

An In-depth Study of Psychotropic Substance
Abuse In Hong Kong

Dominic TS Lee

MBChB(Hons), MD, MRCPsych, FHKAM, FHKCPsych

Associate Professor of Psychiatry, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Lecturer of Social Medicine, Harvard Medical School

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1.1 The present study was commissioned to examine the recent changes in the local drug scene, in particular the use of mind-altering substances in party and disco contexts.
- 1.1.2 A qualitative approach was adopted and the study was ethnographic in design. By using an open-ended approach to collect insider information from those who live within the “rave” culture, it was hoped that the data would shed lights on the rapidly changing drug culture. The investigation consisted of four components: participant observations in drug abuse educational activities, interviews with key players of local party and drug scenes, participant observations in parties and discos, and in-depth interviews with party and disco informants.
- 1.1.3 The study yields rich and novel data on what is commonly called “rave culture.” The so called “rave” is actually made up of parties, discos and clubs, which are distinctive entities that deserve independent examination and analysis. Party and disco drug scenes are shaped by different history, cultures, key players, participants, and meanings. While party drug use is new to Hong Kong, disco drug abuse is long-standing and is only one facet of a more complicated youth problem.
- 1.1.4 The alleged “epidemic” of ecstasy and ketamine abuse was re-examined. It is felt that Hong Kong lacks quality empirical data on party drug use. Although the CRDA recorded a rising trend of ecstasy and ketamine abuse, the figures should be interpreted with caution. This is because the CRDA system is better

suitable for addictive substances, which generally have well-defined caseness. The fact that most ecstasy and ketamine users do not develop significant physical and psychosocial dysfunctions also contributes to the ambiguity in reporting caseness. Given these difficulties, the rise in ecstasy and ketamine user population may not be as acute as the CRDA suggested.

1.1.5 The size of the party drug user population is estimated. Though the estimation is preliminary, it is hoped that it may alleviate some of the unjustified panic generated by misrepresenting reports.

1.1.6 It is felt that parties and discos require different policies and interventions. It is envisioned that party culture is a hype that will gradually fade out. Thus prevention of morbidity and mortality caused by overdose and dehydration is of priority. Provision of creative substitutes (e.g. break dance, skate boarding) may also help shorten the hype cycle for rave party. Local discos are frequented mostly by marginalized youths. Social policy is more important than drug policy in reintegrating them into the society. It is also felt that supply reduction executed at the border may be more effective than party and disco drug raid.

1.1.7 Party and disco drug users often restrain their drug use following serious overdoses. However, unless they quit partying and discoing, it is unlikely that they will cease their drug use. Full time employment and stable relationship are central to recovery and abstinence from the disco scene. For people who have not yet contemplated leaving the drug scene, a multi-stage approach that emphasizes controlled drug use, harm reduction, healthy substitute pastimes, and meaning centered counseling is proposed.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1.1 This study was commissioned in late 2000 to examine the latest trends in psychotropic substance abuse in Hong Kong. This was in response to the rising trend of new drugs of abuse (i.e. ecstasy and ketamine) captured by the Central Registry of Drug Abuse (CRDA), with growing awareness that the abuse of these new drugs is closely connected with the so called “rave culture”¹. Although the abuse of ecstasy and ketamine in parties and discos was widely and colorfully reported in the media, there had been hitherto few well-conducted studies in this area?.

2.1.2 It was in this context that the present study was planned. This study was qualitative and ethnographic in its approach as relatively little had been known about the drug phenomena in rave parties and discos. It was felt that an open-ended approach (in contrast to hypothesis-testing in quantitative research) was more suitable as identifying the key issues in the emergence and development of the new drug scene should be given the priority. The ethnographic approach means that the study began with few assumptions about the drug scene. Even facts widely publicized in Hong Kong were carefully reviewed, re-examined, and scrutinized. It was envisioned that by doing so the study would lead to new observations, perspectives, and hypotheses about the party drug phenomenon. These observations and hypotheses can be subjected to validation in future quantitative studies.

2.1.3 A qualitative approach was chosen for two other reasons. First, it was virtually impossible to set up a representative sampling frame. There was no

¹ The term “Rave Culture” is often used in Hong Kong to refer to the party and disco scenes.

convenient and practical way to identify a group of drug users that represented the new drug scene, not to mention that it was not entirely sure what this new drug scene was about. Second, when the study was commissioned, most of the understandings about the latest development in party drugs were based on media reports, unconfirmed anecdotal cases and rumors within the drug culture. Before engaging in expensive quantitative hypothesis testing, there is a need to clarify and scrutinize these widely held beliefs. Just to cite two examples: Is the perceived increase in party drug abuse grounded in empirical data? Do party drugs commonly lead to physical and psychosocial dysfunctions of the concerned individuals?

2.1.4 The ethnographic approach of the present study has several unique features. First, a wide spectrum of key players and informants of the drug scene were interviewed in depth. The researcher also joined different types of parties, clubs, and discos using the method of participant observation. By spending long periods of time participating in the party and disco scenes, the researcher had first hand experience on what it was like and what it meant to be in a party. The participant observations also gave the researcher the opportunity to observe and cross check the genuineness/reliability of the reports by the informants. The methods of ethnography, commonly used in anthropology, are relevant to the present study because modern party and disco cultures are to a certain extent comparable to “virtual tribes” within modern societies². The ethnographic approaches turned out to be very useful as significant discrepancies were identified between what were reported in the public space and what actually happened in the drug using contexts.

² See Rave Culture: An Insider’s Overview by Jimi Fitz (Chapter 10 The Tribal Experience).

2.1.5 This is not a study that emphasizes on representativeness and hypothesis testing. This is not an epidemiological study that yields figures about the rates and distribution of new drug problems. However, the present study will inform the local society as to what the new drug problems are about. What are the new drugs? Where are the new drugs used? Who are using these drugs? Why did new drugs emerge in new contexts? What does it mean to take these drugs in parties or discos? What are the dangers and other implications? What is the likely scope of the problem? What are the misrepresentations of the new phenomenon? How does the abuse of new drugs in party contexts differ from traditional forms of drug abuse? What are the unidentified issues? These were the issues that this study aimed to address.

2.1.6 This report is written with the policy makers and opinion leaders in mind. Hence, instead of putting down basic background and detailed findings of intellectual interests, the researcher chose to select observations and interpretations that were of particular relevance to policy formulation. Along the same line, in writing the report, the researcher deliberately avoided academic and anthropological language as far as possible.

2.1.7 This report is aimed for an audience that has basic understandings of rave culture and related drug use. It is not a textbook for the novices. Hence, this report does not review what rave culture is, what rave party is like, and what ecstasy and ketamine are. Readers who are not familiar with these topics are advised to review the relevant literature (see appendix 1 for details). This report will also focus on local phenomena that are different from what are generally observed in the global rave and drug scenes.

2.1.8 Last but not least, when the study was commissioned, the publicity generated by the phenomena of rave parties and entailed drug use had aroused profound public concern. There was an unspoken public expectation that immediate actions be taken to tackle the alleged epidemics. Such had shaped the design and time frame of the study. By academic standard, the present study was planned and conducted within a very short time frame. Hence, the time constraint had some bearings on the scope of the study. This will be explicated in later sections.