

Report on
A Study of Substance Abuse in
Underground Rave Culture and Other Related Settings

Executive Summary

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1. Rave culture first appeared in western countries in the 1980s. It is a mixture of dance, music, drugs, youth culture, and deviance culture. The culture came to Hong Kong in the late 1990s. There has been an increase in the popularity of rave parties and discos in the past decade. However, this study found that the rave culture is transforming quickly in recent years. Large-scale rave parties are disappearing and changing into a variety of less structural and small-scale underground settings. The focus of this study is placed on the substances abuse behavior among young people in the context of the Underground Rave Culture (URC).
2. **Definition:** The Underground Rave Culture (URC) basically refers to those underground activities that, as a part of the rave culture, can also be regarded as a combination of youth culture, deviance culture, drug culture, dance culture, and music culture. Participants in URC place more emphasis on communicating with friends and regard taking drugs as a ritual, a form of recreation, and as an enhancer of activities (e.g. dancing). Drug consumption is often a means to an end rather than an end itself.
3. At first, URC takes the form of small-scale discos or rave parties in different local communities and has now become more widely spread. It has the effect of giving participants greater access to drugs, and expanding their networks to form groups in which drugs are consumed. URC has been changing rapidly and developed into different forms of activities. The activities that go on within URC

are multifarious, but transitional and temporary.

4. It has to be noted that URC has prevailed in those organized and illegal parties or discos where the organizers do not get the license from the government to hold discos/parties. Young people not only dance and listen to the music in these environment, they also abuse substances in such organized and illegal rave parties. In our study, we found that these activities took place in *privately run discos and parties* (私竇), *resort houses* (渡假屋), *drug dealers' warehouses* in industrial building, *cyber cafés* (網吧) and *shopping malls* (after the normal opening hours). However, URC cannot be regarded as a mainstream culture for drug abusers to take drugs, but develops from the rave culture. Their drug taking behaviors are not only restricted to the places that mentioned in URC.
5. In the context of Underground Rave Culture (URC), as we found in this study, the types of drug behaviour can be further divided into three categories, each of which involved taking drugs in specific settings. First, the respondents might abuse drugs in *organized, structural, and commercialized settings*, such as small-scale discos/ dance clubs and Shenzhen discos.
6. Second, they might take drugs in *spontaneous and self-initiated ways*. That is, drug abuse is often a peer-related and in-group activity among youngsters. Some would take drugs in their friends' homes or in their own homes, at karaoke bars, at video game centres (機舖), in public parks or country parks.
7. Third, some young people would treat drug abuse as *an entertainment program of other activities*; that is, they would abuse drugs in various places. For instance, the respondent in this study had taken drugs at beaches, in cinemas, and at podiums of public housing estates.

Findings of Qualitative Study

8. **Target of interviews:** Semi-structured in-depth interviews with 30 young drug users (18 males and 12 females) who had psychotropic substance abuse experience in the context of URC and who aged between 15 to 30.
9. **Respondents' drug beliefs and values:** The majority of the respondents held the belief that they were not addicted to any drugs. They claimed they were casual and recreational users, since they only took illicit drugs on special occasions, such as friends' birthdays or certain festivals like Christmas. They also believed that they could control their drug dosage. They just wanted to experience the "happy" feeling that drugs gave them and were confident in their ability to control their drug usage.

10. **Observation of social workers:** A total of 23 social workers from different settings participated in the study. Overall speaking, the social workers agreed that the problem of substance abuse among young people in the context of URC was serious. The age at which they start taking drugs has been getting lower, and most of them are poly-drug users. They also confirmed that young people would abuse at various places, such as in their homes, at friends' homes, in public gardens, in the stairwells of public housing estates, or even on buses and in the street. Hence, the substance abuse behaviour among young people in the context of URC highlights the seriousness of the problem. For there is a clear trend of habitual substance abuse. Like smoking or drinking, the respondents take drugs in various places, as if it is a kind of hobby.

Findings of Quantitative Study

11. In the survey, we studied the drug abusers' pattern of taking drugs, and their psychological states as identified by the *Chinese Drug Involvement Scale (CDIS)* and the *Chinese Purpose in Life Questionnaire (CPIL)*. Snowball sampling was used in this survey to recruit respondents who had drug abuse experiences in the context of URC, including drug abusers identified in discos and rave parties by the research team, and drug abusers referred by outreaching social workers (N=201). The scales were also administered to students (non-drug users) from a purposively selected secondary school which had students of academic standards relatively lower than average (N=233). The results were compared with the young drug abusers group.
12. **Sample characteristics:** It was found in the survey that male drug users (61.7%) accounted for a higher proportion in our sample. There were relatively high unemployment rate among the drug users (44.8%) as compared with the population as a whole. It was also found that the drug user group had higher single parent rate (23.4%) than the school comparison group (7.3%). It implied that drug abuse behaviour is related to the status of being in a single parent family.
13. **Disco/rave activities:** Regarding the frequency of visiting disco, nearly half of them (45.9%) visited disco twice a month or more. Social gathering (including "meeting friends" and "being invited by friends") accounted for 58.4% among the major reasons of visiting disco or rave party. While some of the boys (8.6%) visited disco for making new friends as the major reason, none of the girls took it as the major reason, much more girls (32.9%) than boys (17.2%) stated that

dancing was their most important reason of visiting disco. Getting drugs accounted for 13.0% among the major reasons of visiting disco.

14. **Drug abuse pattern:** Most of the drug abusers (88.6%) were poly-drug users and had ever abused more than three kinds of drugs on average. The three most popular drugs were Ketamine (89%), Ecstasy (84%), and Cannabis (79%). In the last month, each subject on average had abused drugs for more than five times ($\underline{M}=5.35$). Most of the subjects (73.1%) abused drugs in more than one location. On average, they abused drugs in more than two places ($\underline{M}=2.41$). Apart from disco/rave parties, it should be noted that 53% of our respondents abused drugs at their own homes or at their friends' homes, in Karaoke and other entertainment venues such as 'Cyber cafes' and TV game centres (44%). Moreover, many of the participants had the experience of substance abuse in public areas (34%), such as parks.
15. **Drug abusers' attitudes towards drug abuse:** It was found that drug abusers and their peers generally showed acceptance towards substance abuse. Their motive for drug abuse was mostly out of fun. Most of the drug abusers tended to deny their problems or under-estimate their involvement in drugs. Nevertheless, the drug abusers realized that there were adverse effects of drug abuse on their health, their study, or their work.
16. **Comparison between drug abusers and students:** It was found that the drug abusers had higher CDIS scores ($\underline{M}= 70.5$) than non-drug users ($\underline{M}= 32.0$). The difference was significantly different as expected and was consistent with the purpose of CDIS being a measure of one's involvement in substance abuse. The CPIL difference between drug abusers and non-drug users was also statistically significant, and it was found that drug abusers had their CPIL ($\underline{M}=88.0$) lower than the non-drug users ($\underline{M}=97.6$). It meant that drug abusers had less purpose in life than that of the non-drug users.
17. **Relationship between CPIL and CDIS:** The CPIL and CDIS were negatively correlated for both drug users ($\underline{r}= -0.189$) and students ($\underline{r}= -0.314$). It suggested that those with higher involvement in substance abuse tended to have a more negative purpose in life.

Trend and extent of drug abuse problem in the context of URC

18. Based on the findings of this research, we anticipate that the problem of substance abuse in the context of both URC will continue to exist and transform. It is noteworthy that in the current social and economic environment, young

people with low academic motivation and achievement will not be in a position where they will be able to gain a sense of success and self-fulfilment. Hence, substance abuse will remain an easy way for some young people to gain peer recognition and avoid unhappiness and boredom.

19. “Drug buffet” or “drug cocktail party”, with all kinds of drugs (including heroin) provided for free use at a party, were apparently a common underground cultural practice among drug abusers. We consider them very dangerous and the drug abusers are at a greater danger of becoming addicted to heroin.
20. We also anticipate that drug users in the context of URC will act as a “transmitter” of this social illness to their friends and community. While drug-taking activities being organized in small, unstructured groups, police detection and social worker interventions become difficult.

Recommendations

21. **Formalizing the management of entertainment venues:** To reduce the possibility of drug trafficking at discos, a personal licensing system for disco staff needs to be set up to ensure that no personnel have a criminal record. Body searches and tests for psychotropic drugs should be carried out at the entrances, to ensure that customers do not carry or use drugs at these events.
22. **Drug prevention education:** Drug education should be an integral part of secondary schools’ health and social studies curricular, and drug education programs be provided as extracurricular activities.
23. **Anti-drug programs and publicity functions:** They should be target-specific to different groups, including young drug abusers, at-risk youths, normal youths, and parents. The government should put more emphasis on the programs that make use of the stories of former drug users, and increase their circulation through the Internet. NGOs should be invited to design anti-drug programs and make it a requirement for them to involve ex-drug users, so that the programs will be more acceptable to young drug users.
24. **Social Services:** More resources should be allocated to help young female drug abusers, who can easily get free drugs. “Youth substance abuse clinics” should be set up so as to provide basic health care services to young drug users. The service can also reach out, and make the at-risk youth become more aware of their health problems while simultaneously providing counseling services to drug users.
25. We also suggest that peer counseling programs in NGOs for drug abusers should

be expanded so that young people who have been rehabilitated can help current drug users. There should also be more services to help unemployed young drug users find jobs or participate in vocational training courses.

26. Finally, the government should launch more programs to foster the development of resilience in young drug abusers and other young people at risk. Such programs should aim to increase their self-confidence, and problem-solving skills, and provide them with strategies to enhance their bonding to their family, to their school, and to the community.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 1

Background

1. The research team was commissioned by the Research Sub-committee, Action Committee Against Narcotics (ACAN) in 2001 to conduct a study on the drug behaviour of young adolescents. This was given the title “A Study of Substance Abuse in the Context of Underground Rave Culture.”
2. Rave culture first appeared in western countries in the 1980s. It is a mixture of dance, music, drugs, youth culture, and deviance culture. Redhead (1993) argues that a rave is a dance party that evolved from the dance-musical styles adopted mainly in black gay clubs, especially the Warehouse in Chicago and Paradise Garage in New York. The prevalence of rock and pop music and the adoption of the rock star as a model for a new artistic lifestyle contributed to the increase in illicit drug use in the second half of the 20th century.
3. Rave culture came to Hong Kong in the late 1990s. However, only a small group of people would attend these early rave parties and discos, most of which were run underground before 1997.¹ However, there has been an increase in the popularity of rave parties and discos in the past few years, and more and more people, especially young people, now attend these parties and discos.
4. Under guidelines issued by the Narcotics Division,² rave parties in Hong Kong have been contained by a bilateral agreement between party organizers and the government. Under the agreement, party organizers should responsibly manage the parties (such as by providing a safe environment) and prevent any unlawful activities (especially the possession and consumption of drugs inside the dancing hall) from taking place. Most large scaled rave parties and discos in Hong Kong operate legally.
5. Some frequenters of raves predicted that the popularity of rave parties in Hong Kong would decline and even disappear from Hong Kong within one or two years. As in other countries that have faced the same problem, the government and law enforcement agents in Hong Kong use a wide range of legislature and operations to tackle illegal drug use at parties and discos. It has been argued, however, that such a prohibitive approach will drive parties and discos underground (Task Force on Psychotropic Substance Abuse, 2001).
6. With the decline of rave parties comes the rise of an alternative mode of

¹ Task Force on Psychotropic Substance Abuse (2001). *Report on an in-depth study of psychotropic substance abuse problem in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: ACAN.

² *The Code of Practice for Dance Party Organizers*, October 2000, Hong Kong SAR Government.

gathering. Along Nathan Road in Kowloon, an increasing number of small-scale disco clubs and parties have been established. They have also been spreading to other districts, especially satellite towns such as Tsuen Wan where many young people live. Often, such discos and parties do not have a license from the government and so can be considered to operate underground. The public has expressed concern that another type of culture, Underground Rave Culture (URC), will expand along with the growing popularity of underground discos and parties, youths will resort to other forms of gathering in order to take drugs in a group.

7. If discos and parties go underground, there will be no communication between the different parties, namely government authorities, law enforcement agents, youth workers, disco/party organizers, and underground disco-goers/party-goers. If the policy cannot fit the genuine needs and expectations of these young people, stronger resistance will develop among them, leading to their isolation and their refusal to seek help. If the problem worsens, it may finally lead to the social exclusion of disco-goers from our society.

Definition of Underground Rave Culture (URC) in this Research

8. When the research team was commissioned by the ACAN in October 2001 to conduct the research, whether URC existed in Hong Kong or not was largely unknown. Nevertheless, we define URC as basically referring to those underground activities that are characterized by the consumption of psychotropic drugs and, as a part of the rave culture, can also be regarded as a combination of youth culture, deviance culture, drug culture, dance culture, and music culture.
9. Apart from that, based on our review of the literature and information provided by some social workers, we predicted at the beginning of our research two possible scenarios. First, it was possible that URC might exist. There would be organized, illegal rave parties where young people not only enjoyed dancing and music, but also took drugs that were most probably provided by party organizers, by party-goers' friends or by party-goers themselves. Such parties or discos were in small scale. They were done secretly because they were unofficial and illegally. Second, at the other extreme, it was possible that URC did not exist at all; that the authorities had been successful in controlling URC and consequently drug abuse by disciplinary measures.
10. Finally, we have found from our research that URC has prevailed in those organized and illegal parties or discos where the organizers do not get the license from the government to hold discos/parties. Young people not only dance and listen to the music in these environment, they also abuse substances in such

organized and illegal rave parties. In our study, we found that these activities took place in *privately run discos and parties* (私竇), *resort houses* (渡假屋), *drug dealers' warehouses* in industrial building, *cyber cafés* (網吧) and *shopping malls* (after the normal opening hours).

11. We have also found from our research that URC has developed from the “old” rave culture and emerged as a life style of some young people in Hong Kong. Raves act as a ritual site for young people where they can gather together in order to socialize, take drugs, and have fun. Furthermore, such rave parties and discos also help participants build networks that facilitate their future drug use. In this network, they share the same culture, a common language and the common beliefs (particularly about drugs).
12. During our period of study for nearly one and a half year, however, the research team also found that URC has been changing rapidly and developed into different forms of activities. As we observed, URC was only transitional and temporary and the scope of URC has been transformed, not only restricted to those organized and illegal parties. The activities that go on within URC cannot be regarded as a mainstream culture for drug abusers to take drugs. Therefore, apart from examining the URC, research team also investigated the trend and extent of substances abuse behaviour among young people in related settings.
13. In the context of URC, the types of drug behaviour of the respondents in related settings can be divided into three categories, each of which involved taking drugs in specific environment. First, the respondents might abuse drugs in *organized, structural, and commercialized settings*, such as small-scale discos/ dance clubs and Shenzhen discos.
14. Second, they might take drugs in *spontaneous and self-initiated ways*. That is, drug abuse is often a peer-related and in-group activity among youngsters. Some would take drugs in their friends' homes or in their own homes, at karaoke bars, at video game centres (機舖), in public parks or country parks.
15. Third, some young people would treat drug abuse as *an entertainment program of other activities* and would abuse drugs in various places. For instance, the respondents had taken drugs at beaches, in cinemas, and at podiums of public housing estates.
16. As a whole, URC is part of the drug culture, characterized by the consumption of psychotropic drugs and associated activities such as dancing and listening to loud music. Participants in URC place more emphasis on communicating with friends and regard taking drugs as a ritual, a form of recreation, and as an enhancer of activities (e.g. dancing). Drug consumption is often a means to an end rather than an end itself.

17. We have also found from our research that, in the context of URC, raves act as a ritual site for young people where they can gather together in order to socialize, take drugs, and have fun. Thus, URC has the effect of expanding participants' networks and giving them greater access to drugs, leading them to form groups in which drugs are consumed. This expansion of networks also stems from information and communication technologies such as mobile phones. In this network, they share the same culture, a common language and the common beliefs (particularly about drugs).
18. Essentially, URC is a part of drug culture, characterized by the consumption of drugs (especially psychotropic drugs) and associated activities such as dancing and listening to loud music. Participants in URC tend to be young people aged between 16 and 30. With reference to their drug beliefs, they regard taking drugs as a form of recreation and a ritual. They place more emphasis on communicating with friends, thus taking drugs is regarded as a social activity with discos being used as a platform where people can interact. Taking drugs is not the only goal within this culture but it is one of the goals. Viewed from this perspective, URC can be regarded as a derivative of the "old" rave culture. However, it differs from the rave culture in that it is deeply associated with psychotropic drugs.
19. In the context of URC, drugs are used recreationally as an enhancer of activities such as dancing, socializing, having fun, feeling high, and doing something new and exciting that users would never have dared to do before taking drugs. Thus, drug consumption is often a means to an end rather than an end in itself.
20. Since the participants in URC tend to be underground and anonymous, our research strategy was to initially focus on potential URC participants such as disco-goers and the clients of outreaching social workers. The selection criteria of the participants are:
 - (A) Aged 30 or below.
 - (B) They had taken psychotropic drugs in the past six months.
 - (C) They had attended rave parties or discos.

Research Method

21. This project is guided by Peele's (1991) cognitive model of addiction, which sees addiction as a self-defeating and habitual style of coping. Data were collected from multiple sources through both qualitative and quantitative means, including standardized scale measures and semi-structured interviews.
22. Qualitative research methods are used to understand the problem from an

insider's perspective by engaging the "subjects" as equal and full participants in the research process. The results are compared with those relating to "normal" youths and other stakeholders in society (e.g. government officials, councillors) whose ideas are studied through in-depth interviews or focus group meetings.

23. For the quantitative part of the research, two scale measurements were adopted namely, the *Chinese Drug Involvement Scale (CDIS)* and the *Chinese Purpose in Life Questionnaire (CPIL)*, to provide an outsider's view of the drug experience. The results are compared with those relating to a group of "normal youths" assessed with the same tools.

Research Objectives

24. The objectives of this study were as follows:
 - (A) To study different aspects of URC, including its features, operation modes, target groups, and attraction to youths, and *compare* them with those of *normal party culture and youth culture*.
 - (B) To analyze the social, family, demographic, and other characteristics of the participants; in particular, *their drug abuse pattern and behaviour, personal values, and beliefs about drugs*.
 - (C) To assess the trends and extent of the drug abuse problem in the context of URC.
 - (D) To recommend strategies to combat psychotropic substance abuse within the context of URC in Hong Kong.
 - (E) To compare URC with the *mainstream culture of* our society.
25. We hope that this study will highlight the effects of drug control policy on young people's drug use behaviour, and provide insights into the future development of drug control policy and anti-drug programs for young people in Hong Kong.