Commuting and the urban night: nocturnal mobilities in tourism and hospitality work

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ABSTRACT

The importance of the tourism and hospitality sectors to the urban night and the economies of cities has been well-documented. However, commercialised night-time leisure as a timespace of work remains relatively underexplored. A greater understanding of bars, hotels, restaurants and clubs as workplaces as well as leisure destinations can contribute to conceptualising the potential of urban nights to be more diverse and inclusive. This paper examines the challenges faced by tourism and hospitality workers who need to commute at night. Drawing on a mixed-method study of Sofia, Bulgaria, and Brussels, Belgium, the paper explores the barriers encountered and resources mobilised to make the nocturnal commute possible. The dimensions discussed include the need to continuously adjust one’s commute; the economic and non-economic costs of night commuting; cycling at night; and the impact of collegial and employer relations on negotiating the night commute. The paper demonstrates that while tourism and hospitality workers mobilise a range of economic, organisational, affective and physical resources in order to make night commutes possible, much remains to be done by urban authorities and transport planners to ensure inclusive nocturnal mobilities which attend to work as well as leisure journeys.

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Introduction

The urban night is often thought of as a timespace of leisure and freedom, an opportunity to escape the pressures of work and the routines of everyday life. This notion is reflected in the image many European cities have been keen to commercialise in their ‘night-time economies,’ with authorities and tourism and hospitality businesses positioning cities after dark as destinations of entertainment, indulgence and escape (see, among others, Hollands & Chatterton, 2003; Roberts & Eldridge, 2007; Shaw, 2018). However, the work required to sustain night-time destinations such as restaurants, bars and hotels, and the conditions in which nightlife employment is performed, have received less attention (cf. Liempt & Aalst, 2015; Monaghan, 2002). The present paper contributes to a body of work which explores the particular and often problematic demands which commercialised night-time leisure places on the physical and emotional labour of hospitality workers.
(see Guerrier & Adib, 2003; McDowell, Batnitzky, & Dyer, 2007). Clearly, a great diversity of occupations and working conditions exists in tourism and hospitality (Baum, 2007). Nevertheless, work in these sectors remains frequently associated with long and unpredictable shift hours, low and/or precarious pay, and frequent change of workplace locations (Vladimirov & Vedar, 2016). In this context, the journey to work can present particular economic, physical and emotional demands for tourism and hospitality employees working late hours.

This paper discusses the night commute as one aspect of tourism and hospitality work in night-time cities. Drawing on a mixed-method study of Sofia, Bulgaria and Brussels, Belgium, the paper aims to explore the challenges faced by night-time commuters and the individual and shared resources which they mobilise to make their nocturnal journeys possible.

As mobilities research has repeatedly demonstrated, commuting is not simply a goal-driven movement from A to B, but a particular mode of inhabiting the city, replete with interactions, negotiations, frictions and emotions (Bissell, 2018; Middleton, 2009). The paper aims to enrich the night-time economy literature by attending to the night commutes of tourism and hospitality workers as a significant aspect of their labour, and thus of night-time urban life. The paper draws on theoretical approaches to the subjective and situated experiences of commuters developed by mobilities scholars (Corvellec & O’Dell, 2012; Plyushteva, 2016; Waitt, Harada, & Duffy, 2017). In the past two decades, a number of studies in tourism and hospitality have explored issues around mobility relevant to these sectors. Topics have included the journeys of tourists, the mobilities of trends and ideas, as well as the role of international migration in shaping the tourism and hospitality workforces in many locations (Duncan, Scott, & Baum, 2013; Edensor, 2007; Hall, 2005). However, the seemingly mundane mobilities involved in commuting to tourism and hospitality jobs have received limited attention, reflecting also a broader scarcity in research on hospitality workplaces, working conditions and everyday work practices (Baum, Kralj, Robinson, & Solnet, 2016; Ioannides & Zampoukos, 2018; Jordhus-Lier & Underthun, 2015).

A mobilities framework draws attention to the perspective of workers of late shifts, for whom the urban night is not a spatio-temporal container separated from the mundane pressures of the daytime. At the same time, while the day and night may be indivisible in terms of human experience, urban authorities and transport planners take very different approaches to them in terms of transport provision. To address this, the paper makes use of insights from studies of transport exclusion (Lucas, 2012; Schwanen et al., 2015), in order to make visible the specific barriers which night commuters encounter. While transport exclusion may manifest itself along many different dimensions in both daytime and night-time cities, the urban night presents particular barriers to mobility. Public transport is scarce or absent; taxis are more expensive; people on the move and women in particular are more likely to feel unsafe and vulnerable (Collectiu Punt6, 2017). Tourism and hospitality workers doing late shifts perceive and tackle these issues in ways shaped by the particularities of their workplace, such as uncertain working hours or expectations regarding personal presentation. As night mobilities remain inaccessible and precarious for many, greater attention to the needs of those who are mobile at night for work rather than leisure is needed if nocturnal cities are to become more inclusive (Hadfield, 2015).
Research locations and methods

The research presented in this paper is part of a wider comparative project which examined shift work, commuting and night-time public transport provision in Brussels and Sofia. The capital cities of Belgium and Bulgaria each have populations of approximately 1.3 million inhabitants (National Statistics Institute, 2018; StatBel, 2018). Hospitality and tourism work was selected as a case study for this project due to the frequent combination of around-the-clock shift work, uncertain hours and low and/or irregular incomes which workers in these sectors experience. The study focussed on small and medium sized independent businesses in these sectors, covering hotels, restaurants, bars, cafes and night clubs. Tourism has greater importance to the Brussels economy, with 4.3 nights per resident spent in tourist accommodation in 2016 compared to Sofia’s 1.4 (Eurostat, 2018). However, tourism and hospitality have greater relative importance for employment in Sofia, with an estimated one-third of jobs found in the trade, transport, hotels and restaurants sectors in 2011 (Eurostat, 2018).

The hours between 23:00 and 05:00 were taken as the basis for defining the night commute, as at the start of the study, public transport services were unavailable on weeknights during those hours in either Sofia or Brussels. In Brussels, a night bus service has been operating on Friday and Saturday nights since 2007, with last buses departing the city centre around 2.45am. In addition, a shared night taxi service called Collecto operates all nights of the week. In Sofia, an all-week night bus service was introduced in April 2018 in response to public pressure (Zografsky, 2018). As data collection for this paper took place between May 2017 and May 2018, its introduction had not yet impacted on respondents’ commuting practices. In future, its longer operating hours compared to the Brussels service is likely to influence night mobility to a greater extent, although both services are limited in their spatial reach. In addition, both night bus services require the purchase of special tickets, which are not integrated in daytime public transport travelcards, and are also more expensive. Both city authorities have banned the operation of ride-hailing app Uber, although the company’s premium service continues to operate in Brussels (with limited utility for tourism and hospitality night commuters due to its price). Brussels also offers a city bike-sharing service which is available 24/7, whereas no such scheme has been introduced in Sofia as of August 2018.

The study relied on a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Initially, online survey questionnaires were distributed to tourism and hospitality employers and employees using a snowball sample, ensuring that responses broadly reflected the spatial distribution of hospitality and tourism business across the two cities (in both cases, venues are concentrated in the city centre, but prominent secondary centres of night leisure can be found in peripheral neighbourhoods). The survey covered questions about commuting routes, modes, costs and durations; barriers faced; employer policies and facilities relevant to commuting; and demographic data. 49 employer/manager and 92 employee questionnaires were completed. Follow-up in-depth interviews were carried out with 20 respondents (11 employees and nine owners/managers), with interviews lasting between 40 and 90 min and allowing participants to discuss in greater depth their survey responses. Interview respondents were rewarded with a shopping voucher for their time. Data were analysed using data analysis software and are reported here in anonymised form using pseudonyms.
Results

The continuous re-negotiation of night commutes

The commute is often thought of as a predictable and stable everyday practice (Anable, 2005; Schlich & Axhausen, 2003). Researchers have often conceptualised the commute as an arrangement based on an initial one-off rational evaluation of costs and benefits, which is then repeatedly performed in a routine, automatic manner (cf. Bissell, 2011, 2018; O’Dell, 2009). However, the journeys of the tourism and hospitality workers interviewed for this study defy this characterisation. For many participants, the night-time journey was central to making decisions on whether to start a particular job in tourism and hospitality, and then required continuous adaptation and renegotiation.

When Georgiana started working as a waitress during her university studies, she specifically chose a restaurant which was within a short walk from her parents’ house:

> It took five minutes to walk. I wanted it to be close, because I knew I will have to work night shifts. (Georgiana, Brussels)

The need to travel at night can limit what positions a worker perceives as accessible to them. However, the majority of participants reported that the issue of the night commute was not raised by either applicant or employer at the recruitment stage, resulting in the need to continuously try out possible arrangements, and negotiate the night commute as part of gradually settling into a workplace. This involved learning about transport options, gauging the availability of support from the employer and the possibilities for sharing lifts with colleagues, and importantly, the level of earnings which could be expected – and which over the first few weeks determined whether certain options such as a taxi at night would be affordable, or not. Georgiana described this dynamic in the context of one of her subsequent appointments in the sector:

> - When you applied for the job, did you discuss night transport with the owner or manager?
> - I didn’t ask, and they didn’t say anything. It’s like it wasn’t an issue. That’s interesting. It should be discussed. It was a bar. I finished at 4am. Usually, I walked to my house. It was a 40-minute walk. That’s why I stopped, because it was too much. I didn’t want to take a taxi. It made no sense financially – a taxi would cost more than 10 euros, that’s more than an hour’s work. It turned out it was too much. I worked there for three weeks. (Georgiana, waitress, Brussels)

For many research participants, working evening and night shifts meant that the journey to work, and the return journey home, differed significantly. Research participants who worked late hours typically found that the two parts of their commute required their own separate arrangements in terms of transport mode, duration, route and payment. While the majority of survey respondents found daytime journeys to be relatively straightforward, the night-time journey required continuous negotiation:

> Occasionally, the manager gives people a lift [at night], and since I live on her route, she drops me off, which is great for me. However, this is not anything that is organised systematically: if it happens, great, if not, I have to fend for myself. No money is given for the taxi fare home. Sometimes I share a taxi with some colleagues. But it all depends which shift you are in, which people you end up in a shift with. (Julia, waitress, Sofia)
On some occasions, both Georgina and Julia had experienced needing to walk home from
work at night through areas which made them feel unsafe or uncomfortable. This reflects
the concern raised by some mobilities and transport researchers that enduring assump-
tions about the commute often obscure important gendered dynamics (England, 1996;
Schwanen, 2007). In the context of daytime commuting, the portrayal of the outward
and inward part of the commute as mirror images of each other can make invisible the
fact that women in particular are likely to make complex trips (also known as trip-chain-
ing) as part of returning home from work, collecting children from school, shopping, or
undertaking other unpaid care work (Gonzales & Daganzo, 2013; Kwan, 1999). Similarly,
the gendered mobilities of night workers are excluded from straightforward conceptualis-
ation of everyday mobilities as A to B and B to A. By contrast, the interviewed women –
and on two occasions, men – described feelings ranging from unease to fear in relation to
walking home at night. Thus, the need to repeatedly reorganise and adjust mobility
arrangements during the night hours could represent a significant burden, in terms of
planning, worrying, dealing with uncertainty, and additional expenses.

The costs and affects of public transport at night

One key policy measure which has the potential to improve the ability of tourism and hos-
pitality workers to access and sustain employment is introducing night-time public trans-
port services, or ensuring that night work is reflected in the routes and timetables of
existing night services (MASKED, forthcoming). However, the mere availability of such
services is not a sufficient condition in itself, as respondents frequently pointed out the
importance of affordability. With 35% of surveyed employees relying on taxis or private
cars to return home, night-time public transport had the potential to reduce a significant
financial burden for night commuters. However, the specifics of pricing and scheduling
were critical to whether the service was seen as accessible and beneficial, or not:

It took me a long time even to figure out how it works. I wasn’t sure if I needed to buy a sep-
arate ticket. And then, I feel like the last Noctis® is earlier and earlier all the time. Once, at half
past two I already couldn’t take it. It’s a long time until the first regular bus in the morning.
Plus, when I have weekday shifts, it doesn’t work for me. (Thomas, hotel receptionist,
Brussels)

In Brussels, only one in five survey respondents reported making use of the city’s limited
night bus service at least occasionally. At a fixed price of 5 euro per ride, the Brussels Col-
lecto shared night taxi service was described by interviewees as suitable for people on a
night out but too expensive for regular commutes. Similarly to Collecto, Sofia’s new
night bus service operates a fixed price, which at approximately one euro is 25% higher
than that of a daytime public transport ticket. With existing daytime travelcards not
accepted, night bus commuters therefore shoulder two sets of expenses if they also buy
daytime public transport tickets or travelcards.

Incorporating night-time public transport tickets into the existing travelcards, rather
than charging them as a separate service, thus appears to be an essential first step in redu-
cing the challenges faced by nocturnal commuters. However, for those working in the
tourism and hospitality sectors, this may involve additional barriers and risks. While
many 9-to-5 commuters can make substantial savings by purchasing a monthly or
annual travelcard, this is predicated on mobility needs which remain fairly stable and predictable over time. This was not the case for 65% of survey respondents:

At the moment, I work as a waitress in [Restaurant], I also take occasional shifts as a washer, and I have another job, in a pub in the city centre. But things change all the time. For me, it’s easier not to buy a travelcard, because I don’t always use public transport that much. To be honest, I don’t even buy a ticket. I got a fine once, but it still makes more sense for me financially to pay the occasional fine. (Tanya, waitress, Sofia)

Thus, unpredictable shifts, changing workloads, incomes and employer demands impacted on the ability to plan ahead for transport costs. In both Sofia and Brussels, many restaurants and bars close for a period over the summer months – in some cases, as long as 10 weeks. In the month of January, operations can be scaled back, with many employees working a reduced number of shifts. As a result, an investment in an annual travelcard could be too risky given the large initial expense involved.

Access to student travelcards in both Brussels and Sofia could provide substantial savings in both cases, and highlighted the on-going negotiations commuting entailed. With 32% of the survey respondents combining tourism and hospitality work with study, a student travelcard was a key resource for mobility, even if not useable for night travel. For several participants, it made the difference between an acceptable income from a job in these sectors, and earnings which would be too low to justify the cost of commuting. However, once working students graduated and became ineligible for a reduced-price travelcard, making new commuting arrangements could result in significant upheaval:

The advantage, when you are a student, is that for three years the travelcard costs you 50 euro per year. I was already working in the hotel as a student and I am still there, but now, the monthly travelcard costs me 50 euro per month. This is quite a difficulty when you finish your studies. Ok, you are going to earn a salary, but it is not easy, it’s a difficult financial transition. It’s a huge change, 50 per year versus 50 per month. (Thomas, hotel receptionist, Brussels)

Although economic costs were a principal concern for many respondents, using public transport at night is also associated with particular emotional costs which interviewees highlighted. Over and above a financial burden, these journeys often came with sensations and socialities which were not always enjoyable for workers returning home. Following Bissell (2010, 2018), these experiences can be described as the affective atmospheres of public transport, often configured differently and intensified after dark. Such atmospheres could be challenging in ways which are not present for daytime commuters. As explained by Daniel, a bartender in Brussels, sharing a bus or metro train with passengers on a night out could be a tense experience when returning home from a long shift:

I felt a certain tension between me and other people. In the evenings, especially on weekends. Drunken things. It can be loud – arguments, fights. There were people who have no respect for other people. After a night shift, you just sit there thinking any moment something can happen.

These comments can be interpreted in the context of a wider debate on the ways in which alcohol consumption can shape the experiences of the night-time city (Eldridge & Roberts, 2008). For Daniel, these experiences on the metro ride home contributed to the
psychological fatigue he had accumulated in his customer-facing role at the bar. He eventually abandoned public transport, choosing to drive or cycle to work instead. The next section focuses on the arrangements which made a bicycle commute possible when working the late shift.

**Complicating the active and sustainable commute with the night-time**

In recent years, transport planners in many European cities have sought to develop approaches to commuting which focus on two related agendas: sustainability and active transport. Sustainable commutes are encouraged for their lesser environmental impacts in terms of air pollution, noise and demands on urban space, and have generally focussed on promoting alternatives to private car transport (Banister, 2008; Schwanen, Banister, & Anable, 2011). Relatively, active commuting by modes such as walking and cycling has attracted policy attention for their health benefits in light of increasingly sedentary urban lifestyles (Gerike et al., 2016). However, both agendas remain largely focussed on the 9-to-5 office worker, and interventions have mostly targeted large white-collar organisations (Van Malderen et al., 2012).

At first glance, walking and cycling can seem particularly well-suited to the night commute, when public transport provision is limited or non-existent. In both Brussels and Sofia, this assumption could be compounded by the fact that many tourism and hospitality workers choose employment located within relatively short distances from their homes (Ermans, forthcoming; see also Section 3.1). However, this view must be qualified in a number of ways.

Importantly, the small and medium-sized employers who predominate in this sector are often unable to provide shower facilities and secure bicycle storage, due to lack of space. Only 17% of the employers surveyed provided both of these at their establishments. Combined with the exacting requirements for personal presentation for customer-facing roles, this limitation presented a barrier to commuting by bicycle for several research participants:

I do it, but most of my colleagues are worried about sweating. Heading into work on my bike, the workout of the muscles, spinning your head this way and that to check for cars, the sweating, the stress, the anxieties of cycling in a road. With all of this, you are on your way to work. You have to be fresh, to be presentable. You are working with customers. I had work clothes to change into, but still. (Daniel, bartender, Brussels)

At the same time, cycling did offer specific benefits for tourism and hospitality workers needing to travel at night. Eleven survey respondents (10% of total) chose cycling as either a main or occasional mode of travelling to work. In the four follow-up interviews carried out among this group, all participants pointed out the affordability of bicycle commuting, compared to taxi and private car, and two of the participants also felt it offered greater personal safety at night compared to walking (see Section 3.1). Interestingly, physical exhaustion was not perceived as a barrier: both cyclists and non-cyclists felt that the physical demands of their work would not prevent them from cycling to work:

The bicycle is great, it’s very healthy. Even though I work on my feet, cycling can actually be really good for tired feet, for the circulation. (Kyle, sous-chef, Sofia)
This is a potentially surprising finding, since efforts to promote active commuting have generally excluded those in physically demanding occupations, implicitly or explicitly assuming that it is the sedentary office worker whose health has the most to gain from travelling by bicycle (Fishman, 2016). While employment in tourism and hospitality often entails a more intense kind of bodily exertion (‘Out of an eight-hour shift, you are probably on your feet seven hours and 45 min’ – Daniel, bartender, Brussels), it was framed by cycling commuters not in terms of an additional physical effort, but in terms of the opportunities for psychological relaxation it could offer:

Many people have the wrong idea about our line of work. Yes, there are long shifts, 14-15 h sometimes, but it’s not just being on your feet the entire time. (…) Mostly, it’s not physical exhaustion so much as a mental tiredness. You have to interact with different people throughout your shift. (…) So, for the people who come by bike to work, it’s not a problem to cycle home at the end of a shift, because it’s a relaxing thing, a way to unwind emotionally and psychologically. (Julia, waitress, Sofia)

For the tourism and hospitality workers interviewed, the benefits of the active commute were interpreted in the context of the emotional labour they engaged in (Adib & Guerrier, 2003). To reflect this, efforts to promote cycling should go beyond the current focus on active commuting as a counterbalance to sedentary work. In addition, opportunities to improve access to shared bicycle schemes at night (when their current usage is low) could be explored by local authorities. Given the low and/or precarious incomes of many night workers, affordability measures would be required, including reduced prices after 8pm, and lowering current barriers to adoption such as prohibitive subscription and deposit fees.

Given the difficulties small employers face in providing facilities for cyclists, and the expectations placed on tourism and hospitality workers’ personal presentation, shared bicycle schemes could accommodate these night commuters’ needs where private bicycles do not. Thus, cycling may often be a solution for the return part of the journey only. The capacity of the shared bike to offer a solution for those who can only cycle at the end of a work shift but not before was demonstrated by Georgina. While working as a restaurant waitress in Brussels, she took public transport on the way to work, and a Villo shared bike at night. For Georgina, the location of bicycle docking stations near both origin and destination made this seemingly complex arrangement fairly convenient.

**The role of employers in night-time commuting**

The employers who participated in this study were not oblivious to the challenges faced by night commuters. Three-quarters of the employers surveyed reported implementing some form of measure for making employee journeys more affordable and/or convenient (on the other hand, only 57% of employees reported such measures being in place, raising questions around the extent to which all workers were made aware of mobility-related measures). One Brussels and one Sofia hotel owner specifically adjusted the night receptionists’ shifts to ensure that they begin and end at times which are well served by public transport. A hotly debated topic across all interviews was the ability of employers to pay for taxis home at night. Overall, Sofia-based businesses were more likely to offer a fully paid-for taxi ride home for workers on a late shift:
Even when we recruit people, in the advert we say that we provide free transport at the end of the evening shift. This is crucial. For the last one-and-a-half years, we’ve had a contract with a taxi company, and a button which is just here, in the restaurant. We press the button, and a taxi comes – you don’t have to call, you don’t have to say where the taxi is going. The member of staff takes a voucher from the office, gives it to the driver, and then they invoice us at the end of the month. (Vasil, restaurant owner/head chef, Sofia)

The employers who took such an approach to organising the night commute reasoned that they had a responsibility of care towards their staff, but also highlighted the strategic business importance of the subsidised taxi ride in terms of reducing staff turnover. All employers interviewed spoke of the difficulties they faced in recruiting and retaining staff, and recognised problems with night commuting as a dimension of these difficulties. Subsidising nocturnal travel was thus seen as a costly investment, but one which paid off in terms of staff loyalty.

However, a blanket scheme where all employees would be entitled to a fully paid-for taxi ride home on all occasions they worked at night, was relatively rare. In Brussels, one restaurant owner reported making a small contribution towards taxi costs on nights when shifts finished later than usual (‘I give two or three euro per person, given that a taxi ride is about 10 euro’). Other employers in both Sofia and Brussels subsidised taxi costs selectively:

We have this one waitress, she has been with us a long time. She has a small kid now, and in the evening, she wants to get back home as quickly as possible. So, we pay for her taxi. Just hers. We want to keep her. (Stanislav, restaurant owner, Sofia)

While sustainable transport research and policy have repeatedly highlighted the importance of workplace mobility planning, implementing comprehensive transport-related strategies remains out of reach for many small and medium-sized businesses, due to their scarce organisational and financial resources. The approaches for dealing with the complexities of night commuting reported by the tourism and hospitality business owners were largely ad-hoc, responding to changing circumstances, often from one week to the next. The employers drew on their knowledge of their staff, and the close-knit relationships which developed in their small teams. One employer described the continuous renegotiation of night commuting arrangements not as a burden, but as an expression of their organisation’s flexibility, informal communication in the workplace, and culture of cooperation:

If you’re a more junior, less experienced member of staff, you are paid less. So, we will always try and give you a lift home. This is not a formal arrangement. We simply can’t afford to give people money for taxis. But we are a very small team, we all know where people live, how everyone travels here and back. If someone drives, they will offer a lift to another. We just talk to each other, we are a very close team, and we just make it work. (Anya, bar owner, Sofia)

A minority of employers felt that the expectation that they should plan night commutes with their employees, or contribute to them financially, was unfair. One Brussels-based business owner perceived employee demands for support with commuting as an erosion of a previously existent culture and work ethic. The owner of a high-end restaurant in Sofia perceived his business as a site of professional development and spoke of the many learning opportunities his employees had compared to others in the sector. For him,
making one’s way to work and back independently was an expression of dedication and drive which he expected from workers. From the employees’ perspective, such an approach often meant that it was up to them and their colleagues to negotiate the night commute amongst themselves, as a shared challenge.

Collegial relations and collective strategies

In transport research, the commuter is often conceptualised as a solitary figure, an individual moving through space while seeking to minimise contact with others, and making travel-related decisions as a bounded independent agent (cf. Manderscheid, 2013). However, the commute can also be thought of as a socio-spatial practice which is an extension of both workplace and household relations, with individual journeys always entangled in the commitments and responsibilities linking the commuter to other people (MASKED, forthcoming). Similarly, the night commute, as a complex arrangement requiring continuous rethinking of constraints and strategies, was demonstrated by the accounts from Sofia and Brussels respondents to be an extension of workplace relations. On many occasions, the need to return home in a way which was affordable, convenient and safe was discussed regularly with colleagues, and ad-hoc strategies were developed on an almost-nightly basis:

In my old job, a [female] colleague and I got into the habit of combining our socialising plans after work, so then we could walk home together — she lives very close. The more I think about it, the more I realize how much [the night commute] is an issue for us. We talk a lot about transport during shifts. (Georgiana, waitress, Brussels)

As a shared challenge, the night commute could, on one hand, initiate cooperation and mutual care. On the other hand, it acted as a way of reinforcing and sustaining existing workplace friendships and relations of care:

One of my colleagues lives very close to me. It happens that we share a taxi on the way home; we finish at 1am, or 2am on Fridays and Saturdays. We actually got a taxi yesterday. I fancied a walk. But she was very tired. So, we got a taxi together. (Ivaylo, bartender, Sofia)

Thus, collegiality made the night commute possible or improved the experience of it, while the commute in turn became a shared concern over which colleagues got to know each other better. Several interviewees discussed the socialising with colleagues which often follows a late shift — whether in the place of work, or in bars and clubs nearby. This practice reflected the need to unwind, while also building upon the friendships and relations which staff in closely located venues often engaged in. For one Sofia-based respondent, boundaries between acting as an employee and as customer could become easily blurred — after finishing his work as a bartender, he would visit a friend’s bar for a drink, and occasionally lend a hand if the venue was busy. His experience was one which problematised any facile distinction between the consumers of night-life and those who produce it. The blurring of categories of work and leisure in tourism and hospitality is well-documented, and accounts such as this one are important in interpreting employees’ position in urban nightlife as multifaceted and open-ended (Bianchi, 2000; Guerrier & Adib, 2003). Applying these insights to the nocturnal commute points to the need to complicate rigid categories of journey purpose, and recognise the extent to which work and leisure-related mobilities in the urban night cannot be disentangled.
When it comes to transport policy and planning, night transport services and discourses around them should expand their focus from the consumption of night leisure to include the range of journeys which take place at night.

The practices of support and cooperation which emerged during and after late shifts highlighted the ways in which night commuters were never simply victims of circumstance. On one hand, research participants acknowledged the extensive demands placed upon them to deliver particular kinds of experiences to night revellers, while dealing with low and unpredictable incomes, limited employer support, and ebbs and flows in custom which required constant adjustment of their personal daily and nightly rhythms. On the other hand, they did not simply endure nocturnal work and travel, but organised them as active agents, involved in intricate collective strategies and negotiations. Nevertheless, as demonstrated above, these negotiations often represent a significant psychological, physical and financial burden. They do not reduce the need for local decision-makers and individual employers to better account for the mobility needs of those whose labour sustains night-time cities as destinations for leisure and sites of economic activity.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper undertook an examination of the barriers which hospitality and tourism workers encounter when they have to commute at night, and the resources they draw upon in addressing them. It sought to highlight the specific challenges which result from the nature of tourism and hospitality work, the ways in which they amplify the limitations of night-time transport in cities, and the practices which employers and workers developed in tackling these challenges. Rather than a stable and predictable arrangement, the nocturnal commute of workers in Sofia and Brussels emerged as an undertaking made possible through continuous renegotiation, involving adjusting choices of transport mode and extending workplace cooperation and care into practices of organising mobility. Both employers and employees emphasised the significant financial burden of commuting at night, with persistent ambiguities and tensions around who should shoulder this cost. Being able to share nocturnal journeys with colleagues was important in making them safer and more affordable, but shift patterns and the cost of a taxi at night meant alternatives had to be found, often at short notice.

This discussion contributes to the growing body of research on the mobilities of tourism and hospitality, which to date has focussed predominantly on the mobilities of tourists, and the role of international migrant workers in these sectors. By focussing on the intricate negotiations involved in everyday (and everynight) mobilities, I have sought to demonstrate the ways in which seemingly mundane journeys are part of sustaining tourism and hospitality services. In light of growing research and policy calls to re-conceptualize the so-called ‘night-time economy’ in more inclusive terms (Hadfield, 2015; Roberts & Eldridge, 2007; Schwanen, van Aalst, Brands, & Timan, 2012), I have argued that mobility at night presents both workers and employers with difficult questions around affordability, safety, fatigue and workplace relations. The nocturnal commute of tourism and hospitality workers thus foregrounds issues which can often remain invisible to dominant conceptions of the urban night as a timespace of freedom, leisure and escape from daytime pressures. For city authorities and businesses aiming to develop nocturnal
cities as leisure destinations, the night commute points to the particular mobility needs of those working the late shift: on one hand, they cannot be assumed to coincide with the mobilities of night revellers; on the other hand, they problematise rigid distinctions between travelling for work and for leisure.

In exploring the night-time commute of tourism and hospitality workers, this paper has aimed to address the scarcity of research on night-time mobilities more broadly. Transport and mobilities research has overwhelmingly focussed on daytime urban travel, with peak hour congestion prioritised in both data collection and transport planning. Public transport provision at night is absent or scarce in many European cities, with services often limited to Friday and Saturday nights (MASKED, forthcoming). As a result, night-time commuters can face uncertainty, high costs, as well as concerns about personal safety. While this paper examined commuting in the tourism and hospitality sectors, the nocturnal mobilities of cleaning, maintenance, health, transport and security services, to name a few, remain largely unknown. Further research is needed to make the particular barriers to nocturnal mobility visible, and to ensure that they are reflected in urban transport policy agendas.

Notes

1. While some daytime public transport services continued to run until approx. midnight, field observations revealed very infrequent services after 11pm in most study locations.
2. Collecto operates between 11pm and 6am every night of the week. It requires that the user books their trip at least half an hour in advance, and boards the taxi at one of the designated Collecto stops across the capital region. A central dispatch point ensures taxi rides are shared by up to 3 passengers with similar routes, keeping costs lower. The Collecto service is paid for by the local authority, and provided by sub-contracted taxi companies.
3. Noctis is the brand under which the Brussels transport authority operates its night buses.
4. Villo is a shared bicycle scheme operated by the Brussels Capital Region in partnership with a private company. It was launched in 2009, and as of 2014 there were 346 stations where bicycles could be rented or dropped off. A number of pricing options are available, but a 150-euro deposit is required before using the scheme. As of April 2018, a similar scheme is in development in Sofia.
5. In Belgium, only companies with 100 or more employees are required to have a formal workplace mobility plan in place, which excludes the majority of tourism and hospitality businesses. No such legal requirement exists in Bulgaria.

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