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Small, Informal Music Venues Creating Performance Opportunities for Artists in a Minority Language Music Scene: A Study Based in North Wales

Research Article

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Abstract: This study analyses how small music venues and festivals contribute to the nature of a largely non-urban music market where a minority language plays a significant role. The studied non-urban market is marked by geographical isolation and a unique cultural identity. A qualitative dataset consisting of twelve semi-structured interviews alongside secondary data was used to gain insights into the characteristics of music venues in the North Wales music scene, where a minority language market exists. It was explored that even without sufficient funding and infrastructure, a non-urban music scene can thrive due to strong community engagement and participation, emerging not only from the region's remoteness and geographical isolation but also from a shared minority language and culture.

Keywords: *music venues • community participation • language • niche • rural • festivals*

1. Introduction

In a music scene, the opportunities and challenges artists face are determined by various factors such as cultural identity, urban/rural nature of the place, music venues, community participation, funding, infrastructure and government policies. As Bennett (2004) highlighted, the first structured definition of "scene" was offered by Straw (1991), which created a foundational basis for the study of music and culture. A scene emerges when people, including fans and artists from different classes, genders and ethnicities, come together through a shared interest in a particular style of music. It can exist either in specific localities or across multiple locations translocally (Straw, 1991, cited in Bennett, 2004). Authors such as Gibson & Gordon (2018), Bennett et al. (2020) and Thompson (2020) highlighted music venues and community participation as key players in determining the nature of a music scene and opportunities and challenges for artists working within the scene. The type of venues and frequency of live music events in a region also depend on economy, infrastructural facilities and community participation. While previous studies by Carr (2011) and UK Music (2019) explored the state of music infrastructure and venues in Wales more broadly, the music scene in North Wales remained largely understudied. UK Music (2019) acknowledged that the lack of proper transport connectivity and geographical isolation has created unlike music scenes in the north and south of the country. While several major cities in South Wales, like Cardiff and Swansea, have strong infrastructure, the North Wales region is largely non-urban and lacks necessary infrastructure and economic support. Therefore, it was necessary to study the nature of the music scene and venues in a geographically isolated, non-urban region

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of Wales where a minority language is more dominant than in the major cities of South Wales. The study explores how musical opportunities for artists in the North Wales music scene are shaped by the nature of music venues and community engagement and participation, the factors identified in previous research by Gibson & Gordon (2018), Bennett et al. (2020) and Thompson (2020). Furthermore, it draws comparisons with music scenes examined by these researchers, including those in rural Australia and Scotland. The research question, therefore, is:

How do music venues and community engagement shape musical opportunities for artists within a minority language music scene?

The results indicate that despite a lack of music-related infrastructure in the region, the geographical isolation and the desire to preserve a minority language resulted in the creation of many small and informal opportunities for artists operating in the region. This study contributes to discussions on the state of contemporary live music scenes and venues, particularly in non-urban areas. Moreover, while previous studies on the contemporary Welsh music market had focussed on areas such as infrastructure and cultural production, a gap exists in understanding how the live music scene can act as social spaces where people connect and boost community engagement. This study is particularly relevant to regions of Wales where a minority language is prevalent and there is a strong desire to preserve that language and its associated culture. Therefore, it contributes to the broader literature on the sociocultural significance of live music venues, especially within communities that possess a distinct cultural identity.

The six counties that constitute North Wales region include Wrexham, Flintshire, Denbighshire, Conwy, Gwynedd and Ynys Mon (Isle of Anglesey). The North Wales region is largely rural, with a few urban pockets and seaside towns. Apart from the coasts, the region also includes Eryri (Snowdonia) National Park and the Clwydian Mountain Range, near which many small villages and towns exist. There are no major cities in the region, as the main Welsh cities of Cardiff and Swansea are located in the south. Wrexham is the biggest city in the North Wales region, with a population of approximately 45,000. There are other smaller towns and cities in the region such as Caernarfon, Bangor, Llandudno, Llangefni, Pwllheli, Holyhead, Rhyl, Conwy, Abergele and Mold (Figure 1).

Figure 1. A map of Great Britain with the studied North Wales region highlighted in black.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Welsh Music Scene

Wales is one of the four countries forming part of the United Kingdom, alongside England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The country is largely bilingual; both English and Welsh are used. However, English is more widely spoken, while only 27.8% of the overall Welsh population could speak Welsh, according to an annual population survey conducted by the Welsh Government in 2024. The northwestern counties of Wales such as Gwynedd and Anglesey have the highest percentage of Welsh speakers, where more than 60% of the population can speak the language (Welsh Government, 2024). Traditionally known as the "Land of Song", music in Wales has played a major role in the country's history, culture and politics (Carr, 2012). According to Hill (2007), Welsh language music has historically been a tool to mobilise a geographically diverse community into social and political activism and to revive the sense of Welsh identity. As Llewellyn (2000) added, Welsh language music further developed as resistance music in a society faced with increasing pressure towards social and political hegemony in the last century. A big surge happened in modern Welsh music in the 1960s with the growth of "Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg", the Welsh Language Society, which emerged as a dominant force in the provision and stimulation of live rock music. Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg campaigns for the Welsh language and communities and recognises it as a part of a global struggle for minority rights and freedoms (Llewellyn, 2000). At present, there are English-language, Welsh-language and bilingual artists in Wales, spread across a diverse range of genres including traditional folk and classical to contemporary rock, metal and pop (Carr, 2012).

Although music is a part of Welsh culture which serves as a medium to unite people, several infrastructure-related issues exist in the Welsh music market. Prior literature from Carr (2011), Carr (2012) and UK Music (2019) had identified issues such as a lack of infrastructure to boost music promotion activities, a lack of specialist music venues outside the urban regions of South Wales, closure of many grassroots music venues in the last two decades and infrequent transport connectivity creating unalike music scenes in the north and south of the country. Even though Carr (2011) mentioned that some excellent venues are available in the country, UK Music (2019) highlighted that the number of grassroots music venues and arts centres had significantly dropped over the previous decade, mainly due to financial pressures. Carr (2012) acknowledged that due to the strong prevalence of the Welsh language in the northern part of Wales, it is the most important region for the establishment of Welsh language popular music. Although there are issues, the prevalence of the Welsh language, especially in the north and west of the country, creates potential for further development of Welsh-language music.

2.2. Music Venues and Festivals in Non-Urban Music Scenes

The availability and nature of music venues in a region play a key role in determining the opportunities and challenges for musicians operating in that region. Theoretical frameworks such as Becker's (1982) Art World theory suggest that an artistic creation is a collective activity which involves a network of people, including artists, audiences and others. In a music scene which can be referred to as the "art world", musicians, music venues, recording studios, music consumers, audiences, instrument manufacturers, promoters and others all play a crucial role in the creation and dissemination of musical work. Music venues, therefore, have a significant role in this collective activity of creating, promoting and distributing music in a region.

Prior studies on various music scenes across the world have stated the importance of music venues, their impact on artists and the wider community and various factors affecting the functioning of music venues. The type and nature of music venues differ across various urban and non-urban music scenes. Baker (2016) mentioned that music scenes in urban areas, including "music cities", are characterised by strong musical histories, state-of-the-art facilities, a continuous stream of music events and substantial economic power and influence. Rural music scenes lack many of these attributes, such as state-of-the-art facilities, a continuous stream of events and strong economic power. While music venues in rural areas or smaller cities may lack infrastructural facilities compared to the major cities, they are often marked by greater community engagement, collaboration and independence (Ballico, 2017; Bennett et al., 2018). Easier engagement, collaboration and independence may create opportunities for artists to network and market their music. North Wales, a largely rural region with a few urban pockets, was not expected to have strong infrastructure and economic support which was also supported by prior studies by Carr (2011) and UK Music (2019). However, elements of rural venues such as community engagement and collaboration were expected to play a role in the live music scene. In a minority language music scene where music played a significant role

historically in resisting oppression and mobilising people towards a shared culture, it was crucial to examine how this shared minority language might impact the characteristics of the scene and opportunities for artists.

Particularly in rural scenes, there can be further challenges apart from the unavailability of venues with good infrastructure. The lack of proper transport connectivity may hinder artists and creative workers from accessing music venues and festivals, which was highlighted by several authors who studied rural music scenes in countries like Australia (Gibson & Gordon, 2018; Stromblad & Baker, 2023). Gibson & Gordon (2018) acknowledged that while smaller community-run programmes or festivals contribute to rural cultural resourcefulness and boost local engagement and creativity in the rural Bega Valley of Australia, challenges related to infrastructure, economy and transport exist. The music scene in Bega Valley is characterised by a fluctuating seasonal population where small venues like cafes and clubs offer live music events to cater to visitors. However, venue managers often find it difficult to balance between providing opportunities to local artists and bringing in artists from outside the region. Unlike an urban scene, the region's music practices are not dominated by big concerts or weekly performances in pubs, clubs or theatres. Stromblad & Baker (2023) acknowledged that Gippsland, another rural region in southeast Australia, faces similar challenges regarding public transport availability, economic issues, lack of venues and youth mobility to urban regions. UK Music (2019) highlighted similar challenges in the Welsh music scene, such as financial difficulties and limited transport connectivity. However, the presence of a minority language and culture in North Wales is likely to differentiate the music scene from other non-urban scenes.

Thompson (2020) studied the music scenes of rural Scotland and agreed that although the geographical ruralness of some Scottish regions could be seen as a disadvantage, it also serves as a feature that shapes the identity and appeal of rural music scenes. The participants of Thompson's (2020) study included musicians and festival attendees in the rural Scottish island of Eigg and the study described the nature of the place as "magical". There was also a strong sense of community, which they described as "family". The people were repeat attendees, had personal connections with one another, including the musicians and organisers. This example illustrates that rural music scenes emphasise authenticity and a close-knit community. On the other hand, Bennett et al. (2020) argued that in other regions, mainly in poorer countries, musicians in remote locations tend to struggle with a lack of facilities, obsolete resources and difficulties in finding audiences. As part of the United Kingdom, Wales has a first-world economy and has better infrastructural facilities even in the remotest areas than many other less-developed countries. Therefore, the unique language and ruralness of a large part of the North Wales region could potentially become a distinctive brand.

Articles published on Sound Diplomacy, a global research and strategy consultancy, highlight that it is crucial to conduct mapping exercises to understand the potential opportunities and challenges of music scenes (Sound Diplomacy, n.d.). In Wales, venue mapping has been done by Creative Wales and other organisations such as Y Selar. Based on Carr's (2022) recommendations, a public-facing bilingual map has been released in 2023 by Creative Wales, a government agency that supports Welsh creative industries. According to the venue map, there are seven rehearsal studios in Wales (including four in Cardiff), all of them in South Wales. There are only four grassroots music venues in North Wales, whereas Cardiff alone has seven. There are no grassroots music venues listed by Creative Wales in the three counties of North-West Wales that include Anglesey, Gwynedd and Conwy where the Welsh language is most dominant. There are three in Wrexham and one in Flintshire, which are in North-East Wales with low Welsh-speaking population. On the other hand, several websites list upcoming concerts by more prominent Welsh-language artists and bands across Wales and abroad. These include a Government-funded website awni.cymru supported by SAIN Records (a record label from North Wales) and the Welsh media outlet Y Selar which publishes information and articles on Welsh-language music. It was observed that majority of these concerts in North Wales happen in small venues such as pubs, bars, village halls and social clubs which are not recognised as music venues by Creative Wales or other organisations. This highlighted the need to gain a deeper exploration of the music venues and nature of music events in North Wales, and how they might impact artists' opportunities and challenges.

2.3. Live Music and Audience Motivation

In the UK, live music is a thriving industry and music tourism is constantly growing. This was highlighted by a recent report by UK Music (2023) which suggested that the total attendance at music events in the UK in 2022 including festivals, concerts and grassroots gigs was 37.1 million. The number of attendees has increased by more than 6 million since 2016, when total attendance was 30.9 million. In Wales, Carr (2022) highlighted the importance of the live music industry and developed recommendations for the Government which involved a public-facing map

of music venues and a database of the music industry, highlighting transport network issues, prioritising financial support and facilitating identification and development of Welsh talent. However, as the majority of the support systems are in South Wales, the live music sector in North Wales was expected to face accessibility challenges. It was therefore necessary to examine the impact of the live music sector in North Wales, especially where the Welsh language is more dominant. This was especially important because UK Music (2019) had highlighted that issues like transport connectivity created unalike music scenes in the northern and southern parts of Wales, which is also likely to have created differences in the regional live music scenes.

Several prior studies have highlighted themes that motivate audiences to attend live music events. Brown & Knox (2017) identified the concert experience, including uniqueness, visual stimulation and proximity to performers acting as a key motivator, alongside social interaction and novelty. Pitts (2005) added that performer dress codes, atmosphere of the venue, arrangements and proximity to the stage, accessibility, visual impact and non-listening spaces like bars, foyers and ticket queues also shape engagement, impacting attendance. Practical concerns such as venue accessibility, ticket pricing, travel and merchandise availability further influence attendance decisions. However, live music attendance is also shaped by economic and logistical barriers, including travel and sensory costs, venue design and crowd behaviour. Independent artists have limited control over many of these factors but can enhance engagement through creative incentives, such as engaging talks and visual performance elements. In addition to these, socio-cultural values, such as a community's connection to local identity, language and traditions, can significantly influence audience engagement, as individuals are more likely to attend events that affirm and reflect their cultural heritage.

A study by Whiting (2021) on small live music venues in Australia acknowledged that these venues provide an ideal atmosphere for informal social gatherings and engagement that niche music scenes thrive on. Although these small venues are disinterested in economic capital, social and cultural values are created through the generation of social and cultural capital by continued promotion of original music. Local musicians can capitalise on these values through gaining skills and experiences that can potentially provide them with further opportunities and develop more social connections (Whiting, 2021). If this applies to the North Wales scene, similar small venues could help Welsh independent artists showcase their identities, expand networks and engage local audiences. Addressing infrastructural challenges and using digital platforms for promotion and music distribution are crucial for artist development and the sustainability of live music in rural areas. Supporting and sustaining live music venues may not only nurture emerging talent but also strengthen the cultural identity of the region. Therefore, in regions of North Wales, music venues could empower local artists to authentically express their unique cultural identity through their language, creating a stronger connection between the music scene and the community.

3. Research Methods

The results are derived from a case study on the North Wales independent music scene through the analysis of qualitative interviews and secondary data consisting of news articles, Government websites and census data, observation of social media posts, etc. The objective of the case study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the North Wales music scene and live music in the region. Prior studies on various music scenes by authors such as Ballico (2017), Bennett et al. (2018), Gibson & Gordon (2018) have used exploratory case studies, with interviews as a primary method of studying their cases. This study has also used exploratory interviews as the primary empirical research method to gain an in-depth understanding of the music scene and appropriate marketing strategies for artists. Using secondary data sources and twelve interviews with artists, managers and other music industry professionals, the nature of the North Wales music scene could be explored. This approach of using multiple sources including secondary data and interviews with artists and industry professionals working in the region has allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the live music scene.

As there is a lack of academic research on the North Wales music scene and music venues, secondary data was collected as an attempt to gain an in-depth exploration of the scene. An exploration could be conducted using data from the Welsh Government, music venues, events and other organisations that support the music industry, through websites, news reports and the social media pages of various music-related organisations and venues. Sources were initially selected using a structured approach based on predefined keywords entered into search engines and social media platforms. Additional relevant sources were then identified through the first selected ones. The sources were grouped according to themes derived from the research question, including Welsh language and

community, live music and music venues, festivals and celebrations, as well as an initial review of opportunities and challenges highlighted in publicly available interviews, blogs and other secondary sources. This thematic grouping enabled the identification of key patterns, gaps and insights relevant to the study's objectives. While secondary sources provided a broad overview of the Welsh live music scene, with some emphasis on venues in North Wales, the interview results offered more focussed information on the live music scene exclusively in North Wales. This included details on types of venues, festivals and networking opportunities in the Welsh-speaking regions. The research followed an inductive-deductive approach, used in an empirical research cycle.

Twelve online semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who were prominent Welsh-language or bilingual musicians from North Wales, having over 1,000 followers on at least one social media platform and professionals working in organisations that support the Welsh music scene. This was done to ensure that the participants had in-depth knowledge of the minority-language music scene in North Wales. The objective was to gain an in-depth understanding of the Welsh-language music scene, and therefore, predominantly English-language artists were not considered for interviews. A total of forty-six Welsh independent artists, bands and professionals were contacted via Facebook, Instagram, website, email and phone, and twelve of them agreed to be interviewed, resulting in a response rate of 26%. A significant amount of usable information was obtained after the twelfth interview, with repetition observed in several major themes, such as availability of music venues and opportunities for artists. All the interviews were conducted in the post-COVID era between 2021 and 2024. They were conducted via Zoom software which had an inbuilt "Record" feature allowing the researcher to record the interviews for transcription. Once all the interviews were transcribed, a thematic analysis of the interviews was done with multiple layers of coding in order to explore the main themes that emerged from the data. A qualitative analysis software, NVivo, was used to code and develop relevant themes emerging from the interviews.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the collected data revealed several key themes, which are discussed in this section. Three main themes that emerged through a multilayered coding process are explained in detail. It was found that even in the absence of strong professional infrastructure and monetary support, the close-knit and supportive nature of the community, driven by a strong desire to preserve a minority language, creates many informal performance and networking opportunities for musicians, particularly in northwest Wales, where the percentage of Welsh speakers is higher.

4.1. Small Informal Venues as Spaces for Live Music and Community Engagement

North Wales does not have many large music venues. There are only a few music venues in the region having a capacity of more than 500, as observed from secondary data. Venue Cymru in Llandudno is the largest venue in the region with an arena capacity of 2,500 (1,450 in theatre), whereas the Pavilion theatre in Rhyl is the second largest with a capacity of just over 1,000. Other venues with capacity between 500 and 1,000 include William Aston Hall in Wrexham and Theatr Clwyd in Mold, both located in the northeastern region of Wales. However, there are several other medium-sized venues such as Neuadd Ogwen, Pontio and Galeri which can accommodate between 300 and 500 people in live music events. Thus, there is a limited number of medium-sized and large-sized music venues in the whole North Wales region.

However, there is an abundance of smaller venues that host live music events which are largely informal and are not listed as music venues by Creative Wales or any other organisation. One of the themes that emerged from the interviews is the existence of many small and informal opportunities in North Wales. The venues hosting live music events in the North Wales region mainly include pubs, bars, coffee shops, community centres and village halls. Many pubs and bars across the region organise weekly open mic or live music events which offer opportunities for local Welsh artists and bands to perform, network and build their fan base. These venues are not listed as grassroots music venues because their primary aim is not music; these spaces hold weekly or biweekly music events for local or regional artists. These small venues provide valuable opportunities for artists in the early stage of their musical careers to showcase their musical work. They tend to host live music events in order to bring the community together and establish close connections between artists, community members and others. These venues provide Welsh artists with easy access to musical opportunities in a friendly atmosphere, without the need to navigate more professional hurdles.

This was confirmed from the interviews and the participants were mainly optimistic about the state of the music scene and opportunities for artists. The interview participants frequently referred to musical opportunities in North Wales as “small” and “informal” which they referred to as a positive characteristic of the music scene, providing a friendly networking atmosphere for artists. This helps Welsh artists at the early stages of their careers with valuable opportunities to perform, network and get noticed by the local community that shares similar cultural values. The participants acknowledged,

“The majority of the venues in North Wales specifically are the pubs”. (Member of a goth/nu-metal bilingual band from North Wales)

“I really enjoyed going to see bands. And it was, you know, it’s all very small scale. Everything is small scale”. (Welsh folk artist from North Wales)

“If you want to play to about 100, 200 and 50 people, those venues are just everywhere”. (Member of a Welsh rock/folk band from North Wales)

“But otherwise it was, grassroots as they say, you know, small places, pubs, bars”. (Welsh folk artist from North Wales)

In addition to these, another participant acknowledged,

“And I know in Anglesey there are little villages and you know, but you’ve also got a lot of pubs that offer stages to or opportunities to bands and artists as well, so there’s definitely a pub in Anglesey that does that. There’s some, especially, you know, where pubs have been bought by the community these days, so it’s not just a pub, it’s a community hub”. (Manager of an organisation promoting musical activities for young people in North Wales)

Therefore, many pubs are seen as “community hubs” rather than drinking establishments which provide musical opportunities to artists. Some pubs are even community-owned. Snowdon (2014) acknowledged that pubs in the UK have been shut in the last two decades due to declining sales caused by less alcohol consumption in pubs. Cultural changes have led people to choose alternative leisure activities instead of drinking at pubs (Snowdon, 2014). This decline in the culture of pub drinking can also be attributed to other factors such as economic changes and the recent cost of living crisis. In the post-COVID scenario, these establishments are organising more musical events, including live music and open mic nights, to attract audiences from local communities. Additionally, more people are eager to watch live music events in the post-COVID scenario. The interview results suggest that many people are recognising the significance of these events after the COVID-19 pandemic when lockdown laws forced the closure of music events. Pubs can benefit from holding music events to draw consumers, as people are becoming more interested in live music events while indulging in less alcohol consumption. It is essential that independent musicians, mainly in the early stages of their careers, take up these informal opportunities which would help them to showcase their musical talent and network with community members and other artists. This underscores a mutually beneficial connection in which local venues can revitalise their spaces by facilitating cultural experiences, while emerging musicians gain significant opportunities to perform, expand their audiences and establish professional and social networks within their communities.

Although these venues do not have professional music infrastructure and equipment, they provide valuable opportunities for artists to connect with the local community, build a fan base, sell compact discs and merchandise and network or collaborate with other musicians. Performing at local pubs or village halls can provide a relaxed experience which often cannot be found in the more rigid structure and formal environment of a professional venue. A lot of small community events at these venues in North Wales, such as village halls, are funded by various Welsh Government grants, such as Noson Allan (Night Out scheme). In towns and villages where a significant percentage of people speak the Welsh language, artists singing in Welsh can effectively use this opportunity to perform and establish valuable connections with fans, artists and community members. Even though there are only a few specialised music venues, several interviewees were optimistic about the live music scene, acknowledging that small events happening throughout the region can provide significant opportunities, especially for artists in the early stages of their musical careers. As the participants said,

"One of the fortunate things is that these there is music everywhere in, in North Wales and there's opportunities everywhere". (Member of a goth/nu-metal bilingual band from North Wales)

"I think the Welsh music scene is thriving in a way that it hasn't done for a while and I think that it's developing". (Manager of an organisation supporting Welsh music in North Wales)

"The opportunities is if you sing in the Welsh language, it's very easy to get small gigs and you can and you can very easily become quite busy with small gigs if, you know, obviously if you're good, that helps". (Welsh folk musician from North Wales)

"If you're kind of, especially if you're starting out, I'd say it's easier to start out in North Wales than it is in South Wales just because there's more opportunities to play, you know, at open mic nights, maybe or like, just playing at like a local pub, and that kind of stuff". (Member of a Welsh rock band from North Wales)

"So if you're an established or if you're an upcoming artist or a band. I think it's a better time than any right now for to get your music heard to get that performing experience". (Manager of an organisation supporting Welsh music in North Wales)

Thus, these small and informal venues create more opportunities for emerging Welsh artists within North Wales, as compared to other regions where the scene is more formal, even if bigger venues or better infrastructural facilities are available. Although pubs, coffee shops and village halls may not be able to provide the comforting experience of a proper music venue, they are characterised by creative freedom, community support and easier networking opportunities for artists. Although these venues are often not recognised as music venues by funders and organisations supported by the Welsh Government, as their primary focus is not music, many artists consider them as grassroots music venues which play a pivotal role for artists to develop their musical careers by providing a personal and friendly live music experience. Thus, there is a need for the Welsh Government and other organisations to reconsider what constitutes a music venue.

4.2. Impact of Minority Language and the East-West Divide

Earlier, authors such as Hill (2007) and Carr (2012) highlighted the importance of Welsh language and the desire of many Welsh people to preserve the minority language and culture from English domination. Although only 27.8% of the Welsh population could speak Welsh according to 2024 data from the Welsh Government, the percentages are significantly higher in the western counties of North Wales, such as Gwynedd and Anglesey, where majority of the population speaks the language. On the other hand, eastern counties such as Wrexham, Denbighshire and Flintshire had fewer Welsh speakers. This linguistic difference also has an impact on the music scenes in the east and west of North Wales. The strong prevalence of Welsh nationalist political party Plaid Cymru in the northwestern part of Wales also suggests that the Welsh identity is more prominent in that region. Many of the small informal venues which organise live music or open mic events are located in the northwestern counties of Gwynedd and Anglesey, where the Welsh language is more dominant.

However, Thomas (2014) acknowledged that everyone who speaks Welsh can also speak English, highlighting that their affinity towards the Welsh language is stronger, which creates a sense of cultural identity and belonging. This strong affinity for the Welsh language and identity has been repeatedly demonstrated in local events as well as international rugby and football matches. A recent example is when Dafydd Iwan's patriotic song "Yma o Hyd" (translates to "We're still here") became the anthem of Wales' football World Cup journey in 2022 (BBC, 2022). Welsh football fans were seen singing the song together at football stadiums in Qatar. Moreover, thousands of children across Wales and even outside the country had joined online with Dafydd Iwan to sing the song together before the World Cup (WalesOnline, 2022). The widespread participation, both at home and abroad, illustrates that the Welsh language and cultural values are strongly supported by people who consider their Welsh identity an important part of their lives. While it was acknowledged from earlier studies and secondary observations that the Welsh language plays a crucial role in the music scene and there is a strong desire to protect the minority language, the interviews provided detailed information on how the minority language and culture shapes the music scene in non-urban North Wales. This strong participation in cultural events and the deep emotional connection to the Welsh language suggest that language is not only a means of communication but also a central aspect of identity, which profoundly influences the music scene, especially in non-urban areas where local traditions and values are more tightly intertwined with cultural expressions.

While traditional Welsh music was deeply rooted in Celtic folk traditions, modern Welsh-language music has evolved beyond these folk origins and branched into many contemporary genres such as pop, rock, dance and electronic music. Though folk music in Welsh still exists, contemporary genres have gained significant popularity in the Welsh language over the past few decades. This sets Welsh-language music apart from that of other Celtic nations like Ireland and Scotland, where minority language music has often remained more closely tied to its folk roots. The greater emphasis on the language than the tradition of music genres highlights that the Welsh language has more significance among artists and communities than their cultural roots and tradition.

The strong presence of Welsh language and culture in the region can provide a significant advantage for Welsh-language artists, as they're more likely to receive support from local communities who share similar cultural and linguistic values. This may also have contributed to the notion that breaking into the Welsh-language music scene is somewhat easier compared to other scenes, such as in England, which do not share a common desire to preserve a minority language from extinction. As an interviewee said,

> *"I think it's very easy for a band in Wales, compared to England, for example, or many many countries, because you can get recognition comparatively easily in Wales. It's through the Welsh language. ok, you don't reach thousands and thousands of people. But you, you will if you've played maybe a couple of gigs or if you've sent in the tape, you will very often be heard on the radio, on national Radio Cymru. And you know, it's comparatively easy for that, whereas bands over the border will be sweating and gigging and gigging and gigging to get any kind of recognition". (Welsh folk musician and event organiser from North Wales)*

This perspective, shared by an experienced Welsh musician and event organiser, suggests that the linguistic aspect can make it easier to gain recognition in Wales, particularly in regions with strong Welsh-speaking communities. Moreover, Welsh-language artists are more likely to get opportunities in the western counties where the language is more widely spoken and there is minimal influence of the international music market in this region, except in a few bigger venues. This contrasts with music scenes in urban regions. As a participant mentioned,

> *"There are for example like Neuadd Ogwen in Bethesda, run by Dilwyn, who programmes some interesting international stuff. And next weekend he's got a festival in indigenous music. But none of that seems to dominate the local scene in the same way that the international music market dominates the southeast of England, or to a lesser extent, Cardiff. So there's very much a flavour of the place and as you suggest in the question, some of that is language. Some of that is communities, some of that is geography. There aren't any big venues". (Head of an organisation supporting Welsh-language music)*

While some bigger venues such as Venue Cymru, Neuadd Ogwen, Pontio and Theatr Clwyd sometimes host international artists, the smaller venues tend to thrive with local or regional artists. A major reason for the localised nature of the music scene is the existence of the Welsh language and the desire to preserve it from extinction, which forms a part of the cultural identity of people who identify as being Welsh, or "Cymraeg". This contrasts with other rural or non-urban music scenes like the Bega Valley of Australia, where Gibson & Gordon (2018) acknowledged that venue managers often face difficulties in balancing between offering opportunities to local musicians and bringing in artists from outside the area. This is different from rural North Wales, where event organisers at small venues do not have to rely on bringing in artists from outside the region. Therefore, although the geographical isolation and ruralness may play a role, they may not be the primary factors leading to the localised nature of the scene. However, the shared minority language and culture, informal nature of the scene and strong community support emerging from the shared desire to preserve the language and culture are likely the reasons why the music scene is highly localised. This localised nature of the music scene is more prevalent in the western counties of North Wales such as Gwynedd and Anglesey, where the Welsh language, culture and identity is more prevalent than the eastern counties, as reflected in Welsh Government' s 2024 annual population survey. Northeastern counties near the English border such as Wrexham have fewer Welsh speakers, and therefore, the music scene is not as localised as in the northwest.

Therefore, the presence of a unique language, culture and community in North Wales has shaped a unique, localised music scene where Welsh-language artists can thrive, especially in the western counties. The desire to preserve the Welsh language and identity not only encourages support from local communities but also creates a distinct musical environment that stands apart from other music scenes. While geographical isolation might have an impact, it is mainly the shared cultural values and strong sense of Welsh identity that shape the local music scene.

This sense of shared cultural values and a strong Welsh identity ultimately provides a solid foundation for the growth of a distinct and thriving music scene in North Wales, where language and community serve as key drivers of artistic expression and support.

4.3. Small Festivals as Key Platforms for Music Opportunities

In Wales, the National Eisteddfod is the largest cultural festival, which takes place in a different location across the country each year. The locations vary widely, including cities, towns, villages and even rural or mountainous regions throughout both North and South Wales. As James (2024) acknowledged, National Eisteddfod is the largest travelling festival of its kind in Europe, attracting more than 170,000 visitors across the world. The National Eisteddfod is an 8-day celebration of the Welsh language, culture, heritage, arts and music. The interview participants pointed out that this festival provides one of the few opportunities for Welsh artists to perform in front of thousands of people. Other big festivals in North Wales include Focus Wales and the Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod, which also offer performance and networking opportunities leading to international exposure.

However, many smaller festivals take place in cities, towns and villages across North Wales run by local communities, councils or funded through Welsh Government schemes such as Noson Allan (Night Out). As Gibson & Gordon (2018) and Thompson (2020) acknowledged, small community-run programmes and festivals in rural areas can increase local engagement and cultural vitality. These small and localised festivals in the predominantly Welsh-speaking towns and villages such as Caernarfon, Dolgellau, Llangefni, Blaenau Ffestiniog and Beaumaris, offer Welsh-language musicians valuable opportunities to perform, grow their network and connect with the local community. These festivals, often unticketed, offer live music events where artists from the local area can perform, network and grow their fan base. Many of these festivals are not dedicated to music and the arts, but to local food and artisan festivals, which offer stages for local musicians. As the interview participants mentioned,

> *"We have Sesiwn Fawr Festival, which was once probably one of the biggest in Wales at one time. Then just on the road in Llanuwchllyn, and there was a festival in Bala, there was the festival in Blaenau Ffestiniog, there was a festival ten miles down the road Dinas Mawddwy had a festival. So there's been lots of festivals this summer and that's just within a radius of about twenty miles of where I live". (Folk musician and founder of a festival)*

> *"A lot of villages are putting on their own little music festivals now because it's a way to get people, get the community together". (Manager of an organisation promoting musical activities for young people in North Wales)*

Many of these festivals are celebrated in towns and villages with a strong Welsh-speaking population, where Welsh artists can easily integrate into the community and perform music. The frequent display of music and cultural activities through these small-scale events, even if they are not solely dedicated to the arts, indicates that arts and music play a crucial role in the local culture that unites communities.

On the other hand, this localised nature of the music scene in rural northwest Wales indicates that local artists may not easily get recognition outside the region, unless they get concert opportunities outside the area or perform at bigger festivals such as the National Eisteddfod or Focus Wales. The geographical isolation and the informal nature of the music scene also indicates a lack of industry professionals in the region. This highlights the need to use promotion and networking skills on social media platforms in order to connect and network with fans, media producers and organisations which support Welsh music, as many of their professionals may be located in major cities of the south, such as Cardiff. Due to the unique shared cultural and linguistic identity in the northwestern part of Wales, there is an opportunity to boost music or cultural tourism in the region, which could draw visitors from outside the region who get a taste of this unique cultural identity, including the minority language music scene. According to Visit Wales, Welsh Government's tourism organisation, tourism in North Wales is primarily characterised by history and heritage, castles, beaches, coastal walks, mountains and nature reserves, where music and contemporary culture do not have priority. However, small festivals or music events in Welsh-speaking tourist locations, as well as large festivals like the National Eisteddfod, which attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors, can draw tourists and offer them a glimpse of the Welsh music scene.

5. Conclusion

While previous studies on the contemporary Welsh music market focussed on issues such as infrastructure, finance and state of venues, far less attention has been given to how the unique language and cultural identity contribute to the scene, especially in areas where the language is more dominant. North Wales lacks large music venues with high-level infrastructure. However, many small informal venues and festivals provide musical opportunities for Welsh artists in the region. While UK Music (2019) previously acknowledged that the number of grassroots music venues in Wales had reduced largely due to financial difficulties, results from this study suggest that a range of small-scale music events are organised at primarily non-music venues such as pubs, coffee shops and village halls. These small events increase the vibrancy of the music scene in strong Welsh-speaking regions. Many pubs in the significant Welsh-speaking regions of North Wales have turned into community hubs where people gather, engage and listen to live music. Frequent small music events across the region indicate adequate participation of artists and audiences in the local music scene. The small events, often unticketed, are sometimes funded by Welsh Government schemes such as Noson Allan (Night Out). This indicates that local communities and artists sharing a common language and culture strongly value music events in the region. This is not only rooted in Wales' rich musical history but also reflects the importance placed on preserving and celebrating music in the Welsh language. The strong, close-knit communities result not only from the rural nature of the region but also from the shared language, which enhances the richness of minority language music in the area.

Moreover, local or regional artists dominate the scene with less influence of the international music market, particularly in northwestern regions with strong Welsh-speaking communities. The situation is different from areas such as southern England or rural Australia, where venue managers often require inviting artists from outside the region (Gibson & Gordon, 2018). Although some larger venues occasionally host artists from outside Wales, the music scene is not heavily reliant on artists from outside the region. Apart from the geographical isolation, this also results from the friendly, informal and shared musical culture in the Welsh-speaking regions of North Wales. Welsh artists can also perform and connect with local communities at small festivals held in different towns and villages across North Wales, often hosted by local councils and communities. These festivals facilitate connections with local communities that share the same Welsh identity, language and culture. Therefore, even though there is a lack of strong infrastructure and big venues, small informal music events at pubs, village halls and local festivals provide artists with opportunities to perform, network, engage and generate revenue through merchandise sales. In a close-knit community like North Wales, where people share a unique cultural identity largely based on the minority language, artists can get valuable performance and networking opportunities, even in the absence of robust infrastructure or financial support.

This article has not only addressed a significant gap in the Welsh music scene as discussed earlier, particularly in North Wales, but also contributed to theory and knowledge on niche and minority-language music scenes. It has demonstrated how a minority-language music scene can thrive despite having limited music-related infrastructure. This vibrant musical community, mainly in the western part of North Wales, is shaped by individuals united by a shared culture and a desire to protect their minority language, who come together to organise and support small festivals and informal concerts in their local area. While previous studies by Ballico (2017) and Bennett et al. (2018) have shown that remoteness of an area can create tight-knit musical communities, in North Wales, both the region's isolation and the shared language contributed to the development of a strong and supportive community where music creators and consumers can easily engage and network with each other. While prior studies such as Gibson & Gordon (2018) and Stromblad & Baker (2023) have mostly focussed on rural music scenes by addressing areas such as infrastructure and cultural production, far fewer authors have extensively studied how live music venues in these areas can act as social spaces where people connect and boost community engagement. Therefore, this article contributes to studies on sociocultural values of music venues in non-urban music markets. If Straw's (1991) definition of a music scene, as highlighted by Bennett (2004), is applied to the Welsh music context in North Wales, a strong scene is formed not only through musical style and genre but also through the support of people united by the shared use of a minority language, regardless of genre.

There are limitations to this study that resulted from time constraints and difficulties in reaching many venues and festivals due to a lack of public transport, such as the incorporation of ethnographic observations. While the interview sample provided useful insights about the music scene and repetitive answers were noted, it may not still fully represent the views of all Welsh artists in the region. The participants were predominantly males, which

may have limited the diversity of perspectives captured and constrained the generalisability of the findings. Only one out of the twelve interviews included a female artist. While the Welsh music scene in North Wales appears to be predominantly male-dominated, as explored during the interviews, attempts were made to include more female artists; however, these were unsuccessful. This may reflect a broader lack of support for, or confidence among, female artists in the region. However, the study has opened up areas for future research. There is an opportunity to explore the role and contributions of female artists in the North Wales music scene and to examine how support for them can be enhanced. Future research can also investigate whether English-language artists in the region face different opportunities and challenges from Welsh-language artists due to cultural and linguistic differences. This would help in gaining a greater understanding of the overall North Wales music scene, which includes both English-language and Welsh-language artists. Moreover, comparative studies could be conducted by examining the results alongside those of other similar music scenes.

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