

From ecstasy to MDMA: Recreational drug use, symbolic boundaries, and drug trends

Author(s)

Edland-Gryta, M., Sandberg, S., Pedersen, W.

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Abstract

Background:

Ecstasy pills with MDMA as the main ingredient were introduced in many European countries in the 1980s, and were often linked to the rave and club scenes. However, use gradually levelled off, in part as a response to increased concerns about possible mental health consequences and fatalities. Extensive use of MDMA now seems to be re-emerging in many countries. In this study, we investigated the cultural and social meaning associated with MDMA use in Oslo, Norway, with an emphasis on how users distinguish MDMA crystals and powder from “old ecstasy pills”.

Methods:

Qualitative in-depth interviews ($n = 31$, 61,3% males) were conducted with young adult party-goers and recreational MDMA/ecstasy users (20-34 years old, mean age 26.2 years).

Results:

Research participants emphasised three important perceived differences between

the MDMA crystals and ecstasy pills: (i) The effects of MDMA were described as better than ecstasy; (ii) MDMA was regarded as a safer drug; (iii) Users of MDMA crystals were described as more distinct from and less anchored in out-of-fashion rave culture than those using ecstasy. These differences were an important part of the symbolic boundary work MDMA users engaged in when justifying their drug use.

Conclusion:

MDMA has re-emerged as an important psychoactive substance in Oslo's club scene. One important reason for this re-emergence seems to be its perceived differentiation from ecstasy pills, even though the active ingredient in both drugs is MDMA. This perceived distinction between MDMA and ecstasy reveals the importance of social and symbolic meanings in relation to psychoactive substance use. Insights from this study can be important in terms of understanding how trends in drug use develop and how certain drugs gain or lose popularity.

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