

Report on an in-depth study
of psychotropic substance abuse in Hong Kong



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

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Hong Kong Jockey Club Drug InfoCentre

Commissioned by Task Force on Psychotropic Substance Abuse

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**Narcotics Division
Government Secretariat**

May 2001

*"A rave is what you make of it. It is somewhat built up
around what the person throwing it means to do"*

DJ Drenalin, California, USA

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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

suited 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.

3 METHODS

3.1 Overview

- 3.1.1 The present study was multi-sited and multiplex in design. The research began with review of literature and documents. The CRDA data and reports of recent local drug surveys were examined. Following that, the researcher participated in four drug abuse educational talks and seminars in order to learn the drug issues that were at stake in the public and professional discussions. These two steps prepared the researcher for the subsequent ethnography.
- 3.1.2 The researcher interviewed a variety of key players who had privileged access to and the knowledge about the local drug and party scenes. He also interviewed informants who participated in parties, clubs and discos. The main objective of these interviews was to obtain the insider perspectives³ in relation to the use of illicit drugs in parties and discos.
- 3.1.3 The present study also included participant observations in parties, clubs, and discos. In these participant observations, the researcher immersed into the subculture and actively engaged with party- and disco-goers in order to experience the party and to witness entailed drug use firsthand. It was envisioned that this research process would help the investigator to understand why people used drugs in party, and to reflect on the issues that were at stake in the emergence and development of new mind-altering substances in local contexts.

³In contrast to the outside perspectives, which can be biased, judgmental, and often theory-driven.

3.1.4 A cohort of informants was identified and acquainted during the participant observations. Repeated in-depth interviews were conducted with these informants both within and outside the party venues. By becoming a member of this peer group, the researcher obtained insider's views and information pertaining to their party and drug subculture.

3.1.5 It is important to point out that the overall approach of the study was purposive. As the research progressed, in response to the new domains identified, new research questions and strategies evolved, which in turn led to further questions and reshaped strategies. The ultimate results of such intense engagement with the research topic are enriched and in-depth comprehensions of the latest drug scene and party culture.

3.2 *Document and Literature Review*

3.2.1 An extensive review of literature was conducted at the outset of the study. Both professional and lay documents and literatures published internationally and locally were examined. These include articles in books, journals, magazines, newspapers, discussion groups, and web sites. Electronic databases (e.g. PsychInfo, PubMed, Embase), Internet search engine (google.com) were used to facilitate the literature search. Hand search was also used, as some documents might not be systematically archived. Relevant articles were retrieved and reviewed. The researcher also invited key informants, such as ravers, party organizers, and reporters to suggest pertinent literature and documents. As the study unfolded and new research domains emerged, new wave of literature search was conducted to identify the relevant materials.

3.2.2 Particular attention was paid to documents and articles that were relevant to the recent development in local drug and entertainment scenes. Examples of this category of document include the CRDA data as well as the reports of recent local drug related surveys.

3.2.3 The data extracted from these searches contributed to an overall understanding of the research topics. These data were not analyzed alone. The researcher juxtaposed the written data with what he observed and experienced in other parts of the study, in particular the participant observations. The triangulation provided invaluable opportunities for the researcher to reflect on where the differences were located as well as what might have shaped these differences. One example of such difference was while most local surveys suggested that cannabis was commonly abused in parties and discos, it was not commonly observed in the participant observations. The discrepancy was probably related to the validity of the research instruments used in the surveys.

3.3 Participation in Drug Abuse Educational Activities

3.3.1 During the early stage of the study when preparations for the participation observations and in-depth interviews were being made, four independent agents approached the researcher for assistance as expert speaker. These invitations include a teacher development day seminar of a band one school, a public parent-teacher seminar on drug abuse funded by the Beat Drug Fund, a retreat seminar for drug abuse workers and social workers, and a seminar on dance drug intervention for social workers. These talks and seminars might seem remotely related to this study⁴. However, after participating in the first

⁴ Besides, it was not originally planned to conduct participatory observation on drug abuse talks and lectures.

seminar, the researcher quickly realized that these drug abuse talks and seminars were actually invaluable research opportunities that were highly relevant to the study.

3.3.2 This is because drug abuse talks and seminars generally involve large number of professionals (e.g. social workers, teachers) and lay public. These meetings are convenient opportunities to gather a global view of the lay public and professional perceptions and understandings of drug abuse situations in Hong Kong. The researcher can also make use of the participation to reflect on the following: What are the issues at stake in these educational activities? What kind of knowledge do professionals want to get across to the audience? What do the lay public want to ask? What are their concerns and worries? What shape the lay and professional perceptions of drug abuse problems? In brief, the participation in these educational activities helped provide a rapid global assessment of the key drug abuse issues that are shared by the local community.

3.3.3 A total of four seminars were participated. To avoid sampling bias, all invitations received during the study period were included in the study. In each, three key steps were taken. First, when approached by organizers, the researcher enquired about the historical background, objectives, intended audience, co-speakers, as well as the program of the activity. When necessary, the researcher would conduct independent inquiry on these issues. Before the researcher agreed to serve as speaker, he would notify the inviting party or the organizer that he was conducting a study of drug abuse situation for the Hong Kong Government and that his participation in the seminar would serve as a

component of the study. He also explained that he would take the opportunity to ask the audience a few questions related to drug abuse in Hong Kong. All organizers readily agreed with these requests.

3.3.4 In participating these educational activities, the researcher paid attention to the following issues and notes were taken. He also asked the audience questions when necessary.

3.3.4.1 Who were the audience? What were the voices? Parents? Teachers? Youths? Marginalized youths? Drug users? Reporters?

3.3.4.2 Was the audience attentive? What were they interested in? What were they not interested in? What did they ask?

3.3.4.3 Who was the organizer? Why did they want to organize the activities? What were the objectives? What were their utmost concerns?

3.3.4.4 How did the organizer and professional perceive the drug abuse scene and trends? What shaped their perception? What was the empirical basis for their views? Who did they have such views?

3.3.4.5 What about the audience and the lay public?

3.3.4.6 How were the drug abuse scene and its related culture represented in the seminar? What were people most worried about?

3.3.5 Following the seminar, the researcher reflected on his experience of participation as well as what were recorded in the field notes. Apart from re-examining the above-mentioned questions, the researcher also asked if his experience and data led to new domains or questions. The researcher also

reflected if there were deeper meanings behind what he observed and experienced during these educational talks and seminars.

3.4 *Key Player Interviews*

- 3.4.1 Key players interviews, informant interviews, participant observations, and ethnography were conducted in parallel.
- 3.4.2 The objectives of key player interviews were to gather information from key players in local drug abuse and dance scene. The key players were chosen on the premise that (1) they were close to the drug abuse and dance culture, (2) they were knowledgeable on these topics, and (3) they shaped the culture and how the public perceived the culture.
- 3.4.3 Ten key informants were identified and interviewed. They included one news reporter, one magazine reporter, two substance abuse social workers, one rave party organizer, one Disc Jockey (DJ), one music engineer, one senior marketing manager of a cross-national music industry, one researcher of rave music, and one drug pusher.
- 3.4.4 As key informant interviews were mostly conducted in the earlier stage of study when the research issues remained opened, the researcher chose to conduct the interviews in a non-structured manner. This approach facilitated the gathering of new materials and helped the researcher to identify novel domains and issues pertinent to the study. As the researcher entered the interviews without pre-conceptualized framework, this approach permitted more open exploration of all issues relevant to the study. It was hoped that by adopting an open design in the earlier stage, it would maximize the coverage

of the study, avoid missing issues and domains that were salient to the understanding of the party drug phenomenon.

- 3.4.5 The informants were explained the objective, methodology, potential inconvenience, as well as the potential benefits of participating in the study. Full informed consent was obtained from all key players. The interviews took place at a location that the informants found convenient and comfortable. Three interviews took place in researcher's departmental library, two in café, and four in pubs and restaurants.
- 3.4.6 As all interviews were conducted only once, and the interviews covered sensitive issues like drug use, it was decided that these interviews were not audio-taped. However, with informant's permission, notes were taken during the interview, and the researcher prepared the field notes within 24 hours of the interview.
- 3.4.7 The researcher also participated in parties with five key players. Apart from letting the key players shepherding the researcher on issues ranging from what to wear, what to look for, and what to avoid, the researchers also observed what were at stake for the key players, i.e. what issues they were most interested in. These joint participant observations helped overcome the problem of decontextualization⁵ and normative answers. Not to mention that they helped the researcher to get to know the drug and dance scene.

3.5 *Participant observations*

⁵ This refers to the concern that informants may perceive and report a subject differently in different context. For instance, a professional may give a more judgmental view when interviewed in his office, while a similar interview held in the party may provide a very different kind of answers.

- 3.5.1 Participant observation refers to a research technique in which the researcher observes a social group of which he or she is also a member. It combines participation in the lives of the people under study with maintenance of a professional distance that allows adequate observation and recording of data.
- 3.5.2 Participant observation is a technique commonly employed in ethnography to help the researcher to immerse into the culture. Such participation allows the researcher to observe covertly, sometimes without the group being consciously aware. Ideally, the researcher lives and works in the community for six months to one year or more learning the language and seeing patterns of behavior over time. Long-term residence of the culture helps the researcher internalize the basic beliefs, fears, hopes, and expectations of the people under study.
- 3.5.3 The process may seem unsystematic. In the early stages of fieldwork, the researcher searches out experiences and events as they come to attention. The exploration becomes more refined, as the researcher understands more and more about the culture. Participant observation can be followed by other research techniques, such as questionnaires, to improve the validity and representativeness of the data.
- 3.5.4 The method has been used successfully in studying small scale "closed" communities and organizations, including drug-using communities. The "Pulse" project in the U.S. is a good example of the usage of participant observation in understanding and monitoring drug trends. By employing a team of street ethnographers, the project collected data pertaining to the latest development of drug scene in various parts of America. The ethnographic

data are often more sensitive than other surveillance system in picking up new trends.

3.5.5 The advantage of the participant observation is that the technique can provide data that have great authenticity and validity than the more common sample survey approach. Furthermore, by becoming a member of the community and bracketing researcher's own past experience and knowledge, the researcher can obtain firsthand insider perspective. The method of participant observation generally emphasizes understanding from the inside, which helps to overcome the preconceptions and partiality that often bias our understandings. Although participant observation generally yields rich data, it is far more time-consuming, and makes greater demands on the researcher's skills and personality.

3.5.6 The key player interviews revealed that there were at least three different categories of "rave". These were big parties, clubs, and discos (both locally and in Shenzhen). These categories were confirmed in subsequent participant observations and ethnography.

3.5.7 Although the terms "party", "club," and "disco" were often used interchangeably, they actually represented three overlapping but distinctive subcultures under the umbrella of "rave". For these reasons, in sampling sites for participant observations, attention was paid to ensure that the three categories were adequately represented in the sample. Moreover, in judging data saturation and when to end data collection, each category was treated independently.

- 3.5.8 The participant observations of this study were multi-sited. This strategy was necessary since parties did not generally have fixed venue. Besides, the development of the disco scene was also connected with the popularization of party culture in Hong Kong. Hence, parties, clubs, and discos were included in the participant observations to facilitate the understanding of the latest development of the drug scene.
- 3.5.9 The participant observations of this study are different from conventional ones in the sense that the parties, clubs and discos do not constitute a community that like a village or city that the researcher can live in. Owing to budgetary constraint, the research could not join the clubs or discos on a daily basis⁶.
- 3.5.10 The party and disco were studied as a ritual. Hence, the researcher entered the parties and discos as early as possible and stayed until they finished. On some occasions, the researcher joined the informants in their pre-party gathering. Post-party gathering was not attended owing to physical constraint on the researcher's part.
- 3.5.11 The party, club or disco venues were seldom conducive to notes recording. When necessary, the researcher would record overriding terms or keywords in his mobile phone. When the researcher left the parties or discos, he immediately dictated his observations and reflections with a dictaphone. Complete field notes were prepared within 48 hours of the participant observation.

⁶ The researcher however was able to join most parties held during the study period.

3.5.12 The ethnographic observations were not limited to the party or disco venues.

The researcher also spent time with the informants outside the parties. These included phone calls, having snacks and meals together, and shopping trips.

3.5.13 During the participant observations in parties, a cohort of informants was acquainted. The initial cohort of two women was snowballed to a large group of four men and eight women. Seven of them were interviewed on repeated occasions within and outside the parties in great length. As the researcher was gradually accepted by this cohort, he would go to the parties with these men and women together, observe their drug use as well as other behaviors (including deviant behaviors) within and outside the parties.

3.5.14 In participating the parties and discos, and living with this cohort of informants, the researcher joined the informants in all activities⁷, except drug use and illegal venture. This arrangement was readily accepted by the informants.

3.5.15 Apart from general informants recruited at parties and discos, two special kinds of informants were sampled. During the participant observations, it was observed that selected individuals were observed to have overdoses in repeated parties. The researcher was successful in recruiting two persons for interview in order to deepen the understanding of overdosing behaviors. As the researcher was also a drug abuse psychiatrist, he could make use of his clinical contacts to recruit informants for the study. During the study period, three persons (two men and one woman) who had quitted discoing and drug

⁷ Including sharing a bottle of water together, looking after overdosed peers, negotiating for bargain ticket in the black market.

use were referred for health assessment. They were recruited and interviewed with the view of understanding the road to recovery from drug use.

3.5.16 At the time of writing, there were evidences suggesting that some discos were turning underground⁸. While this development deserves investigation, it was not possible to conduct further interview and participant observation because of the time constraint. However, the researcher plans to continue the ethnographic investigations of the party drug scene after submitting this report. When feasible, he will extend the participant observation to the underground discos.

3.6 *Ethno-Epidemiological Data*

3.6.1 When the study was commissioned, it was hoped that a small-scale epidemiological survey could be combined with the ethnographic research to improve the representativeness of the data. Quantitative data could also substantiate some of the observations made by the researcher.

3.6.2 After due considerations and discussions with statisticians, it was decided that a research assistant would recruit participants for questionnaire-guided interview at party entrance using a stratified sampling.

3.6.3 A pilot study, carried out by a research assistant, showed that this was impractical. All approached party-goers refused to be interviewed. Although the pilot was not extended to discos, it was expected that a better response was unlikely as disco-goers tended to be more abrasive.

⁸ The evidence comes from newspaper report and informal verbal communications from one informant.

3.6.4 Running out of time and alternative, the researcher decided not to pursue epidemiological data any further. The decision was also based on the observations that the participants in parties, clubs and discos were very heterogeneous. It is likely that a very sophisticated epidemiological design⁹ is needed to map out the socio-demographic as well as other characteristics of the participants of the local dance scene.

3.7 *Ethical approval*

3.7.1 The present study was approved by the Clinical Ethics Committee of The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

⁹ Probably a multi-stage design with attractive incentive payment.

4 RESULTS

4.1 *Overview*

4.1.1 Instead of presenting the collected data in the format of an academic thesis, this report will present the data in a user-friendly fashion. This was based on the researcher's previous experience in government commissioned study. A well-organized and purpose-driven report will save the readers' effort in locating the relevant data and the applied discussions.

4.1.2 To protect the identity of the informants¹⁰, this report will not specify the personal characteristics of those who were involved in the study (Appendix 3). Only very simple information will be provided in this report, which may eventually be distributed in the public domain.

4.2 *Review of Empirical Data*

4.2.1 CRDA

4.2.1.1 The CRDA received the first report of ecstasy in 1996. This corresponds closely to the informants' experience. Following an incubation of 3 years, the drug takes off to become the most commonly reported drugs of abuse among the less than 21 year olds in the first half of 2000. Ketamine arrived Hong Kong in 1999. It was quickly popularized largely because it was used in conjunction with ecstasy, which had already had a significant user population.

4.2.1.2 The upsurge in the number of reports relating to ecstasy and ketamine in the CRDA, however, should be interpreted with caution. This is because the

¹⁰ Many of them use drugs.

level of caseness was not clearly defined in the CRDA. In the past, this has not constituted any problem as the common drugs of abuse are all addictive. Since most regular users of these drugs would become physically dependent fairly shortly, in reality the reported persons in the CRDA represent the physically dependent population. This caseness of pharmacological dependence is unambiguous and permits longitudinal comparison of the drug dependent population.

4.2.1.3 Physical dependence syndrome, however, has not yet been evidently identified for ecstasy and ketamine. Hence there is no easily definable consensual caseness that the reported agencies can adopt. The reporting behavior is unavoidably shaped by individual discretion, organizational policy, as well as the societal perception of the severity of the problem. It is difficult to make of what constitutes a person reported to the CRDA as he or she can be a serious daily user, a weekly to monthly regular user, an irregular user who only takes drugs in festive parties, or even someone who only use the drug once.

4.2.1.4 A rapid surge in the number of reports can thus represent a true rise in number of drug users. But, it can also be a lowering of reporting threshold when the reporting agencies share the public perception that the problem is escalating.

4.2.1.5 The nature of ecstasy and ketamine also poses challenge to the conventional diagnostic system. The majority of party informants we encountered in the interviews did not exhibit any dysfunctions in their physical, psychological, and social lives. Many of them continued to hold a job or to attend school, to

have regular social and family lives, and exhibited no substantial or persistent psychological problems.¹¹ Thus these individuals would not qualify for the diagnosis of drug abuse. For this and the reason that these individuals are dissimilar to others addicts who are reported to the CRDA, the current CRDA figures for ecstasy and ketamine must be interpreted in caution.

4.2.2 Surveys

4.2.2.1 Five survey reports and one visit report related to drug use in parties and discos were reviewed. The visit report was about a trip organized by the Hong Kong Council of Social Service to Shenzhen. The other four surveys were conducted on party- and disco-goers. One report was about a telephone interview conducted during the Christmas season to enquire about party and drug use behavior in the general youth population.

4.2.2.2 The results of the four surveys were consistent with the trends captured by the CRDA system. Polysubstance abuse was common among the party- and disco-goers; ecstasy, ketamine and cannabis were commonly used. Most of these surveys, however, were small in sample size, and drug using population who did not seek help with treatment agencies was conspicuously absent. Given that only a small proportion of party- and disco-goers seek help with treatment agencies, the results of these surveys should be interpreted with caution. It is important to note that some of the research instruments were poorly constructed. For instance, the level of caseness was

¹¹ Although MDMA is known to cause depression, most resultant depression spells are transient. Major depression is not common among the study informants.

often undefined or poorly defined in these surveys. None of these surveys were peer-reviewed.

4.2.2.3 The telephone survey has the best methodology out of all examined surveys.

There is one important finding that deserves special attention. Only 9.5% of the youth respondents planned to go to rave parties and discos.

4.2.2.4 None of the organizations that released these results discussed the limitations of the methodology in the report or the press release. The results of these surveys were often conveniently cited in the news media. The findings from a biased sample were commonly generalized to the whole youth population. Hence, while these surveys were set out to increase understandings of local party drug scene, the dissemination of these findings may actually mislead the public.

4.2.3 Taken together, quality empirical data on drug use in parties and discos are few and far between. Given the uniqueness of ecstasy and ketamine, the rising trends of these drugs as captured in the CRDA should be interpreted with caution.

4.3 *Misrepresentations of Party Drug Scene*

4.3.1 One natural consequence of the lack of empirical data is the propensity of misrepresentations of the drug scene in the public sphere. The misrepresentations were not restricted to news media and lay public. It was observed that misrepresentations were also common among local professionals.

4.3.2 Misrepresentations in professional contexts

4.3.2.1 As discussed in previous section, the CRDA dataset is probably the only piece of sound empirical evidence that suggests a growing problem of ecstasy and ketamine abuse in Hong Kong. Not surprisingly, the increased number of reported individuals to the CRDA is the only piece of evidence that professional and media used to “prove” that party drug abuse is escalating.

4.3.2.2 Unfortunately, the researcher noticed that the CRDA data were often misused by the professionals. For instance, in order to impress the readers and audience that the rises in MDMA and ketamine abuse were acute, professionals often divided the latest number of reported persons by the number of reported persons when MDMA and ketamine were first identified. In the most extreme circumstances, the audience was told that there had been hundred-fold increase in MDMA abuse in recent years. The audience was then informed that the actual size of the problem was even bigger as the CRDA system only captured the tip of the iceberg. These statements are exaggerating and self-contradictory. Dividing the size of an existing drug-using population by its size when it first appeared would invariably produce a very large ratio; albeit a meaningless one.

4.3.2.3 Similar self-contradictory statements were not uncommon in other professional encounters. For instance, in the past few years when the CRDA captured a decreasing trend of drug abuse, its validity was criticized and challenged. Now as the CRDA recorded a rising trend, it is embraced as a welcome and conveniently available piece of data.

4.3.2.4 The misuse and misrepresentation of the CRDA data are worrying because it is the only piece of quality epidemiological data available.

4.3.3 Media misrepresentations

4.3.3.1 More serious misrepresentations of the drug abuse scene are observed in the newspapers and magazines. Common misrepresentations include:

4.3.3.1.1 Untrue claims relating to the drug effects. For example, the misbelief that MDMA causes its users to shake heads.

4.3.3.1.2 Exaggerated drug toxicity.

4.3.3.1.3 Romanticization of drug use and partying behavior. As one teacher succinctly pointed out in one educational seminar, “a colorful portray of rave parties in the media is not unlike ‘an invitation to try’”.

4.3.3.1.4 Sexualization of the party drug phenomenon. For example, parties and discos are venues to acquaint with girls who are liberal with sex.

4.3.3.1.5 Superficial understanding of the drug problems. For example, claiming that ketamine and ecstasy are physically dependent and therefore the users are addicts. .

4.3.3.1.6 Rave parties are equated with taste and upper class.

4.3.3.1.7 Promotional materials masquerading as educational materials.

4.4 *The Party Experience*

- 4.4.1 The researcher has participated in a total of nine parties during the study period (four were non-festive parties). While each party had different organizers, DJs, types of music and themes, there were so much in common that the researcher would attempt to essentialize the structure and experience of the parties he had been to.
- 4.4.2 Nearly all parties were made up of an organizer, publicity campaigns, a venue, one or more DJs, technomusic, participants, drug dealers and the police.
- 4.4.3 There are a few party organizers in Hong Kong. Those that are better known include Pink, Way Out East, Club Progressive and Hong Kong Rave.com. The party organizers vary amongst others in their background, missions, modes of operations, and target clienteles. These organizers can be young entrepreneurs in entertainment business, DJs, or people who are committed to the appreciation of rave culture and technomusic. Most commonly, the organizer may be a varied combination of these identities. Most party organizers operate within small companies that arrange DJs from local and overseas, overlook publicity, disseminate tickets, organize the venue and instruments, and overlook the conduction of the party.
- 4.4.4 Most organizers do not own a fixed party venue (Pink being the exception), but some may have their preferred sites to host parties. For instance, most parties by Club Progressive were hosted at Kwun Tong Ferry Pier. There are not many public venues for parties¹² and the owners of these venues tend to

¹² Common venues include Hong Kong Exhibition Center in Wan Chai, HITEC in Kowloon Bay, and Kwun Tong Ferry Pier.

overcharge the party organizers. To cite an example, the rental for a night of party in the HITEC costs around HK\$600,000. The high rental cost is collectively shared by the consumer and explains the high admission charges of most parties (between HK\$300 – 500)¹³. Even worse, some venues request for guarantee for catering service. For instance, the HITEC requests a guarantee of HK\$250,000 for a night of party. Hence, there is a pressure for the organizer to limit supply of water within the party venue (e.g. turning off the tap), hoping that this would boost the sales of water.

4.4.5 Parties are commonly organized around the festive seasons and long holidays, but non-festive parties are not uncommon. As a rule of thumb, during the study period, there was at least one major party in each month, and sometimes there were two or more. Once an organizer decides to conduct a party, he will publicize it by posters, web sites, magazines, and other means. The magazine “absolute” is dedicated to rave culture and parties. It is distributed free at record stores, like Hong Kong record and HMV, and contains the most updated information on local parties. Since early 2001, a few local newspapers, such as the Apple Daily, have also publicized the local parties in the “entertainment” section on Fridays and Saturdays. However, we found that the most powerful way to disseminate about party news is by word of mouth. Most party- and disco-goers learn of the details of coming parties (e.g. infamous DJ) and new discos from their peers.

4.4.6 Most parties attract a large crowd. The researcher has been to two parties of 5000 people. It was estimated that even for parties of smaller scale, there were

¹³ The party at Kwun Tong Ferry Pier is an exception. The admission ticket cost about HK\$100, including two drinks.

at least 2000 to 3000 participants. It is extremely difficult to describe who the participants were as they came from all walks of life, from middle class professionals to secondary students and the unemployed. From what were gathered in the interviews and the documents, the early parties that took place before wide publicity had higher proportion of middle class professionals, people who returned from overseas studies, and expatriates. Judging from people we observed, met and interviewed, the participants of contemporary party scene are made up of very more heterogeneous populations. It is impossible to classify the party-goers, but interestingly the local party culture identifies two distinct groups, the overseas students and graduates ("*chuk sing*"), and the less sophisticated youth from new satellite towns ("*ngau si fei*"). The *chuk sing* often comes from better family background, has more education, may even be a middle class professional and often dresses more fashionably. These two groups can be viewed as the two extremes of a spectrum, if party-goers are analyzed by their income, resources, education, party attire, and social behavior. The majority of party-goers are between these two extremes.

- 4.4.7 It is often viewed that party is between midnight and sunrise (6am –7am). While this is technically true, for many participants, the party may well begin before midnight and extend beyond the dance. This is because party is often only one component of the group's social gathering. The party is often preceded by gathering in Causeway Bay or Tsim Sha Tsui for dinner. For the more privileged, they may even spend some time a few days beforehand to shop for the party attire. Following the party, many party-goers would continue to spend the day together with their peers. The possibilities are

enormous, ranging from mahjong games, beaches, more partying, and even trip to Shenzhen. Sometimes, when party-goers need to work, they will leave for work immediately afterwards. In those instances, they are generally more restrained in their drug use during the party¹⁴.

4.5 Drug Use in Parties

4.5.1 It is generally recognized that rave parties are connected with drug use. In participant observations and ethnographies, drug use was commonly observed. Despite the heavy input from the police, there was no difficulty in obtaining drugs in all except one parties the researcher participated. People also used drugs rather openly. The researcher observed people snorting ketamine or taking ecstasy not only in toilets, but also in chill area¹⁵ and dance floor. It is also likely that some party-goers take the drugs before entering the party as we observed overdoses when people were queuing in for entry. To what extent this practice is common is uncertain.

4.5.2 Although most surveys show that cannabis is also used by people who frequent discos and parties, it was not commonly encountered in our participant observations. Ecstasy and ketamine remains the duo for parties; and most informants who use cannabis tend to use it outside the party context. Alcohol is also commonly used in parties when it is available. The researcher also encountered individuals who smuggled liquor into parties.

4.5.3 Although it is impossible to measure the drug use prevalence among a representative sample in parties, the researcher estimates that only a very small proportion (probably less than 15%) of party-goers are regularly drug free.

¹⁴ For instance, they would limit the ecstasy intake to half a tablet and would refrain from ketamine.

¹⁵ Chill area is the rest area in rave party.

These drug free participants tend to be middle class professionals (such as lawyers) who are more familiar with raving and are more able to achieve a natural high. Indeed as party-goers become more experienced, they are better in achieving a natural high in parties. By then, drug use is more to do with the social experience¹⁶ and other meanings (see 4.5.5).

4.5.4 Given the vigorosity of the pre-party drug search ¹⁷, and level of police presence in all parties the researcher attended, it is likely that most drugs in the parties are smuggled in. This view is concurred by some party organizers. However, it cannot be ruled out that other possibilities exist. The researcher was told that usually several smugglers would get the drug to the dealer at homebase ¹⁸, who would then disseminate the drugs via small dealers. For instance, ketamine would be sold at about \$30-60/pack, to small dealers who would then resell the ketamine to their friends and customer at increasing levels of price. This networking can help the dealer to reduce the risk of arrest by undercover police.

4.5.5 Why do people take drugs in the party? Most drug using informants explained that the drugs enhance the party experience by making them more elated and engaged (*fee di*). As one disco informant stated, “a party¹⁹ with drug is entirely different; you feel much more free.” Without ketamine or ecstasy, many informants expressed that they had difficulties in freeing themselves in parties and discos. Many also commented that it was a group behavior, and it

¹⁶ The positive experience of being recognized as a member of a social group.

¹⁷ For instance, in many parties, following the rehearsal, sniff dogs were sent into the venue to search for drugs.

¹⁸ A jargon used by dealers to signify a site they station.

¹⁹ She used party and disco interchangeably.

was difficult if not absurd to turn down invitation to share drugs²⁰. One informant compared parties to dim sum restaurant and drugs to tea and dim sum. The context and drugs fit in very naturally. In the initial participant observations, the researcher vividly encountered the lure to use drugs. This was because as a novice member of the culture, the researcher had great difficulty in engaging into the party. It was a very uneasy experience to stand in the middle of the dance floor with the rest of the crowd enjoying the music and the dance when the researcher felt that he was the only one out. A similar situation would be a formal cocktail party where most participants were strangers. While a glass of champagne would help the socially phobic individual to loosen up in the cocktail party, ecstasy and ketamine serve the same function in helping the participants to overcome their inhibitions and to immerse into the scene. Western literature tends to emphasize the pharmacological action of ecstasy in helping people to feel close to each other. This was not commonly mentioned locally, except among the educated and middle class participants. To sum up, the use of MDMA and ketamine is not mindless behavior; it serves an important function in the party context.

4.5.6 On the other hand, overuse of drugs can also jeopardize the party experience. Drug overdose is commonly called "OD" among local drug users. It was not uncommon in all parties the researcher participated. OD is usually caused by a combination of MDMA and ketamine, with ketamine playing a more important role. This is because it is more difficult to control the dosage of ketamine. And when several people are sharing a pack of ketamine, personal greed may prompt some individuals to take an excessively high dose. OD is

²⁰ Ketamine is often shared together by a group. A pack of ketamine is adequate for 4-6 persons.

most common around 3 to 4 am. This is probably because it is the time when many drug users top up and the tempo of music (often measured by beat per minute BPM) reached the peak. Coupled with dehydration and exhaustion, a small additional amount of ketamine, MDMA or the impurities in the ecstasy tablet (e.g. benzodiazepines) can easily lead to an overdose.

4.5.7 Although overdoses were commonly observed in all participated parties, they had little impact on the joyful atmosphere and spirits. People were not concerned about the overdosed. Most continued to dance next to the sick and unwell, as if these sick persons did not exist at all. The study informants told the researcher that they rarely paid attention to the overdosed strangers. They would not reduce or stop their drug use even if they saw many overdoses in the dance floor.

4.5.8 Overdosed individuals were usually helped by their friends to the sides of the party venue and the chill area, if such exist. Most overdoses would recover slowly within 30 minutes to 2 hours, depending on the amount of drugs taken. Many people would try to shorten the overdose by talking continuously to the overdosed person to keep him/her awake. Only rarely would the friends seek help from the party workers, security, and first aid personnel. When overdosed individuals were brought to the first aid station, the overdose was usually quite severe or the peers were inexperienced with overdose. It was observed that most overdosed individuals were reluctant to be transferred to hospital²¹. Often this reluctance was supported by the police officers if they were present at the scene. It was also observed that some police officers

²¹ This is because overdosed person and his/her friends are afraid that the hospital staff would inform the police and their family. Besides, the experienced users know that overdoses are usually reversible and not life-threatening.

would search friends who brought overdosed individuals to the first aid station for drugs.

4.5.9 The first aid facilities in all except one party we participated were appalling. Most workers in the party were ignorant of what to expect in an overdose. In most parties there were only two male first aid personnel, most of whom were inexperienced with drug overdose. To cite an example of the poor quality of care, there was no sphygmomanometer in one party and the first aid personnel had no way to measure the blood pressure of a comatose man. In another case, the first aid personnel allowed a peer to help his overdosed friend to take a large sip of water. This could have led to vomiting and life threatening aspiration pneumonia.

4.5.10 In one party, the undercover police used the first aid room to hand search arrested suspects. When the suspects were female, the first aid room had to be evacuated. Hence there was a pressure to evacuate the less severely overdosed individuals even before they regained full consciousness.

4.5.11 The St. John's Ambulance Brigade should be commended for their excellent service in one of the parties the researcher attended. The team was adequately staffed (8 members, including 3 females), well trained, and was equipped with a good range of instruments required for resuscitation. The team members were friendly, caring, empathetic, and non-judgmental in relating to those who required their care. They gave away free bottled water and patrolled the dance floor to identify the overdosed. The St. John's, however, was able to serve this but not other parties because this party was named a music festival.

4.5.12 Among the informants, a small number used ecstasy and ketamine outside the party or disco context. Two of them used ecstasy and ketamine in karaoke once during the period of study. No informant regularly used other drugs or had drinking problems. Most party informants did not smoke on a regular basis. Many, especially girls, did not smoke at all²². Smoking is more common among the disco informants.

²² This is in sharp contrast to heroin and methamphetamine dependence, which nearly always co-exist with regular smoking.

4.6 *The Club Experience*

- 4.6.1 The researcher entered the club scene without realizing that it was a category of its own. This is largely because clubs and rave parties share many features in common. These include clientele, atmosphere and music culture.
- 4.6.2 Five participant observations were paid to three clubs. These include two participant observations during weekdays.
- 4.6.3 Most clubs are located on the Hong Kong Island, but they tend to cluster around Lan Kwai Fong (LKF) area and nearby streets, like Hollywood road.
- 4.6.4 Clubs are smaller than parties; most clubs hosted fewer than 200 people during the peak hours. In general, there are more expatriates; about half are local and half are westerners. Drug use is rarely open in clubs and overdose is very uncommon. No overdose was observed in the participant observations. In contrast to parties, beer and cocktails are more commonly consumed.
- 4.6.5 Similar to parties, clubbing is a social experience. Most clubbers go in pairs or small groups. It is common practice for clubbers to frequent several clubs in one night. The magazine “absolute” publicizes many of the clubs, but word of mouth is also an important means to disseminate the latest news.
- 4.6.6 The attire of clubbers tends to be more stylish and trendy. In general people are neither too formal (e.g. business suit) or too casual (e.g. T-shirt) in clubs.
- 4.6.7 People dance, chat and enjoy a drink in clubs. The dance tends to be less vigorous than those in parties. Dehydration and exhaustion are rare.

- 4.6.8 Club music is more pluralistic in orientation though technomusic is still the predominant trend. Only black vinyl records are played in clubs. In some clubs, different DJs play different music each day.
- 4.6.9 Most clubs do not charge admission fee. Clubs earn their profits from the drinks. People may enter and leave freely; water supply is rarely a problem. As expected, clubs are better in business from Thursday to Saturday as well as during the festive seasons. The cost of clubbing varies substantially, depending largely on the number of drinks consumed.
- 4.6.10 Physical violence is generally rare in clubs, as the clientele tends to be middle class, better educated, and more mature. Police tend to posit themselves at strategic locations of LKF, but not at individual clubs.
- 4.6.11 In brief, the researcher observed that individual drug use is less rampant, better controlled, and more concealed in local club scene. Besides, according to the key player informants, there is no evidence that the club scene, pre-existed the recent rave hype, has grown in size in the past few years.

4.7 *The Disco Experience*

- 4.7.1 Discos are very different from parties and clubs, providing a very different kind of experience. The researcher conducted three participant observations at discos.
- 4.7.2 It is important to note that discos have existed in Hong Kong for decades. The disco scene is revived in recent years largely because the rave parties re-popularize the local dance culture. As rave parties and clubs are relatively expansive, there exists a niche for cheaper forms of dancing venue. The arrival of MDMA and ketamine also served as important monetary incentive as these drugs are largely consumed in the discos and parties, and their sales are lucrative business. Hence, over the past two to three years, many new discos are opened and even pubs, karaokes and nightclubs were renovated as discos or modified to include a disco dance floor.
- 4.7.3 Indeed, the term disco is so loosely used nowadays that it no longer denotes a venue where people dance. People may go to disco to watch football, to celebrate birthday (usually in private room), to have a drink, to meet friends, and to obtain drugs. As the market continues to evolve, new discos are increasingly pleomorphic in its orientations; and not uncommonly there are elements of pub, karaoke, nightclub, and even table dance in new discos.
- 4.7.4 Hence it can be dangerous to essentialize the disco culture. Nonetheless, a grand narrative is presented here. Compared with people who go to parties and clubs, people who frequent discos tend to be younger, economically less resourceful, more likely to come from deprived background, and more likely to be unemployed or unlawfully employed. Discos also have more

marginalized youth than parties and clubs. Deviant behaviors, such as physical violence, casual sex, and date rapes, are comparatively more common among its attendees. Discos are generally rougher and less peaceful than parties and clubs.

4.7.5 In contrast to parties, discos are not tightly connected to the rave culture. Although in many discos, quasi-technomusic is played, they are substantially different from the technomusic in rave parties. In discos, CDs instead of vinyl records are used. The music is mostly Cantonese and English pop songs mixed with a strong beat with BPM between 120-160 Hz. People sing along with the music, especially when the DJs deliberately turn down the volume abruptly. There has not been a culture of famous DJs in discos. Many disco-goers pay attention to the strength of bass and the loudness of the speakers. Few are bothered with the style and originality of the music, not to mention the technical details, such as BPM and the different schools of technomusic.

4.7.6 The attire in discos is very casual. In contrast to parties or clubs, most attendees do not pay attention to what they wear in discos.

4.7.7 Use of ecstasy and ketamine is common in discos. Drugs are obtained inside and used immediately. It can be observed in the toilets, in the dance floor and in private rooms. Overdoses are also common. Drug users in discos tend to be less sophisticated than those in parties in terms of their drug knowledge. For instance, disco drug users are less aware of the potential mind-altering effects of ecstasy and ketamine. In general, these two drugs are used like alcohol or sedatives for their disinhibition effects. The descriptions about drug

use and overdose in parties (see section 4.5) are generally applicable to parties the research participated.

- 4.7.8 In the participant observations, it was observed that alcohol use was far more common in discos than in parties. This is probably related to the admission and booking systems, which will be described below (see 4.7.9). Alcohol and drugs are often inseparable in the disco context.
- 4.7.9 Admission charge to discos varies. Most discos charge between HK\$100 – 200 for each person, but not uncommonly that for ladies are free. Insider connections may also help to get admission to discos at lower price or for free. According to informants, in some discos, admission fee can be reduced if the attendees purchase drugs from the gatekeepers. Most admission charge includes two complementary drinks. Otherwise, a can of soft drink or beer or a bottle of water costs around HK\$50. People can also reserve a table or a room by guaranteeing purchase of a specified amount of beer.
- 4.7.10 Discos are common in Tsim Sha Tsui, Mong Kok, Tsuen Wan, Wan Chai, and Sha Tin. Most discos have their own fixed venues, but there are exceptions (e.g. the disco hosted in Riverside Hotel). Discos are generally of similar sizes to many clubs, but the venues are generally more crowded. During peak hours, the popular discos can be so densely packed that it would be impossible to dance at all.
- 4.7.11 Although clubbers generally do not go to discos, there is a small overlap between party-goers and people who attend discos. This is especially so among the party-goers who are less privileged along the socioeconomic ladder.

4.7.12 In brief, the disco scene is less stylized and sophisticated than the rave parties and less glamorized than the clubs. Compared with parties and clubs, discos are generally more disordered and less peaceful. However, there is no evidence that drug use or overdose is particularly serious in discos.

4.8 *Under-age disco and party participants*

- 4.8.1.1 This issue was brought up by one social worker informant. She expressed concerns of the increase in under-age disco-goers witnessed among her clientele. They were mostly 14 to 15 and referred by their parents. Most of these under-age party-goers began their partying in 2000. They tended to enter discos at 2 to 3 am with older peers to minimize the chance of being identified.
- 4.8.1.2 They often shared the drugs with a larger group of friends. Few of them could appreciate the drug experience; the drug use was mostly a social experience and peer activities.
- 4.8.1.3 There is some evidence that disco raid may drive the under-age disco-goers to underground discos. One disco in Yuen Long actually provides free transport for participants from Tsim Sha Tsui East. According to informants, this disco is frequented by the under-age as disco raid is less likely there than other discos in Mong Kok, Wan Chai and Tsuen Wan.
- 4.8.1.4 As for disco, police generally check the age of the young looking participants. In the participant observations, the researcher did not encounter any under-age youth.

4.9 Safety

4.9.1 Dehydration

4.9.1.1 The pertinence of drinking water in rave parties is well known. The night-long dancing, the thirst and hyperthermia induced by ecstasy, as well as the often hot and stuffy venue all contribute towards the risk of dehydration.

4.9.1.2 The issue of drinking water is particularly relevant to Hong Kong. In most UK and US parties, tap water is an important means to replenish dehydration associated with dance and drug use. Yet in Hong Kong because tap water is not edible, participants cannot replenish their fluid loss by resorting to the tap. During the study, the researcher noticed that a small number of organizers turned off all taps. Hence, even in desperate situation, participants would not be able to access the tap as a last resort.

4.9.1.3 It is also important to note that most organizers (especially of parties) do not allow participants to re-enter the venue upon leaving. Hence, it is not possible for the participants to shop for water in nearby convenient stores.

4.9.1.4 As a result, the organizers have absolute control on the distribution of portable water within the venue. Not surprisingly, distilled water is generally sold at an exorbitant price in parties. The most expensive water cost the researcher HK\$2 per 10 mls. As the admission ticket and drugs already cost a lot (HK\$500-700 for party, and HK\$200-300 for disco), it was not surprising that we observed many participants, especially those without fixed income, were very restrained in replenishing their water loss.

- 4.9.1.5 Party-goers use several ways to combat their thirst. The researcher has known partygoers who quenched their thirst by chewing gum. Some resorted to tap water while others resorted to ice cubes (but only if available).
- 4.9.1.6 As the study progressed, the researcher observed that it became increasingly rare for alcohol be available in parties. On the other hand, because most discos and small parties have fixed venues and drinking license, the same trend was not observed. Since alcohol is a diuretic that speeds up excretion of water via the kidney, it hastens water loss and dehydration in discos and small parties. The availability of alcohol in an enclosed environment where there is relative inaccessibility of water increases the risk of dehydration and related complications.
- 4.9.1.7 Most discos include in the admission tickets two free drinks. While this is welcoming, it is important to note that ladies are usually waived for admission fee. Hence, in most instances where a woman and a man go to a disco together, each will have only one drink. And, it is not uncommon for disco-goers to enhance the drug effects by alcohol. Hence, the only free drink they take can well be a glass of beer.
- 4.9.1.8 The researcher observed that in only one party was portable water given out free of charge at first aid station. This practice was welcomed by the party-goers the researcher encountered and is actually a good way to attract overdosed or dehydrated individuals and their peers to approach the first aid station for help.
- 4.9.2 Overdose and first aid

4.9.2.1 These topics were covered in section 4.5.6. The inadequacy of first aid personnel and facilities was discussed.

4.9.3 Physical Violence

4.9.3.1 No physical violence was observed in all parties participated. Even in very crowded parties where there were long queues, participants were well behaved. As one informal informant told the researcher, "People come here for fun, not for troubles."

4.9.3.2 People were also well behaved in the clubs the researcher visited.

4.9.3.3 The propensity of physical violence was reported in the local media, and confirmed by news reporters, social workers, and disco informants. The researcher did not encounter fights or aggression in discos visited. However, it was observed that people in discos tended to identify a certain area as their territories. Outsiders were generally not welcomed. One common way to purchase a territory in a disco is to book a room or a table by pre-ordering a specified amount of beer. The table and room provide a home base and the place for rest in between dance.

4.9.4 Personal safety of female participants

4.9.4.1 Contrasting views are held by the media and the female informants as to whether female is vulnerable in parties and discos. Sexualized female bodies have now almost become the icon that represents local parties and

discos. Most newspaper reports of rave parties are accompanied by a photo of a sensually dressed young woman. Reports of newly established discos often include personal features of two or three pleasant looking young women, implying that these are representatives of the female participants there. Flirtatious language is often used in describing these women.

4.9.4.2 On the other hand, the social worker informants and the female drug using informants told us that most women were very cautious of their safety in parties and discos. For example, women often visit these places in groups. They overlook each other's safety. The experienced ones will supervise the new comers' first drug use, in case they become comatose and vulnerable to sexual assault.

4.9.4.3 In the participant observations, the researcher confirmed the reports made by the social workers and the female informants. However, it was also observed that the level of security was not as high as often emphasized. For instance, in one of the parties, a new comer to the party overdosed herself. Her peers rested her at a corner and supervised her from a distance while keeping on dancing. She was almost taken away by another group of friends without her peers noticed. Sometimes, all members of the group were drugged up, and none was able to maintain a supervising role.

4.9.4.4 Many female informants emphasized their vigilance on safety in parties, but the researcher observed that some of them were actually amnesic of what had happened. In one party, a female informant was embraced by three strangers for several minutes. She later on admitted that she could only remember that one of them was an Indian. She was evasive as to whether she gave consent.

These three men left their numbers on her phones, but she was not even able to identify their names among all names recorded.

4.9.4.5 It has been rumored among the disco subculture that some disco-goers make love in the VIP rooms or even at the dance floor. This was not observed in the participant observations, and none of the study informants had eye-witnessed such happenings before.

4.9.5 Fire hazard

4.9.5.1 The majority of local parties are held in public exhibition halls that adhere to the regulations on fire exits and facilities. In the participant observations, no exit was found to be blocked, or locked.

4.9.5.2 There may however be a problem of overload in the most popular discos. In one disco the researcher participated in Mong Kok, the venue was so loaded that it was very likely that it had violated the approved capacity. The risk of fire hazard in such overcrowded premises should not be underestimated.

4.10 Issues Pertaining to Medical Treatment and Rehabilitation

4.10.1 Training needs of teachers and social workers

4.10.1.1 Most teachers and social workers who participated in the educational talks and seminars expressed needs to update their knowledge on new drugs. For instance, they wanted to know how to recognize “dependence” on ecstasy and ketamine. Many social workers were keen to learn how to motivate drug users to “detoxify”.

4.10.1.2 One teacher insightfully pointed out that most of their knowledge about the latest development in drug scene came from newspapers and magazines. Much as he would like to visit and investigate the drug scene, he was concerned that such would generate misunderstandings (e.g. if he met his students in a Shenzhen disco). On the other hand, he expressed concern about the genuineness of the media representations, which were often oriented toward infotainment.

4.10.1.3 In discussing how teachers and social workers might equip themselves in the rapidly changing drug scene, three distinct kinds of resources were mentioned. They were international and local Internet web sites, regular continuous education seminars, and channels for front line drug workers to feed the latest development to teachers and social workers.

4.10.2 Are ecstasy and ketamine gateway drugs?

4.10.2.1 This issue was raised in two educational seminars. Given the lack of evidence of addictiveness, some social workers felt that gateway phenomenon would be an important argument in dissuading youngsters from using ecstasy and ketamine.

4.10.2.2 None of the drug using informants of this study had ever used heroin. A small proportion of informants had experimented with cannabis, methamphetamine, and benzodiazepines. None of them were dependent on methamphetamine or benzodiazepines. There was no obvious evidence that party or disco drug use, like cigarette smoking, preceded and led to the abuse of other illicit drugs.

4.10.2.3 The drug pusher informant explained to us the distribution network of hard drugs, like heroin and methamphetamine, and party drugs (ecstasy and ketamine) were distinct and separated. While the reasons behind this separation were not entirely clear, it was partly related to the protection of self-interests of the two networks.

4.10.2.4 There was an unexpected observation that many of the party informants, especially the female, were not regular smokers.

4.10.3 How do party-goers and disco-goers perceive their drug use?

4.10.3.1 The data from social worker informants showed that most users of ecstasy and ketamine did not equate ecstasy and ketamine with heroin. Seldom were ecstasy and ketamine conceptualized as illicit drugs in their subculture. These were confirmed in the informant interviews and participant observations. None of the party- or disco-goers the researcher interviewed formally and informally agreed that they were addicts. In fact, many of them were surprised that the researcher considered this term in the party context.

4.10.3.2 Most drug users informants were aware of the potential harmful effects and toxicity of ecstasy and ketamine. Most of them could name the acute toxic reactions as well as the longer-term amnesic consequences of drug use. Some even admitted that they had been more forgetful since they used ecstasy and ketamine and were not as sharp as before²³. However, the knowledge and negative experience on ecstasy and ketamine did not deter their drug use. The commonest cited reason of continued drug use was the

²³ These subjective memory impairments were not obvious in daily conversation. Even with sophisticated neurocognitive examinations, most drug users with subjective memory problems would demonstrate no well defined deficits.

analogy of smoking: “People continue to smoke cigarette even though they know smoking can cause so many diseases in the long run. So, what’s the problem of using ecstasy and ketamine?”

4.10.3.3 Most informants expressed some degree of concerns about their drug use.

These worries about the potential long-term harmful effects were context dependent. Even an individual said she would not take drug in the next party, the determination often disappeared once she entered the party site. As explained before, ecstasy and ketamine are highly useful in helping people to engage in party, not to mention that the decision to take drug is often implicit and group-dependent. Thus, it would be difficult for an individual to fully engage in a party without taking drugs.

4.10.3.4 In participant observations and ethnographic interviews, the researcher observed that the mere suggestions of cessation of drug use generated negative emotions. Few informants contemplated stopping their drug taking behavior, even within days after rather severe overdose. However, many informants expressed concerned about harmful and toxic effects inflicted by ecstasy and ketamine. Most welcomed information about safer drug use, e.g. on how to avoid overdose, how to avoid dehydration. The discussion of these harm reduction strategies often generated warm responses and trust from the informants. As many informants have access to the Internet, when explaining the potential harm of party drugs, the information must be accurate and impartial. Exaggerated information more often than not leads to distrust and disengagement from the therapeutic relationship.

4.10.3.5 Few informants or their peers succeeded in stopping their drug use in one step, the exception being those who developed transient psychotic symptoms from their drug use. The experience was so frightening that most afflicted individuals were determined to stop the drug use. Otherwise, most successful informants went through a period of controlled drug use before moving on to another pastime or even a new peer group (a substitute) and stopped the drug.

4.10.3.6 In the present study, the researcher was not able to identify individuals who were able to abstain from party drug use. However, three ex-disco-goers were identified and their drug use trajectories yielded insightful perspectives. Two male informants who used ecstasy and ketamine in discos on very frequent basis (both used more than once per week) ceased discos altogether when they secured new jobs. Both explained that once they worked, they had no energy and time for discos and drugs anymore.

4.10.3.7 The female informant explained that she and her peers felt tired of discoing. They moved on to pastime they treasured before, including barbecue, Ocean Park, karaoke. Like the other two male informants, the drug use ceased once she left the disco scene. One social worker informant also stated that female disco-goers often ceased partying once they developed stable relationships. This observation was echoed by one of the disco informants who dramatically cut down her drug use after she met her current boyfriend. Although the number of cases is not big enough for generalization, these perspectives are consistent with the clinical experience. They explain why it

is so hard to help party- and disco-goers out of the drug scene²⁴, but also provide insights as to how to motivate and help individuals to stop ecstasy and ketamine use.

4.11 The scope of the problem

4.11.1 One of the biggest difficulties fraught with the understanding of parties, discos and the entailed drug use is the scarcity of quality data. Most ad hoc studies on this and related topics have small and unrepresentative sample. Only the CRDA and the Hong Kong Youth Council study have good sample. The Hong Kong Youth Council study showed that only a small proportion (about 10%) of local youths participated in parties and discos last Christmas. The rising trends of ecstasy and ketamine captured by the CRDA should be interpreted with caution for reasons explained before.

4.11.2 The scope of party drug abuse problem may not be as enormous as it is commonly perceived. The average size of a rave party is between 2000 to 5000 individuals. Using scenario analysis, we can estimate the maximum and the minimum scopes of the drug user population. In the best scenario, about 5000 individuals regularly frequent all parties; and this gives a minimum party drug user population of around 5000. In the worst case, we can assume that half of the participants are regulars who frequent all parties and the other half are regulars who attend parties on a less frequent basis (one in three parties)²⁵.

These are very conservative estimates based on the data collected in the

²⁴ It is widely acknowledged that helping marginalized youth to hunt for a job in the current economic climate is difficult. Motivating a whole peer group to change to a health substitute activity is equally if not more difficult.

²⁵ This is based on the observation that there were at most 3 major parties each month and most regular partygoers go to party at least once a month.

interviews. In this worst scenario, there are about 10,000 persons involved in party drug use.

4.11.3 As for discos, it is difficult to estimate the number of participants since they are not centralized ritual-like events participated by all or most members of the subculture. However, it is important to appreciate that most people who go to discos are marginalized teenagers and young adults. They do not become marginalized by frequenting discos. Rather, they frequent discos because it is now the popular venues for them to hang out. Individuals who do not belong to this subculture rarely like to visit discos, which are now generally recognized as rough places. For these marginalized youths, drug abuse is merely a symptom that signals more thorny problems, like social poverty, early childhood abuse, unsuccessful education, early delinquency, abusive relationship, unemployment, violent environment, and triad involvement, that are more fundamental and closer to the reality.

4.11.4 These two analyses are not without limitations. There is a small degree of overlap between disco- and party-goers. Some new discos are positing themselves as up-market entertainment complexes. Hence the above analyses are only meant to serve as a framework for understanding the drug and party scenes before quality data are available. It is however hoped that these informed estimates give a more realistic outlook than the gloomy and alarming pictures portrayed by evidence-less reports.

4.12 The Fallacy of Language

4.12.1 An enticing observation that warrants discussion in the first place is the difficulty in describing the phenomena under study. For instance, there is no single term that can cover the different kinds of venues where dance and drug use take place simultaneously. The inadequacy of our language and vocabulary is very obvious as the following examples illustrate.

4.12.2 The present study was commissioned with a title that reflects government usage of the term “psychotropic drugs” in embracing a variety of drugs that are popularized in recent years and are commonly used in dance scenes, like parties and discos. Hence, the term embraces drugs like ecstasy, ketamine, cannabis, methamphetamine, and probably most benzodiazepines. The term “psychotropic drug” however is rarely used to refer to thinner and other solvents, or cough medicine.

4.12.3 The term “psychotropic drugs” has two meanings. It is commonly used by clinicians referring to medications prescribed by psychiatrists. Using in this way, the term includes antidepressants, anti-psychotics, anti-epileptic drugs that are rarely abused. Indeed, among commonly prescribed psychiatric medications, only anxiolytics/hypnotics (e.g. diazepam, flunitrazepam) has the potential of abuse. “Psychotropic drugs” has a second meaning when it is used by neuroscientists. In such context, psychotropic drugs, also commonly called psychotropics, refer to chemicals that affect the functioning of the central nervous system. This broader definition is closer to the term “mind-altering substances’ commonly used by social scientists, and embraces a wide

range of substances, including nicotine, alcohol, caffeine, as well as all psychiatric medications.

4.12.4 Hence the term “psychotropic drugs” has two meanings and a confusing boundary. When it is used beyond the clinical and neuroscience contexts, the term is even more confusing as it is often unsure what it refers to. For instance, when the term is used in the drug abuse context in Hong Kong, it is unsure how it should be defined. Should it include methamphetamine, which is as addictive as heroin and often classified as hard in the drug culture? Should the term include substances like cough syrup, which is addictive, contains opiates, mind-altering, but seldom abused in parties and discos? Should we only use the term to refer to ecstasy, ketamine and cannabis, the trio that has been reported to be common in parties and discos²⁶, but has never or rarely been used by psychiatrists?

4.12.5 It has also been critiqued that the term “psychotropic drugs” can be misleading when it is used in the drug abuse context. This is especially so for the Chinese translation adopted by the public as it literally means psychiatric medications. For the lay public, abusable psychiatric medications are often equated as sleeping pills (mostly benzodiazepines), which is regarded as quite benign, safe and “legal”²⁷. As the term “medications” implies that these substances, like sleeping pills, are prescribed in clinical practice, the term sends out a message that these substances are mostly safe and not too illegal.

²⁶ We shall contest these findings in subsequent section.

²⁷ There is a sizeable literature that shows that a substantial proportion of benzodiazepines abuse and dependence occurs in clinical setting.

4.12.6 What is a better term to describe the upsurge of drugs in parties and discos?

Or is there a better term? Terms, such as “club drugs”, “dance drugs”, and “party drugs” are used by authorities like the National Institute of Drug Abuse to describe drug use associated with the Rave and related culture. While these terms are closer to the phenomenon, they may not be directly applicable to Hong Kong. This is because the term “club” has a different meaning in Hong Kong. The term “dance drugs” is also misleading as discos and parties are only part of the dance culture, which includes ballet, modern dance, traditional Chinese dance and the like. The term “party drugs” misses the point that the referred drugs are also abused in discos, which in Hong Kong are very different from parties.

4.12.7 The abovementioned contradictions and limitations are highlighted to illustrate the complexity of the contemporary drug use patterns and trends. One explanation for the lack of the best-fit term is that the evolution of drug culture overshoots the invention of our language. Hence, our language is generally behind the drug scene and there is often a lack of a “best-fit” term to describe the latest drug use trend. We try to be as close to the reality as possible, but are often failed by the lack of a language invented to mirror the latest drug scene.

4.12.8 The lay culture, however, is often more responsive to these changes. This is well illustrated by the Cantonese slang terms for ecstasy. Although ecstasy is first translated literally, “extreme happiness”, by the press and other media, this translation has never been taken up among the drug users. Instead, it is clear from what we observed during the participant observations and the

informant interviews that ecstasy was commonly called “E” or “*fing tou*” in their local world.

4.12.9 The slang term “*fing tou*” has no equivalent in the west. It is hence likely a local invention. While the originator of the slang is uncertain, it is clear that the term has been validated and widely used by the local drug users to refer to ecstasy. The word “fing” represents the collective expectation among the drug users, the lay public and even some professionals that the drug causes the users to swing their heads and bodies with the dance. Although ecstasy does not induce swinging bodily movements, the slang captures the public imagination of a party as well as drug users’ subjective expectations and perhaps experiences. To “fing” may mean more than to swing; it may refer the ability to engage with the party/disco atmosphere and to liberate oneself from inhibition treasured in traditional Chinese culture. Hence, perhaps there is no better term than the spoken word of “fing” that describes the experience that is not generally acceptable in the local culture. The absence of a written word for the behavior and experience of drug use and dancing illustrate once again the fallacy of language in capturing the rapid transformation in dance drug culture.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 *Overview*

5.1.1 The present study, using a combination of qualitative methods, has yielded extensive and rich data that cover different aspects of party drug abuse. By adopting a non-judgmental approach and labor-intensive participant observations, the researcher was able to reach the lived experience of party and disco drug use. Such insider perspectives provide an invaluable window for us to understand why people go to parties and discos, and why they use drugs in such contexts. It also informs us as to the true nature of parties and discos in Hong Kong: where they are from, what they are, and where they are heading. The study also identified the potential danger associated with party and disco drug use, in particular unattended overdose and dehydration. Apart from the danger within the disco, this report also alerts the danger of misrepresentation of the drug scene by the local media and professionals. By grounding the discussion and recommendations on quality empirical data, this report hopes to clarify some of the confusions and misunderstandings and to identify new or neglected issues that are at stake to the understanding of contemporary youth drug problems in party and disco.

5.2 *Deconstructing “rave party”*

5.2.1 As pointed out earlier, the public discussion of rave culture and parties often fails to distinguish different kinds of dance scenes where drug use occurs. The terms “rave” and “rave party” are often constructed as a homogenous entity in the local society. One important findings of this study is that the local rave hype is actually made up of three distinct but overlapping scenes in parties,

clubs, and discos. Although all of these three local subcultures capture on the global rave trend, they have different histories, participants, structures, and discourses.

5.2.2 This ethnographic understanding has important bearings in formulating informed drug abuse policy. Unless we have a clear and accurate map of the actual drug scene, it is difficult to design rational policy and treatment. Given the diversity of the drug using contexts, different strategies and policies are required to address the emergence of drug use in the different contexts of parties, clubs and discos. A good understanding of the genuine nature of these three subcultures is hence fundamental and essential to an informed discussion of so called “party drug abuse”.

5.3 What is the scope of the party drug problem?

5.3.1 As the report pointed out, the often dramatized, skewed, but extended coverage of the party and disco scenes in the media is rarely evidence-based. However, these reports projected to the public an image that Hong Kong is doomed with a new drug problem that is hype, cool, sensual, and sexualized. Thus a “verdict” is made even though empirical data is few and far between. There is, however, a danger that this proclaimed epidemic of party drug abuse may become a self-fulfilling truth if it drew a large number of curiosity-driving youths and teenagers into it.

5.3.2 Quality and well-sampled data on party drug use are rare in Hong Kong. Although the CRDA recorded a rapid increase in number of ecstasy and ketamine abuse, the figures are difficult to interpret. Nearly all reported

persons would not have pharmacological dependence, and a substantial proportion of the reported persons would not meet the criteria of drug abuse. Thus the actual increase in problematic use of ecstasy and ketamine can be much smaller than the trend recorded by the CRDA.

5.3.3 As our analyses illustrate, the actual scope of party drug problem in Hong Kong is probably much smaller than what is generally perceived in the public. Although the estimates in section 3.11 should be treated as preliminary, they are informed estimates of the party populations.

5.3.4 It is also important to appreciate that disco drug users are substantially different from those in the parties. Most disco drug users are marginalized youths, who have existed in the society even before the recent revival of the disco culture. For them, drug abuse is merely a presenting symptom of more sinister underlying psychosocial pathologies; drug abuse treatment is only a facet of a holistic rehabilitation package they required. Hence, framing this population as disco drug users is an incomplete and biased representation.

5.3.5 To overcome the problem of ambiguous caseness, the CRDA system should require reporting agencies to specify the frequency of ketamine and ecstasy use (e.g. daily/weekly/monthly/irregular/once or a few times). The reported persons can then be stratified by the severity of drug use and the longitudinal trend can be monitored more meaningfully.

5.4 *Does Hong Kong really have a new drug problem?*

5.4.1 This provocative but enticing question should be addressed at different levels. First, have new drugs penetrated local drug scene? If so, has such occurred in a new socio-cultural context? What's more, is the nature of the new drug use

in a new context genuinely different from that of the pre-existing drug problems?

5.4.2 The first two questions are not difficult to answer. The arrival and the rise of ecstasy and ketamine are documented by the CRDA data and validated by both key player and drug-using informant reports. Although the absolute size of the ecstasy and ketamine user population is far from clear, the informed experience and the CRDA data suggest that the user population has been growing since its emergence in the local drug scene.

5.4.3 The present study showed that the use of ecstasy and ketamine is predominantly restricted to the party, club and disco contexts. Although clubs and discos have existed in Hong Kong for a long time and drug use in clubs and discos is generally recognized, the use of drug in large-scale parties is new to Hong Kong. Before 1996-97, rave parties were only known to a restricted group of people and they were mostly underground. The popularization of rave parties and its entailed drug use hence represents the birth of a new culture of drug use. The party drug use culture is distinct from the traditional form of drug problems in Hong Kong as it does not stand at the margin of the society. Quite the contrary, as the rave scene is appropriated into the mainstream society, as it has already happened in most developed countries, party drug use is at the center of our culture, often glamorized by inaccurate representations and public imaginations.

5.4.4 The rave hype has revived the disco culture in Hong Kong, but as explained before, disco culture has existed in Hong Kong for a long time and it is distinct from the party culture. Although new drugs (ecstasy and ketamine) were

introduced into the disco scene, this does not really constitute a new drug problem. This is because there have been no significant changes of the core culture, including its participants, key players, structures, rituals, and cultural themes. The same argument goes to club scene in Hong Kong. While the rave hype may affect the kind of music or drugs consumed at the local clubs, the nature of the core culture has not changed.

5.4.5 Hence, the genuinely new drug problem is the use of ecstasy and ketamine in parties. This should not be confused with the long-standing drug use among the marginalized youths in discos.

5.5 *Will parties and discos gradually go out of fashion?*

5.5.1 This enticing question was raised by several of our informants. The party organizer opined that Hong Kong would follow the North American's experience that rave party would remain popular for next five to eight years. The party and disco informants gave a different view. They believed that party and disco would lose their popularity and attractiveness in one to two years' time, just as any kind of fads.

5.5.2 This report believes that the latter view is perhaps more relevant to the party scene in Hong Kong. This is because the North American experience was 10 years ago when Internet and global economy are not as developed as present days. It is now generally recognized that Internet has tremendously sped up economic cycles and cultural transformations. Most Hong Kong teenagers and young adults are very in tune with these cycles and transformations. Hence, once new fad comes out, it is anticipated that a substantial proportion of party-goers, especially the younger ones, will leave parties for the new hype.

- 5.5.3 As for discos, they have been in Hong Kong for decades and will continue to exist. However, the popularity of discos will probably wane with the rave parties. Indeed, towards the end of the present study, there was already preliminary evidence that some party- and disco-goers were leaving parties and discos for new fashionable hangouts.
- 5.5.4 It is often wrongly assumed that party is the only entertainment of the party-goers. As explained in the Results section, social activities are common both before and after the parties. It was also observed that many informants had other activities and entertainment they enjoyed and pursued in between parties. Such include karaoke, skateboard, picnic mahjong²⁸, Chinese hot pot, and barbecue. When asked what the alternatives to parties were, the informants expressed that skateboard and break dance were possible candidates, but they were not widely available. Many informants were annoyed with the fact that while parties and discos were not endorsed by the public, few alternatives are available.
- 5.5.5 The experience in many parts of the world showed that there were a range of legislatures and operations that government and law-enforcing agents could use to crush large scale rave parties. Drug raids in discos may also temporarily halt the popularity of drug use in such scenes. However, it has been argued that such prohibitive approach will drive parties and discos underground. In contrast to Europe and North America, Hong Kong parties and discos are mostly under public surveillance. However, it is technically not impossible that rave parties in Hong Kong be turned underground.

²⁸ Playing mahjong in a remote island, like Lantau.

5.5.6 We also observed in the study that whenever it was publicized that drug search would be stringent in the party, some party-goers would choose to obtain and take their drugs before they entered parties. There is hence a possibility of spreading the drug use and the distribution network outside parties if such situation persists.

5.6 *Why parties? Why drugs?*

5.6.1 The general public often perceives partying and the entailed drug use as mindless, irrational and functionless. The participant observations and in-depth interviews of the present study, however, showed that partying and the entailed drug use often carried important meanings for the individuals concerned. Many of these meanings epitomized the lived social experience of our youths at a time of widening inequality and profound socio-economic transformations. The party is a shared social space for peer groups to experiment and negotiate the often contradictory values and discourses advocated in western modernity and traditional Chinese culture. Drugs and parties are inseparable not only because of the abundance of drugs in parties. More importantly, ecstasy and ketamine and partying provide amnesia, anesthesia, and asylum; a bracketed reality that is insulated from the daily life experience of confused identity, social deprivation, school failure, unemployment, financial problem, family discord, unstable relationship, and disillusionment.

5.6.2 The discos that flourished in Hong Kong nowadays are in many ways no different from the discos that existed before. Hence the “rave phenomenon” does not generate a new cohort of disco drug users; “rave” is merely taken

upon by the youths who already exist at the margin of our society. The finding that disco-goers constituted mostly of marginalized youths is no surprise to many drug workers. Nonetheless, the translation of the global rave culture in our local context intensifies and reminds us of a long-standing youth problem.

- 5.6.3 The research would like to point out that these models are constructed to summarize the rather complex phenomenon. Like many other models and master narratives, the model proposed in this report tends to essentialize what can be more heterogeneous populations and experiences. However, it is hoped that the described model will help balance the tension between lumpers and slitters, and provide a framework for policy decision and therapeutic intervention.

5.7 *The challenge of the ecstasy and ketamine*

- 5.7.1 While a lot of suggestions and efforts have been made to curb party drug abuse, there has been relatively little discussion on what makes party drug use so popular. Ecstasy and ketamine are different from most other drugs of abuse in many important ways. In this study, we observed two unique characteristics that make these two drugs distinct from the traditional drugs of abuse: the relative lack of biopsychosocial complications associated with drug use, and the use of drugs in a context that is normative in most culture.

- 5.7.2 Unlike abusers of heroin, methamphetamine, or benzodiazepam, users of ecstasy and ketamine seldom find themselves losing control over their drug use, an important and easily recognizable feature of addiction. Indeed, as explained, it would be hard press to diagnose substance dependence or even

abuse among most study informants, as most of them do not fulfill the standard diagnostic criteria. Hence, users of ecstasy and ketamine are often confident that they will not become addicts because of dependence problem.

5.7.3 It was also observed that in contrast to other drugs of abuse, ecstasy and ketamine do not invariably cause complications. This is related to the fact that there is as yet no conclusive evidence to suggest that ecstasy or ketamine causes physical dependence, and the use of these drugs is mostly restricted to party and disco context. Thus in contrast to heroin or methamphetamine, features of substance abuse²⁹ are not commonly observed among the drug using informants. Although transient overdose is a common complication associated with ketamine use, it is not universal and rarely leads to significant or life threatening complications. Most overdosed drug users recover spontaneously with time. While subjective complaint of memory impairment is common, they are at most subjective and vague problems that do not show up in objective tests.

5.7.4 Ecstasy and ketamine are also unique because they are mostly used in dancing contexts, which are generally regarded as normative in most societies. While heroin, methamphetamine, and many other substances are mostly used in privacy or margin of the society (e.g. the staircase of a public housing estate), ecstasy and ketamine are used in public gatherings right in the center of the culture. Using ecstasy and ketamine in a rave parties of 5000 people is simply an entirely different experience. Hence, few of our drug using informants

²⁹ According to the DSM-IV criteria, one or more of the following criteria is/are required for a diagnosis of substance abuse: substance use resulting in a failure to fulfill major role, recurrent substance use in situations in which it is physically hazardous, recurrent substance-related legal problems, and continued substance use despite having persistent or recurrent social or interpersonal problems caused by the effects of substance.

experienced any feelings of shame, guilt or fear that are common among traditional drug abusers.

5.7.5 Taken together, ecstasy and ketamine challenge the classical concepts of addiction. There have not yet been conclusive evidence of physical dependence. . They are simple to use. Their uses do not invariably lead to recognizable and documentable physical and psychological problems. And they are used in a context that is now widely popularized by the global economy. In a nutshell, they overcome the traditional concepts of dependence and abuse, two commonly used justifications most societies employ to control illicit substances.

5.8 *Are drug free parties possible?*

5.8.1 The concept of a drug free party is controversial and has aroused tremendous discussions both within and outside the rave culture. This report will not dwell on the theoretical issues. Rather a more pragmatic approach is taken to dissect if such is possible technically and if not, what the alternatives are.

5.8.2 As stated before, despite vigorous efforts from party organizers and police force, ecstasy and ketamine were easily available in nearly all parties and discos we visited. According to our informants, drugs could still be smuggled into the party because they were hidden close to private parts (e.g. under the bra). Moreover, it was impossible to search every person thoroughly given the large number of entrants. Hence, unless intrusive and thorough body search is conducted for every entrant, drugs will still be available inside the party.

- 5.8.3 Drug control is even more difficult in discos because a large number of discos are open each night and the relatively smaller number of participants rendering drug searching by police force not cost-effective.
- 5.8.4 In some countries, such as Australia or Canada, the city councils take the initiatives to organize parties, hoping that these parties will be safer and drug-free. The results of these experiments are controversial and may not be generalizable to Hong Kong because Hong Kong parties are mostly indoor and public (in contrast to underground parties held in remote countryside).
- 5.8.5 Given that ecstasy and ketamine are integral to the party experience in Hong Kong (see section 4.5), and drug use has already become an established practice in local parties and discos, it will be very difficult to decouple drug use from partying. It will be more effective to control drug availability outside the party and disco venue.
- 5.8.6 An alternate strategy to reduce drug use in parties and discos will be to control the influx of ecstasy and ketamine to Hong Kong. Without these drugs, or if these drugs become expensive due to the shortage of supply, parties and discos will lose their attractions.
- 5.8.7 Before such can be accomplished, it is important to keep down the size of morbidity and mortality associated with party and disco drug use. This is an attainable goal because most informants expressed concerns about the harmful effects and toxicity of ecstasy and ketamine. Moreover, many of them also wanted to know how to avoid complications. Providing hard reduction educational materials is tenable and important, but has not yet been widely practised. Here local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can play an

important role in distributing educational materials, free water (see 5.10.5), and in providing first aid for overdosed individuals inside parties.

5.9 *Preventing drug overdose*

5.9.1 Transient drug overdose is by far the commonest morbidities encountered in parties and discos. While entailed mortality is rarely seen, such is possible and entirely preventable. The best way to reduce the number of overdose is better education of the drug users. More efforts should be paid to increase the level of drug education and harm reduction education given at parties and discos. Pamphlets on what is and how to prevent overdose should be designed and distributed at parties and discos³⁰. Again partnership with NGOs should be considered.

5.9.2 It is also important to proactively identify overdosed persons who need first aid care. It is highly undesirable for overdosed persons to lie against the walls of the dancing hall for recovery (which is now commonly practised). They should be taken to the first aid station for monitoring and resuscitation when necessary. The party organizer should bear this responsibility.

5.9.3 Well-lighted chill areas should be made mandatory for all parties so that participants who want to rest do not need to sit against the walls of the dancing hall. This will help distinguish the overdosed persons from those who want a rest at the periphery of the dancing floor.

³⁰ This should cover the features, causes (e.g. new drug, unfamiliar dealer, re-taking, dehydration, unrestrained intake), potential harms of drug overdosed in a balanced manner. The principles of proper management (e.g. recovery position, maintenance of airway, no water allowed until regain of consciousness) should also be emphasized.

5.9.4 An ample supply of potable water will reduce the chance of dehydration and the risk of overdose. This is because dehydration and related electrolyte imbalance increase the likelihood of overdose.

5.10 Free Drinking Water

5.10.1 As it has been clear that the organizers cannot stop the influx of drugs into the discos or parties, and these drugs are known to cause life-threatening dehydration in nightlong dancing, portable water should be accessible and affordable to the participants in all parties and discos. This is especially so if the organizers forbid the participants to re-enter the venue upon leaving.

5.10.2 Clean portable water should be available at all parties and discos. Legislation should be made to render it compulsory for organizers of parties and discos to provide clean and readily accessible water for drinking. The experience of Manchester Council, U.K. can be borrowed.

5.10.3 An alternative solution will be to allow participants to bring in their water. However, this will increase the difficulties of checking the influx of illicit drugs into the venue since many drugs, including GHB and other date rape drugs, are water-soluble. The researcher also feels that it is counter-intuitive to relax the re-entry of participants upon leaving the venue as this may encourage drug trafficking into the venue.

5.10.4 Before water is made compulsorily available in parties and discos, the government may consider mandating portable water be provided free at first aid counter. This should be printed on the admission ticket adjacent to the drug warning. It is hope that this interim measure will prevent casualties

(including overdoses) due to dehydration. This will also help link up participants who need medical assistance to the first aid personnel.

5.10.5 It may also be worthwhile to consider allowing NGOs to serve as a second safety valve. NGOs may be granted permission to distribute free water supply with harm reduction and treatment information. Such can be achieved with the appropriate legislative and administrative assistance from the government. For instance, large-scale parties may be required to allocate a fixed percentage of space in the chill area for the NGOs to provide free water and harm reduction message. Preferably the NGO free water counter and the first aid station should be proximal to where the organizer sells the beverages. Such measure is not as relevant for clubs and discos owing to space limitations. However, as these premises generally allow re-entry, the need for safety valve is not as pressing.

5.11 Other measures to improve safety of parties

5.11.1 The appalling first aid services provided at parties need to be brought up to standard as soon as possible. Designated and well signposted first aid area, adequate and qualified first aid personnel, and first aid equipment for resuscitation, basic and advanced life support should be made mandatory in all large-scale parties. Female first aid staff should be made mandatory for all large-scale parties. Law enforcing agencies should not use the first aid area for non-first aid activities.

5.11.2 One party organizer collaborated with university academics to monitor and control the level of music played at parties. This has proved to be successful in keeping down noise pollution and complaints. The measure may also

potentially reduce hearing damages inflicted on party- and disco-goers who dance close to the loud speakers.

5.12 *Fallacy of Language*

5.12.1 We have discussed in section 4.12 the lack of language in representing the rapidly changing drug and dance culture. Many official and professional terms are simply inadequate, if not incorrect, in what it is supposed to define. One notable example is the term “psychotropic drugs” which fails to capture the liquid and changing drug scene that Hong Kong has witnessed in the past decades.

5.12.2 On the other hand, we see novel slang terms constructed outside traditional institutions, which have nonetheless popularized among the user population. Not only that these terms reflect the attitude, value, and experience associated with the novel drug use in parties and discos, they illustrate the resourcefulness and the power of lay culture and even the drug use subculture in shaping and defining the meaning and the experience of drug use.

5.12.3 It is hence important for researchers, therapists, workers, and policy makers to keep abreast of the evolution of these slang terms, and to use these terms as a lens to capture how local drug scene and culture change. It will also be worthwhile to collaborate with individuals within these cultures to invent new terms that better capture the experience, pattern, and trend of drug use. One pressing need is to devise a term that is better than “psychotropic drugs” in summarizing the latest development in the local drug scene. A series of focus group interviews with key players and informants will be a good way to begin.

If we can define and name the phenomenon more accurately, we will be able to avoid unnecessary confusion and misunderstandings.

5.12.4 In the meantime, the term “party drugs” or simply specifying the misuse of ketamine and ecstasy in party and disco is preferable to the term “psychotropic drugs.”

5.13 Treatment Issues

5.13.1 The need of a meaning centered approach

5.13.1.1 The study findings show that better knowledge about the harmful effects of drugs may not be useful in deterring drug use among the established users. In both parties and discos, dancing, drug use and drug overdose occur in close proximity. Even the presence of countless overdoses do not deter the other participants from further drug use, and perhaps overdoses. The public health approach of drug education is based on the premise that all human beings avoid risk and make rational decision. While this has been shown to reduce the risk of initiating drug use³¹, this may not be applicable for established drug users. That people who are well aware of the harmful effects of cigarettes continue to smoke testify to the limitation of a risk education approach.

5.13.1.2 A meaning centered approach may serve to fill in this gap. As explicated in section 4.5, participation in parties and its entailed drug use often carry important meanings to the individual concern: desire to be in, acceptance to a social group that provide company and support, or to anesthetize painful and

³¹ For instance, the US National Household Survey showed that as more youth perceived drugs harmful, there was a corresponding decrease in national youth drug use.

overwhelming emotions. Without addressing these deeper meanings, it will be difficult to engage the drug users to reflect on their party and drug use behavior.

5.13.2 A stepwise approach

5.13.2.1.1 Though most informants do not contemplate ceasing party and drug use, most welcome information concerning drugs. Some even agree with the suggestion of a physical check. As local youths tend to respect doctors and health care professionals, a comprehensive physical and mental health assessment can serve as a good starting point in sensitizing the awareness and health concerns. However, doctors and social workers should understand that most of these physical checks yield completely normal results. For ethical reasons, soft findings (e.g. a slight elevation of white cell count) should not be exaggerated to impress the youths of the harm done. Physical check should neither be used as a bait to coerce the drug users into rehabilitative program. The potential negative impacts associated with a psychiatric record should also be considered.

5.13.2.1.2 Drug workers may also help drug users connecting to web sites and other facilities that promote drug education and harm reduction. Unfortunately, most well designed web sites and educational materials are in English. More efforts should be paid in translating these materials into Chinese.

5.13.2.1.3 The first step of harm reduction and controlled drug use is often to stop snorting ketamine. More motivated individuals will move on to limit the use of ecstasy to one or half tablet per party or disco. The motivation to

reduce drug use is strongest when the individual has experienced or witnessed an overdose recently. It is important to set targets that are realistic, given the severity of drug use and the personality of the individual and his/her peers.

5.13.3 Problem oriented rather than drug centered counseling

5.13.3.1 The popularization and glamorization of rave culture drug problems have the undesirable effects of misaligning the thrust of therapeutic efforts. Since party drug use is so interesting and attention-grabbing, it may overshadow more fundamental problems that deserve more intense interventions. Social deprivation, relative poverty, divorced or disengaged family, abusive upbringings, learning difficulties, failed schooling, unstable or abusive relationship, unemployment or "never-employment", unprotected sexual activities, commercial sex work, and trafficking activities are all too common among the disco informants. To them, drug abuse is merely one facet of their troubled lives. It is neither the genuine focus of the social pathology nor the most pressing problem. Not surprisingly, most of them have never contemplated ceasing discos and drug use.

5.13.3.2 One social worker informant justly pointed out that the counseling for party- and disco-goers must not be drug-centered. This insightful opinion reminds us that it is important for the drug workers not to fall in the same trap with the drug users. Drug users often use drugs to deny their life problems, to anaesthetize themselves and to take refuge. A drug-centered counseling can be a colluded denial of more thorny problems.

5.13.3.3 Occupational rehabilitation is important in helping drug users and marginalized youths in reintegration into the society. As the informants pointed out, having a job is the best way to institute a new lifestyle. Often it gives a life meaning to the youth concerned. Occupational therapists are seldom involved in job rehabilitation. Future studies should examine if their contribution will improve the rate of success and long-term outcomes. It is also important to identify successful overseas models and to introduce these models to local services.

5.13.4 Providing alternatives

5.13.4.1 During the study period, most discussions on the control of party drug use centered on prohibitive measures, such as party raid, supply reduction. While there is evidence that these measures yield short-term success in limiting the spread of party drug use, they are unlikely to succeed in the long run unless alternatives are provided for the youths. Without providing substitutes for parties and discos, the party- and disco-goers may resume their partying once prohibitive measures relax.

5.13.4.2 It is hence important to involve the relevant government departments, advisory bodies, and the NGOs to brainstorm, to conduct focus groups, and to design creative alternatives to discos and parties. The study informants provided some clues (e.g breakdance, roller-skate board), but these are by no means exhaustive.

5.14 *Limitations*

5.14.1 As explained in the beginning of this report, this study was not set out to address all issues pertaining to use of drugs in parties and discos. As a

qualitative research, this study did not give figures that summarized the drug scene. Our attempts to generate epidemiological data by recruiting party-goers onsite were unsuccessful. Thus, what are described in this report are mostly qualitative observations that deserved quantitative validation.

5.14.2 This research had focused mostly on local parties and discos. Although the study informants included those who went to Shenzhen discos, no participant observation was conducted in Shenzhen discos. This decision was deliberate as it was felt that with the constraint on time and manpower, extending the participant observations to Shenzhen would thin out the research efforts. Our initial interviews revealed that the Shenzhen disco scene should be studied as an independent category (on equal level with parties and Hong Kong discos) because it has its unique culture, structure, players and participants. Since it is the depth and richness of data that are emphasized in qualitative research, it will be better to understand the local parties and discos in depth rather than to get a superficial impression of all parties and discos in Hong Kong and Shenzhen.

5.14.3 In this report, a distinction was made among parties, clubs, and discos. While this distinction was relatively clear out at the beginning of the study, we observed that there was a growing trend that new entertainment tended to combine these three categories together. For example, a newly opened “disco” played genuine techno-music on one floor and disco music on the other floor in order to attract a larger range of customs. Because of the limitations of time and the fact that this is a recent development, there has not

been enough time for the researcher to study these new forms of “discos” in details.

6 CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1.1 The present report has mapped out critical issues and previously neglected domains that are central to an intelligent understanding of the rapidly changing drug scene. The discrepancies between what the general public perceives and what the researcher observed in the fieldwork are highlighted. Last but not least, essentialized constructs are deconstructed and complex social phenomena are summarized to facilitate evidence-based discussion.
- 6.1.2 The recent changes in local drug scene are so fluid, complex and far-reaching that it is impossible to cover all relevant subjects within one study. The constraint on time and resources has also limited the scope of the investigation. However, this study has already yielded invaluable data and rectified misconceptions. Hopefully this study will be followed by a series of empirically driven researches that will cast more lights on contemporary drug scene.

7 APPENDIXES

7.1 *Appendix 1 Useful References*

- Fetterman DM. Ethnography. 2nd ed. 1998 Sage, London.
- Spardley JP. The Ethnographic Interview. 1979 HBJ, Florida.
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- Beck J and Rosenbaum M. Pursuit of Ecstasy: The MDMA Experience. 1994. SUNY, New York.
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- www.ecstasy.org
- www.dancesite.com
- www.techno.org
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7.2 Appendix 2. Summary of Recommendations

- 7.2.1.1 It will be useful to involve the relevant government departments, advisory bodies, and the NGOs to design creative alternatives to substitute for discos and parties.
- 7.2.1.2 More efforts should be paid to increase the level of drug education and harm reduction education given at parties and discos. Pamphlets on drug overdose should be designed and distributed at parties and discos.
- 7.2.1.3 A stepwise and problem oriented approach is preferable to drug education model in counseling party drug users. Party and disco drug users who manage to secure stable employment and relationship are more likely to quit drug use and partying. More training can be provided for social workers and drug workers to equip them with the knowledge about the new drug cultures, as well as the best approach to engage and motivate clients.
- 7.2.1.4 Clean portable water should be made available at all parties and discos. Legislation should be made to render it compulsory for organizers of parties and discos to provide clean and readily accessible water for drinking.
- 7.2.1.5 The appalling first aid services provided at parties need to be brought up to standard as soon as possible. Designated and well signposted first aid area, adequate and qualified first aid personnel, and first aid equipment for resuscitation, basic and advanced life support should be made mandatory in all large-scale parties. Female first aid staff should be present in all large-scale parties.

7.2.1.6 To overcome the problem of ambiguous caseness, the CRDA should require reporting agencies to specify the frequency of ketamine and ecstasy use (e.g. daily/weekly/monthly/irregular/once or a few times). The reported persons can then be stratified by the severity of drug use and the longitudinal trends can be monitored more meaningfully.

7.2.1.7 The term “party drugs” or simply specifying “the misuse of ketamine and ecstasy in parties and discos” is preferable to the term “psychotropic drugs.”

7.2.1.8 Researchers should not publicize their findings (e.g. in the form of press conference) unless the findings are peer-reviewed. Organizations that are interested in conducting surveys in the future should also consult with experienced researchers and statisticians to ensure that the study design is sound and the data are likely to be interpretable and contribute to new understandings of the drug scene.