

Radical Raving: Exploring harm reduction perceptions and strategies in EDM communities

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Abstract

The electronic dance music (EDM) community has a cultural history of incorporating recreational substance use into events to enhance sensory and connective experiences of its participants (i.e., ravers). The ethos of the EDM scene, PLUR (Peace, Love, Unity, Respect) amplifies the sense of community belonging and acceptance but also acts as a form of safety from the potential harms (Sterling, 2016). The current study highlights raver's perceptions of incorporating harm reduction into their personal experiences and the EDM community as a whole.

Prior research on the EDM community takes a reductionist approach to substance use, often minimizing experiences to the quantity of drugs and condemning the use of substances (Palamar & Barratt, 2019). Majority of studies on EDM communities take a quantitative approach that are directly related to observations of substance use and adverse experiences (APA, 2013). Such studies limit the inside perspective of members of the community. Another identified gap is the limited number of United States-based literature on EDM communities (Little et al., 2018). The literature fail to provide a clear picture of rave attendance and substance use.

This study used a qualitative-exploratory, in-depth interview design to understand ravers' experiences with harm reduction in a holistic way. Results of this study were organized into three comprehensive themes: Essentials, The Balance Between, and New Spaces New Worlds, with five concurrent subthemes. This study ultimately found that ravers' perceptions and strategies of harm reduction traversed beyond recreational substance use and, rather, provided a multitude of protective factors for ravers' physiological well-being, community acceptance, and sense of internal safety.

Methods

This study utilized an exploratory, qualitative research design to understand the perceptions and varying opinions towards harm reduction from ravers in EDM communities. Qualitative data was collected from 7 study participants using an in-depth interview (IDI) process to understand the individualized rave experiences and range of harm reduction strategies employed by ravers. The in-depth and personalized nature of data gathered through purposive sampling methods contends to increased levels of internal validity and truth behind results (Campbell et al. 2020).

Results

Themes and Sub themes:

Two primary themes and five sub themes developed as a result of IDI data. Main study themes included "Essentials", "The Balance Between", and "New Spaces, New Worlds". The principle sub themes of the study were identified as safety, community care, recreational substance use, responsibility, and liberation. Unlike primary themes, sub themes were identified as the strategies of harm reduction implemented by ravers across contexts defined by the primary themes

Some quotes from our participants from each theme:

- **Essential Theme:** "That act [RAVE Act] that was passed now, venues are scared to be giving, you know, allowing hydration packs because does that suggest that people are doing drugs there. Does giving free water stations mean that we're suggesting that they do drugs there? Does having medical tents, drug testing all that? So I feel like, I feel like it's changed a lot. It used to be PLUR and safety, always. There's been a shift and how these venues wanna present themselves externally versus how the ravers may want it to be." (Clover, in-depth interview, 3/2/2024)
- **The Balance in Between:** "But the community really brought it together for us and made our experience manageable, and we ended up meeting one of our really good friends out of it, too. So um you'd be surprised at what a bunch of strangers would do for each other. "(Cupid, in-depth interview, 2/29/2024).
- **New Spaces, New Worlds Theme:** "I love that these people like they're they don't care like they're gonna be themselves. They're gonna do what they want to do and dress, how they want to dress and be who they want to be. And I-- I think that's just really empowering to to see people be brave and be themselves and I feel like that gives me courage myself, just seeing that to make me feel like I could also be myself, too. And then once I started going to raves, I was like, you know what, hold on. I can express myself however I want to, even if I'm not in a rave environment." (Phoenix, in-depth interview, 3/5/2024)

Discussion

Unlike prior research which explored harm reduction as inextricably linked to the use of illicit substances, the current study's qualitative findings underscored raver's perceptions of harm reduction as related to more than recreational substance use. In the essentials theme, we identified that the sub theme of safety, including physical and environmental safety which was paramount to ravers and a prioritized form of harm reduction prior to using substances. The theme of The Balance Between included sub themes of community care, recreational substance use, and responsibility. We found that this theme stressed harm reduction as pertaining to the overall well-being of the EDM community, the use of the PLUR ethos, and protections of fellow ravers. Finally, in the New Spaces, New Worlds theme, we learned that the sub theme of liberation in ravers was linked to internalization of harm reduction when it came to trying out new expressions to one's own identity. Our findings confer that the definition and implementation of harm reduction strategies in EDM communities should extend beyond the typified use of the subject relating to substance use.

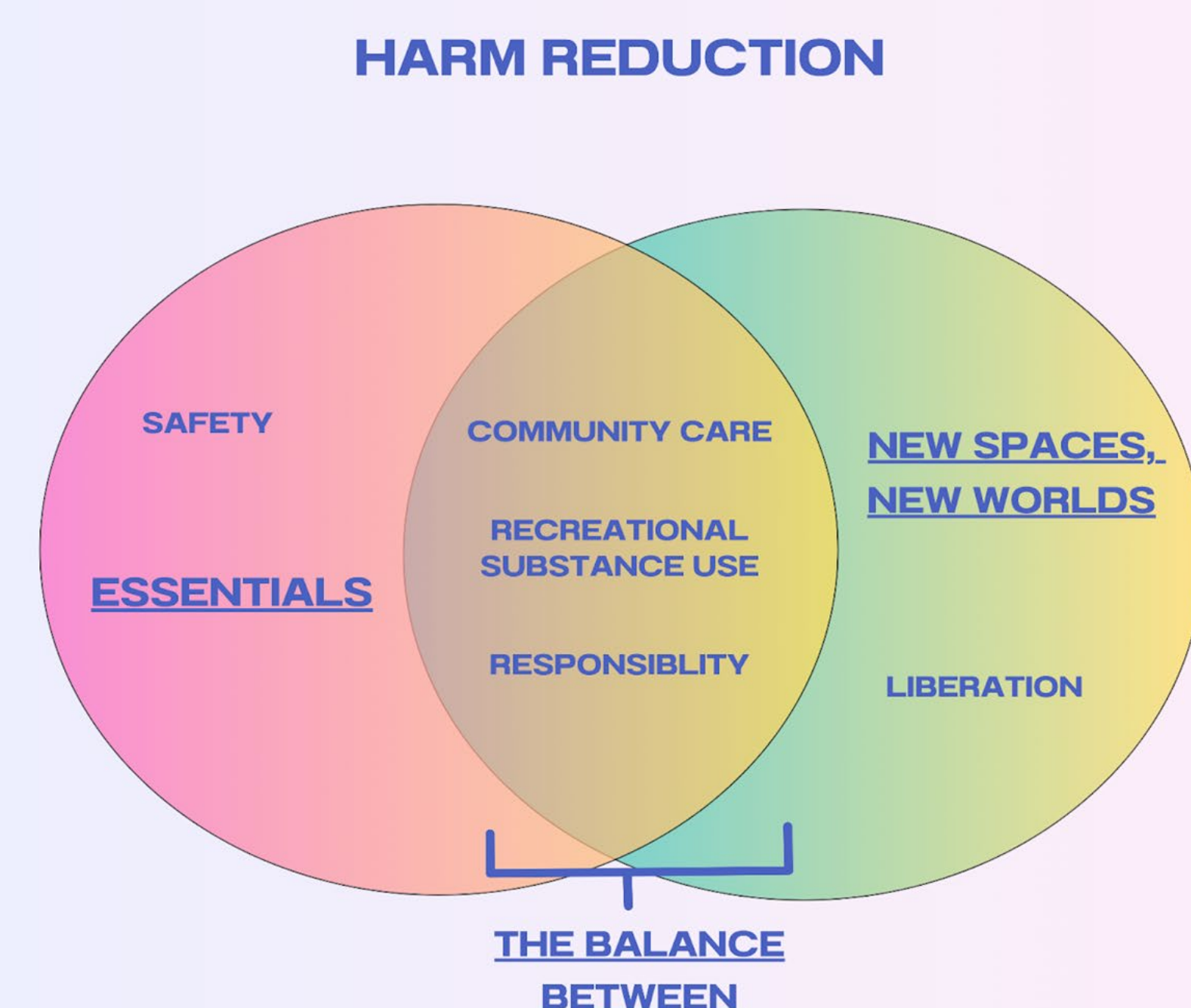


Table 1:

Participant Sample Demographics (n=7)

P#	Name	Gender	Ethnicity	Race	Age	Rave '23	Rave (Life)
1	Raven	F	Not Hispanic/Latinx	White/Caucasian	18-29	4	6-10
2	Cupid	M	Not Hispanic/Latinx	White/Caucasian	30-39	2	16-20
3	Clover	F	Not Hispanic/Latinx	Asian	30-39	1	20+
4	Orion	NB	Hispanic/Latinx	Prefer Not to Say	18-29	3	1-5
5	Zest	F	Hispanic/Latinx	Other	18-29	2	1-5
6	Momo	M	Hispanic/Latinx	Other	30-39	2	11-15
7	Phoenix	F	Not Hispanic/Latinx	White/Caucasian	18-29	2	1-5

Table 1: Each participant was provided a pseudonym post-interview to ensure confidentiality.

Conclusion

The current study examined the perceptions of harm reduction within the EDM community members. Conducting and analyzing in-depth interviews with ravers revealed harm reduction is embedded in EDM communities through shared values and the commitment to ensuring community members are safe and have the opportunity to rave. Our findings revealed fostering and practicing harm reduction is connected to some ravers' interactions within new spaces and new worlds and experiences of liberation. Where we initially believed harm reduction was inextricably linked to recreational substance use, ravers demonstrate that harm reduction is practiced in all elements of the EDM community and traverses into their daily lives and practice. In practicing harm reduction and PLUR, ravers interpersonally and communally reduce harm related to substance use, increase perceptions of safety, and intrapersonally engage in healing and liberatory actions that contribute to experiencing degrees of self-actualization.

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