Have a Safe Trip: Ecstasy Exposure, Perceived Risk, and Harm-Reduction Practices Among College Students

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Background

- Ecstasy – a.k.a. 3, 4-Methylene dioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) – has become a notorious “club drug.”
- It is a Schedule 1 drug – along with heroin, LSD, etc. (DEA).
- It has become popular as a social activity due to its subjective effects, such as feelings of connectedness, empathy, and heightened sensuality and sexuality (Leslie et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2010).
- Ecstasy use is prevalent among musical events such as nightclubs, festivals, and raves (Leslie et al., 2015).
- Harm Reduction Drugs Education (HDRE) argues that because the illicit usage of drugs cannot necessarily be stopped, the next step in safety would be to reduce or minimize any harm that can occur from using substances through harm-reduction practices (Aram & Galt, 1999).
- Three harm-reduction practices were used in this study: (1) drinking water/electrolyte – rich fluids, (2) preloading/post-loading, and (3) pill checking/testing (Davis, 2016).

Methods

- 110 participants from the San Francisco Bay Area were recruited through social media, snowball sampling, and classroom invitation.
- The Ecstasy Use History Questionnaire measured participants’ history in using ecstasy; these questions were adapted to measure musical event attendance and non-use prevention (Davis, 2016).
- The Index of Habit Strength was used to measure participants’ agreement in how strongly they would perform a harm-reduction practice (Davis, 2016).
- A 31 statement questionnaire directly related to perceived health problems associated with ecstasy use was adapted to only include the first three statements on physical harm, mental harm, and overall health harm (Martins et al., 2011).

Results

Hypothesis 1. College students who have attended more musical events will be more likely to be exposed to ecstasy than those who have attended fewer musical events. A Spearman r correlation coefficient confirmed that there was a significant positive correlation (ρ (108) = .496, p < .001) between frequency of ecstasy usage and event attendance.

Hypothesis 2. College students who have been exposed to ecstasy will be more likely to state that there is a perceived risk when exposed to ecstasy.

Hypothesis 3. College students who perceive a higher risk when exposed to ecstasy will be more likely to engage in harm-reduction practices such as drinking water/electrolyte – rich fluids, preloading/post-loading, and pill checking/testing.

Discussion / Future Work

Q: Why did users perceive less risk in ecstasy use than non-users? A: Cognitive dissonance. Understanding the possible dangers of ecstasy use may cause discomfort to an individual, so cognitive dissonance may play a role in alleviating such negative feelings and thus allowing for an individual to continue engaging in substance use.

This current study established that:
- the more musical events an individual attends the likelihood of exposure to ecstasy increases.
- those engaging in substance use do not necessarily follow through in safety measures to reduce risk and consequences from occurring.
- New strategies can be created to better implement harm-reduction practices for those engaging in recreational substance use.