Title

Enlightened hedonism? Independent drug checking among a group of ecstasy users.

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Declaration of interest

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Key words

Ecstasy, drug checking, pill testing, harm, pleasure, consumerism.

Abstract

Background: Research indicates that a body of ecstasy users across the globe employ 'home' drug testing technologies to learn more about the content of their drugs – a process referred to throughout this article as independent drug checking (IDC). Whilst a small number of studies offer accounts of this process, they do so through a narrow lens of harm reduction, potentially overlooking wider socio-cultural factors which may affect this. In response, this article draws on Slavoj Žižek's political theory of the *cultural injunction to enjoy*, situating IDC in the wider political economy of neoliberal consumer capitalism to contextualise and interpret its use as integral to pleasure and leisure.

Methods: This empirical study documents the thoughts and experiences of a group of UK ecstasy users who independently use a privately owned drug-testing kit. Drawing on qualitative data generated through 20 semi-structured interviews, the article considers two research questions; what role did drug checking play in the group's drug journeys and leisure activities?; and is drug checking thought to be purposeful?

Findings: For this group of ecstasy users, issues of safety and self-responsibility interweaved with the pursuit of pleasure as they sought to enjoy their drug consumption, but in a way that navigated potential harms. IDC therefore served to maximise pleasure via its 'guarantee' of a prolonged, enjoyable, authentic consumer experience whilst simultaneously safeguarding wellbeing via its premise of more responsible and controlled consumption practices.

Conclusion: IDC allowed this group of drug consumers to partake in 'enlightened hedonism' - demonstrating their conformity to the imperatives of capitalism and its social norms. Despite recognising the limitations of IDC and disclosing potentially harmful outcomes, the group's

engagement with capitalist markets provided a belief that investment in your consumer experience can both improve it and make it safer – premises that belie the empirical reality.

Introduction

Despite being illegal, the drug ecstasy, also known as 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA), is widely used across the globe (Moore, Wells & Fielding, 2019). As with all illegal drug use, those who consume ecstasy buy unregulated products of unknown composition and strength. Consequently, ecstasy users employ a variety of methods to manage the risks associated with the unidentified content of their drugs (Davis & Rosenberg, 2017), including the use of 'home' drug testing technologies (Johnstone et al., 2006). Indeed, Palamar and Barratt's (2019) recent study in the USA estimated that almost a quarter (23%) of their sample who reported past-year ecstasy use also reported having their drugs tested by such kits. This indicates that a significant body of ecstasy users undertake (what is referred to throughout this article as) independent drug checking (IDC), a process we define as the use of privately owned drug testing technologies to identify the content of illegal substances, outside of any such official services.

The independent checking of ecstasy is made possible by a burgeoning online marketplace that ensures home drug testing kits are freely available to purchase, starting from as little as £10. The most popular of these - reagent tests - seek to identify the most prominent substances evident within the drugs under review. The process of using a reagent kit involves adding a liquid chemical to a small sample of a drug, which produces a chemical reaction that turns the sample a certain colour dependent on the most prominent substance it contains. This colour can then be cross-referenced against a provided chart with different colours indicating the presence of different substances. This process can be repeated with other reagent liquids, each testing for the presence of different sets of substances. In theory, this allows users to build a chemical profile, dependent on the number of reagent liquids they apply, of the drug they possess – although this profile only shows the presence and not the quantity of each substance. Online reagent kits vary in price, guided by the number of reagent liquids supplied, meaning that users can identify either the single most prominent substance or a wider spectrum.

Research indicates that home testing kits are used globally to facilitate IDC (Davis & Rosenberg, 2017; Day et al., 2018; Johnston et al., 2006; Palamar & Barratt, 2019) with sales reportedly seeing an exponential increase (Bright, 2019). However, existing knowledge around IDC is limited with extant studies focusing almost exclusively on the accuracy and harm-reduction related inferences of drug testing technologies and post drug checking drug user behaviour. Consequently, knowledge in relation to ecstasy is restricted to trends in prevalence and some tentative insights into IDCs implications for drug-using behaviour (Barratt, Bruno, Ezard & Ritter, 2018; Camilleri & Caldicott, 2005; Davis & Rosenberg, 2017; Day et al., 2018; Dundes, 2003; Johnston et al., 2006; Murray et al., 2003; Palamar & Barratt, 2019; Winstock, Wolff, & Ramsey, 2001). A further limitation is that these studies often compile data around the use of IDC in conjunction with other harm reduction measures (see Barratt et al., 2018; Davidson & Rosenberg, 2017) or focus on generic samples of drug users (see Day et al., 2018). Resultantly, only two studies offer specific insight into IDC among ecstasy users. Palamar and Barratt's (2019) study of New York clubbers estimated that 23% of past-year ecstasy users had the contents of their drugs independently tested within the previous year, with 63.6% of these usually or always testing their ecstasy. Furthermore, Johnston and colleagues (2006) study of regular Australian ecstasy users, indicated that 22% reported personal use of testing kits with 45% reporting that they used a kit 'most times' or 'always'. Both studies indicate that drug checking interventions can (but not always) result in behavioural changes (Johnston et al., 2006; Palamar & Barratt, 2019). As such, they illustrate how IDC 'has become an important harm reduction measure' (Palamar & Barratt, 2019: 47).

Whilst these studies provide invaluable insights into IDC, its processes have thus far been analysed in accordance with a recognised research pattern within the substance use sphere (Taylor, 2016), whereby studies of novel phenomena initially employ a narrow lens of harm and its subsequent reduction (Moore, 2008). Whilst important, such a focus risks overlooking 'the multiple and contingent agencies, subjectivities and affects that circulate and participate in events of drug consumption' (Duncan, Duff, Sebar & Lee, 2017: 94). Hence, there is a need to build upon these studies to learn more about who use drug testing kits, why they use them, and how drug testing impacts on their drug-using behaviour – especially at a time when companies/organisations are proactively distributing self-testing technologies (see Busby, 2018). This article, therefore, seeks to move beyond existing notions of efficacy and harm

management (Dennis & Farrugia, 2017) by further contextualising IDC within the nexus of drug use, pleasure and consumerism (see Ayres, 2019a, 2019b; Hayward & Turner, 2019; Turner, 2018).

Drawing on data from 20 semi-structured interviews with a group of ecstasy users who use a privately owned drug testing kit to facilitate IDC, this paper considers the inferences of this process for the group's shared drug-using journeys. Examining this group of drug users as consumers (Fitzgerald, Broad & Dare, 1999), we draw on the work of Slavoj Žižek to construct a framework that contextualises IDC in the wider landscape of neoliberal consumer capitalism and hedonic consumption. Heeding calls from critical drug studies, this framework acknowledges pleasure as a central component of subjecthood (Valentine and Fraser, 2008), but extends this analysis by looking beyond pleasure to an ontology of desire (see Malin, 2017). This is motivated by a belief that desire is integral to subjectivity and defining who we are (e.g. politics, culture). It is caught up in cultural ideologies, social structures and laws, which is articulated via fantasy (Žižek, 1992). This fundamental fantasy is the setting/backdrop for desire, which is constituted by lack. 'Liberal capitalism manipulates our existence in order to generate and harness apposite forms of individual desire' (Hall, Winlow & Ancrum, 2008: 170) as every commodity/product consumed is a supplementary feature that promises to satisfy this lack but never does (Žižek, 2005). In fact, the pleasure of desire comes from inhibiting desire, oscillating around the object of desire rather than taking ownership of it. As soon as we take possession, our lust for it immediately dissipates and moves onto the next object, which drives consumer capitalism. At the core of desire is the misrecognition of fullness, but in reality, it is driven by its own impossibility. Desire is always excessive and 'combined with the alienation that shadows it in the subject's relationship with all other objects' (Hall et al., 2008: 184). It is this market of the alienation of the consumer that is central to today's political economy. We desire what the 'other' wants, as we are driven towards unrestricted pleasure demanded by the cultural injunction to enjoy and the commercial market.

This article, therefore, employs Žižek's (1992) notion of desire as unconscious and grounded in a constitutive lack alongside Žižek's (1989, 1997, 2002, 2005, 2008) political theory of the *cultural injunction to enjoy* to situate desire and fantasy as central to a drug consumer's subjectivity and behaviours. This allows us to acknowledge that we cannot properly grasp

'real-life developments' unless we examine 'the self-propelling metaphysical dance of Capital that runs the show' (Žižek, 2006: 383). As such, it situates the range of affective and embodied performances through which drug pleasures flow (Duncan et al., 2017), allowing interpretation of how, for this group of drug consumers, the purchase and use of drug testing kits served to satisfy key ideological demands of consumer capitalism.

The study's findings illustrate that for this group of ecstasy users, issues of safety and self-responsibility interweaved with the pursuit of pleasure as they sought to enjoy their drug consumption, but in a way that navigated potential harms. IDC therefore served to maximise pleasure via its 'guarantee' of a prolonged, enjoyable, authentic consumer experience whilst simultaneously safeguarding wellbeing via its premise of more responsible and controlled consumption practices. In this sense, it represented a tool to achieve an enlightened hedonism. Consequently, the use of IDC elevated this group of drug users above 'others', marking them out as savvy and enterprising autonomous consumers. This contextualised understanding of the place and utility of IDC acknowledges the risk environment of drug prohibition (Taylor, Buchanan & Ayres, 2016), hyper-consumerism and the power relations in which strategies of harm reduction are employed (Moore & Fraser, 2006), enabling a more nuanced understanding of ecstasy users, which may ultimately serve to better shape service provision (Sharifimonfared & Hammersley, 2019).

Methodology

The aim of this study was to provide a contextualised account of IDC among a group of (ecstasy using) drug consumers. It asked two research questions; what role did drug checking play in the group's drug journeys and leisure activities; and did the group believe drug checking to be purposeful? To answer these questions, this exploratory study was designed to prioritise user narratives and capture their lived experiences. The study received ethical approval from XXXXXXX Research Ethics Committee.

Research Design

To address the limitations of previous research and its reliance on quantitative methods, this study employed semi-structured interviews to provide a richer insight into the views and experiences of those who undertook IDC. Capturing the lived experiences of drug users allows the meaning of their experiences to be conveyed within the social context (Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2015). This is also consistent with the psychoanalytic approach adopted throughout this article, which emphasises the centrality of people's narratives and 'users' voices to be heard, interpreted, analysed and disputed' (Valentine & Fraser, 2008: 416). The focal point of the study was a friendship group of ecstasy users who also used IDC. 'Ecstasy' in this study refers to pills purchased under the guise they contained MDMA and not MDMA crystals. The reason being the sample primarily used the former and only undertook IDC to assert the contents of ecstasy in pill not powder form. Whilst frequency of ecstasy use among the group varied, the site of use was consistent - shared forays to raves, clubs and/or music festivals. Each member reported using (either in person or remotely) a singular reagent drug testing kit owned by one of the group on at least one occasion in the previous 12-months. Whilst this kit was situated in the north of England, members of this group resided in various locations, spanning three different counties within the UK, yet regularly co-assembled to use IDC before attending events.

Research Sample

Whilst previous studies indicate that engaging with ecstasy users who use IDC is possible (Davis & Rosenberg, 2017; Day et al., 2018; Johnston et al., 2006; Palamar & Barratt, 2019), this remains a hard to reach population. Thus, this study utilised a group of friends that were accessed by a gatekeeper known to the researchers who facilitated access to other members of the group via snowball sampling, a method often used to access drug users (Kemmesies, 2000). Indeed, many drug studies have involved similar 'foot-in-the-door access' (O'Neill, 2017) with participants known to the researcher (O'Neill, 2014; Wilson, 2007).

The sample comprised 20 individuals with an equal number of males and females. All self-reported as of white ethnicity. The age range was 20-47 with a mean of 25. Nine of the sample were full-time students, 10 were in full–time employment, and one was a full-time carer.

Whilst one of the group classified themselves as a non-ecstasy user (who engaged with IDC as a voyeur), the remaining 19 reported both past year ecstasy use (with nine reporting monthly or more frequent use and 10 either bi or tri-monthly use) and past year use of IDC to assert the contents of ecstasy they intended to take. Nine of the sample reported using/observing IDC on three separate occasions or less (including seven who had used it only once) whilst 11 reported using it on multiple occasions (classified as five or more). Two of the sample had only experienced IDC remotely (meaning they were not present but that drugs they intended to use were checked with results communicated to them), whilst the remaining 18 reported being present for this process.

When IDC took place, the individual who acted as the gatekeeper distributed a participant information sheet on behalf of the researchers whilst those who used IDC remotely had this read out to them via telephone. Individuals were encouraged to take a week to consider participation and asked to contact the researchers via email if they were willing. All except one individual who was approached agreed to participate, providing either signed or verbal consent.

Data Collection and Analysis

Individual interviews took place in a private office either in person (*n* = 8) or via telephone (*n* = 12) during a four-month fieldwork period in 2019. Each interview was recorded and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Topics covered included; previous use of drug testing kits; the inferences of drug checking for experiences, practices, and decision making; and the utility of drug checking in relation to what it did/did not achieve. Interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research took an inductive approach with two of the research team undertaking independent analysis of the data. This process involved reading and re-reading transcripts, identifying prominent themes and sub-themes, and placing all relevant verbatim within these. Each researcher identified similar themes with the ensuing framework audited by the third author. The underpinning theoretical spine of the works presented here was formulated at the very end of the project, protecting the integrity of the data and the inductive approach.

Twenty themes emerged from the data and throughout the article quotations are taken from seven of these (drug checking experiences; results; accessibility; impacts; safety; accuracy; and positives), to illustrate the contributions made by the respondents (using pseudonyms), and to further highlight the reasons underpinning IDC and its utility to the drug users. In order to contextualise the use of IDC we consider the study's emergent findings within the wider political economy of neoliberal consumer capitalism. Drawing on Žižek's cultural injunction to enjoy, we conceptualise IDC, not simply as a tool to manage harm, but as a medium through which drug consumers can responsibly pursue risk-free pleasure.

Findings: Contextualising IDC

Underpinning Žižekian conceptualisations of politics and law is the ideology of enjoyment; as capitalism has deployed the 'pleasure principle for its own perpetuation' (Bauman, 1991: 50). Enjoyment is both promoted and normalised by capitalism and its commodities, which encourage excessive, pleasurable consumption (Žižek, 1989, 2006) to the point that consumers feel guilty if they do not seize every opportunity for enjoyment (Žižek, 2014). Yet as responsible agents of choice, consumers also have to select the healthiest enjoyment option - as the pursuit of excessive pleasure, despite being solicited, is punished by the very system that incites it (Žižek, 2014). Instead, pleasure is diluted by the contradictory logic of sacrifice (Žižek, 2014), which demands that we consume, but in a tempered orderly fashion (Ayres, 2019b), demonstrating self-constraint and moderation to ensure that our pleasure is both responsible and risk-free (O'Malley & Valverde, 2004).

Hence, in the contemporary marketplace, products have been stripped of their malignant properties (e.g. coffee without caffeine, beer without alcohol) or sold containing their own antidote (e.g. Žižek's chocolate laxative) as pleasure and constraint comprise today's tolerated hedonism (Žižek, 2008, 2014). Consequently, in the new spirit of 'cultural capitalism', people buy experiences and lifestyles that are entwined with the cultural injunction to enjoy, just not too much (Žižek, 2002). Dangerousness has been removed as consumers buy into fantastical, risk-free products that promise healthier, more ethical lifestyles/experiences – authentic fulfilment and self-realisation - which also relieve anxiety, reduce fear and promote happiness, supposedly (Ayres, 2019b; Winlow & Hall, 2016; Žižek,

1989). Removing these malevolent dangers has become an investment of biopolitics (Žižek, 2003) at a time where the protection of human life is paramount and fear dominates (Žižek, 2008). Here then, we employ this Žižekian lens to consider IDC in relation to three distinct themes that emerged from the research data; self-responsible, savvy and superior consumption; guaranteeing the consumer experience; and reconfiguring harms.

Self-responsible, savvy and superior consumption

The group's initial motivation to use IDC was grounded in notions of safety. Indeed, the language employed by respondents characterised a group who were both aware of and concerned about the potential risks of ecstasy use. For many, these fears were borne from 'stories' of ecstasy related deaths, yet were compounded by previous personal experiences provoking concern about the content of ecstasy tablets;

> There'll be pills where I'd take half of it, and they taste horrible, and then spit them out. They leave a bad taste in your throat, you feel anxious. This isn't, obviously, a pill. There is something in it (Tim)

Tim's experience was not uncommon and when presented with the opportunity to access a testing kit he embraced the peace of mind it seemingly offered. Despite acknowledging that IDC had limitations (it did not guarantee safety; it did not identify the exact content of a tablet), the group voiced confidence in its ability to assert the contents of an ecstasy pill - a belief instilled through three assumptions. Firstly, that the kit was bound by appropriate regulations governing its manufacture and reliability and therefore *must* be accurate. Secondly, it was more dependable than another users/dealers word. Thirdly, personal experience provided reassurance – as Emma noted 'when it says it's absolutely pure MDMA, I will take them and I will take a quarter and that'll just blow my head off. So I do think it matches up'.

Yet peace of mind was not the only push factor here - simultaneously IDC acted to satisfy a wider pressure for self-responsibility. Having made the decision to use illegal drugs, there was

a seeming *need* for users to implement strategies of risk mitigation as they, and only they, were responsible for the subsequent outcomes. As Joe noted, 'first things first, don't do drugs, but it was my choice. So, if you're going to do it, be safe, test the pills'. In this context, drug testing technologies, through their purported ability to identify both desirable and undesirable content, premise safer drug use, abating users' fears and anxieties, while maximising their enjoyment. IDC allowed these drug consumers to partake in 'enlightened hedonism' whereby they 'carefully cultivate their pleasure to prolong their fun and avoid getting hurt' (Žižek, 2014: 4); enacting an individualised controlled loss of control (Hayward, 2004; Measham, 2004) when engaging with intoxication (Ayres, 2019a; Ayres & Taylor, 2020) to avoid being harmed. IDC therefore represents a savvy consumption practice, while drug users who do not check their drugs take unnecessary risks and thus become irresponsible and toxic subjects (Žižek, 2009).

In this sense, the sample viewed themselves as exemplars of both accountable - 'you know you're raving safe' (Stuart) - and superior - 'we are a lot smarter about it' (Emma) - consumption. Indeed, a number of the sample were so self-impressed by their exercised investment in IDC that they expressed they were not only 'better' than other drug users, but part of an elite 'secret club' (Sasha). This expressed sense of superiority indicates the competitive individualism inherent in contemporary society, which has seemingly been embodied by this group of neoliberal drug consumers. Even among this friendship group, there was a sense of social competition and individuality emanating from their narratives. These narratives sought to elevate them above the masses, marking them out as responsible drug consumers.

Key to this process of self-responsible consumption was that IDC afforded choice, or at least the illusion of choice. Hence, whilst acknowledging that their initial choice to use ecstasy placed them at risk, using IDC meant that they had acted dutifully, doing all they could to diffuse the risks/harm associated with ecstasy use;

> I think they're a really responsible response because you can read the ingredients listed on a wine bottle, you can't do that with drugs, and this gives you kind of an insight into what you're actually taking. And then, yes, you have the prerogative to say

like, “Hmm, I don’t want to do that,” or, “Yes, actually that’s fine, I’m happy with that” (Jackie)

Informed choice was integral to this group’s use of ecstasy with a clear sense of individual responsibility evident in their narratives. Their use of IDC was about ensuring their consumption of ecstasy was as safe as practicably possible, thus adhering to societal norms, which demarcate acceptable intoxication and tolerated hedonism. Enjoyment must be healthy, or as healthy as possible, otherwise the consumer only has themselves to blame (Bauman, 2001; Žižek, 2014).

This is a process which illustrates the incongruences of consumer capitalism as drug testing kits are aimed at checking prohibited drugs, demonstrating that you can enjoy anything as long as it is deprived of its danger. Despite the consumption of illegal drugs therefore seeming to subvert capitalism and conflict with the demands of neoliberal subjectivity to be independent, reasonable, rational and responsible (O’Malley & Valverde, 2004), the reality sees drugs tied to the exigencies of capitalism and symptomatic of neoliberal consumerism and its harmful subjectivities (see Ayres, 2019b). Like every other aspect of transgression, illegal drug use – and its checking - has been incorporated into the scripts of licit consumerism (Ayres, 2019b; Hayward & Turner, 2019), as transgression is also ‘solicited by capitalism’ and consumers become conscious ‘of desires they were not even aware they possessed’ (Žižek, 2001: 21), as ‘controlled deviance has become healthy and conformist’ (Hall et al., 2008: 168).

While the pleasures of transgressing the law are well documented (Katz, 1988), pleasure in this context is withheld. Enjoyment becomes impossible because it is an order; the permissive ‘you may’ becomes the prescriptive ‘you must’ (Žižek, 2008: 24). Imposing this duty means real enjoyment is unachievable, which effectively restricts behaviour and induces guilt and uncertainty – for not enjoying properly and not enjoying enough – as transgression is necessary to gain access to enjoyment. Thus, the manipulation of pleasure/enjoyment is integral to the political economy and operates as an obscene underside of the law as prohibition creates the desire to transgress (Žižek, 1989, 2003). While transgression of the law allows the ego to freely desire without the injunction, desire opposes the lethal and excessive dimensions of pleasure that require prohibition. Whilst the law therefore constrains

pleasure and imposes prohibitions on us, we still take enjoyment from adhering to it, as complicity means we are no longer 'tormented by the uncertainties, doubts and unyielding commands of the superego' (Dean, 2004: 19). Yet, there is also pleasure in transgression of the law (Katz, 1988), which offers autonomous individuals a sense of community that 'is held together through the knowledge of which rules to break' (Dean, 2004: 30) as society tolerates minor indiscretions to make conformity more bearable.

This solidarity, sense of community, and desire for authentic meaningful experiences has been documented in the research on ecstasy use, particularly at Electronic Dance Music (EDM) events (see Kavanaugh & Anderson, 2008). Nevertheless, the reality is these feelings of solidarity and its subsequent friendships 'are instrumental…distilled down to their use value' (Raymen & Smith, 2017: 11) as competitive individualism and 'fetishistic illusions' dominate (Žižek, 1989: 31). In neoliberalism a contradiction arises between the desire for a meaningful, collective and happy life on the one hand and the seductive but alienating individualism on the other, which is personified in EDM events where meaningful intersubjectivity is excluded (Žižek, 2008). In fact, 'authentic experience matters' (Žižek, 2009: 54) and checking their drugs to identify adulterants, ensures drug users obtain their desired experience for the night out they want (Measham & Moore, 2009), even if they know the limitations of IDC (see Johnston et al., 2006). It is here drug testing kits play on the drug users desire promising to 'assuage the anxieties that gnaw away at us from within' (Winlow & Hall, 2016: 4), illustrating how ideology works. Instead, 'as long as desire remains within the channels that capitalism provides…there is no possibility for satisfaction, just a false happiness that serves as…profound dissatisfaction' (McGowen, 2016: 9), which perpetuates further desire and consumption that is necessary to drive capitalism forward (Winlow and Hall, 2016; Žižek, 1997).

Rather, the known limitations of drug testing kits are disavowed, while their use elevates drug consumers into a privileged position, one that is superior to 'other' drug users as everyone is responsible for making their own 'authentic existential choices, where the very core of our being is at stake' (Žižek, 2009: 63). Personal responsibility for all aspects of life is thus emphasised, which may appear empowering on the surface, but may actually be disempowering (see Moore and Fraser, 2006), through its ability to depoliticise social

problems, drawing attention and blame away from the state by focusing on individual behaviour. Here, drug testing kits highlight a paradoxical cynicism that everyone 'knows very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it anyway' (Žižek, 1989: 19). Instead, what we desire is structured and controlled by capitalism (Bauman, 2001), determined by ideology, and secured by the law as we 'are guided by the fetishistic illusion' (Žižek, 1989: 31). Therefore, despite the proliferation of the drug testing market and the use of drug testing technologies among drug users and dealers (Palamar & Barratt, 2019), there is little evidence underpinning their efficacy. Instead, via symbolism, drug consumers are presented with technological innovations like drug testing kits, which promise to allay their insecurities and provide safer pleasure. Despite the limitations of IDC, it gave this group of drug consumers an advantage over other drug users. It allowed them to heed the cultural injunction to enjoy and partake in excessive and risky transgressions whilst also adhering to society's ideological fantasies.

Having chosen to undertake IDC, individuals were then faced with a further apparent choice - how the results would influence their drug taking practices. Responses among the group were varied, with some maintaining their usual procedure (regardless of whether results were welcome or worrying); others exercising greater caution (whether the pill was seemingly purer or adulterated); whilst for a further group, knowledge of a purer tablet saw increased incremental and overall dosage. Choice, however, was not necessarily individualised within the group's approach. Instead, it was negotiated. Whilst the results of IDC predominantly indicated that ecstasy tablets contained the desired contents (MDMA), the majority had experienced unwanted content with many consequently 'binning' pills (meaning to put them in the bin, sink or toilet). The group's response to results was largely consistent, epitomised by Rebecca's comment that 'when you find out, you're either, "Oh we'll be fine" or "No chance"'. Evidence of Paramethoxyamphetamine (PMA), heroin or bath salts meant the group usually chose to destroy the pills, whilst confirmation of ketamine or methamphetamine caused concern for some. Importantly, the owner of the kit played a crucial role in this decision making process;

> And it came up that they had a bit of meth in them. And that was a bit like surreal for me. I was like, "No, someone doesn't sell me a pill with meth in it." XXXXX reassured

> me that actually this is quite common. Any pills you take will probably have meth in them. So, we decided okay we'll just take a small bit first and see (Jackie)

Not everyone in the group, however, abided by these dominant parameters with certain individuals choosing to use pills despite unwanted/worrying content. Here 'choice' saw a clash between the contradictory neo-liberal traits of self-deserving consumption, the demands elicited by the cultural injunction to enjoy, and the need to demonstrate self-responsibility. Resultantly, when IDC specified concerning content, the majority, whilst dismayed that the product they had purchased was not as promised, acted in what they construed to be a responsible manner, rejecting the substance. Others, however, would doggedly pursue the pleasure they had paid for, meaning that regardless of results, they would use the substance – a choice that could lead to tension;

> Those really bad ones that we bought, there was one of the girls who was like, "I'm just going to take it anyway." I was just like, "I'm not letting you take them. No way." We had a falling out (Emma)

> We were just like, "Don't have them." We were like, "You know what's in them," and she just wasn't bothered. It was kind of scary. I'm just like, "If anything happens to her, it's going to be my fault" (Rebecca)

Not only had this group of drug consumers internalised the notion of individual responsibility for their own health and wellbeing, there was a shared logic of individual responsibility for the collective health and wellbeing of the group as individual members felt an obligation to provide their expert and superior advice to less knowledgeable, and therefore riskier drug users. The use of IDC as part of the group's ritual of taking illicit drugs and going out built a collective out of these atomised individuals, providing the 'libidinal support that binds a collective together' (Žižek, 1997: 57). It provided them with an authentic collective experience, borne from their desire to transgress the law in pursuit of safe pleasure.

The limited utility of IDC did not really matter, as it offered this group of ecstasy users' social distinction, which in contemporary society is favoured over the technical utility of products

(Hall et al., 2008), they are fetishistic commodities (Žižek, 1989). IDC therefore reassured this group that they were doing everything in their power to be responsible, savvy and superior consumers, who were minimising risk and exercising their freedom of choice in order to obtain the experience they wanted - guaranteeing an acceptable 'controlled-loss-of-control' (Measham, 2004; Hayward, 2004) in their pursuit of pharmacological pleasure and leisure (Measham & Moore, 2009). In this sense, the group were 'enlightened hedonists' (Žižek, 2014) illustrating their commitment to consumer capitalism and their adherence to societal norms when engaging with intoxication (Ayres, 2019a). It alleviated their anxieties (lack) and created a fantasy for them to believe in. IDC kits marked this group out as different from others and fed into their imaginary self, which satisfied their 'fetishistic drive to obtain the objects that reflect, affirm and comfort the[ir] alienated imaginary I' (Hall et al., 2008: 187). They were clued up consumers that had a competitive edge over other, less savvy drug users whose consumption choices were inevitably questioned - 'if they want to do that to themselves then it's their choice' (Emma) – as they went in search of the ultimate consumer experience that constituted the 'big night out'.

Guaranteeing the consumer experience

Despite associating IDC with certain risks, the sample unanimously agreed that the knowledge attained through this process enhanced their feelings of safety (on both an individual and collective level). This was borne from improved knowledge, enabling them to: better identify potentially dangerous substances; engage in more informed collective discussion about use; and motivate behavioural change (among most) when faced with concerning results. Simultaneously, the group associated enhanced feelings of knowledge and safety with a heightened sense of enjoyment – prompted by increased confidence and a more relaxed state of mind due to having a product of known content and quality;

> I had a bad experience. So, I didn't really touch pills as much. Then, since I was introduced to the kit, I've used them more because I knew what was in it, and they weren't mixed with any bad stuff. I felt more confident using them. It just gives a boosted confidence in it, and you know that you can control… how much to take, and stuff like that. Whereas, if the pills were mixed with something that you didn't know

> and hadn't tested, then you wouldn't be able to control your come up, or whatever. So, I just feel that's a much safer option (Paul)

> Better than when I've taken stuff in the past, I must admit. It seemed a lot safer, more sensible. I was more in control, I knew that what I was buying was going to be what I wanted to take (Adam)

> Just before you take it, you've always got the doubt in your mind that it could be a bad one. As soon as you use a drug testing kit and you know it's good, then you haven't got that threat in the back of your mind, the worry (Tim)

The element of control (e.g. controlled intoxication, controlling the effects of the drug or the experience) was prominent in this group's narratives, illustrating that although they wanted a good night out, their consumption practices reflected wider neoliberal governance, which can be seen to be operating here through individual freedom and choice via the logic of sacrifice/constraint. This group of drug consumers were acting like responsible citizens in a system that has marked out acceptable and unacceptable intoxication (Ayres & Taylor, 2020). However, the drug testing kits were also used to reduce the fears and anxieties of contemporary life, where solutions/remedies to address these feelings can be bought from the ever-expanding marketplace;

> If you haven't tested it, you're constantly worrying just in case something bad happens, or looking out for your mates, just in case. It's like when you test it, you know you're going to be alright and you have a better night, then, because you're not worrying about it, because, you're guaranteeing what's in it, and then you're just more comfortable when you're on it. You know where your limit is and you know what some of your boundaries are (James)

James' quote here indicates an interplay between drug use, feelings of safety and 'a better night' out. For this group, engagement with ecstasy and organised music events were essential elements of their social lives, with both representing products/experiences purchased for pleasure. In this context, IDC signified an investment to guarantee the

consumerist experience via the maximisation of pleasure and the navigation of harms. Here the group of friends saw themselves as clued up consumers who were in control of their consumables, avoiding the ruin of (costly) social events;

> Well, because when we're taking pills, it's when we're going to a festival, so it's something we've paid a lot of money for to have a good time. You don't want to take the risk of something going wrong or you becoming unwell, then ruining what you've paid so much money to go and see (Sue)

> I feel it is [useful] because I wouldn't want to go too far because I've got a real interest in music and that's where I mainly use it. So, I wouldn't want it to ruin my night and then I had to go home (Paul)

Whilst IDC allowed the identification of potentially dangerous substances such as PMA, it also avoided the group using substances that were not associated with the experience being sought. Resultantly, the group spoke of enhanced feelings of pleasure;

> It's definitely enjoyable when you are taking safer drugs. So, if I know for a fact, they're going to be safe, then I'll relax. So, definitely, my night is better (Sue)

> A lot of drugs can cause people to go a bit funny and when they have that in the back of their mind, you know, of its purity, then they're safe as houses and they all have a good night (Joe)

> The pills enhance the love for going to these music festivals and listening to the tunes. So, I think knowing that it is safe, definitely enhances it (Stuart)

Additionally, IDC itself acted as a novel extension to the group's consumer experience, which took place prior to forays to clubs or music festivals (either days or hours in advance dependent on when the ecstasy was acquired). As such, it was indicative of the group's pre-planning that characterised their dual aspirations of feeling safe and guaranteeing 'big nights out' went smoothly. The cost effectiveness of IDC and its potential to minimise risk and

enhance pleasure to ensure expensive nights out were not ruined is illustrative of the careful orchestration of this group's nights out/leisure to ensure maximum pleasure for the best possible price (Ayres, 2019a; Measham & Moore, 2009). Whether purposefully or not, IDC had become part of the group's consumer experience - buy the pills – test the pills – take the pills. In essence, it represented a theatrical experience, elucidating feelings of anticipation, enjoyment, excitement, intrigue, curiosity and nervousness among its audience, serving as the central spectacle of a social event whilst members chatted, drank and waited for the 'big reveal';

> It's just an abnormal social event between friends. It's like going for a coffee, but it's not going for a coffee, it's testing a pill (Amira)

> I still enjoy watching it. It's kind of like, a mystery bag, isn't it? You have no idea what it's going to be (Frank)

> My first one, I felt like I was in a lab. I felt like I should have been wearing a white coat (Sasha)

The big reveal would not only serve to entertain those present but also those having their ecstasy checked remotely – with results sent in picture/message form via WhatsApp groups specific to the upcoming event – adding to the build-up of the consumer experience. Admittedly, among some of the more seasoned testers, the initial excitement had dulled. As Barry noted 'I'd say, more safety now. So, the initial buzz about using it's probably gone'. Despite IDCs entertainment value diminishing for some, there remained a group conviction in its ability to 'make drugs safer' (Sue). This belief, however, belied a number of processes disclosed by the group, which had the potential to increase harm.

Reconfiguring harm

Previous studies have indicated how IDC may increase rather than mitigate harm (Murray et al., 2003; Winstock, Wolff & Ramsey, 2001) and this study found similarly concerning outcomes. Collectively, these indicate the futility of seeking marketplace solutions to the

potential harms presented by consuming illegal drugs within an epoch of prohibition - as these harms are caused by the very governance structures which purport to protect people (Taylor et al., 2016). Hence, whilst this group of drug consumers expressed how their self-responsible use of IDC mitigated harm, they disclosed experiences which highlighted how such harm was reconfigured rather than removed.

One such example is how IDC appeared to enhance potential risks around criminalisation. For example, Johnston and colleagues (2006: 46) note that many of their sample indicated 'that there was a dedicated tester within their social group who tested one pill within each 'batch''. This study supports this, with the owner of the kit providing a 'pit-stop service' (Frank) at their home. As the dedicated tester would ultimately need to access the drugs, it made logistical sense for them to buy large quantities of ecstasy tablets on behalf of the group of friends. A further example related to the groups dual motivation of wanting to know the contents of their drugs and their awareness that drugs purchased within events were of poorer quality. Resultantly, all of the users had smuggled previously checked drugs into such events. Whilst engaging with IDC therefore alleviated the group's health related fears, it simultaneously appeared to increase the risk of them being identified, criminalised, and more punitively sanctioned by the authorities.

Furthermore, despite the group expressing that IDC ensured a safer consumer experience, they divulged that this process concurrently risked harm to wellbeing. For example, individuals spoke of the pressure induced by the testing of ecstasy they had been responsible for purchasing;

> I did kind of shit myself a bit; I was like, "Oh my God, what if we can't even do these?". I was a bit like, "If I turned up with this and no-one wants to do it anyway, I'm just going to like ostracise myself." I was like, "I've got to make sure that what I'm giving these people was a: worth their money, like ecstasy-wise, and b: safe enough, like ecstasy-wise." I don't know what I would have done if everyone was like, "I'm not fucking taking that. What are you trying to give us?" (Jackie)

Several of the group identified the tension they experienced during the IDC process, especially when the ensuing results for ecstasy they had bought on behalf of the collective had been unwelcome, with feelings of anxiety, stress, and personal responsibility (on both a friendship and financial level) expressed. Again, this illustrates how solutions offered by the consumer market represent a mirage - whilst users attempt to navigate harm, drug prohibition ensures that harms are omnipresent, consistently evolving, perpetually causing suffering (Taylor et al., 2018). Anxieties, however, were not limited to the process of IDC. Concern also arose when, having routinely used a drug testing kit, it was unavailable. Whilst the majority expressed that since using IDC they were loath to use previously untested tablets, a number had subsequently experienced occasions whereby they had a choice between using an untested tablet or not using at all. Opting for the former option seemingly prompted discomfort;

> I wasn't really as wary. I wouldn't really get much anxiety but now I do because I've seen what people can throw into it. It's made me a lot more aware (Katie)

> That night, I was absolutely crapping myself. I thought, “Oh, my God. I don’t want to take it.” I was worried to take it and then it made me take less and I was just like shaking taking it. I felt sick taking it because I didn’t know what was in it (Emma)

Whilst IDC therefore represented a licit solution to the insecurities and concerns prompted by illicit behaviours, the continued lack of regulation surrounding illegal drugs, and facilities to circumvent this, ensured that despite the groups best intentions, enlightened hedonism itself was fantasy - as prohibition by its very nature means those who use illegal drugs face perpetual and purposeful harm, which is difficult to mitigate.

The findings from this research show IDC allowed this group to feel safer and more relaxed about the drugs they were taking, despite the limitations associated with the reagent drug testing technologies. Instead, this group of drug consumers believed in the ‘illusory promises’ made by drug testing kits leading to the belief that ‘it can certainly protect the users, it can protect them from more harm than would occur otherwise’ (Adam). In fact, out of all drug testing methods, home reagent kits appear the least effective, having limited ability to detect

some of the more potentially harmful or at least undesirable compounds occasionally found in illicit drugs (CFR, 2019). The reality is that 'individual drug risks are beyond individual control' (Sumnall cited in Hillier, 2017) and IDC may therefore provide users with a false sense of security, potentially increasing harm (Murray, et al., 2003).

Discussion

The aim of the research was to explore the use of IDC among a group of ecstasy users, drawing on their lived experiences to ascertain the role and purpose it played in their drug-using journeys. A unique contribution of this study was not only to explain the motivations underpinning IDC, but to situate IDC in the wider political economy of neoliberal consumer capitalism to contextualise and interpret its use among this group of friends. The findings extend the lens of extant research from one of harm reduction to a more nuanced contextual one, which incorporates aspects of pleasure, desire and the consumer experience. As such, the study locates IDC as a medium through which this group of drug consumers were able to adhere to the contradictory demands placed on them by neoliberal consumer capitalism - to enjoy, just not too much; to be part of a collective but also individualistic. IDC therefore served the dual purpose of satisfying both the cultural injunction to enjoy and the logic of sacrifice that reveals 'the secret double bind that ties even the most sublime moral law to the dark continent of morbid desires and obscene superego injunctions' (Žižek, 2006: 399).

The data collected as part of this study shows that drug consumption is tied to the wider context of neoliberal consumer capitalism and that biopolitics, individualism, anxiety and risk underpinned the explanations provided by this group to explain their use of IDC. Neoliberal consumerism provided this group of autonomous drug consumers with apparent freedom, yet in reality, this freedom is fantasy, as both desire and choice are structured and controlled by capitalism (Bauman, 2001). The marketplace proffers a solution to all of our problems, including the 'scientific' testing of drugs, which allowed this group of enlightened hedonists to practice self-constraint in their pursuit of authentic pleasure, enjoyment and self-actualisation, despite knowing the truth. Thus, illustrating Žižek's (2010: 190) 'commodity fetishism' – 'our belief that commodities are magical objects, endowed with inherent metaphysical powers' – and how ideology works in our cynical era of consumer capitalism. In

contemporary society consumers can buy themselves 'out of their own activity' (Žižek, 2008: 27), as 'action and reaction' coincide in the neoliberal marketplace (Žižek, 2003). Instead, dangerous, unrestrained consumption has become one of the main focuses of today's biopolitics, as every aspect of life has become commodified and individualised (Moore & Fraser, 2006; Winlow & Hall, 2016).

In true neoliberal ethos, this group's drug consumption and use of IDC was not only a way of improving their lives and leisure experiences, making them less dangerous, but illustrated the hyper-individualistic competition inherent in contemporary society. This group of friends saw themselves as savvy and elite drug consumers; better than other drug users, illustrating the way competitive individualism is used to drive consumer culture forward (Winlow & Hall, 2016). IDC and what it represented enhanced this groups self-worth and elicited the appreciation of others as 'consumerism now has a firm grasp on both the ego and the super-ego, which operate together as a joint psychodynamic force' (Hall et al., 2008: 17). The consumption of drug testing kits promised to fulfil the desire (despite their limitations and potential for harm) to pursue a healthy risk-free lifestyle, while still adhering the obligation of capitalism to enjoy. Such findings emphasise the need to further explore the interaction between drug consumers and the licit and illicit markets they engage, and how the pursuit of enlightened hedonism relates to the flourishing marketplace of drug related technologies (such as drug checking kits, vaporizers, stash devices, eye drops, snorting tubes).

In accordance with other research, this study demonstrates how IDC is used to minimise the risks and harms arising from illicit drug use (Johnston et al., 2006; Palamar & Barratt, 2019). It also, however, by more centrally considering issues of pleasure, shows how IDC is valued through its perceived ability to not only assure consumer experiences, but extend the enjoyment of these. Additionally, in this study we see that despite IDC indicating unwanted/concerning content, some individuals use such substances regardless – why then engage in drug checking in the first place? Again, because it potentially provides users with a pleasurable, authentic experience in its own right. A key message of this paper is that extending the parameters of research allows a richer exploration of those who undertake IDC and a deeper recognition of the contemporary context in which this takes place. Indeed, an important appeal for this group of drug consumers were enhanced *feelings* of safety sitting alongside a novel, fun, social drug checking experience which assured/added to their pleasure

– factors which drug (checking) services might want to consider when designing services to ensure they engage ecstasy users.

In this study, the experiences of those who use IDC indicate that a key appeal of drug checking is its dual outcome of a fun way of preparing for and enhancing your night out, as well as a tool to (on the surface at least) mitigate harm. IDC therefore serves to appease the neoliberal demands to enjoy, but to enjoy responsibly. This means that despite IDC having 'limited utility' (Winstock, Wolff & Ramsey, 2001: 1140) we have to recognise that it can seemingly reduce drug consumers anxieties and enhance their pleasures by reducing risk and danger. Simultaneously, its use represents a gesture of self-responsibility, which is particularly poignant given that levels of (UK) drug-related deaths are at an all-time reported high. Phenomena which advances the need for and indeed pressure upon drug consumers to enact responsible, risk-free and controlled consumption practices, which the use of IDC may duly appease, even if this more accurately represents an 'artificial shine of safety' (Winstock, Wolff & Ramsey, 2001: 1139). Here, engagement with capitalist markets provides a belief that further investment in your consumer experience can both improve it and make it safer – premises that belie the empirical reality. Hence, the reconfigured harms illustrated within this study indicate how solutions found in the marketplace may actually increase the potential for detection and criminalisation, and enhance risks to wellbeing when employed within the structures of drug prohibition. Resultantly, drug consumers efforts to navigate harm are shackled by the landscape of prohibition (Taylor, 2016), which acts as both cause and effect, ensuring that harms are reshaped rather than overridden.

Despite the unique contribution to knowledge offered by this article, the limitations of this research must be acknowledged. A clear limitation is the sample size, sampling strategy (single point snowball sampling) and its focus on one group of drug-using friends. Although this limits the generalisability of the findings, as these are not representative of all demographical or cultural contexts, nor are they representative of all ecstasy users or all those ecstasy users who undertake IDC, the study was an exploratory piece of research that has offered a unique insight to an under-researched area among a hard-to reach drug-using population.

Conclusion

The findings from this research highlight the commitment to neoliberal consumer capitalism demonstrated by this group of drug consumers. Among this group, IDC served the integrated purposes of enhancing feelings of safety and guaranteeing pleasurable consumerist experiences. Hence IDC was motivated by a desire to mitigate established risks and appease pressures for self-responsible consumption and healthier lifestyles, aligning with the logic of sacrifice inherent in capitalism's cultural injunction to enjoy. Drug testing therefore served to elongate the consumer experience, augment excitement and avoid the ruin of costly 'big nights out'.

Consequently, IDC allowed the group to partake in 'enlightened hedonism' that conformed to the imperatives of capitalism and its social norms. It ensured this group of drug consumers took part in controlled, risk-free hedonism that maximised their pleasure, while also offering an authentic experience. The IDC process and the 'big night out' built a collective out of individuals that excluded 'intersubjectivity proper' as everyone remained immersed in their own isolation (Žižek, 2008: 31). Using drug testing kits elevated this group of drug consumers above the masses of 'other' drug users, marking them out as savvy, responsible enterprising autonomous consumers. IDC illustrates how consumer capitalism proffers objects that simulate a fantasised image constructed via the illusory promises of commodities that embody the impossible and unattainable, as 'consumer culture is a supplier of a procession of *imago* [a fantasised image of the self] models that promise to reorganise and reflect the self' as everyone consumes themselves into being (Hall et al., 2008:179). The narratives from this group of drug users conveyed a sense of social competition, individuality and self-responsibility as they sought to navigate their way through the contemporary neoliberal landscape, driven by desire in search of pleasure. However, 'as we become dedicated to pleasure, we become subjects of permanent anxiety, haunted by our potential failure to achieve the ultimate experience' (Žižek, 2000, cited in Hall et al., 2008: 189), fantasies which IDC purportedly alleviated (anxiety) and accomplished ('big night out' for the best possible price), despite the reality. Drug testing kits therefore allowed this group to minimise the risks

and harms arising from their drug use but also the harms arising from consumer capitalism and drug prohibition (Ayres & Taylor, 2020).

Whilst previous studies have identified the positives and pitfalls associated with IDC, this paper draws attention to the wider contextualised purposes it may serve. In particular, the anticipation, fun and communal spirit that IDC can harvest, and its calming, pleasure-enhancing role that ensures a better and more controlled night out. This allows us to better understand the disjuncture between evidence which demonstrates the potentially dangerous outcomes associated with IDC and the enhanced *feelings* of safety expressed by the group of drug consumers within this study – affording a recognition and contextual understanding of such issues and therefore, of what motivates drug consumers to use drug checking, which may better place drug services to respond to their wants and needs. It also, by locating drug consumption in the wider landscape of neoliberal consumer capitalism where pleasure has been made obligatory, reinforces the demands from critical drug studies that pleasure should be integral to drug research and any coherent response/discussion/understanding of drugs and their use (Moore, 2008).

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