

A Qualitative Examination of Substance Use and Sexual Risk Behaviors among 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.



Aim and Methods

Aim: This qualitative study, which is part of a larger ongoing study, examines gender differences in substance use and sexual risk behavior among men and women participants in Israeli club drug culture.

Methods: in depth qualitative interviews were conducted with men (n=4) and women (n=8) who were over the age of 18 and reported recent (past 30 days) use of club drugs (e.g., cocaine, ecstasy, LSD, GHB, ketamine, or methamphetamine) and attendance at large Israeli nightclubs.

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. Interviews were conducted in Hebrew and were simultaneously translated and transcribed into English. NVivo software was used for analysis.

Interviewees

- A total of 8 women and 4 men participated in in-depth interviews. Participants ranged in age from 23 – 35. All interviewees live in Tel Aviv, but previously came from other parts of Israel. Younger club goers (under the age of 30) reported working in bars or restaurants in addition to studying. Older club goers reported working in media or design. Two of the men were married, and one reported having a baby. All other participants (men and women) reported being single, not in a relationship and identified as straight.

Qualitative Interview Data – Key Themes

Being in control?

Women:

- "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 MD, 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."

Men:

- We take a lot of shit. It's really out there. Truth is the dealer gives it to you and you don't really know what it is... Like all these synthetic mushrooms. No idea what the fuck they are... But of course I take them.
- I used to also do 'shrooms. You don't feel them in the same physical way [that you feel MDMA, ecstasy] but the hallucinations are much clearer. I see everything more visual... Everything is more alive. The 3D is clearer. So if you look at a building and its background they separate from each other and then you see it in 3D... Once I did it at this party and then after I say green light rays that cut everything. I close my eyes, I see the world move and everything becomes one piece... Actually it's something I like to think about philosophically. I look at time not chronologically, it's outside of the prism of chronological order, and you see how this chronology becomes one object and all of humanity and all our surrounding connect... At the end there is an epiphany, you say "wow, this is it, I grasp the concepts of time" and then it crumbles and you start over so you can enjoy it again. The experience is the same, but different, the next time.
- I was in a lot of situations where I just want to lie down on the asphalt because it feels good [talking about being under the influence of MDMA]. I was in a lot of situations where I was on the asphalt because it feels good. All of the sudden, you find yourself in the middle of the street laying down and where you in you everyday life do you get to enjoy just laying down on the street... You're body has this frequency that fills your chest. You feel this inner heat.
- Nothing ever happened that made me want to stop, to say 'fuck it, I'm not built for this, I'm out'.

Security doesn't care about drug use or sex, clubs facilitate

Women:

- "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.

Men:

- There's security. There are a lot of drugs they can't detect, it's too small. No one can find it on you, and they don't look. They look for people with violent tendencies, not suicidal ones. So they don't look even when you're inside the club. If it's the MD you're drinking in the water bottle or this pill you pop in your mouth. Nobody will ask you... With coke it's a little more of a problem. It's a whole production to go snorting. But again, it's something you do in the bathroom; no one [from security] will go in the bathroom with you. There are a lot of places that actually encourage it. In the sense that you go to the bathroom and there's a built in metal tray that you can line with cocaine.
- We don't pay for alcohol [at the club]. I hate that you have to pay so much. We bring it from home.... You put it on the girl. They never check the girls. And I also always have a flask on me that's packed with tequila. We do it because it's always fun to do hard drugs with alcohol. It brings you up. So you want it on hand and I don't want to have to wait in this crazy-ass line next to the bar for 20 minutes until someone looks up at you... What you really need is for everything to be available at any given moment.



Sex and drugs are intertwined

Women:

- "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's 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.

Men:

- I didn't give a shit about anyone [females]. It was like, 'you wanna stay, stay. You don't want to stay, go. I don't give a fuck about you.' I just didn't give a shit. 'If you want some, come, do you job [referring to sexual acts] and if not - you can go'. You do what you do, every once in a while you also go out and have a drink and every once in a while you talk. I used to get into fights and arguments on purpose. To make them leave. 'You don't want to be here, don't be here'. I used to pull so much crap so get into a fight. I was an asshole, big time, I was shit. Really, I see it now that I'm married and it's a different world, but I used to just not care, I didn't want [my relationships] to work. I needed her for my own use, I was a horrible person... My own use, what I need, 'do what I tell you or figure out what I want to do and if you can't - fuck off'. I'll move on to somebody else. So I did.
- All my girlfriends and I used to use together. What I mean is they have a good effect. Never negative... The relationship is stronger, spiritually... My wife and I have been together for years, on and off. Our joint experiences are strong. And it effects our dynamic when we're not using. I get her. She gets me me. Just looking, no talk... The drugs build this communication avenue that's underneath the surface, and you get to know each other just by being, by feeling each other.
- You remember flashes of feelings, not concrete situations... Everything is pleasant. All the time. You see a male friend and you hug him. And it's fun for you and fun for him and it's not a problem that you are hugging. It's like you stroke him. He strokes you. And it feels good for you. And it feels good for him. ... The 'feeling good' bit, that the MD, the Ex and the similar ones. There nothing you can do about it. It just makes you feel good [interviewee identifies as a heterosexual male, is married, and has a child]

Discussion and Conclusions

Women described common cultural practices, such as trading sex for drugs inside club restrooms, paying little or no money for drug. Men, on the other hand, describe paying substantial amounts of money for drugs, and using them to facilitate sexual acts with women in and out of the club scene. Men, who identified as being straight and married, also describe past and current sexual contact with other males. Women only described sexual relationships with males. While women describe being in control of "being out of control" and taking measures to assure that they are not alone in case of emergency, men describe many experiences of being out of control, yet do not address control as an issue or describe taking measures to mitigate their lack of control (personal or towards others). Both men and women describe a milieu in which they take (women) or buy (men) various drugs from people they do not know, without knowing exactly what they are being given. Both genders also believe that club and security personnel permit and/or facilitate drug use and related sexual behaviors inside the clubs.

While the vulnerability of women was prominently observed during the authors' field research in earlier phases of this ongoing study, in-depth interviews conducted to date have pointed to some important differences between men and women club goers in their attitudes towards control, drug use and sex. Both genders do not perceive club security as having a role in mitigating drug use or risky sexual behaviors. 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 practices 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. The interviews suggest that women may be particularly vulnerable to negative consequences of drug use, including victimization, substance use disorders, and transmission of HIV or other sexually transmitted infections. Prevention efforts must address multiple social ecological factors to increase safety and decrease risk exposure for young adults in the Israeli club drug scene.