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## Motivations for Selling Ecstasy among Young Adults in the Electronic Dance Music Club Culture in Brazil

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### ABSTRACT

This article describes data on the motivations for selling ecstasy among young adults in the electronic dance music (EDM) club culture in Brazil. Individual interviews were conducted with 20 individuals recruited for their involvement in the EDM club scene. Eligible participants were aged 18–39 and reported ecstasy and/or LSD use one or more times in the past 90 days. Exclusion criteria included current treatment for drug/alcohol problems and cognitive impairment or clinically evident psychiatric disorder. Mean age was 22.92 (SD 2.77), 60% were male, 45% reported 12 or more years of education, 50% did not have a primary partner, 50% were living alone, and all had friends who also used ecstasy. Three main themes emerged: (1) “easy” transition from ecstasy user to seller; (2) desire to achieve popularity and fame; and (3) need to sell ecstasy to maintain the high cost of EDM club scene participation. This is one of the first studies of ecstasy sellers in Brazil. The results demonstrate the ease with which the participants transition from ecstasy user to seller. Given the potential health and social dangers associated with ecstasy use, public health campaigns to prevent ecstasy use and policy initiatives to limit the ecstasy supply are warranted.

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The electronic dance music (EDM) culture has its roots in rave and gay male circuit party subcultures that arose during the 1980s (Fritz 1999; Kurtz, Inciardi, and Pujals 2009; Silcott 1999; Thornton 1996). This type of nightlife environment is found in many major cities around the world and usually attracts young adults. The EDM club culture provides participants with a space to escape typical routines and engage in “time out” behaviors with lowered social control and less individual responsibility for their behaviors (Owen 2003; Shister 1999; Uriely and Belhassen 2006). Freedom from parental monitoring, combined with lack of responsibilities such as marriage or parenthood (Arnett 2000; Bachman et al. 1997), may increase the likelihood of engagement in problematic behaviors, including risky sex, heavy drinking, drug use, and driving while intoxicated (Arnett 2000; Chen and Kandel 1995).

The drugs commonly used as part of the EDM club culture, also called “club drugs,” include powdered cocaine, methamphetamine, ketamine, flunitrazepan, gamma-hydroxybutyric acid (GHB), and LSD (Beck and Rosenbaum 1994; Measham, Aldridge, and Parker 2001; Reynolds 1998; Sanders 2006; Thornton 1996). Perhaps the

most popular drug among participants in the EDM culture is ecstasy (3,4-methylenedioxy-Nmethylamphetamine, MDMA) (Lee et al. 2011). These drugs typically promote feelings of confidence, energy, and euphoria that contribute to the ability of young adults to dance all night and experience intoxicating, euphoric, and disinhibiting effects (Fritz 1999; Reynolds 1998; Silcott 1999). Ecstasy use has been linked to high-risk sexual behaviors as well as psychiatric symptoms, including memory problems, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Klitzman et al. 2002; MacInnes, Handley, and Harding 2001; Mattison et al. 2001; McCardle et al. 2004; Parrott et al. 2001; Roiser and Sahakian 2004; Schifano et al. 1998).

Ecstasy consumption and participation in the EDM culture among young adults has become a trend in Brazil (Battisti et al. 2006; de Almeida, Garcia-Mijares, and Silva 2009; de Almeida and Silva 2005; Pechansky et al. 2011). The limited available data suggest that ecstasy consumption is largely restricted to single, heterosexual, well-educated young adults of middle or upper socioeconomic status (Carlini et al. 2010; de Almeida and Silva 2005; Pechansky et al. 2011). Because of their higher social and economic

status in society, it has been suggested that young adult ecstasy users in Brazil are influential and may encourage ecstasy use among their non-drug-using peers (de Almeida and Silva 2005). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2011) states that although ecstasy consumption has stabilized in other parts of the world, it is increasing in Brazil. Although epidemiologic data on ecstasy use in Brazil are not available, the Federal Police of Brazil have seen a 100-fold increase in the number of ecstasy pills seized at the country's ports and borders, uncovered eight large drug ecstasy laboratories within Brazil, and seized over 1.4 million ecstasy pills (International Narcotics Control Strategy Report 2015).

The buying and selling of ecstasy has become a prominent feature of an illicit economy at nightclubs, raves, and similar venues (Sanders 2006). The social picture of ecstasy use and distribution in Brazil appears similar to that of the United States, where most ecstasy sellers are middle- to upper-class, educated, and employed young adults who act as small-scale suppliers for a core customer base of friends and acquaintances (Jacinto et al. 2008; Sales and Murphy 2007; Schensul et al. 2005). Sellers differ from dealers in that a seller is a person who may possess and use drugs but the sale of drugs is not their primary purpose. It has been suggested that many users also participate as sellers and vice versa (Jacinto et al. 2008). Thus, it is not uncommon for ecstasy sellers to reject identifying as a dealer (Jacinto et al. 2008). Reasons for ecstasy users' initiation into sales include the ease of selling, social connections to obtain and sell, and sales as a way to fund one's own ecstasy use or make money (Sales and Murphy 2007). One study reported that users in São Paulo most often obtained the drug from friends, dealers, or both (Battisti et al. 2006), yet no literature describes ecstasy sellers in Brazil who supply users in the EDM club scene. The present qualitative study was guided by this research question: What are the motivations for selling ecstasy among young adults in the EDM culture in Porto Alegre, Brazil?

## Methods

### Data collection

Qualitative interviews were conducted with young adult ecstasy users as part of an exploratory study of EDM club-goers in the metropolitan area of Porto Alegre, Brazil, a city of 1.5 million inhabitants. Eligible participants were aged 18–39 and reported having used ecstasy and/or LSD at least once in the 90 days prior to the interview. Exclusion criteria included current participation in alcohol or drug use treatment,

cognitive impairment, or evident psychiatric disorders that might interfere with the conduct of the interview. Potential participants were recruited from raves and EDM events to determine eligibility, and were asked to provide contact information to the research team.

Recruitment was conducted using a venue-based sampling approach. Project staff, in conjunction with key informants in the club scene, mapped the primary club “hot spots” (e.g., bars featuring electronic music, nightclubs, rave parties, and parks) where potential participants were known to congregate. “Hot spots” are defined here as places within a bar or club where risky or illicit behavior tends to take place. Potential participants were approached by project staff in these locations on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evenings or late nights, as well as on Sunday afternoons in local parks where groups of participants would get together.

Based on initial observations and key informant interviews, we determined that much of the drug-related activity and partying happens not only inside club venues, but also in the queues that form at the entrance. Many patrons spend substantial time outside the clubs meeting friends and acquaintances. The queues served as contact points for field staff to approach potential participants, since it would not be possible to collect data inside the clubs because of the noise and atmosphere. On data collection days, the interviewers would cover predetermined locations in pairs or small groups, and conduct screening interviews among interested individuals. Eligible and interested participants were invited to participate in the study. Subsequent participants were recruited by the initial participants based on a snowball sampling strategy. Further details of this technique with this specific sample can be found elsewhere (Remy et al. 2013a).

Twenty young adults signed an informed consent form and completed in-depth interviews conducted between January and March 2011. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and generally took place in semi-private places that included shopping centers, coffee shops, a city park, the study field office, and the participant's home. Participants were compensated with a lunch voucher equivalent to US \$7 and transportation fare when necessary. Research protocols were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Delaware, and the Ethics Committee and the Office of Human Subjects Protection of Hospital de Clínicas de Porto Alegre, Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul.

The interviewer followed a semi-structured guide listing various topics to ensure that all areas of interest were covered. While particular attention was given to discussions related to the sale or distribution of ecstasy, the interview guide also focused on: (1) EDM culture; (2)

recreational use of club drugs, including history of use, consumption patterns, and motivations for use; (3) perceived social and health consequences of ecstasy use; (4) mental health; and (5) sexual behaviors.

The semi-structured interview method allowed for some flexibility so respondents were provided space to express themselves in their own terms and at their own pace (Bernard 2011). The interviews were conversational in style with topics from the interview guide being discussed as they naturally occurred during the conversation, rather than maintaining a fixed format.

All interviews were digitally audio-recorded and a data accounting log was used to track collected data. The data collection log (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014) documents on a single form when and what type of information has been collected from specific participants and sites. A contact summary form collected basic information about each participant, such as gender, age, and level of education, in addition to describing and summarizing the most salient themes discussed during each interview (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Interviews were transcribed by an independent transcriptionist and reviewed for accuracy by the principal investigator. A panel of experts discussed occasional inconsistencies. Transcribed interviews were entered into ATLAS ti version 7 for data management, coding, and analysis.

## Analyses

A grounded theory framework guided the data analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In this method, as researchers review the data collected, repeated ideas, concepts, or elements become apparent and are tagged with codes. Codes are defined as anchors that allow the key points of the data to be gathered. The coding process is inductive and grounded in the participants' voices. As more data are collected, and as data are reviewed, codes can be grouped into concepts—defined as a collection of codes of similar content that allows the data to be grouped—and then into categories. These categories may become the basis for new theory. Categories are defined as broad groups of similar concepts that are used to generate a theory. Each interview produces key concepts that are later linked and analyzed in order to form theories (Bernard 2011; Glaser and Strauss 1967).

A basic principle of the grounded theory approach is that interviews are conducted to the point of saturation, meaning no new insights are gleaned from additional interviews (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Previous research has shown that saturation can be reached after as few as 12 interviews (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006).

Upon transcription of each interview, the first two authors created preliminary codes using *descriptive* and *in*

*vivo* schemes. *Descriptive* codes use words or short phrases to summarize passages of data, while *in vivo* codes use actual language from participants to name concepts and themes (Saldaña 2013). In addition, memos were written after each participant was interviewed and after each interview was coded by the first author to reflect code choices, emergent themes and patterns, and conceptual models. Following the last interview, the first author coded the interviews a second time to ensure that coding was consistent throughout the dataset. Codes were reviewed and agreed upon by all authors. Data collection was a cyclical process in which codes and memos were used to guide subsequent interviews, coding, and memo writing, as advocated by Saldaña (2013) and Glaser and Strauss (1967). Next, the data were themed (Saldaña 2013), in which the final set of codes and their meanings were transformed into longer and more descriptive themes in order to organize recurrent meanings and patterns. Themes and definitions of themes were constantly compared across interviews to ensure consistency and reliability; external validity was ensured through the use of thick, rich descriptions of data, which provide the researcher with sufficient detail to identify patterns and relationships and evaluate the extent to which such descriptions reflect the lived experience of the population (Creswell 2013; Lincoln and Guba 1985). Following Denzin (1989), triangulation consisted of: (1) using multiple analysts to review findings to ensure comprehensive interpretive analyses; (2) recruiting participants from multiple locations; and (3) quantitatively assessing ecstasy use and associated behaviors (see also Pechansky et al. 2011; Remy et al. 2013b, 2013a).

## Results

The mean age of study participants was 22.92 (SD 2.77), 60% were male, and 45% had 12 or more years of education (Table 1). Half of the sample did not have a primary partner (boyfriend or girlfriend) at the time of the interview and 50% lived alone, either in a rented place or a place that they or their family owned. Most participants were heterosexual (13), with smaller numbers self-identifying as homosexual (6) and bisexual (1).

All participants had friends who also used ecstasy, described themselves as members of dance communities in which ecstasy use was commonplace, and often sold ecstasy to friends and acquaintances. Most of the sellers characterized their behavior as a service they provided to their friends.

### Transition from user to seller

Participants described an easy transition from being only a user of ecstasy to becoming a user and a seller.

**Table 1.** Demographics ( $n = 20$ ).

Variables	n (%)
Age (mean $\pm$ standard deviation)	22.92 $\pm$ 2.77
Gender	
Male	12 (60)
Female	8 (40)
Educational status	
8 to 11 years (middle/junior high school)	11 (55)
12 or more years (high school)	9 (45)
Residence	
Living alone	10 (50)
Living with boyfriend/girlfriend	1 (5)
Living with parents	9 (45)
Marital status	
No boyfriend/girlfriend	10 (50)
Boyfriend/girlfriend	8 (40)
Married	1 (5)
Separated	1 (5)
Sexual orientation	
Homosexual	6 (30)
Heterosexual	13 (65)
Bisexual	1 (5)

Many participants described their experiences with ecstasy as including both using and selling the drug, without a clear distinction between being only a user or only a seller. As one male university student stated, “I sell, and then I use.” Several participants mentioned that once they began to use ecstasy, they very quickly became aware of the benefits of also selling the drug and the ease with which it could be done. In the words of one participant working as a DJ (TD, age 26), “I tried the ecstasy pill once, and I had a friend that asked me if I had one for her, then another friend asked the other... and when I realized, I had 10 pills in my hand and I was selling. The thing was going on... easy money and a lot of money.” A male university student (FL, age 21) described a similar initiation into selling and said, “I met the guys who already usually sell the drugs, and then I bought from them to use. In the beginning, I did not sell, just used. But after the third party I began to sell. It is very easy. I bought for a good price, in larger quantities and resold it to friends. That’s how I started.”

Others described similar transitions. One college student (PJ, age 24) stated, “You begin as a user of ecstasy, and then you meet the guys and you easily become a seller. If you get a good dealer, you buy the drug for R\$20 (about US\$5) and sell it for R\$40 (about US\$10).” Another student (DM, age 24) echoed the same sentiment: “The user becomes a drug dealer because it is easy money.” In addition to being money easily earned, the profits can be high. For example, one male university student (FL, age 21), describing how much he could earn during one night out, said, “Selling some 100 capsules of ecstasy, you could earn R\$2,800 to R\$4,000 (about US\$700 to US\$1,000) per night.”

Though these participants were largely from middle- to upper-class homes, earning such large sums of money made the transition to selling hard to avoid, especially because participants did not consider ecstasy selling to be dangerous. “It’s not like selling cocaine, which is bought in the most dangerous places to resell,” said a male college student (FL, age 21), who went on to say that for him, “the deal is fun.” In the Brazilian context, a “rush guy” refers to low-level drug sellers, who largely sell to maintain their own drug use and lifestyle. This concept was discussed by a young male college student (AD, age 18), who said, “I’m a rush guy... rush guy because I sell, and I enjoy the sale.” Thus, in addition to potential earnings, a lack of perceived danger and the enjoyment of the sale prompted many participants to engage in this practice.

### **Popularity and fame**

One of the most frequently mentioned motivations for selling and distributing ecstasy was to become popular with their peers. Several male participants described the desire to be recognized as famous and prominent figures in the EDM club scene and to have everyone know who they are. As one young male university student (FL, age 21) described it, “Those who sell have more money and girls, meet new people, and end up becoming famous. It is a world of glamour.” Another university student stated, “You are popular at the party and everyone is after you.” These experiences of selling, which led to greater interaction with women in the club drug scene, were supported by female respondents, who described being attracted to men who sold ecstasy. Said one female college student (TK, age 24), “I started dating a guy; he was very popular. He used eight tablets of ecstasy per night. My friends heard that he sold and everyone wanted it. I pointed him out to many people. He was getting a lot of money. He started selling drugs and doing it quietly, and suddenly he became the boss of all raves.”

### **The cost of selling**

One negative aspect associated with selling ecstasy was the high cost of continued participation in the EDM scene. One male university student (age 21) mentioned, “I made a lot of money, but I spent everything buying drinks and drugs for friends.” Still another male participant (TD, age 26), who also worked as a DJ in addition to selling ecstasy, said, “To maintain the lifestyle, you have to sell. My friends began selling to keep the rave style: clothing brands, big car, and a pumped-up body. It’s a way to belong and be part of the culture.”

This participant went on to say, “There are people who have a lot of money in the parties, for example, and they have glasses that cost R\$1,000 (about US\$250). This is something that in my reality does not exist, you see,” and that he “felt bad standing in that environment,” which is highly materialistic. However, he continues to sell ecstasy and maintain the lifestyle. A male participant (TD, age 26) said, “Everybody in the culture has a beautiful body and the girls are like dolls, beautiful and well dressed. I did not want to be out of this.” From these descriptions, it appears that once a certain level of popularity is achieved, the maintenance of popularity requires great effort and money, thus causing participants to continue selling ecstasy.

## Discussion

This study investigated the motivations for selling ecstasy among young adults in Porto Alegre, Brazil. All respondents were regular participants in the EDM club scene and reported having many friends who also participated in the club scene. Three main themes emerged from the interviews: (1) participants described the easy transition from being an ecstasy user to an ecstasy seller; (2) this transition was often driven by the desire to achieve popularity and fame in the EDM club scene; and (3) there was a need to sell ecstasy to maintain the high cost of EDM club scene participation.

In Brazil, ecstasy users are often middle- or upper-class, heterosexual, trend-setting young adults (Battisti et al. 2006; de Almeida, Garcia-Mijares, and Silva 2009; de Almeida and Silva 2005). This social picture was seen in the young adult participants in this study, who were mostly educated, middle-class, and heterosexual. Generally, participants in the current sample described positive experiences with ecstasy. This is worrisome, given previous research suggesting that ecstasy use is a public health concern in Brazil (de Almeida and Silva 2005).

Of potential importance, ecstasy users reported the ease of making money by selling ecstasy, often involving little more than using the drug and participating in the EDM scene. The use of ecstasy facilitated the development of large social networks to which the user was able to sell, consistent with other research which emphasized the influence of the social environment, including ecstasy-using social contacts and attendance at dance music events, as important predictors of using and selling ecstasy (Smirnov et al. 2013). Moreover, drug selling inside dance music venues, especially club drugs such as ecstasy, has been described as an intrinsic aspect of the club scene (Sanders 2006). Thus, for participants in the

EDM scene, the tendency to adhere to group culture as well as the inherent vulnerability in doing so seem to encourage using and selling.

These findings indicate that ecstasy sellers in the EDM club scene do not fit stereotypical images of Brazilian drug dealers, who are largely armed drug traffickers working in urban slums (Remy et al. 2013b). Instead, these findings are similar to prior studies in which drug sellers can be friends selling to friends or episodic users who sell to support their own habits (Hammersley 2011; Tarter et al. 2011). Moreover, like ecstasy sellers in other contexts, participants in the current sample “drifted” into selling, rather than making a conscious decision to become an ecstasy dealer for their primary source of income (Jacinto et al. 2008).

As described by male participants, the sale of ecstasy is associated with popularity and fame in the EDM club scene. While females did not describe desiring these things for themselves, they did find popularity and fame to be attractive qualities in males. Male participants noted that benefits obtained by ecstasy selling, including social status, material possessions associated with increased popularity, and attractiveness to members of the opposite sex, are especially meaningful.

Unfortunately, ecstasy use is associated with numerous adverse health and social effects (Klitzman et al. 2002; MacInnes, Handley, and Harding 2001; Mattison et al. 2001; McCardle et al. 2004; Parrott et al. 2001; Roiser and Sahakian 2004; Schifano et al. 1998). Data from Brazil indicate that large proportions of ecstasy users meet substance dependence criteria and report unsafe sexual behaviors and concern for health risks associated with use (de Almeida, Garcia-Mijares, and Silva 2009). Public health prevention programs directed toward young adult ecstasy users are needed, as they may help reduce consumption of this drug and limit the potential for health and social problems resulting from these behaviors. One possible approach is targeting peer social norms, both descriptive (i.e., perceptions of the common behaviors of those around you) and injunctive (i.e., perceptions of what is commonly approved or disapproved behaviors) (Reno, Cialdini, and Kallgren 1993), which may discourage ecstasy selling and consumption. Similar approaches have met success in substance-using young adult populations in the United States (Wilson, Stover, and Berkowitz 2009). In addition, public policy initiatives that limit the supply of ecstasy and related substances may help, but the logistics required are complex since these drugs are widely available via the Internet.

Given the sampling methods and specific eligibility criteria, findings may not be generalizable to ecstasy

users and sellers in other locations. In addition, data presented are based on self-report. Recall bias, interviewer effects, and social desirability are potential limitations. However, trained interviewers, investigator expertise, and knowledge of local EDM club culture likely mitigated these effects.

Findings from this study represent the first study of ecstasy sellers in Brazil and demonstrate the ease with which the participants transition from user to seller. Reasons for this transition are related directly to EDM club scene participation. The social aspect of valuing the achievement of popularity and fame, as well as the economic aspect of maintaining a specific lifestyle, appear to be the principle drivers of ecstasy selling among these participants. Given the potential health and social dangers associated with ecstasy use, public health prevention campaigns to discourage ecstasy use and policy initiatives to limit the ecstasy supply are warranted.

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