

The Irish Bar: An Identity Familiar to All

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Photo: Typical bar interior - aged wood and deep green interior displayed in Malones Irish Bar. Prominent Irish brand 'Guinness' is regularly featured in the bar's décor. © Clarrie Baker



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Malones Irish Bar is a popular tavern nestled in the heart of Edinburgh. With a wide clientele, ranging from students to solitary patrons and a solid branding of being an 'Irish Bar', Malones has a faithful following. During my ethnographic research it became clear that it was Malones solid branding and identity as an 'Irish Bar' that stood out as one of the most important reasons for customers to visit the bar.

So why do Malones customers frequent the bar so regularly? For many it was simply the warm and welcoming familiarity of the dark wood interior, the deep green décor and the friendliness of the staff. A student informed me that when they visited bars on George Street in their first year at university they felt as if they "somehow shouldn't be there" in a way that they have never questioned their presence at Malones. In fact, the feeling that they could unapologetically be themselves without any judgement was a common response from patrons, something that seemed to reassure their sense of personal identity – making Malones feel like a safe space. Students reported not feeling like a secondary customer or stereotyped in the way they feel they are in other bars. Solitary individuals who came to watch sport said they enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere and the feeling that they could come alone without it seeming unusual. Sports such as rugby and football are regularly televised, incorporating supporters of both of Irish and non-Irish teams into the bar's identity through the unity of sport and promotes the Irish brand through this shared team spirit. This leads me onto the second component of how I determined identity to be the most prominent theme at Malones.

What is it about Malones that evokes this sense of security amongst clientele? Undeniably there is no 'us and them' mentality like a stranger entering a village pub; perhaps this is something that doesn't occur in a city? Through my observations and discussions with participants I established that the branding of an Irish bar is one of its selling points. Everyone I spoke to, regardless of their nationality has Irish bars in their country of origin. I even found myself in an Irish bar in Turkey last summer. It therefore appears that the Irish bar has gradually evolved into a brand that appeals to all as a symbol of familiarity with the recognisable wood and deep green interior, adorned with shamrocks and Irish flags. Thus, Malones has become familiar in Edinburgh because everyone can identify with it and relate it to the naturalness of home, and this is how the bar has established its persona. By playing on the idea of 'home' and comfort the bar attracts a broad clientele, which shows that the Irish bar brand is a successful one. Whether this feeling of comfort derives from the 'Irish' aspect of the bar or the familiarity of the brand of Irish bar is not something that can be answered from my research in one bar.

Ultimately, it looks like the identity and brand of the 'Irish bar' is widespread and that it promotes the feeling of comfort and familiarity experienced by its patrons. It is this brand and identity that is part in characterising Malones as a friendly place to spend one's free time. The 'Irish Bar' is not a place of 'self-discovery' but somewhere that patrons can go with confidence in their identity, without worrying about false pretences or how they feel they should be acting. The theme of identity therefore manifests itself in the idea that neither the bar nor its clients need to change in order to fit in.