Reviewer's report

**Title:** Reasons for not using ecstasy: a qualitative study of non-users, experimental users and ex-users

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**Reviewer:** Gjalt-Jorn Ygram Peters

**Reviewer's report:**

This paper describes a qualitative study in Sao Paulo among non-users, experimental ex-users, and regular ex-users of ecstasy. Reasons for not starting to use and for ceasing use were examined and are discussed and thoroughly related to the literature. The issues addressed by this study are still largely understudied, and this paper thus represents a valuable contribution to the literature. The authors chose an appropriate method (qualitative research) and described their methods with sufficient rigour. Their results contribute to our understanding of the dynamics underlying why young people start ecstasy use (or better, why those who don't, don't) and why they cease ecstasy use, and these results are thoroughly discussed.

The paper is well written, although I would advise that a native speaker reads the paper. I am not, but I had the impression that there were some errors. Since I am not a native speaker, I do not feel qualified to review the paper regarding the use of English.

I have listed a number of minor and discretionary revisions.

**MINOR ESSENTIAL REVISIONS**

Page 4, last paragraph, first sentence ("another [..] use"): there appears to be one 'information' too many?

Page 5, second paragraph, second sentence ("however [..] drug"): some words seem to have disappeared just after "where the drug".

Page 5, first paragraph under heading "Methods" ("Qualitative research references were used"): I am not sure what you mean here. It could be me of course, but then there will probably be others who also fail to understand this. I am not clear on what you mean by these references, and how they were used exactly. Do you mean that you did not use grounded theory, but rather were guided by the state of the literature in your collecting of the data and the analyses? Could you explain what you mean here and how it influenced your data collection and/or analyses?

Page 6, paragraph about Ex-users: you define ex-users as users who used ecstasy 6 or more times; but then explain that this cutoff point was based on a study where this group was defined as people who used ecstasy 5 or more
times?

Page 6, lines 18-20 ('eight [...] festivals): with 'participant observations', do you mean recruitment? If not, what exactly was observed? Does this mean that another method of data collection than interviews was used?

Page 8, line 4: you mention a pilot study, but this is the first time you mention this. Did you perhaps mean something else? Also, what exactly was the role of these other senior researchers? Do you mean that you discussed the analysis with other researchers so as to use their experience to optimize the process? If so, I did not get this from the text. If you meant something else, I didn't get that, either, I'm afraid . . .

Page 9, first sentence: almost all users reported using tobacco -> in the Netherlands, such a high proportion of smokers might be considered worrying, as it would be considerably higher than the proportion of smokers at, for example, dance events. Is such a high proportion of smokers normal in Sao Paulo, or might it indicate that you have a select sample (one of the risks of snowball sampling)?

Page 9, second paragraph, seventh line: with 'the study group', do you mean your entire sample, or the ex-users (and could you make this explicit in the text)?

Page 10, fourth line: the participant acronym isn't right: seems to contain an "s" that shouldn't be there, according to your explanation on page 7. Also, this is a non-user citing a micareta party as a venue for potential use; whereas earlier you explained that ex-users who reported this type of venue?

Page 12, first sentence: 'EX' should be 'EXP', I guess?

Page 16, second paragraph, first sentence: I thought that finding non-users was hardest (methods section)? I can imagine people in both groups were hard to find of course; in any case, please make sure this is clear at both points in the paper.

Page 16, second paragraph, second sentence: you don't explain which implications this higher age may have?

Page 21, first sentence: this same review by Peters et al. points out that influencing _correct_ positive beliefs does not seem a wise intervention strategy. After all, such an intervention would have to spread untrue information. This would most likely result in substantially lowering the trust of the target population in such communications. Therefore, I am not sure whether suggesting to address the positive effects of ecstasy is a good idea. Of course, providing information about potential negative effects seems a good idea, but there are two considerations that should be kept in mind. First, since ecstasy generally does not have many acute negative effects, one would have to be very careful about one's phrasing. Second, such an intervention could only work to discourage ecstasy use, as ecstasy users who do not have a high self-efficacy to cease use will likely process such a communication defensively (e.g. Ruiter, Abraham & Kok, 2001, Psychology & Health). This also touched upon the issue of impurity of
pills sold as ecstasy. Of course, pills contaminated with other active ingredients than MDMA, or pills exclusively containing other ingredients, are more likely to have undesired effects. This may provide a useful avenue for interventions.

Page 21, second paragraph: I do not understand the logic here. Why does that fact that the participants used the internet and peers to acquire information imply that information enhances risk? It's possible that ecstasy users, perhaps even very heavy ecstasy users, also used the internet and peers to acquire information?

DISCRETIONARY REVISIONS

Page 3, third paragraph ("Most investigative [...] other users"): perhaps also include information about the relevance of electronic music, not just the social context? (for example, "'Dancestasy': dance and MDMA use in Dutch youth culture.", ter Bogt et al, 2002, Contemporary Drug problems)

Page 6, paragraph about Experimental Users: experimental users are defined as users who used ecstasy 1-4 times, where the last use occasion was over one year ago at time of recruitment. When I read this at first, I thought this was a mistake, and it should have said that their last use occasion should have been within one year. Later, I discovered that experimental users seem to be ex-users as well. This is not clear. If indeed 'experimental users' are also ex-users, just ex-users who used less intensively, perhaps consider renaming them to reflect that status (e.g. 'ex-experimental users', or 'light ex-users' and 'heavy ex-users' (for the other ex-users group))?

Page 6, line 14: how many initial participants (i.e. selected, not snowballed, participants) did you use, and from which contexts (you list three (academic, artistic, medical): were there more, and if so, which?

Page 6, line 18: 'could' -> I'm not a native speaker, but shouldn't this be 'can'?

Page 9, second paragraph, third line: "the ex-users reported that they used the drug at [...]" -> don't you mean "had used"? ("used" implies that they still do)

Page 11, first paraph under heading "Adverse effects": this paragraph made me realise that some participants may not have used 3,4-methyldioximephentamine (MDMA), but another substance, sold as ecstasy. Is known what proportion of the pills sold as ecstasy in Sao Paulo actually contain MDMA?)

Page 14, last paragraph: Could you maybe rewrite that a bit? As it is, it's not clear to me which contrast is signified by the "however" that opens the paragraph; I don't understand how people in the NU group can have used experimented with ecstasy (as this group is defined as people who never consumed ecstasy); and why the fact that one participant indicated that he'd be willing to switch to ecstasy if he wouldn't have access to his drug of choice contrasts with the fact that most non-users didn't want to try ecstasy - after all, this guy also didn't want to try ecstasy, right?
Page 15, last quote: I assume 'bullet' is Portuguese slang for ecstasy; if so, maybe explain this (e.g. using brackets in the quote), or if not, what is this?

Page 17, third paragraph, last sentence: you mention classical conditioning as a theory that can be used to understand the use of ecstasy in specific contexts. Could you elaborate a bit more on the implications of this theory in this situation? Does it yield insights that can be beneficial to intervention development? Ah, I now see that you do this two paragraphs further. Perhaps consider omitting this sentence from this paragraph. Both this paragraph and the next one deal with contextual effects, so it seems natural to go more in depth after that (without the need to already mention conditioning half way through).

Page 17, last paragraph, last sentences: could you relate the findings of Falck et al. to your own findings? As it is, they're kind of disconnected from the rest of the paragraph.

Page 20, second paragraph: it's not clear what you mean by vulnerability and sensations. Does vulnerability mean that less positive, and more negative effects were experienced? Or that more positive effects were experienced? Or both more positive and more negative effects?

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.