Author's response to reviews

Title: Careers in ecstasy use: do ecstasy users cease of their own accord? Implications for intervention development

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Careers in ecstasy use: do ecstasy users cease of their own accord? Implications for intervention development

Revision 1

Dear dr. Mark Todd,

Hereby we resubmit our revised version of our manuscript "Careers in ecstasy use: do ecstasy users cease of their own accord? Implications for intervention development".

We are very grateful for the comments of the reviewers, which we think have improved the manuscript. We have included these comments after this letter, and we have reacted on them one by one, to explain where and how the comments were taken into account, or, in the cases where it was not possible to implement the suggestions, why this was not possible. For reasons of clarity, I have placed each reviewers’ comments in a box with an unbroken border, and my response in a box with a dashed border.

We apologise for the delay in sending you this revision. We hope this has not caused any inconvenience.

Kind regards, on behalf of all authors,

Gjalt-Jorn Ygram Peters
Reviewer: Ana Regina Noto

Dear Dr. Noto,

Thank you very much for your comments! I am convinced that their implementation has added to the strength of the manuscript. I hope you agree.

Kind regards, on behalf of all authors,

Gjalt-Jorn

PS: below, I have reacted on your comments one by one. Your comments are in a box with an unbroken border, and my response in a box with a dashed border (like this one).

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**Major Compulsory revisions**

1. Considering that the data can not be generalized, the authors should review some statements such as, in page 04, “in order to describe ecstasy use patterns in the Netherlands…”

   Of course, very good point! On page 4, ‘in order to describe ecstasy use patterns in the Netherlands’ changed to ‘in order to explore ecstasy use patterns in the Netherlands’ (we have not found any other instances of this error).

2. The composition of the sample is not clear. The authors recruited 160 participants, called randomly to fill five focus groups with 24 (24 in each group or in all?). If only 24 were interviewed, what happened with the other subjects? (Did they refuse? How about the limitations associated with this refusal?). How were the other 8 subjects recruited?

   This revision has been implemented, and the requested information has been provided, in the method section (on pages 4 and 5).

3. Methods must be better detailed (or reviewed). Why only 8 subjects were individually interviewed (why not all 32)? How many non users, users and ex-users composed each group (individual interviews and FGDs)?

   This revision has been implemented, and the requested information has been provided, in the methods section (on page 5).

4. What is the relation between the article and Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4 (supplementary files)? The tables are not mentioned in the text; Do they belong to the study?

   I am sorry, this was a stupid mistake. I apparently erroneously attached only the tables of the manuscript. I intended to attach the qualitative review that at that time was submitted to Addiction (but regarding which we had not yet received a reply as to whether Addiction would publish it). Thus, these tables belong to another manuscript, which I have attached this time. This manuscript had been rejected by Addiction and is now resubmitted to Qualitative Health Research.

5. Conclusions are not based on all the data observed. Considering the diversity of the studied situations (non users, users and ex-users), the authors focused the study on ceasing ecstasy use and
harm reduction as an intervention for cessation. I suggest discussion concerning other possible interventions (prevention) based on non user reports.

This would indeed be an interesting addition. The reason that I did not elaborate on interventions for non-users was because the focus of the manuscript lay in exploring cessation. However, indeed, reporting the reasons for not starting and starting to use begs consideration of prevention efforts in the discussion. There are, however, only two more reasons that emerged in the data that remain unconsidered. The reasons to not start using ecstasy that were reported in the results section were 1) fear of acute negative effects, 2) fear of negative health effects, 3) fear of addiction, 4) a strict moral principle against (hard)drug use; or 5) the belief that one did not 'need' the disinhibiting effects of ecstasy. Furthermore, initiation of ecstasy use seemed instigated by curiosity. The possibility for interventions to intervene on the first three reasons to not start using ecstasy are discussed in the discussion on page 15. The other two reasons do not constitute useful intervention targets. As far as I know, there are no publications reporting on successful manipulation of moral norms. Thus, there are no known methods to attempt to influence this variable. Further, regarding the belief that one does not 'need' ecstasy (as a disinhibitor): it does not seem that those starting to use ecstasy start to use because this belief changes, given that the main reason to start using is curiosity. The explanation of why these reasons do not appear to provide useful leverage for prevention efforts has been included on page 16.

**Minor essential revision**

1. Methods: The acronym FGDs must be specified at the first paragraph.

This revision has been implemented.

**Discretionary revisions**

1. I recommend the authors review the title. “Career in ecstasy use” suggests a longitudinal study.

Indeed this title may create the erroneous expectations that it concerns a longitudinal study. Yet, careers can also be studied cross-sectionally, and a cross-sectional examination of transitions from non-use to use and from use to cessation does so. However, if you feel strongly about this point, the part 'careers in ecstasy use’ can be removed from the title, leaving “Do ecstasy users cease of their own accord?”.

2. Individual interviews provide different contents compared to FGDs. So these different contents should be analyzed from different perspectives.

This would be a very interesting addition. However, the authors feel that the substantial work required to re-analyse the data from different perspectives would, in this case (given the small amount of focus groups and the small amount of individual interviews), not yield sufficient added value to warrant this endeavour worthwhile. With larger samples, such a comparison might indeed prove very enlightening. For the purposes of the current project, however, we deem the exploratory results achieved as of yet satisfactory.

3. The authors should consider other relevant Dutch data concerning ecstasy use (and ecstasy use cessation), such as the “Next Study” (for example, Vervaeke et al., 2007). I recommend also reading Sydow et al. (2002).

These are interesting references, especially the second one, which I did not have yet! In combination with the first discretionary revision, I added the 'cross-sectionality' of the study as a limitation, citing these studies as examples of how improvement can be achieved (see pages 16-17).

4. Limitations should be presented with more details.
A paragraph has been added (see page 16-17) to the discussion where the three main limitations are considered (cross-sectional design; the limitations of the qualitative method in general; and the lack of an in-depth consideration of differences between FGD's and individual interviews).
Reviewers: Silvia Martins

Dear Dr. Martins,

Thank you very much for your comments! We think their implementation greatly improved the manuscript. I am afraid, however, that we have not been able to implement all suggestions, simply because we lacked the data you suggested be implemented. We hope that you do not see this as a substantial problem of the manuscript.

Kind regards, on behalf of all authors,

Gjalt-Jorn Peters

PS: below, I have reacted on your comments one by one. Your comments are in a box with an unbroken border, and my response in a box with a dashed border (like this one).

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The article attempts to address an important topic in the area of illegal drug use, their study investigates whether Ecstasy users in the Netherlands cease their use automatically and what would be the implications of this cessation for intervention among Ecstasy users. While this is an interesting well elaborated qualitative study, particularly for researchers in the area of Ecstasy use research, there are a few points that need to be clarified before the article is accepted for publication.

**Major compulsory revisions:**

1. **Abstract:** After the first citation of Ecstasy use the authors should list Ecstasy’s pharmacological name (MDMA, 3, 4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine). This should also be done when Ecstasy is first cited in the Background section of the full manuscript.

2. **Abstract:** The authors should briefly cite here the lifetime and past-year prevalence of Ecstasy use in the Netherlands, to make the case of why it is important to study cessation of Ecstasy use.

These revisions have been implemented (in the abstract and on pages 2 and 3).

3. **Background:** In the first sentence of the background section the authors should briefly describe which are the potential health damages caused by ecstasy use. This should be followed by a description of the lifetime and past-year prevalence of Ecstasy use in the Netherlands, particularly among young adults. If possible, please add the proportion of the Netherlands population that attends dance events. It would be interesting if the authors also compared the prevalence of Ecstasy use among young adults and dance event attendants in the Netherlands with the prevalence of Cannabis use (which is legalized in the Netherlands) in the same subgroup.

These do indeed provide interesting additions. I have been able to find all suggested information, and added this in the first paragraph of the discussion (pages 2 and 3).

4. **As is,** the Background section is relatively short. I believe the authors could add a new paragraph in this section (right after the second paragraph) and briefly describe results from references number 6 and 8, which are extremely important to support this current study.

5. **Background,** last paragraph- I believe the article would be more appealing to international readers if the authors included here a description of the findings of ecstasy cessation studies that have been...
Adding the information requested in points 4 and 5 is a valuable addition to the manuscript; it information has been integrated on pages 3-5.

6. Method, first paragraph- I suggest the authors clarify here how they classified a respondent as an ex-Ecstasy user. For instance, what would be the definition for the last Ecstasy use for these respondents to be considered ex-users? Did they stop using Ecstasy for one month, 2 months, 6 months or more prior to the interview?

This information has been added to the Methods section, on page 5.

7. Results, first paragraph- I suggest including here data on the average length of time that current and ex-users of Ecstasy have been using/used Ecstasy. If possible, it would be interesting to mention later on in this section whether there were any differences in attitudes towards Ecstasy use and Ecstasy cessation between recent-onset Ecstasy users and more chronic Ecstasy users.

This is a very good idea. However, we have not collected this information, and will therefore not be able to make this comparison. This would be a very good idea for future qualitative projects; especially longitudinal ones, so that 'within-participant' comparisons can be made as well as 'between-participants'.

8. Results, first paragraph- I suggest the authors clarify the sentence: “During the interviews, however, it became clear that not all self identified ex-users had decided to never use ecstasy again.” Please clarify how many of those classified as ex-users might be considering using Ecstasy again and how interviewers identified this behavior.

This revision had been implemented, and the sentences "In fact, most ‘ex-users’ did not define ecstasy once a month or less.” should be moved to the first paragraph of the results section.

9. Discussion, first paragraph- The sentence: “It is important to note here that most users only used ecstasy once a month or less.” should be moved to the first paragraph of the results section and better explained there (since this is the first time that the authors mention frequency of Ecstasy use in the article). It also would be important to add here information on the median amount of Ecstasy used in each dance event by current and former Ecstasy users.

This information has indeed been relocated to the first paragraph results section (but is still resumed in the discussion). We have not systematically collected quantitative information on the amount of ecstasy used at each dance event (we have, to this end of gathering quantitative information, also conducted a large-scale quantitative study, but we have not yet finalized these manuscripts).

10. Discussion- overall the discussion is too much centered simply in the study’s findings. I suggest that in this section the authors further compare their findings to findings from qualitative studies and Ecstasy cessation studies conducted in other countries and discuss the similarities and differences between their study and these other studies.

On page 17, a paragraph is added that relates the current findings to the studies in other countries, discussing the differences and considering potential causes of these differences.

11. Discussion- before the final paragraph of the Discussion the authors should include a paragraph listing all the potential limitations of their study.
A paragraph has been added (see page 16-17) to the discussion where the three main limitations are considered (cross-sectional design; the limitations of the qualitative method in general; and the lack of an in-depth consideration of differences between FGD's and individual interviews). We have not added the absence of quantitative information to these limitations, as we feel that this study, having a qualitative focus, should not be expected to answer such questions. To this end, we conducted a large-scale quantitative study, the results of which will be forthcoming shortly.

**Minor Essential Revisions**

12. Results, first paragraph- I suggest including here data on the average length of time that current and ex-users of Ecstasy have been using/used Ecstasy. If possible, it would be interesting to mention later on in this section whether there were any differences in attitudes towards Ecstasy use and Ecstasy cessation between recent-onset Ecstasy users and more chronic Ecstasy users.

This seems to be a copy of point 7 of the major compulsory revisions.