of eating out, Koponen and Mustonen (2022) suggested the right type of restaurant, open or visible kitchens, and the presence of like-minded customers creates a social togetherness between diners and thus blurs the boundaries of eaten out alone and together.

Solo Eventgoers

Trendell (2017) reported that over half of young people aged 18–24 attend gigs on their own, and of the 65% surveyed that had attended alone, 98% of them would do it again. For festivals, in 2019, 8% of festivalgoers attended on their own (Statista, 2020) while 5% reported that they usually attend alone (Ticketmaster, 2019). While attending alone may not be the most popular mode of attendance, there is a significant number of solo attendees; however, there is minimal study of the solo eventgoer. Research carried out by Perron-Brault et al. (2020) found that 54.4% of festivalgoers attended alone or with one other person but there was little else reported on the solo eventgoer. Despite emergence of the solo consumer and the market potential for the events and festivals industry, academic studies on the experiences and motivations of festival goers have overlooked the solo eventgoer.

Crompton and McKay (1997) was the first study to categorize motivations for visiting festivals; their results indicated that attendees valued social interaction and were considered gregarious in that they prefer to attend festivals with others rather than alone. According to Dearn and Price (2016), individuals who attend music event alone are still able to socialize and connect with other individuals attending the event, it just occurs differently. Kulczynski et al. (2016) found that people going to music events fulfilled "a desire to socialize with people with the same interest as them, even people they did not know personally" (p. 245). It is believed that the shared experience encourages the potential for friendship by opening up "common ground for discussion" (Pitts & Spencer, 2008, p. 229) and creates a matrix of social relationships across the audience. Although Dearn and Price (2016) also warned that experienced event attendees can make newcomers feel like outsiders and that there may be existing hierarchies or behavioral expectations that a solo, first-time attendee may not understand. Cavicchi (1998) discussed social hierarchy among live event communities and how it is expressed through participation, while Dearn and Price (2016) asserted that becoming part of that community is reliant on developing personal relationships with other attendees and learning accepted behaviors. Consequently, they believe that "the meaning

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derived from an event by an attendee is mediated by discussions . . . [therefore] the aesthetic experience becomes inseparable from the social context" (Dearn & Price, 2016, p. 14). Studies demonstrate that individuals attending events experience a sense of community and belonging regardless.

Event Attendees

The event attendee has been conceptualized in a number of ways, with many studies examining motivations as a form of segmentation. Understanding attendee motivations is critical as it is demonstrated to influence consumer satisfaction (Savinovic et al., 2012) and behavior in terms of spending (Borges et al., 2016; Thrane, 2002), loyalty (Brandano et al., 2019; T. H. Lee & Hsu, 2013), recommendations to others (Kruger & Saayman, 2019), and repeat attendance (Yoo et al., 2020). Therefore, for event organizers to obtain optimal consumer behavior, it is imperative for them to understand why their attendees visit an event, and what they want from the experience. Event and festival motivation studies have typically stemmed from Crompton's (1979) and Dann's (1977) push–pull model and Iso-Ahola's (1982, 1989) avoidance and seeking behavior. While a wide variety of motivational items have been recorded and categorized into particular dimensions, the most popular generally include socialization, event novelty, escape, excitement, and family togetherness (McDowall, 2010). However, there has been no valid consensus on the order of importance of these factors due to a number of reasons. Firstly, events and festivals are diverse and unique, often offering a number of activities and entertainment options. Secondly, it is likely that eventgoers have multiple motivational reasons to attend (Crompton, 1979; Pearce, 2013) and with music events in particular, "the motivation for music is not monolithic, but rather multidimensional" (Perron-Brault et al., 2020, p. 8). Thus, the nature of events means that they generally attract a wide range of people for a wide range of reasons (Crompton & McKay, 1997). Motivations are also found to differ according to the demographic, psychographic, geographic and behavioral characteristics of the attendees (A. E. Brown & Pappas, 2023; C. Lee et al., 2004) such as nationality (Schofield & Thompson, 2007), resident and nonresident status (Formica & Uysal, 1995), and visit frequency (Uysal et al., 1993). Consequently, conceptualizing event attendees by their motivation is already a challenge owing to the diversity of event types, not least individual preferences. However, motivations are a precursor to the event experience, viewed as an element of, or influencing factor within the pre-event experience phase of the attendee's journey (A. E. Brown, 2022, 2023; de Geus et al., 2016). Although a number of researchers have discussed the relationship between eventgoers and their motivations, there is less research around understanding event attendees themselves in relation to the experiences they have, not least the solo eventgoer.

Socialization at Events

One of the most popular and consistent findings across event studies is the significance of social capital. Festivals are acknowledged for their role in providing social and relational capital (Davis, 2017) through community celebration and social cohesion (Arcodia & Whitford, 2006). Moreover, Bond and Falk (2013) believed it is not only the motivational desire for pleasure that attracts visitors, but that festivals and events can be the "medium through which individual and social identities are negotiated" (p. 438). Studies reveal that attendees are significantly impacted and affected by others at an event (Clarke, 2005; Pitts, 2005); however, there is limited research exploring the nature of the community formed by an audience (Dearn & Price, 2016). The few existing studies have found social and community aspects to be one of the most significant roles in music festival attendance (Perron-Brault et al., 2020) and of such importance that festivalgoers engage in an online community before, during, and after an event (A. E. Brown et al., 2020) becoming "year-round festivalgoers" (Morey et al., 2014, p. 257).

In summary, the literature review has examined solo consumption in areas of research that are strongly associated with the study of events management including business and management, leisure, tourism, and hospitality. It has been established that independence and freedom of choice are central outcomes for the solo consumer (Bianchi, 2016; Osman et al., 2020; Yang, 2021). Existing literature has explored the importance of social

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interaction for the solo consumer (Karagöz et al., 2021; Su et al., 2020), spatial practices through physical movement (Yang et al., 2018), the creation of inclusive environments (L. Brown et al., 2020), and adjustments to layouts (Koponen & Mustonen, 2022), all of which afford the possibility of socialization with others. In the context of events management, socialization is considered as a key motivating factor for event attendance (Crompton & McKay, 1997; Iso-Ahola, 1982; McDowall, 2010), and central to customer satisfaction and event experience (Bowen & Daniels, 2005; Dearn & Price, 2016; Kulczynski et al., 2016; Morgan, 2008; Perron-Brault et al., 2020). Although previous research has acknowledged the existence of solo eventgoers (Perron-Brault et al., 2020), to date no studies have examined the experiences of solo consumers at music events. To address this gap in knowledge and to better understand the phenomena of the solo eventgoer, this research aims to critically explore the experience of solo eventgoers at UK music events, and is framed by the exploration of three research questions.

RQ1: How do solo eventgoers experience music events?
RQ2: How do solo eventgoers experience freedom and independence at music events?
RQ3: How do solo eventgoers socialize at music events?

Methodology

The aim of this study is to critically explore the experience of solo eventgoers at UK music events. As this is a relatively underresearched topic an exploratory approach was taken. It is noted that exploratory research is commonly used when little theory or research exists on a given subject. Exploratory research is often associated with a qualitative approach to data collection and as such the research for this study is qualitative. It is suggested that qualitative research provides deeper understanding and knowledge of social aspects of life and uses words to express meanings that provide a more in-depth understanding (McCusker & Gunaydi, 2014). Moreover, according to Choy (2014) qualitative research allows the research to gain a better and more accurate understanding of an individual's values, attitudes, and beliefs, and deeper analysis and conclusions can be drawn. In short, qualitative research involves finding out what people think, and how they feel.

In total, 15 qualitative semistructured interviews were conducted over a 2-year period between April 2020 and August 2022. Interviews are an important and popular method of data collection in qualitative research (Veal, 2017). The main aim of their use and usefulness is the depth of data produced and insights gained into complex social phenomena (Denscombe, 2010). According to Green et al. (2015), semistructured interviews allow more flexibility and freedom, and the use of open questions can prompt more in-depth answers and deeper results and conclusions to be gained. In this research 15 semistructured interviews were conducted with interviews lasting between 30 and 45 min. To facilitate discussion, an interview checklist was used. The checklist was designed to address the overall aim of the research and included themes established in the literature review and to answer our subsequent research questions. The checklist was separated into five sections with themes and probing questions that the researchers felt important to cover.

Section 1: *Before the event*, this section concentrated on understanding the planning process, the circumstances, and anticipations associated with attending alone. Probing questions covered participants' thoughts and feelings on making that initial decision to attend alone and whether they felt inhibited from doing so (de Geus et al., 2016; Goodwin & Lockshin, 1992; Ratner & Hamilton, 2015).

Section 2: *Arrival* covered questions on what happened on arrival and how participants felt when arriving at the music event alone. Relevant theory included the intensity of feelings associated with loneliness (Her & So, 2018) and perceptions of loneliness (Chang, 2020; Jamieson & Simpson, 2013; Kim & Choi, 2018).

Section 3: *Being alone,* this section was closely linked to RQ2 in that probing questions asked about the freedom and possibilities that attending alone presented to participants (Bianchi, 2016; A. E. Brown, 2022, 2023; Yang, 2021) and in keeping with associated research on solo travel barriers, constraints, and risks were discussed (Karagöz et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018).

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Section 4: *Socializing*, directly linked to RQ3. As established in the literature review socializing is considered as key motivation for attending events (Bowen & Daniels, 2005; Crompton & McKay, 1997; Dearn & Price, 2016) and an important aspect for solo consumers when travelling (Karagöz et al., 2021; Su et al., 2020). Therefore, this section of the checklist was concerned with understanding if and how solo eventgoers socialize at music events and how were these interactions initiated or facilitated.

Section 5: *Event experience*, this section relates to RQ1. While general experiential aspects are covered in sections 1 to 4, this part of the checklist sought to understand how solo eventgoers interacted with the event environment and the venue (L. Brown et al. 2020; Koponen & Mustonen, 2022) and on reflection, how they felt about their overall experience of attending alone.

All interviews were completed online. In terms of sampling, a convenience sample approach was taken. The convenience sample allowed for an ease of availability with selected individuals being capable and willing to participate (Given, 2008). However, and more purposively, a brief selection criterion for interview participants was established prior to data collection. This criterion stipulated that participants must have attended a music event alone within the last 5 years, and that the music event attended was held in the UK. Initial participants were found and contacted via a social media post. It is important to mention that 10 of the participants had attended music alone before the COVID-19 pandemic and 5 between periods of lockdown.

Data collection was ended at the point of saturation. In this research, data saturation was reached at the point of 15 interviews as repeating themes and codes became apparent within the interviews, consistent with what Saunders et al. (2018) termed thematic saturation. Data analysis included an open coding process and then thematic analysis was used to identify prominent themes. Our approach followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis. After a thorough familiarization with the data, each researcher independently coded the transcripts and identified recurring topics and relevant findings. Thereafter, open codes were organized into cohesive themes. As an exploratory study we were interested in emergent topics; however, classifying themes was an abductive process in that each researcher had in mind the research aim, questions, and the theory extrapolated from the literature review. To ensure dependability, themes were cross checked and refined (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This review resulted in six initial themes being identified and collectively agreed on by the researchers which were: socialization, being alone, immersion, escape, barriers, and freedom. However, on detailed analysis of the findings and reflecting on the story of each theme and of the overall data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we found that the six prominent themes were not discreet; subsequently a redefining of the themes resulted in three interlinked pairings: Alone and Social, Immerse and Escape, and Barriers and Freedom. The relationship between each pairing demonstrated both opposing and complimentary ideas which could be explored with more depth, which forms the basis of our discussion.

Findings and Discussion

To develop an understanding of the experiences of solo eventgoers at UK music events, three dual themes arose from the findings: Alone and Social, Immerse and Escape, and Barriers and Freedom. These dual themes brought conflictions in relation to how solo eventgoers experience a music event, and what the important values are of the experience.

Alone and Social

The first prominent theme to transpire from the data analysis was alone and social. Our results demonstrate that many of the solo eventgoers choose to attend music events alone as they wanted the opportunity to see their favorite artist live and did not want to miss out on an experience they would enjoy;

> especially for certain artists I go and see I wouldn't potentially get to see them again. . . . I'd rather not miss out on seeing an artist I'd really like to go and see if someone can't come with me.

Although attending music events alone, interestingly, very few of our participants mentioned the negative perceptions associated with solo consumers in the literature; they did not feel that they were

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viewed by others as lonely (Chang, 2020; Jamieson & Simpson, 2013; Kim & Choi, 2018), nor did they feel inhibited from attending alone (Goodwin & Lockshin, 1992; Ratner & Hamilton, 2015). Furthermore, contrary to Her and Seo (2018), rather than intensifying feelings of loneliness, crowded environments helped to subdue feelings of isolation. This in part may be due to the physical structure of music events where participants would blend in with the crowd and become immersed in the atmosphere:

> people are like "would you not be lonely," but when you're there it's different, you're just in the experience or whatever, you're not worried about who's next to you, you're just in the moment.

Often anxieties of attending alone are put to a side and on face value solo eventgoers are confident individuals, and like Shin et al. (2018), respondents have high self-esteem. However, many of the participants did reflect on the will power required to venture out to a music event alone. For instance, one participant noted taking a leap of faith at the age of 65, and having shielded for several months during lockdown, built up the courage to attend an open-air music event alone. Although admitting she felt nervous the participant also stated that attending would be an opportunity to meet and bond with other "fans" and to give her a much needed "feel good" boost, having a positive impact on her personal well-being. In fact, for many the act of going alone was a confidence boost (Bianchi, 2016; Osman et al., 2020). Similarly, other participants having stepped out alone noted the positive impact on confidence and personal well-being:

> It makes me more confident more than anything in terms of my well-being. For me . . . once you get over the first hurdle it's like anything really. Once you get over going for the first time, a lot of the time I think to myself "why would you prevent yourself from going to see your favorite artist?"

Lamont (2012) noted that when individuals attend live music events, they gain positive experiences and have the opportunity to build relationships. Indeed, although our participants went alone, the opportunity for socialising and sharing their experience with others was a prominent theme across the majority of interviews. In keeping with the literature on music events (A. E. Brown, 2022, 2023; Davis, 2017; Dearn & Price, 2016; Perron-Brault et al., 2020) our research demonstrates that for many being immersed in the atmosphere created a sense of being with a "community":

> You get in and the atmosphere is mad so it's not like you're segregated, or you feel kind of by yourself cause even if you don't know people when you're there, you get to meet people.

Throughout the interviews participants spoke about the importance of interacting and making connections with other people, and for solo eventgoers socializing remains an important aspect of the experience (Kulczynski et al., 2016; Pitts & Spencer, 2008). Interactions often created a bond between the solo eventgoer and other groups of attendees. In some instances, lasting friendships endured after the event—for instance one participant noted that having met another attendee in the queue they enjoyed the concert together and have kept in touch ever since. Another mentioned having spoken to other fans online before meeting them at a concert had solidified relationships and helped to strengthen the community. This reflects the research by A. E. Brown et al. (2020) on the importance of online digital media communication in the preevent experience phase for developing a sense of communitas.

Opportunities for socialization with other attendees ranged from chance meetings in queues, loose conversations about artists, to the more purposeful initiation of interactions. Solo eventgoers preferred to stand rather than sit as this offered the possibility of blending in, meeting and engaging with others. Many took it upon themselves to arrive at gigs early so to meet others. Solo eventgoers proactively started conversations with other attendees in the queue and stated that by staying close to the barriers they were able to meet, dance, and enjoy the event with others:

> I went to the concert on my own and I happened to be in the queue and I was just chatting to the girl in front of me. . . . We stood together throughout the concert, and we've kept in touch ever since. . . . there's a few other girls that I have made friends with through the gigs and it's such a lovely network.

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Here we begin to see how seemingly opposing themes of Alone and Social are intricately linked. Significantly, although solo eventgoers attend alone, the results indicate that there is a strong desire to socialize, to bond with other members of a community, and to share their experiences with others. The important factors in the solo eventgoers experience include the social connections that can be made, which in turn influences the eventgoers' behavior, seeking out social opportunities both before and during the event, and some maintaining relationships after. Furthermore, it is evident that the perceived experience of solo consumers at music events appears to oppose that which has been found for solo consumers in travel or hospitality environments. That is, the previous research on solo consumers in related fields found a number of inhibiting factors including loneliness (Her & So, 2018) and feelings of isolation (Ratner & Hamilton, 2015), while this study instead reveals that solo music eventgoers are so immersed in the experience and surrounded by others that they do not feel alone.

Immerse and Escape

The second theme that arose from the research was the dualism of immersion and escapism. Escape is a popular motivational dimension in event and tourism studies (McDowall, 2010), arising from Crompton's (1979) and Dann's (1977) push–pull model and Iso-Ahola's (1982, 1989) avoidance and seeking behavior. Escapism is among the most frequently mentioned motivations in tourism studies (Getz, 2008; Park et al., 2010); thus, it is an unsurprising outcome from the research. However, what was discovered in this study was firstly, that escapism was discussed as an experiential factor rather than a motivation to attend, and secondly that aspects of experiencing escapism and immersion at the event were often blended together, one into the other. That is, elements of immersion and escape were not mutually exclusive:

> It's an escape . . . everybody is there to see the same artist and also in that escape with you. . . . your mind kind of goes in a bit of a trance when you're at a gig. . . . as strange as that sounds it's almost just you, the artist, the people around you.

Participants discussed their experiences as an escape from the usual daily life and responsibilities, and as an immersive experience. While this study did not set out to explore solo music eventgoers' motivations to attend, much of the literature on escapism and events is in relation to motivations (Manolika & Baltzis, 2020; Pilcher & Eade, 2016). Interestingly, Pilcher and Eade (2016) found in their audience segmentation of folk festival attendees, those who were motivated to attend by escapism were solo attendees. Although their smallest segment, it supports this study in the significance of escapism for solo eventgoers. Literature acknowledges that eventgoers have multiple motivational reasons to attend an event (Crompton, 1979; Pearce, 2013) and with music events in particular, "the motivation for music is not monolithic, but rather multidimensional" (Perron-Brault et al., 2020, p. 8). For example, A. E. Brown (2022) found that the "festival atmosphere" was one of the most important experiential factors and a common motivation to attend for many music festivalgoers; however, the atmosphere is not a singular concept but comprises of multiple elements within a socialscape, musixscape, and enjoyment. Therefore, in this case event attendees may go to a music event and feel a sense of escape while simultaneously feeling immersed in the experience. One participant discussed how escaping allowed them to immerse and experience feelings of euphoria:

> When I'm there it's like anything that bothered me that day, everything just kind of disappears . . . it's kind of a euphoric feeling, it lifts everything and makes all my worries go away and it's one of the best feelings in the world for me.

Examining the literature, the notion of escape and immersion and the relationship between the two together has been discussed. Patra (2021) identified this in a gaming article, aptly titled: 'To immerse is to escape'. An article by Baxter, Leer, and Graham (2022) on drag events referred to the event allowing people to escape from everyday life, thus enabling them to immerse themselves in the drag experience (Baxter, Jones, & Leer, 2022). Aşan et al.'s (2020) study on music festivals highlighted the experience as a way in which tourists can escape daily life and immerse themselves in a different world. They go on to note, similarly, the

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escape experience is festival attendees' desire to engage in different experiential contexts that are unlike their daily lives (Rivera et al., 2015). More recently, Oklevik et al. (2022) referred to the physical immersion of event attendees being "associated with the experience of escapism . . . to the extent that they have an impact on the event" (p. 59) (see also Pine & Gilmore, 1999). In this study, escapism is found to be an important experiential factor for solo eventgoers, which enables immersion while also the feeling of immersion at the event is escapism in itself. The two are referred to as separate experiential factors but are also combined as they are inextricably linked.

What much of the literature has previously highlighted in relation to escapism is the opportunity to get away from work, home responsibilities, and the mundane daily life (Manolika & Baltzis, 2020; Pilcher & Eade, 2016). But what does not seem to have been a clear theme in the literature around escapism and events is the notion of escaping from the people in your typical daily life, be that friends or family:

> If I go with my friends, I feel like I can't truly get into the music. I'd be more conscious of their opinions and them looking at me. But if I go alone, I feel like you can just experience it in a completely different way. So, you're more focused on the music rather than the company you're with.

For most of the participants, they were able to escape from their typical, daily social networks to immerse themselves. In fact, going to music events alone made their experiences more immersive:

> For me, I think it's a lot more like you take everything in around you because you're not talking to someone, you're not distracted. You're aware of the music that's playing. You're looking at people's T-shirts. You get more excited than if you were going with someone else. You take it in a lot more, the whole experience.

This study finds that solo eventgoers had a deeper immersive experience, or found it easier to immerse, because they were alone and/or not with their usual social circle. The feeling of escaping from their daily lives, and from usual social connections enabled them to freely immerse and enjoy their experience at music events. These findings demonstrate that feelings of immersion and escapism are intricately linked for solo eventgoers, and by attending alone they are able to experience these more significantly. In fact, attending music events with their usual friends or family members actually acted as a barrier to how they experienced the event, and by going alone they had more freedom to immerse themselves.

Barriers and Freedom

The third theme that arose from this research was the dualism of Barriers and Freedom. Barriers are represented through a number of concepts in this research. Firstly, barriers are examined in relation to the general attendance at an event—for example, physical or financial barriers to buying tickets or the traveling distance to the event. These may also be viewed as structural constraints to preference and participation (Santos-Lewis & Moital, 2013). Generally, these barriers are mostly unrelated to whether one is attending alone or not and may be barriers for anyone attending a music event. Only one participant referred to financial barriers related to going alone:

> You could preorder picnic baskets for two people to sit and have before the gig. It sounds like such a cute idea, but I'm not two people. If it had been an option, I'd have it for one person. I probably would have treated myself. It was a bit like a kick in the teeth because I obviously didn't want to order it for two.

Ticket prices for music events are rarely discounted for groups, so any financial barriers for solo attendees generally arise from additional or supplementary costs in transportation or accommodation. More specific interpersonal and intrapersonal barriers that solo eventgoers experienced were what might prevent, discourage, or make it more challenging to attend alone (Godbey et al., 2010):

> I think I very much obsess over the stage times. I'll probably try and time it, so I'm not stood there alone too much when I first get there.

> I probably wouldn't get really get drunk if I went alone because you're a bit more conscious about

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> your behavior, you don't want to be walking home drunk or acting that way.

The barriers affecting solo eventgoers in this way influences how they behave and how they immerse in the event. Mostly, these barriers in the solo attendee realm of experience were intrapersonal and related to comfort levels, safety, and alternative behaviors. However, contrary to some studies such as Boo et al. (2014), for many of the participants these barriers were not regarded to be as problematic in comparison to the interpersonal barriers that existed or were created by attending with other people. One participant said:

> I like to go alone so you're not restricted to what music or things I can do if I was to have to go with someone. Its better by yourself because there is less restriction, you can do what you want, you can stay as long as you want, things like that. I just prefer it if I'm honest.

For some attendees going alone in itself may be a barrier. For example, Kemp and White (2013) found friends' lack of interest or motivation to attend as a barrier for attendees of a jazz festival, while contradictory to our study, Getz (2007) commented on interpersonal constraints influencing attendance stating, "it is unlikely to think that people would attend events alone" (p. 245). Portugal et al.'s (2022) recent study found that social contexts may facilitate or constrain festivalgoers' participation at a music festival. However, this research reveals that solo eventgoers found attending with other members of one's own social circle to create barriers or hinder the experience. Instead, going alone provided more freedom and flexibility, ergo enhancing more immersive experiences:

> Instead of going with friends who don't really know the artist I can go and relax a bit more and not worry about them not enjoying it . . . I can be in my own world.

Wilks (2011) referred to Putnam's (2000) work that claimed that arts and music events could be used to transcend social barriers. That is, people may make new connections with others whom they perceive to have a different, though equally rigid, set of values. However, Wilks' research found attendees at opera music events felt it was not a social experience. Furthermore, one participant reported feeling more adventurous by detaching and purposefully distancing themself from the people they attended with, while a folk festival attendee stayed in pub, uninterested in the festival as they didn't want to be styled as a "folkie." Although not a common theme in Wilks' research, this detachment likewise indicates that the social element at music events may be an interpersonal barrier for some. However, overcoming the barrier of attending alone is also an important aspect that influences the sense of freedom one might feel at the event:

> It's quite liberating in a sense. You can go alone and you don't need anyone to do anything with. You can literally go and have a good time without needing anyone there. You can connect more too so you're not thinking about who's next to you. Like, if I'm standing there and my friends on the phone or something it just ruins the experience for me.

The findings from this study indicate that overcoming the barrier of attending alone is something that can promote well-being, increase an individual's confidence, and provide more or deeper opportunities for freedom and flexibility in the experience, ergo more or deeper immersion. In fact, overcoming any kind of barriers across the experience can promote a stronger sense of self-achievement, which was also found by Tuzovic et al. (2021), where solo consumption had strong links to aspects of socialization, resilience, and well-being at various stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ability to attend alone also enables more opportunities for eventgoers.

The opportunities from attending alone provide a sense of freedom that enhances the event experience. This confirms research by A. E. Brown (2022, 2023), who found freedom to be an important attribute that enables enjoyment in music festival experiences. Their research suggests, in line with Griffin et al. (2016), that music festivals provide a safe, liminal space wherein festivalgoers may express their identity and interests. For solo eventgoers, attending alone allows them to behave more freely as themselves:

> I get more emotional, there's been loads of gigs I've gone to by myself and I've had tears in my

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> eyes . . . its quite moving. I would never be like that if I had people there with me. When I go alone, I feel the music more.

> I probably didn't enjoy it as much going with someone else as I would have alone because I felt like I act . . . not like a different person, but I couldn't feel as relaxed as I usually am. I felt like I probably would have danced a lot more. I would have definitely sang a lot more because when I go alone I don't care if I'm singing out of tune. But when there's people you know, I feel like you're probably a bit more conscious of doing that.

The findings in this research show that solo attendees found attending with their friends and family inhibits their experience. By negotiating and overcoming structural, intrapersonal, and interpersonal barriers in attending music events, particularly by attending alone, served to enhance their experience through freedom and opportunities for deeper feelings of immersion. There is an interconnected relationship between barriers and freedom within the music event experience that leads to immersion. Negotiating barriers (Boo et al., 2014) to attend music events alone has a direct impact on the eventgoers' experience by promoting a sense freedom, which in turn provides opportunities for more enjoyment and serves to enhance the immersive experience.

Conclusions

The contribution of this research fills a gap in literature as it has explored the case of the solo eventgoer, examining their experience at UK music events. The research explored how solo eventgoers experience music events (RQ1), how they experienced a sense of freedom and independence (RQ2), and how solo eventgoers socialize at music events (RQ3). In answering these research questions, our findings revealed three dualisms, which are not mutually exclusive as connections and overlaps occur separately and concurrently across the three research questions. Firstly, solo eventgoers want to go Alone, and be Social. Being alone presents opportunities for new forms or ways to socialize. Solo eventgoers have different experiences compared to solo consumers in other related fields such as hospitality and tourism, particularly in that they do not feel lonely or isolated. Secondly, Escape and Immerse. Escapism is discussed as an experiential factor rather than a motivation to attend, while attending music events alone provides the opportunity for solo eventgoers to feel that sense of escape. This escapism enables them to have deeper immersive experiences, more so than if they had attended the event with others, while being deeply immersed in the experience is, in itself, escapism. Thirdly, Barriers and Freedom. Overcoming the barrier of attending alone and avoiding barriers that arise from attending with others permits more freedom in choice (of who to see and what to do) and flexibility during the event, which in turn also provides opportunities for deeper immersive experiences. This research reveals that solo eventgoers experiences differ to those who attend music events with others and that more immersive experiences can occur by attending alone.

This study offers practical implications for event managers in how they design the attendee experiences and event environment, particularly for their solo consumers. Considerations towards the design and management of venues and their services and facilities may improve the event experience for their solo audience and maximize financial success. For example, this could include the development of social media networks set up specifically for solo eventgoers so as to provide a space where they can socialize, arrange to car share, or meet up for the event. Social zones could be set up at the music events and also the provision of additional entertainment, products, and services catered towards solo eventgoers. Additionally, this research enables the music event industry to understand better the needs of their solo attendees and how this may impact on the overall event experience.

There are limitations of the study that need to be highlighted. Firstly, it is limited to the UK in both the music events that were attended and the participants in the study. The interviews were conducted online and therefore did not examine the lived experiences at the event, which may have led to further reflections on the solo eventgoers experience. COVID-19 disrupted the study and the perceptions of solo eventgoers at UK music events may have altered following the impact of lockdowns.

This provides opportunities for further study in examining the experiences of solo eventgoers at different types or genres of music events, as A. E.

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Brown and Pappas' (2023) research demonstrated eventgoers needs, wants, and experiences differed among specific music genre festivals. Furthermore, the experiences of solo eventgoers in other countries may provide more context. Capturing the lived experience of solo eventgoers at an event would provide opportunities to observe behavior and gather further information that may not be recollected at a later date. Similarly, obtaining the views of solo attendees that participate in dedicated online groups would present the opportunity to catalogue the social interactions and how this influences their overall experience in attending music events alone. Finally, further study into understanding how immersion is experienced by eventgoers, both alone and with others is recommended.

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