

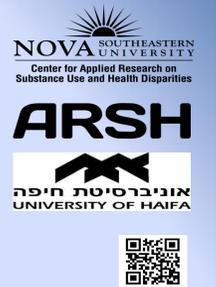
A Social Ecological Examination of Substance Use and Sexual Risk Behaviors among Women Participants in Israeli Club Culture

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Background

- The modern all-night dance club culture is found in nearly all major cities, and is common in the larger Israeli cities of Tel Aviv and Haifa. Tel Aviv is known as the 'nightlife capital of the Middle East' and is renowned for its active, diverse, and international scene.
- Club drugs are common in these settings, with substances varying over time, but generally include MDMA (ecstasy), powder cocaine, ketamine, methamphetamine, gamma-hydroxybutyric acid (GHB), and LSD. The attraction to these substances is the increased stamina which enables participants to dance all night, in addition to the intoxicating, euphoric, disinhibiting and sometimes hallucinogenic effects that are said to enhance the nightclub experience.
- Designer drugs, such as synthetic cannabinoids and emerging psychedelic/stimulant drugs (e.g., mephedrone; DMT; 2C-B) have recently become common in Israeli club scenes and are often marketed as legal and safe.
- The tendency to mix numerous substances puts these nightclub participants at high risk for health problems, HIV transmission risk, criminal justice involvement, and mental distress, such as depression, anxiety, or suicidal ideation. These health and social problems can be especially concerning for women club scene participants.



Purpose and Methods

Purpose: The purpose of this analysis is to present preliminary data from an ongoing qualitative study of the social ecological factors influencing substance use and sexual risk behaviors among women participants in Israeli club culture.

Methods: Data include participant observation in four large nightclubs in Tel Aviv and Haifa. In addition, qualitative interviews with seven women respondents are also included. Targeted and snowball sampling strategies are being employed to recruit eligible participants.

Eligibility: Eligible participants: (1) reported recent and regular use of "club drugs" (cocaine, ecstasy, LSD, GHB, ketamine or methamphetamine) at least 3 times during the last 30 days, (2) attendance at one or more large Israeli nightclubs at least 2 times during the past 30 days; and (3) between ages of 18-39.

Data collection and analysis: Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured protocol. A grounded theory approach is being used to investigate the social and environmental factors related to club culture participation and risk behavior. Interviews were transcribed and translated from Hebrew into English. NVivo software was used for analysis.

Participant Observation – Key Findings

- Club X** – Evidence of the use of molly (MDMA), and other club drugs such as GHB and mephedrone inside of the club included the large percentage of patrons consuming water and eyes that appeared to be "swimming." In addition to these club drugs, the inhalant amyl nitrite (poppers) was also observed. Security was not highly visible, and there were a number of dark spaces in which patrons could hide behaviors. One trend noticed in this club and subsequent clubs in Haifa was the vulnerability of women. Several women who were having gastrointestinal difficulties and steadiness problems occupied the restroom areas nearest to the dance floor, and one asked us for assistance with her belongings while she used the restroom. Many other women, both alone and in groups, were extremely high.
- Club Y** – Cocaine use at this club was much more prevalent than in the others. Because the club conducts security searches prior to entry, it is thought that such large bags of cocaine might be brought inside by employees. Whether cocaine, synthetics, or some other substance, behaviors related to snorting drugs were prevalent. We again observed a number of women who were alone and not in full control. We do not know whether they came to the club alone or were left alone by companions after arrival.
- Club Z** – The trend of young, vulnerable women continued in this night club. Women, both alone and in groups, were very high and unable to properly care for themselves. This situation was particularly worrisome because of the violence inside of Club Z. We witnessed several fights and violent episodes in which security officers forcibly removed patrons.
- Club A** – This small night club was the last one visited during the night and was the most similar to Club Z. Patrons were younger and less affluent. This club was very dark and had many dark alcoves in which to consume drugs. Many patrons were using MDMA or GHB. Again, there were several vulnerable women who were very high and alone.

Participants

- A total of 7 women participated in in-depth interviews. Participants ranged in aged from 23 – 28. All participants live in Tel Aviv, but previously came from other parts of Israel. Participants reported working in bars or restaurants.

Qualitative Interview Data – Key Themes

In Control of Being Out of Control

- "I'm a person who needs to be in control. Coke actually increases one's control over their body. That's why a lot of lawyers and professionals use it. It focuses you in an unbelievable way. With all the other drugs, you decide. It's all psychological. You decide where to take the experience."
- "With hard drugs, acid for sure, but MDMA also, it's really important that there is someone familiar next to you. You want people with good vibes. You want to know someone. You need someone to pull you back to reality. Keep you grounded. If you do it alone, you are not sure what's real or not, if you don't know where you are or who you're with. It doesn't matter if they are using too as long as you know them you can get a grip on reality."
- "One time I was on very heavy medications after stretching a tendon. And I took it for 5 days, with lots of food. And then Thursday came around, and I drank a whole bottle with MDMA, and then remembered I wasn't supposed to with the pills, and I panicked. So my friend was next to me the whole evening drilling in my head 'look how good everything is', 'look how pretty and fun'. And it worked. She gave me a 'faisal' [joint] in addition, and everything was fine."

Sex and Drugs are Intertwined

- "The bathroom is for dancing, using, running lines, sex, selfies in the mirror...sometimes you also pee."
- Usually you only go into the bathroom with friends and people you know. But if someone [I don't know] offers me a line, there is a chance I will go into the stall with him...just into the stall, not to a dark alley or something. Guys always expect something in return. They come with extra coke so they can offer it to girls for sex. It really depends on the club. Last time a guy offered me a line it was my boss, and we ended up in the bathroom. But if I don't like the guy, I don't go into a stall with him.
- For MDMA or coke, I'd just be at a party and someone you know just asks if you want to run a line or take a sip from their water bottle. So at [club] all of the guys are old and ugly and offer lines to get girls. It works on some girls. There are girls who wait near the bathroom waiting for someone to offer them a line. I think they are broken.
- I guess in terms of quality assurance - I'll drink if he drinks. It can't be the rape drug if he is drinking it too. But there have been times I took stuff from people without making sure.

Security Doesn't Care About Drug Use or Sex

- "I work at a club. Security is crucial in case something happens, but they have to be inside the club, not at the door. They [security] are there for the violence."
- "They [security] are not there for the drugs."
- "One time I saw a guard take a water bottle from someone and taste it. It was MDMA and they took the bottle and kicked him out of the club...maybe he [security] wanted it for himself."
- The guards will never call the police if they catch you [with drugs]. In all likelihood, they will just kick you out. Part of their job is to catch [the drugs]. A couple of the clubs were previously closed by the police because they found hard drugs on the premises, so now it's part of what they do. But sometimes they will look the other way... Obviously they know the water isn't water, but they [will only do something about it] if they catch you with powder or mixing. Then they take it. They won't look for it, they are not the police... But they need to appear as though they are watching, because their might be undercover cop around. Personally, I know there are, I am absolutely sure of it, though I'm not afraid of them. I guess that's why we go in the bathroom stalls.



Discussion and Conclusions

Participant observation in four Israeli night clubs revealed some important social ecological influences on substance use and sexual risk behavior. Specific substances used by Israeli club-goers are similar to those reported by club-goers in the United States and Europe. A common occurrence across all four Israeli clubs was the presence of women who were exhibiting a loss of control resulting from substance use. Moreover, many of these women were alone and/or experiencing substance use-related problems (e.g., gastrointestinal difficulties) in addition to being very high. Security appeared to be focused on preventing and halting fights among club patrons, rather than mitigating drug use and sexual risk behaviors.

While the vulnerability of women was prominently observed during the authors' field research, a prominent theme during in-depth interviews was idea of "being control of being out of control." Women detailed heavy substance use and also described knowing and deciding how to control the effects and experience of substance use. Having other friends around to help them "get a grip on reality" was a key component of establishing a sense of control. However, women also described their friends as being high at the same time. Thus, it is not surprising that so many intoxicated and vulnerable women, both alone and in groups, were witnessed during participant observation. This vulnerability is compounded by the club security personnel who are not concerned with substance use or intoxicated patrons inside the clubs. Added to this is the practice of engaging in concurrent drug use and sexual activity and/or trading sex for drugs in the club bathrooms. Women stated that agreeing to accompany a man into the bathroom for a line of cocaine, for example, will lead to some form of sexual activity. Though women may not view it as such, this practice presents a situation in which already vulnerable women are placing themselves at greater risk, including complications for substance use, sexually transmitted infections, or victimization.

Findings from this ongoing study indicate that structural interventions may be a good way to reduce problems for women. Security personnel, already present in the clubs, could be trained and encouraged to conduct protective surveillance of women club participants. In addition, female security officers near bathrooms might mitigate sexual risks, substance use, and potential victimization.