

Working Weeks, Rave Weekends: Identity Fragmentation and the Emergence of New Communities

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Popular music is one of the most ubiquitous forms of contemporary culture. This paper looks at the phenomenon known as rave or dance culture in Britain. It examines the nature of the consumer experience at a dance club through the use of a two stage methodology. Based on observations and the collection of phenomenological data, the findings suggest that the experience is linked to a series of behaviours, which are related to fragmentation and identity. These include narcissistic identity, the emergence of new communities, the need for escape, engagement and prolonged hedonism. The paper examines these concepts in relation to postmodern consumption. In particular, an evaluation of postmodern theory and its focus on fragmentation and the project of the self is offered, by arguing for a return to “community”.

Keywords: Rave; Dance culture; Consumer behaviour; Postmodernism; Identity; Popular culture; Phenomenology; Neo-tribes

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

In today’s mediatized society it is possible to argue that our ability to construct and maintain our identity(ies) is aided by the symbolic resources which we have at our disposal (Sarup 1996). Literature, advertising, brands, television soap operas and romantic fiction are all examples of some of the symbolic resources that people draw on and have formed the basis for a number of studies (Radway 1984; Ang 1985; O’Donohoe 1994; Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). To this ever burgeoning list of popular cultural products we would like to add “rave” and what has come to be known as “dance” culture.

The sound and imagery of rave has impacted upon numerous aspects of popular culture, from hybrid variations of the music through to fashion, and ultimately advertising and communication. Moreover, it might be argued that it is an experience which has influenced the behaviour of a significant group of consumers. The broad aim of this research was to explore the nature of the rave experience from a phenomenological perspective which results in more critical insights by allowing the informants to dictate the shape of the theoretical framework, rather than limiting the analysis to a set of pre-existing theoretical propositions (Thompson and Haytko 1997). The paper draws on

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research conducted at one of the rave super-clubs in the UK, which is used as a case for analysis.

The term super-club has been used to define the position in the club scene hierarchy. Those at the top of the hierarchy include, for example, Ministry of Sound in London and Birmingham, Miss Money Penny's in Birmingham, and Cream in Liverpool. All of these clubs have a well established history, have clubs in rave destinations such as Ibiza, Cyprus, Thailand and, in the case of Cream, a regular input into events at the nightclub called Pasha in Buenos Aires, the latest "chic" rave destination. Furthermore, they attract the top DJs such as Sasha, John Digweed and Paul Oakenfold and have a wealth of CDs mixed at, and called after the respective clubs. These clubs are aspirational in their appeal; there is a status associated with having been to them, which marks them apart from the hundreds of regular dance venues that proliferate throughout the country. However, whilst rave or "dance" culture has attracted considerable attention from cultural theorists (Redhead 1993; McRobbie 1994; 1995; Thornton 1996; Reynolds 1998) and sociologists (Measham *et al.* 1998; Moody 1998), who position their analysis in relation to youth, class and to a certain degree deviance, the phenomenon has largely been ignored by consumer researchers, despite its longevity and importance as a global consumption experience, and a localised sub-cultural activity. This paper examines traditional approaches to sub-cultural theory and highlights some of the problems of applying what might be described as neo-Marxist analysis to contemporary sub-cultural consumer behaviour. As an alternative, a postmodern perspective is proposed, which offers insights into the fragmented and temporary communal life that characterises the rave experience.

SUB-CULTURAL THEORY AND THE NEED FOR ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORKS

The study of sub-cultures has a well established history within the social sciences. In Britain, possibly the most influential work to date has emanated from the "Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies" (CCCS), which was established in the 1970s at Birmingham University. Much of this work was, and still is, grounded in the Chicago School of critical analysis, exemplified in the work of, for example, Hall and Jefferson (1996), Willis (1996), Clarke *et al.* (1997/1975) and Hebdidge (1997/1979). The position adopted by these scholars is to locate sub-cultural movements within a framework of social resistance and reaction against dominant hierarchies of control. Historically, this perspective has been used to explain the emergence of such sub-cultures as the "Teddy Boys" (Fyvel 1997/1963), Punk rockers (Frith 1997/1980) and drug cultures (Willis 1990; 1996). Most of these studies identify social class and particularly the powerlessness of the working class as the main catalyst for the developments of these sub-cultures.

However, this is a position that has not escaped criticism with regard to contemporary movements and alternative life-styles. For example, Bennett (1999) provides a comprehensive critique by pointing out that working class resistance and the implied normalisation of deviance are not sufficient to explain the nature of sub-cultural experiences in what might be termed postmodern society. Essentially, they do not account for the pluralistic and shifting sensibilities of style that have increasingly characterised post-second world war sub-cultures. On the contrary, these scholars have tended to use structuralist accounts to explain behaviours which are effectively examples of consumer autonomy.

Increasingly, sub-cultural spaces are becoming sites of creativity and self expression for both male and female participants from all social backgrounds. Furthermore, Bennett's call for alternative frameworks of analysis appears to be timely given the pluralistic nature of contemporary style and behaviours which characterise the plethora of subcultures,

whether music, fashion, experience or symbolically based, which exist in modern society. Today, sub-cultural activity is recognised as important for the construction and expression of identity, rather than cells of resistance against dominant orders. As such, this activity involves acts of consumption, and the significance of this has not been lost on the marketing community. For example, Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) ethnographic study of "new biker" behaviour and the consequent product constellations emanating from the Harley Davidson, has introduced the "sub-cultural" consumer into contemporary marketing thought. In addition to the intrinsic value of studying such behaviours, Sanders notes that:

"there are a variety of reasons why the examination of such socially marginal commercial activities might be of concern to consumer researchers. Disvalued social activities are typically embedded in sub-cultural groups which provide norms and values which direct and shape patterns of cultural choice." Sanders (1985, p. 17)

It is also important to recognise that sub-cultural choices are also consumer choices involving fashion, leisure and a wealth of accessories, which speak symbolically to members of the group. In other words they represent a form of what Thornton (1996) refers to as "sub-cultural capital". Moreover, although some researchers have suggested that rave is a working class phenomenon (Redhead 1997), this is open to question. What differentiates rave from other sub-cultures is that it is neither class nor age biased. In fact, rave attracts individuals from all walks of life and social position. Furthermore, it is not reactionary, as was the case with the rebellion of the working class "Teddy Boy", and the politicised, middle class "Hippy" movement. Neither is it a constant part of the individual's lifestyle. Punks, for example, adopted a highly visible and distinct code of dress and ideology which permeated every day life. In contrast to this, rave, for the majority, is a "weekend" culture of hedonism, sensation and escape, and has parallels with the life mode communities described by Firat and Dholokia (1998). These communities are based on temporary experiences, evident in the example of cyberspace groupings, whereby individuals are free to construct experiences without withdrawing from mainstream society or committing to the community. Rave offers the same kind of freedom. It provides an opportunity to forget mundanity, dress to impress (Redhead 1997) and engage in fantasy. It is part of what might be termed the trend towards compartmentalised lifestyles whereby one identity (the responsible worker) is shed and another adopted. The rave website "Peace, Love, Dancing and Drugs" (1997), comments,

Outside of a rave, ravers appear normal. Many have jobs in technological fields like computer programming. Many are college students. Raving is not an all the time culture as the hippy movement was and is. Rather raving is a temporary activity separate from the daily lives of the individuals.

Similarly, rave provides a venue for collective engagement with new social groups who meet to experience the dance sensation, but are not necessarily core to everyday social interaction. As such, rave might arguably be viewed as an example of the fragmented and compartmentalised nature of postmodern life.

CONSUMER SOCIETY AND THE POSTMODERN DEBATE

Essentially it may be argued that there are two perspectives on postmodern society. The first perspective views society as dystopian and alienating, with fragmented consumers seeking compensation through the consumption of signs, spectacles and the superficial, and is particularly associated with the work of Baudrillard (1988) and Jameson (1990). The second perspective adopts a more optimistic view of the postmodern consumer, interpreting, for example, fragmentation as a potentially liberating force which frees the individual from conformity (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). However, realistically, there are signs of both

characteristics evident in everyday life. One is never (or rarely) totally alienated and manipulated, but at the same time, “liberation” comes with its consequences. The results of this study certainly appear to indicate that both perspectives have a place in the consumer experience, and that one can be used to compensate for the other.

With regard to the first position, particular attention has been paid to the nature of the individual, the alienating effects of society (Yalom 1980) and the search for identity or a meaningful self (Wiley 1994). Prevalent in much writing is the idea that we have witnessed a moral, social, and identity crisis over the past decades which, coupled with the demise of community and the loss of traditional family networks has resulted in feelings of emptiness and loss (Cushman 1990). In essence, there is a depthlessness and a focus on a superficial and surface “reality” (Eco 1987; Jameson 1990). Such characteristics are said to be endemic in postmodern society which has been described as “consumer society” (Baudrillard 1988) and “society of the spectacle” (Debord 1967) and the media (Venkatesh 1992). According to Featherstone (1991, p. 96), today there is an emphasis on “the spectacular, the popular, the pleasurable and the immediately accessible”, a summary which aptly describes the contemporary rave/club scene.

With regard to the individual, those who adopt the nihilistic view suggest that the postmodern condition is characterised by identity confusion (Kellner 1995) and the fragmentation of “self” (Jameson 1990; Gabriel and Lang 1995; Strauss 1997). On the one hand, those who have been stripped of role and identity constitute Cushman’s (1990) “empty self”; on the other, individuals whose lives have become crowded by the pressures of work and invaded by new technologies such as mobile phones, e-mail and faxes, are suffering what Gergen (1991) describes as personal saturation. The human being that emerges is confronted with endless choices which in turn leads to confusion over multiple roles and responsibilities, or what Gergen (1991) refers to as “multiphrenia”.

This position represents a pessimistic view of a decentred alienated subject. Conversely, within the field of consumer research there is growing acceptance of the notion of postmodernism as a liberatory force (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Fragmentation is one of the central themes of postmodern approaches to consumption (e.g. Brown 1995; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Firat *et al.* 1995; Firat and Shultz 1997). Fragmentation consists primarily of a series of interrelated ideas; the fragmentation of markets into smaller and smaller segments, and therefore the proliferation of a greater number of products to serve the increasing number of segments; the fragmentation and concurrent proliferation of the media; and the fragmentation of “life, experience, society and metanarratives” (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Examples of the latter include increasing rejection of political authority, increasing political instability, disintegrating social institutions (the church, marriage, family and workplace), and the fragmentation of the self. As the traditional institutions that formally provided the basis of identity disintegrate, consumption as a means of constructing and expressing identity becomes ever more dominant. Lee (1993) traces the rise in postmodern thinking about culture up until the mid 1980s, the decade where the image attained an unprecedented importance. Along with changes in technology and the media there was a greater emphasis on style, packaging, the aesthetic form and the “look”. The 1980s also saw the rise of new social groupings such as the “yuppie”, the “career woman”, “the new man” and the “lager lout”. At the centre of all of these was consumption. Consequently, the postmodern self is characterised as *Homo consumericus* “a creature defined by consumption and experiences derived therefrom” (Firat and Shultz 1997, p. 193). Firat *et al.* (1995, p. 52) comment,

In customising oneself to (re)present marketable (self-)images, the consumer is interacting with other objects in the market to produce *oneself*. . . consumption is increasingly becoming a productive process, goal orientated and purposeful.

Consumption, therefore, becomes a means through which individuals can creatively construct and express the multitude of identities that are open to them. Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p. 253) suggest that,

fragmentation means, literally, the breaking up into parts and erasing of the whole, single reality into multiple realities, all claiming legitimacy, and all decoupling any link to the presumed whole.

They go on to suggest that the individual is free to experience the height of emotional peaks without connecting the experience to a logical and unitary state of being (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Kellner (1995) proposes that today, more than ever before, self consciousness comes into its own as it becomes possible to reflect on the increasing number of roles the individual has to cope with, and select one's identity as life's possibilities expand.

Nevertheless, postmodern liberation has its problems for the individual, as this freedom comes with a price attached. The increase in possibilities carries with it a greater focus on others, for as the number of possible identities expands, one must gain recognition to assume a socially valid and recognised identity (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Consequently, we might ask; is rave part of the postmodern experience? And how does this experience relate to the construction and expression of identity? If we summarise some of the key points relating to the postmodern condition, namely, a search for identity, fragmentation of the self, loss of the social in the traditional sense, a need to find alternatives to socially validate identity and a search for stimulation through immediately accessible experiences, it is possible to suggest that rave is a postmodern phenomenon. In other words, it is possible to consider rave as an experience that helps individuals and groups create meaning out of confusion by offering an alternative way of being which allows for the construction of, and the management of the self. The following aims to give an insight into the nature of rave or dance culture in order to illustrate some of these observations.

FROM RAVE TO DANCE CULTURE

The UK's dance culture can be traced back to the late 1970s American club scene of New York, Chicago and Detroit. More importantly, the people at the heart of dance culture's origins were black Americans. And even more importantly they were gay, black Americans. As black Americans, they were generally economically and socially disadvantaged and as gays, they also suffered social exclusion from their own communities. Unable to express themselves in terms of who they were, or wanted to be, they had to actively create their own culture in order to provide an outlet for their self-expression. This culture revolved around the active re-processing and re-mixing of musical styles to create their own—symbolic creativity in action (Willis 1990). This was further fuelled by the ingestion of newly available drugs like MDMA, more commonly known as ecstasy (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine). The combined effect of the music and the drugs enabled them to “escape” from the “real” world into one of their own creation. Despair and isolation had been replaced by hedonism and a sense of community and belonging. According to Rietveld (1998, p. 25), house music “started as an effect of the positive power of community... it was also the negative power of racial and sexual segregation”. As such the origins of rave had greater relevance to the conceptual positioning of the neo-Marxist CCCS, than they do today.

As in the case of so many subcultures there was an eventual diffusion effect, whereby the musical styles, fashion and dance gradually found their way into more mainstream culture. The Paradise Garage, a well-known New York venue, adopted the music, the style and the drugs-without-drink policy of the gay, black clubs of Chicago and Detroit and soon began

to attract a wider audience than the original gay black community. According to Jowers (1999, p. 384), DJs experimented with new techniques to heighten the euphoria of the dancing bodies they “controlled”:

The desires and resistances of the club scene were encoded in the music, enabling their diffusion to a wider culture where questions of personal and cultural identity maintenance became increasingly pertinent.

News of the experience spread, instigating in turn, copy-cat clubs which appealed to style innovators keen to experience a new scene. Hebdidge (1997/1979) talks about the adoption process whereby what was once considered deviant becomes familiar and marketable, giving rise to a process of recuperation which has two characteristic forms. First, is the “commodity form” or the conversion of sub-cultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass produced objects. And second is the “ideological form”, or the labelling and redefinition of deviant behaviour by dominant groups such as the police, the media and the judiciary.

In Britain, rave exploded onto the scene in 1988 (McRobbie and Thornton 1995; Measham *et al.* 1998; Sellers 1998). It was spearheaded in the mid 1980s by the club scene on the Spanish island of Ibiza, where thousands of young British tourists were exposed to the “twelve hour clubbing cycle” (Bennett 2000). When rave was imported to the UK, it marked the grand arrival of a new style of music, fashion, nightlife and a new found direction for thousands of ordinary people (Wayne 1998).

Rave culture began as underground, often illegal occupations of places such as fields and disused warehouses for the purpose of dance, house music, or more commonly rave. Every weekend hundreds of thousands of young people desperately searched the country for massive illegal parties. Promoters meticulously planned each military-style operation with great precision and cunningness, the main objective being to evade police exposure by adding an element of surprise (Wayne 1998). News of such events was spread by word of mouth, they were secret, they were seductive in their hidden appeal and they were places to express identity and communicate with similar others. What distinguished raves from mainstream culture was an emphasis on social bonding, the collective dance experience, a communal state of euphoria and the “happy” vibe (Measham *et al.* 1998). This, however, quickly became associated with an increase in drug taking on a massive scale by providing a location and context for drug use (Blackman 1996). Nevertheless, what McRobbie and Thornton (1995) describe as a moral panic incited by the media, actually became a routine way of making youth orientated cultural products, like ecstasy, more alluring. Consequently, rave was marketed as one of the most controversial sounds of 1988 (McRobbie and Thornton 1995). As a result of much bad press, and the definition and redefinition of the mutating types of music associated with rave culture (McRobbie 1995), the term rave has now largely been superseded by the label dance, in order to cover the specific widening genre that includes, amongst others, “house”, “happy hardcore”, “garage”, “techno”, “drum ‘n’ bass” and “jungle music” (Measham *et al.* 1998).

Today “house” or “rave” is no longer the music and dance of the disempowered. However, whilst the audience for rave has become more diverse, some of the core values such as the notion of escape, hedonism, free self-expression and importantly the idea of the community remain central to the experience. It is possibly this notion of community that has helped to sustain its existence. As one raver reflected in a nostalgic account of the early days in England,

Raves emphasised the ecstatic acid house ideal: It was people who counted above everything. A rave was always about community, joining you to the four or five friends who made up your carload, to the ten or twenty cars that realised they were all heading the same way, to the hundreds of thousands of people who shared a dance beat... shared an experience of communion like no one had before. (Un sourced Quote, Ministry of Sound Magazine October 1998).

QUESTIONS AND METHOD

The following account is based on an analysis of one of the super-clubs located in the west Midlands in the UK. It is the product of many years involvement in the development and promotion of rave on the part of three brothers. All three have been heavily engaged in catering to the needs of the “rave” generation from the outset and are now responsible for a branded empire which hosts venues in Britain, Cyprus, and Ibiza, worth several million dollars per year.

The key questions driving this research were very simply, why do people go to rave clubs and what is the nature of the rave experience, from the perspective of the ravers themselves? Having gained an insight into the nature of the experience, our aim was to examine the findings in relation to contemporary theory. Of particular interest were the concepts of identity, sub-cultural communities, fragmentation, and the creation of meaning through consumption experiences.

In order to illuminate these ruminations a two-stage methodology was employed. Observations were recorded manually through the use of memos (Glaser and Strauss 1967). These were taken at different stages of the evening, at various locations (i.e. outside of the club, the club room and the chill out room) and for general descriptive purposes. They provided a source of field notes and were used to offer a sense of re-orientation during the analysis stage. In effect, this section is largely descriptive. It sets the scene and acts as the background for the behaviour which takes place within the confines of the club.

The second stage of the research utilised interview data in order to develop an account of the “lived” experiences of the users themselves. The research employed phenomenology as a methodological framework to collect data, which allowed the informants to tell their own stories. These formed the basis of our interpretation of the experience in the dance club.

STAGE ONE: A PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION ANALYSIS

The Club

Whilst there are numerous rave clubs in Britain which have more in common with more mainstream, hi-tech, sophisticated nightclubs, and are a far cry from the early warehouse scene, the organisers of the venue used in this research do not have a permanent base. Rather, they lease premises for the weekend, on a rolling basis, promoting the brand name rather than the physical club. At the time of writing, the raves were being held in a club located in a very dingy, industrialised part of the city, full of warehouses and factories, with few bars or restaurants. However, rather than detracting people from coming, this “authenticity” only served to remind clubbers of the early days when the scene was fresh, exciting and liberating. Moreover, the organisers have managed to achieve both notoriety and an image of exclusivity. In a recent newspaper poll, the doormen were voted the worst in the country, while at the same time, the club (on the nights leased by the organisers) was voted the hardest to get into in Britain. This, however, was not considered bad publicity. On the contrary, it only served to increase the number of hopefuls trying to get in. On an average Saturday night, from around eight thirty onwards, there are queues of people, attracted from across the country, willing to wait in line for up to three hours. Indeed the physical location is of little importance. The venue has developed as a powerful brand over the years, attracting a loyal core of customers who are willing to travel to wherever the event is taking place. The following is taken from a memo describing the club.

RESEARCHER'S MEMO ON OBSERVATIONS OF THE PROCESS

The club attracts a wide cross section of people, ranging in age from around eighteen to forty. All are dressed well, the younger ones in clothes designed to make a statement and get them noticed. For example, swimwear, tight shorts, and even fancy dress, such as one man dressed as a French mime artist another as a half naked Satan, and still more wearing such accessories as "bunny ears". The older clubbers wear labels such as Patrick Cox footwear, and Vivienne Westwood dresses and shirts. The more outrageous ones vie for attention while waiting in the queue, juggling balls, chasing people with a fork (Satan), exposing very brief underwear/outfits, or blowing whistles. The whole thing creates a carnival atmosphere which appears to heighten the sense of anticipation of what is to come. It is also interesting to note that the club operates a three queue system. The first queue is for people who are not sure if they will gain entry or not. This line are subject to the inspection of the "fashion police" who patrol up and down selecting individuals on the basis of good looks or extreme fashion. These are then taken to the front and allowed entry. Others have to wait their turn and many are turned away when they reach the door. Loyalty disappears at this point as friends leave friends standing outside whilst they disappear into the club. The other two queues are for paying guests (queue two) and non paying friends (queue three). There is an element of spectacle about the whole procedure. The queuing system alone is an act of theatre with performance, role play, and celebrity. The privileged few, the non paying guests, are ushered through a central barrier, up the steps and into the club room, watched by a crowd who are unsure of their fate at the end of the line.

Once inside the atmosphere changes. Clubbers are greeted by a tall transvestite who hugs them and sees them through into the club room. The first thing that strikes you as you walk in is the feeling of being hit by a blast of music, the volume so loud that you can feel the vibration through the floor. At one end of the club are two bars, one selling alcohol which was virtually empty, the other only water and high energy drinks. There are few chairs and no tables. The whole focus is on the dance floor which occupies the majority of space and is crammed with heaving bodies all frantically dancing, keeping time with the increasing speed of the repetitive rhythm of the music. Dotted around the dance floor are podiums upon which the more flamboyant dance, showing themselves off to the crowd. The room itself is dark, lit only by lasers and strobe lights which are activated by the beat of the music. The whole effect is hypnotic. Some people dance for hours, pausing only to drink water to avoid dehydration. Throughout the night the DJ works the audience altering the music as the evening goes on, varying the tempo from frenetic to a slower more laid back beat as the evening draws to a close. Towards the end of the evening several people disappear to the chill out room. Here the driving beat of house and rave are replaced by softer music. Low comfortable sofas and cushions are spread around the room, the lighting is dim and the overall ambience assists in the process of "chilling out" ready for departure, either for home or for another venue.

THE EXPERIENCE AS A "RITE OF PASSAGE"

Essentially, one might describe the process as an act of transition, from being an "outsider" to becoming a member of an exclusive community. Many are willing to stand in line for hours and subject themselves to personal inspection and evaluation, only, in a number of cases to be rejected. Those on the other hand who are selected, are made to feel special, different, individual and worthy of notice. The threat of exclusion found on the "outside" is replaced by a process of acceptance and inclusion, the successful completion of a "rite of passage". In order to provide a theoretical context it is possible to draw on the work of Turner and Turner (1978) with regard to the process of engagement and the ritualistic disengagement from the real world.

1. *Pre-liminal Rites*: A separation from the ordinary world, entry into the world of play through dressing up and dropping the trappings of everyday life. A journey from home which involves rites of separation which correspond to a separation from reality. Such activities may include dressing to go out, planning the look, arranging to meet others and deciding on the club.
2. *Liminal Rites*: The welcome centre or entrance. Here the customer passes over the threshold into a "womb" like state where there is a levelling or stripping of status. This relates closely to the process of getting to the club, queuing, anticipation, excitement, carnival, entering another world, and becoming a different person.

3. *Post-liminal Rites*: An alternative or more liberating way of being socially connected and a way of being detached from social structure. In the dance club there is an emphasis on common experience and a common emotional bond encountered through dance, and communal identity.

However, these are observations and it is recognised that the problem with observational understanding is its inability to open up the meaning of an individual's lived experience for the observing individual (Costelloe 1996). In isolation, observations do little to explain what is happening and why people continue to come. Therefore, having stated that the aim of the research was to gain an insight into the nature of the experience from the perspective of the user, the second methodology employed is borrowed from Thompson's (1997) description of the phenomenological process.

RESEARCHING THE EXPERIENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

The goal of phenomenology is to enlarge and deepen understanding of the range of immediate experiences (Spiegelberg 1982). Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. vii) suggests that the results of phenomenological enquiry should be "a direct description of our experience without taking account of its psychological origin". Phenomenology is a critical reflection upon conscious experience, rather than subconscious motivation, and is designed to uncover the essential invariant features of that experience (Jopling 1996). It has also been heralded as a critique of the positivist position which views social reality as a system without any respect for the grassroots of everyday interests (Srubar 1998). Accordingly, the aim of the researcher is to construct a model of the sector of the social world within which only those events and behaviours which are of interest to the problem under study, take place (Costelloe 1996). With this in mind, only those individuals who regularly attended rave venues were considered for interview, a tool chosen because

... in social research the language of conversation, including that of the interview, remains one of the most important tools of social analysis, a means whereby insight is gained into everyday life, as well as the social and cultural dimensions of our own and other societies. (Bloch 1996, p. 323)

SAMPLE

Whilst most studies tend to concentrate on rave as a youth centred phenomenon (McRobbie 1995; McRobbie and Thornton 1995) this is not necessarily the case. There are a significant number of individuals who have followed the development of the scene throughout its evolution in Britain. Moreover, many of the organisers and top DJs are in their forties, further reflecting the fragmented nature of this movement. We eventually managed to complete interviews with 23 informants. The sample included a cross section of individuals in terms of age (range from 20 to 40) which is actually representative of the clientele of many "rave" clubs. Each interview was conducted in a private house, lasted between 40 and 60 min, and was tape recorded. Whilst there were difference in terms of lifestyles, occupations, responsibilities, other leisure activities, and everyday experiences, there was surprising similarity across all the informants' description of the rave experience. One factor that did stand out was that rave culture is primarily the domain of the "unattached". Whilst many were in relationships, none had children and consequently energies were focused on other priorities. Table I presents an overview of the informants who took part in the research.

TABLE I Profile of informants

Name	Age	Occupation
Jane	20	Student
Mark	20	Office worker
Ian	21	Builder
Sash	21	Model/promotional work
Jack	22	Travel clerk
Samantha	23	Shop worker
Toby	23	Disc jockey—rave and house
Sally	23	Shop worker
Michael	23	Computer programmer
Jo	24	Advertising agency-design
Stuart	26	Building society manager
Veronica	26	Window dresser
Wayne	28	Furniture designer
Neil	30	Director of a computer firm
Stuart	34	Recent graduate
Debra	34	Teacher
Tracey	35	Green marketing executive
Alyson	35	Recruitment executive
Susan	37	Lecturer
Mark	37	Retail manager
James	38	DJ and promoter
Steven	40	Management consultant
Michael	40	Company director

INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

As a means of interpretation, Thompson (1997) in his analysis of consumer experiences, advocates part to whole analysis of participant accounts by proceeding through an interactive process of description, informants' stories, and theorizing.

In order to illustrate the interpretive process, a description of one of the informants is presented next. The description relates to Sash, a regular on the dance and rave scene.

Sash's Story

Sash is twenty one years old and has been on the club scene since she was sixteen. She lives with Toby, a DJ, who travels the country playing and mixing house and rave music. They have been together for about two years and regularly attend clubs. With regard to her work, she is a part-time model, but works primarily on promotions which include car shows, furniture exhibitions and clothes shows. Sash offered a fairly typical account of her experiences. She was keen to talk, was lucid, and expressed herself without inhibition. Sash was born in Birmingham but has lived and worked intermittently in London. One recurring theme across all of the interviews was the ability to compartmentalise work and leisure, and in this Sash was no exception. Her working life and social life were perceived as two distinct and separate realms. When discussing the weekend, Sash described an almost ritualistic act of transition, from getting home, discarding the week's paraphernalia, and trying out a variety of looks until the right one was found. She discussed experimenting with different identities, which included sophisticated designer dresses (the vamp), micro minis and exposed underwear (the flirt), or sporting beachwear (the serious raver). In contrast to what she normally wears in the week, her clothes and make up are designed to attract attention and are minimalistic and overtly sexual. However, although attracting the attention of the opposite

sex is important, meeting a partner is not. Consequently a large part of the experience could be described as narcissistic.

Once an image is found, the next stage is to arrange a meeting place with friends. This may be at a house or flat, or in one of the many “feeder” bars. She described how sometimes, to set the mood, a tab of “e”, or the occasional line of cocaine might be taken before moving on to the club. In terms of the criteria for choosing a club, she has a hierarchy by which individual clubs are judged and ranked, according to: the difficulty of getting in; the status of having been there; the music that is played; the DJs that play at the club; dress codes; and international and national reputation.

INITIAL INTERPRETATION

Essentially, the experience appeared to be linked closely to issues of identity and self expression. There was also a strong desire to be perceived as individual, having a “look” whilst at the same time conforming to the norms of the group. In the rave scene, clothes are considered symbols, or badges of acceptance, and there are a series of behavioural codes which must be adhered to in order to maintain this acceptance. The appearance of “being in control” is also important and consequently there is a search for release through means that do not involve the consumption of alcohol which takes away this control. The combination of the music, the energetic dancing, the energy and confidence giving drugs, and flights into fantasy through the imagination, appear to heighten a sense of freedom and escape, and are contrasted with the anxieties and pressures of everyday life. This offers an alternative way of being, which is prolonged as long as possible. In essence, these themes summed up the core of the experience, and were found to recur in the stories of most of those interviewed. The following represents a theoretical explanation of the identified themes, beginning with the concept of identity.

IDENTITY AND NARCISSISTIC EXPRESSION

Within the field of consumer behaviour there is growing acceptance that people actively construct who they are, or want to be, from the symbolic resources that are available to them (Firat *et al.* 1995). A central theme emerging from the data was that of “making a statement”. This was very much linked to the projection of a particular kind of image that was largely judged in terms of symbols such as clothes, knowing about the right kind of music, and generally having the “look” to gain access and be accepted in the dance club. Kellner (1992, p. 174) suggests that, “an affluent image culture... creates highly unstable identities while constantly providing new openings to restructure one’s identity”. Thompson and Haytko (1997, p. 21) discuss the development of a sense of identity through fashion discourse in particular social settings, where the theme of “‘who I am’ is constantly defined through perceived contrast to others”. Within the rave sub-culture symbols such as smiley tee shirts, beachwear, whistles, dummies and florescent paraphernalia (Redhead 1997) are all used to define membership.

In this context it is possible to draw on the work of Thornton (1996) who reworks Bourdieu’s (1984) ideas of economic, social and cultural capital. She introduced the term “sub-cultural capital” with regard to club culture, by which she means that “sub cultural capital confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder” (Thornton 1996, p. 11). Increasing one’s sub-cultural capital or “hipness” or “coolness” is a prime motivator for people within this subculture and is indicative of the fragmentation of values concerning

the criteria for judging acceptance in this context. Being “in the know”, using appropriate language, buying, creating or wearing the right clothes and buying, creating, listening and dancing to the “right sort of music”, are all ways of increasing an individual’s sub-cultural capital, a point reinforced by a number of informants.

Sash

My clothes make a statement, they’re about me, they say who I am. I would just die if I walked in and someone else was wearing the same thing.

Mark

If I were to describe me and my friends I would say that we are all very image conscious, and that usually comes down to clothes. We like nice things. I know if I wore a suit from Top Man [part of a High Street retailing chain] they would all take the piss. Everyone I know spends quite a bit on clothes and going to the right places... but we earn decent money so why not... for a start you wouldn’t get into half the places if you weren’t dressed right.

Gabriel and Lang (1995, p. 73), drawing on Freud’s (1921) theory of “narcissism of minor differences” suggest that,

Under the regime of the narcissism of minor differences, signs become essential differences and, therefore, essences. This is how small differences become big differences. Being able to read such differences is vital since these differences become sources of in-group solidarity and out-group hostility.

For example, in the following quotes, Veronica prioritises the designer over the look, whereas for Sash “the look” is all important, but for Mark it is all about getting into the club in the first place. Although these may appear minor differences for these people they are very important.

Veronica

Clothes are very much part of the culture. It’s quite funny when you think about it, someone can walk in and you think what they are wearing is awful and then they tell you, oh I don’t know it’s Katherine Hammett and all of a sudden everyone loves it. It’s like that.

Sash

A friend of mine got married not long ago. She went down to London to get her outfit, a dress with a feather boa. Everyone at the wedding wore black, and most of the conversation was about the clothes everyone had on, not the wedding or anything like that.

Mark

When we go to places like ***** it’s a bit of a buzz. Half the fun is going in. We know the organisers so we’re usually on the guest list if we phone up... it may sound like posing but it’s great to be able to swan in, in front of all those people waiting in the queue not knowing if they’ll get in or not.

However, there was also evidence that taken to the extreme, such narcissistic indulgence could result in a decline into dysfunctional behaviour or an over obsession with appearance that has potentially damaging effects. This is illustrated in James’ description of his friends’ behaviour:

James

My God! I know one guy who is so image conscious that when his partner became pregnant he made her take laxatives and diet so she wouldn’t look fat. He didn’t want his friends to think he was seeing an overweight girl, can you imagine it? When the baby was born he bought it a Versace leather jacket. It cost him £500 and it had grown out of it in a month.

Such statements appear to support the dystopian view of a superficial and depthless society where the emphasis is on spectacle (Venkatesh 1992), and surface reality (Eco 1987; Jameson 1990). It might be argued that the dance scene exemplifies this, particularly with its emphasis on being beautiful and looking good—a form of individualistic self obsessed narcissism which is legitimised in the context of the group. Maffesoli (1996, p. 77), for example suggests that “the cult of the body and other forms of appearance have value only in so much as they are part of a larger stage in which everyone is both actor and spectator”. This is the other side of the story, which challenges the idea that society is becoming more

individualistic (Hall *et al.* 1994; Strauss 1997). What emerged from the data was that although there are clear signs of individualism, these behaviours are in fact socially grounded. What the club environment offers is a location for the creation of new social forms of interaction, or alternative communities, which although temporary, have the effect of anchoring the individual and provide meaning to their experiences.

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW COMMUNITIES

Maffesoli (1996) talks about the rise in what he terms “neo-tribes” or the transitory group, which is neither fixed or permanent, but involves a constant back and forth movement between the tribe and the masses. Indeed it is this tribal affiliation which serves as the backdrop to the many contemporary movements we are witnessing today, especially where the development of new lifestyles based on acts of pure creation are concerned. Accordingly, these “neo-tribes” may be “effervescent, ascetic, oriented toward the past or the future; they have as their common characteristic on the one hand, a breaking with the commonly held wisdom and, on the other, an enhancing of the organic aspect of the social aggregation” (Maffesoli 1996, p. 96). These groups are held together by a certain ambience and a state of mind. Solidarity is expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form, and nowhere is this more evident than in the dance club or venue. According to Nixon (1992) identification involves an act of self-recognition in an image, a representation or form of address. Narcissistic identification is about the establishment of a monitoring relationship in the interplay of “self” and other. Langman (1992) continues the analysis by suggesting that identity is dependent upon the specifics of gender, parental socialisation, values and practices. But it is also provisional and dependent upon class, subculture and the general environment of the social group where selfhood is recognised and confirmed. Shields (1992) proposes that consumption spaces are spaces of sociality, where the status of the individual is encoded in favour of the group. They are places where personas are “unfurled” and mutually adjusted. The performance orientation toward “the other” in these sites of social centrality and sociality draws people together one by one, such that “tribe-like but temporary groups and circles condense out of the homogeneity of the mass” (Shields 1992, p. 108). There was evidence to support this view in the findings of this research where the monitoring of identity was largely dependent on group approval and acceptance. Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998, p. 133) propose that, “the development of individual self identity is inseparable from the parallel development of collective social identity”. Jenkins (1996) calls this the “internal-external dialectic of identification” and suggests that self-identity is validated by social interaction, or what Kellner (1992) refers to as “mutual recognition”. For example, Thompson and Haytko (1997, p. 26) argue that “fashion meanings can be used to foster a sense of standing out, or they can be used to forge a sense of affiliation with others and to foster a sense of belonging”. Club culture, music, dance and fashion help people to make sense of their world and their place in it. On reflection, the findings appear to support Maffesoli’s (1996) argument that society, rather than becoming more and more individualistic, is in fact seeing a return to the concept of community. For example,

Susan

Going to a rave is like going to a massive party where everyone is on the same wavelength. Dancing kind of draws people together, not in any kind of sexual way, it’s just like you’re all sharing the same kind of feelings, you’ve got this one thing in common.

Neil

Once I’m in there it’s just like a big family party atmosphere. I want to dance straight away. . . you can let your imagination go wild, be a different person, there’s something exhilarating, dancing till you nearly drop.

Stuart

You hear about the happy vibe and it's true... you go to a club and everyone is really solid... you're dancing away and the next thing you know you're talking to a complete stranger as if he's your best friend.

Building on the work of Maffesoli (1996), Cova (1997) discusses how neo-tribal formation is aided by consumption practices. However, what links members of rave neo-tribes is not a formal code, as with the music based subcultures of the 1960s and 1970s, rather "shared emotions, styles of life, new moral beliefs, senses of injustice and consumption practices" (Cova 1997, p. 301). In this context, the shared emotion is not the result of verbal communication. Indeed there were accounts of clubbers going to a rave and not talking until they left. For example,

Alyson

You don't go to a rave to talk, you don't need to. It's strange, but I can spend all night dancing, mingling with people, feeling close to them, sharing something without saying a word. The funny thing is that if I met many of these people away from the club scene, I wouldn't know what to say to them. I think what it is, is the whole thing, the music, the dancing, lifts you onto another plane where everyone feels the same, we're all equal.

Jowers (1999, p. 387), in discussing the nature of music and its lived experience proposes,

within the deeper trajectory of electronic dance music an intensifying focus upon the sheer materiality of sound has appeared. Vocal sounds are pulverized to reveal what is always and necessarily elided in most communication, the fact that we communicate by way of the properties of sound waves of varying frequency.

The dance club represents a hyperreal environment where communication is based on an understanding of codes and signals. Jowers (1999, p. 387) goes on to illustrate this suggesting that in the dance club,

the voice recedes into the soundscape, morphing into signals towards noise, away from code. Fragments released from their moorings, become part of a strange inter-text, into which are read ever shifting meanings as these shards are repeated, appearing in ceaselessly altering combinations. Potential meanings proliferate.

Consequently, it is the shared consumption of music and an appreciation of its inherent semiotic meaning, and its ability to link individuals together, that not only validates the individual's self identity but also helps to coalesce and create a neo-tribe. As indicated by Alyson in the previous quote, this juncture may only be temporary and transitory, where shared values exist only for the duration of the experience. The club setting provides many contemporary consumers with an environment, which links them with others who share something that is mutually valued. However, whilst the group may provide the context for the expression of identity and communal bonding, the nature of the experience is also linked to other stimuli such as the laser light shows, the ingestion of drugs like ecstasy and cocaine and the nature of dance itself. These are the things that produce a common bond and a sense of affiliation. They also heighten the sense of being "high" and escaping from reality.

THE NEED TO ESCAPE—WORKING WEEKS, RAVE WEEKENDS

According to Zukin (1991), the features and experiences of leisure sites include spatial practices of displacement and travel to liminal zones. These zones are thresholds of controlled and legitimate breaks from the routines of everyday, "proper" behaviour. Shields (1992) further proposes that such zones become quests, and searches for, alternative social arrangements. Yalom (1980) suggests that individuals will strive to give their lives purpose by engaging in specific behaviours which will provide a sense of autonomy. This is achieved through a mix of behaviours and signals. In the context of the dance club, there is a contradiction between overt sexuality and child-like innocence. For example, both men and women wear very little, partly because of the heat generated through dancing but also to show off their bodies. Nonetheless, the sexuality of the clothes is counteracted by

the accompanying child like paraphernalia associated with rave, such as whistle blowing and dummy sucking. According to McRobbie (1994, p. 169),

In rave and the club culture which it often overlaps, girls are highly sexual in their dress. . . . The tension in rave for girls comes, it seems, from remaining in control, and at the same time losing themselves in dance and music. Abandonment in dance must now, post AIDS, be balanced by caution and the exercise of control in sex.

This emphasis on child-like innocence and a refusal to grow up are significant cultural values (Redhead 1993). It is further supportive of Firat and Venkatesh's (1995) argument that the "postmodern subject is willing to live with the paradoxes that may arise from the fragmentation, the free juxtaposition of objects (therefore even of opposites) in the bricolage" (p. 253–254). Referring to Gergen (1991) they go on to suggest that "postmodernism permits us to conceive of the individual as engaging in non linearities of thought and practice, in improbable behaviours, contingencies and discontinuities" (p. 255). For many the experience was one of fantasy and escape, of dressing up and make-believe and quite often a contradictory need to stay in control, whilst at the same time wanting to disengage from reality. This of course might be read as a conscious or unconscious reaction to the alienating condition of postmodernity.

Sash (on losing control)

You have enough hassle all week at work. What you want to do at the weekend is break free of all that, go a bit mad, get it all out of your system, dancing is like a release, you can lose yourself. . . . On Friday the fun starts early. Usually a group of us will meet up, sometimes at my flat, or someone else's. We might drop an e, or occasionally a line of Charlie [cocaine] just to put us in the mood.

Sash (on staying in control)

I do drink, but not at a club. People go to dance not to prop up the bar. . . it's a different experience. . . you try dancing for an hour to house, jungle or rave, you get high on that alone. . . . With e or coke you can do it, you're not falling around drunk. You're in control, you can dance all night if you want to.

Wayne

I've always had the ability to "make a mess of myself" yet I take my responsibilities seriously. I've rarely been the first to bed. I've never lost control clubbing. I tend not to lose control completely in any aspect of my life. Clubbing is the same. I don't do drugs, and rarely drink much. I know if I go clubbing I can escape for three hours or so. But I'm aware that I'm "on duty" from 8.00 am the next day. I can cope with sleep deprivation more easily than heavy hangovers.

Mark

I don't drink at clubs. If I have two vodka and red bulls in four hours that's my usual limit. You adapt to different situations. If I go to the pub I will drink lager usually, if I go to restaurant I'll drink wine, but if you were drunk at a rave it just wouldn't work, you'd be on a different wave length to everyone else, so what's the point.

The unstated code of alcohol avoidance, and consequently "beer monsters" (young men who make it their mission to get as drunk and loud as possible at the weekend) helps to secure the atmosphere by combating the heightened aggression normally associated with drinking (McRobbie 1995; Hesmondhalgh 1998; Measham *et al.* 1998). For example, one informant, Steven, a forty year old management consultant who has recently completed a Masters degree, described how he would experience stress through overwork. In order to relieve it he would go to a rave, dance solidly for four hours, completely abandon himself to the music and leave feeling exhilarated. The dance club is a hyperreal environment where individuals can escape and get high on dancing. In effect people feel safe. The same informant talked about how he would often go to a club alone, something that would have attracted attention in the popular discotheques of the 1970s and 1980s. In dance clubs, however, the fact that someone might just want to dance is considered perfectly normal. To quote,

Steven

You don't get gangs of blokes propping up the bar looking at you as though you're some kind of deviant. Everyone's just there to have a good time.

However, not all were able to fully escape without the use of some form of stimulants. In this context, alcohol is the equivalent of losing control, so the “high” is experienced through dance and in some cases through the use of drugs which enhance confidence and boost energy without feelings of intoxication. At raves, the drugs of choice are ecstasy or cocaine. These are associated with a “feel good” factor, whilst avoiding any mind altering experiences such as those associated with LSD, or the introversion and introspective properties of cannabis.

Alyson

Now and again I might do a line of coke before I go out, but that doesn't really effect you, it just wakes you up. . .it tells me the weekend has arrived. At the moment there's a lot going on that I want to forget about. . .at work they're talking about redundancy so there's that hassle. . .of course you've got to think about the mortgage and bills, but you need to get away from all that stuff, forget it for a while and switch off. Rave is certainly one way of doing that. You can be a different person. . .you can get on a real high, feel really loved up, you want to kiss everyone and dance for hours.

According to Mick (1996), as consumer research becomes more societal in nature, an important area to pursue is the negative or “dark” side of consumer behaviour. It is well documented that the nature of the experience and the encompassing atmosphere provides a context for drug taking and escapism, and has been associated with the “happy vibe” (Measham *et al.* 1998). Singer (1993) suggests that cocaine users employ a form of self medication against a depressed mood and usually have large discrepancies between actual and ideal self experiences. Nonetheless, in relation to dance, drug taking is seen as context specific and often divorced from the routine activities of everyday life:

James

I don't take drugs in the week, in fact quite the opposite. I go to the gym nearly every day, I'll go running in the morning and cycling whenever I get the chance. No, it's a social thing. . .you take a line of Charlie and you don't get high, you just feel totally confident, you know you can't say the wrong thing, and nothing fazes you. It's not like drink where you think you're really amusing, but really you sound like a gibbering idiot.

However, in nearly all cases there were clear demarcation lines in terms of perceptions of those who do use drugs habitually:

James

If you're that kind of person you can like it too much. Imagine going to work and feeling on top form, no one can get the better of you. That's when it becomes hard to give it up, when you have to face the world as you are. I've seen it happen to people. They become dependent and end up wrecked. That's not for me. I like a good time but I know when to call it a day, it's strictly for the weekends.

In the context of the dance club, what the experience offers is a temporary form of escape, a feeling of being “loved up” and a setting for artificial and fleeting affection through communal identification. In effect there is a disengagement from everyday life and a segregation of activities. The dance club might be described as a hyperreal environment where individuals can escape and get high on dancing and the atmosphere, aided in some cases by the use of stimulants which allow the user to remain in control, whilst at the same time losing any inhibitions. However, much of the experience takes place in the imagination and is governed by the beat of the music and a sense of engagement with it.

ENGAGEMENT

According to Campbell (1987) modern hedonism is characterised by a shift in concern from emotions to sensations where what is sought is more often to do with the imagination.

Sash

If you go to a club you don't go for the conversation, there's not much chance of that anyway. You get into the music and although you're with other people, dancing is very personal, it's about what's in your own

head.....The music is just a blend of rhythms, it's all a variation on a theme, but it's part of the experience...you don't need to worry about too many changes, or words, it just gets faster or slower.

In clubs the beat of the music is repetitive and hypnotic, devoid of lyrics which may require thought and analysis, or according to Redhead (1993) a form of mindless indulgence. The emphasis is on a feeling of well being, in a climate where everyone is experiencing the same emotions.

Steven

Why do I like it. I love the energy of the music. I'm into aerobic exercise, running and so on. I get a kick out of the physical experience, and I use it to mentally chill out and subconsciously "problem solve". I can lose myself in the music and atmosphere. I love the vibe, friendly... camaraderie, no edge/agenda, just people doing their own thing and enjoying it.

However, whilst the music, on first analysis, may appear depthless, and the emphasis on mindlessness or "not having to think", it is far from void of meaning. According to Hesmondhalgh (1998), one of the key features of dance music as opposed to many other sectors of the music industry, is its lack of a star system. This allows for concentration on the music itself, rather than on personalities. He suggests, that this reflects a lack of interest in rock notions of authenticity, sincerity and integrity, and a preference for other values such as immediacy, sensuality and pleasure in secrecy and obscurity. However, this view is open to serious challenge. Within the rave scene the DJs are the new stars, commanding excessive fees for appearing in clubs and bringing with them loyal fans who can describe in great detail the various styles and mixing methods of the top performers. Moreover, the music itself is splintered into various genres, which become the trademark of the more accomplished DJs, each of whom attract a distinct following.

Sash

You really get involved in the whole thing...people who don't know about dance music think it's all the same, just one drawn out beat, but it isn't...there are ways of mixing the music and each individual DJ has his own style and identity.

Mark

I do recognise the different music styles, although I didn't to begin with...I'll travel if there's a particular DJ playing in a club in London or Manchester. I'm not fanatical, some people follow their favourite DJ all over the place, they get hooked on a particular style, and let's face it, it's the DJ's who are the kings in those sort of clubs, not the artists, they can work the audience, create the atmosphere without saying a word.

Steven

Clubbing is pretty conservative. My partner and I have gone to a couple of ecstatic dance sessions. Here dance style is more freeform... there is no dress code or music code. Personal values set the tone of behaviour. This is different to "clubbing". With the latter one might be able to participate as an individual, but there are some pretty constraining protocols, which I like. As the past twelve months have evolved, I've become more choosy in what I term good dance music. I've formed opinions on the various DJs, got more into the fashion around dance. I now use a kindred clubbing soul to advise on club orientated design treatments for my web sites, corporate identity etc. I'd love to dj. A pal and I agreed djing as an objective for me this year.

In 1989, "house" was the all encompassing term for rave music. Nevertheless, in the years that followed, not only has "house" music's primacy been challenged by rival terms such as "techno" and "hardcore", but "house" itself has started to splinter into an array of pre-fixes—"tribal", "progressive" "handbag" and so forth (Thornton 1996). Each of these different strata of music has spawned slightly new attitudes, clothing styles and forms of expression. In effect they have become sub-cultures of the larger all encompassing club culture which further reinforces the concept of fragmentation as noted by Bennett (2000, p. 75),

Contemporary urban dance music now includes forms such as techno, garage, ambient and jungle...in addition to house which has itself become fragmented, including deep house, piano house, hippy house and hard house

Garage music, for example, harks back to the original sounds of Detroit, with its laid back snare driven rhythm laid over diva vocals. It requires a cooler, less energetic stance and is still

the sound of the trendy wine bars which favour people interested in doing little other than standing by the bar drinking, talking and generally trying to look good. Garage attracts upwardly mobile “mature” white clubbers who revile club culture as juvenile (Strongman 1999). “Hardhouse”, on the other hand, a style more related to the acid house of ten years ago is heavily drum oriented, with synthy breakdowns and build-ups. This is the style favoured by so many of the super-clubs.

Consequently, the degree to which we can describe the musical experience as mindless, has to be questioned. Mindlessness was counteracted by descriptions of total inner absorption congruent with Csikszentmihalyi’s (1992) account of flow. This concerns conscious effort and the direction of psychic energy to produce a feeling of well-being. A flow experience involves complete immersion in an activity and demands real involvement. According to Campbell (1987, p. 60) “to search for pleasure is to expose oneself to certain stimuli in the hope that they will trigger a desired response”. Once this response was achieved, the emphasis moved to maintaining it for as long as possible.

PROLONGED HEDONISM

The idea of prolonging the experience is a legacy of the early parties which were renowned for continuing through the night and into the next day. As McRobbie (1994, p. 171) remarks, one of the attractions of rave is that,

unlike the concert or “gig” it goes on, it doesn’t stop. This hyper-reality of pleasure, this extension of media produces a new social state, a new relationship with the body, the pleasures of music and dance.

Whilst most clubs close their doors at approximately 2:00 a.m., the majority of the informants described a reluctance to go home, a desire to continue the experience, and to forget about the problems of “the real world”.

Jack

After the club we will normally go back to someone’s house or flat. . . we’ve been known to stay up all night, the next day, and then go out again the following night.

Susan

It’s like you don’t want it to end. We will always find somewhere to go. My place usually. We went through a phase of going to a club, going back to someone’s house or flat and then heading into town to a pub on the outskirts of the market that opens at 7.00am for the market traders. We didn’t go there to drink, just to be somewhere with each other. God knows what they must have made of us, all dressed up and hyper from the night before.

Michael

When I go out I never want to go home, I like the party to continue. Usually someone will know of something going on afterwards. . . I remember once not going to bed for three days.

Samantha

One of the best nights I have ever had was last New Year’s eve. The organisers of “*****” had the whole night sorted. Everyone had tickets to go to their bar in the city centre. This stayed open until about eleven o’clock. After that buses were laid on to take us to the club where we saw the New Year in. That was absolutely amazing. The whole place was completely packed, everyone was totally loved up, dripping in sweat from dancing, hugging and kissing each other at midnight, just one great communal vibe. I can’t quite describe the feeling. I mean they talk about the happy vibe but I suppose that’s basically what it is, you’re dancing around with this great big smile on your face and you want it to go on for ever. Anyway, at 3:00 am we all left the club and got on the coaches for the opening night of their [the organisers] club in Leicester [a city approximately fifty miles away]. Everyone was hyped up and the driver even had the music blasting out of the speakers on the coach, keeping everyone in the mood. When we got there the club was in full swing, there were some really top DJ’s so we just blended in, everyone dancing like lunatics. It went on until midday the next day when the buses picked us up to go back home. Some people were still buzzing, others looked like zombies, but I don’t think anyone wanted it to end.

Moody (1998) talks about the “weekender” where the clubber returns to boring, repetitive, low paid, low prestige, no future jobs. However, whilst the concept of the “weekender” is generally true, the assertion that clubbers are escaping from “no hope” lives bears little relation to our research. Our findings show that many of those interviewed were professionals or involved in occupations which carried responsibilities. Consequently, for most it was the opposite, a need to escape from the pressures of everyday life and engage in experiences that are distinct and separate from routine; a reaction against Gergen’s experience of multiphrenia, or personal saturation. ... The immersion of self in this hyperreal but secure environment contrasts sharply with the pressures often faced in everyday life and consequently there is a desire to extend the experience for as long as possible. However, ultimately it is an artificial release which offers only a short term solution and the implications of this may result in greater disaffection, as summed up by Stuart who has the last word,

Stuart

Sleep was an alien concept to me at the weekend. I mean I’d be e’d out of my head, totally loved up, so there was no way I’d want it to end. . . I just wanted it to carry on. . . however, when you come down, you come down with a bang. On Monday morning the depression would hit and you think you have a whole week of work and real life problems to face before you can do it again. But I’ve made a decision that it’s got to stop, I know that it’s not quite right, not quite healthy.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to gain an insight into the experience of “rave”, a phenomenon that has existed in Britain for over a decade. The findings suggest that this experience is closely linked to issues of identity, the emergence of new communities, escape, engagement, and prolonged hedonism. The literature suggests that the postmodern individual is characterised by identity confusion and a sense of rootlessness brought about by the demise of traditional notions of authority and community. However, while there were clear signs of alienation, congruent with the “dystopian” view of the postmodern consumer, evident in the desire to escape from reality and prolong the experience, there was also evidence to support the affirmative or liberatory position on the postmodern consumer, illustrating that the two sides of the argument actually co-exist side by side. Consequently, rather than succumbing to feelings of isolation and anxiety, there was an active quest for alternative social arrangements and new communities based around common bonds and experiences. On face value it might look as if rave is merely an extension of the hippy movement with its emphasis on community and shared behaviours. However, our findings support Markus and Nurius’ (1986) proposition that we have multiple selves and identities. The fragmentation and compartmentalisation of working week, rave weekends is one example of this whereby the responsible worker role, complete with the pressures of everyday life, is abandoned at the weekend in favour of the self expressive hedonist. This is not only a mental state but a physical manifestation of what might be termed an “alter personality” reflected in the body practices of the individual. The suit is replaced with shorts, lycra or swimwear, the early to bed early to rise rule becomes a code of not sleeping, and the abstinence of stimulants, the emphasis on health and fitness and hard work at the gym, gives way to the consumption of energy and confidence boosting drugs. This behaviour supports the notion that “in this world of shifting images there is no single project, or no one lifestyle, no sense of being to which the individual needs to commit” (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 253).

The fragmentation of this scene is further reflected in the music into ever more specific genres and the emergence of sub-cultures within subcultures each with their own symbols,

dance and identities. Furthermore these identities are socially grounded. Virtually all informants described not only an experiential separation from the routines of the week, but also a social segregation whereby there was little integration or social interaction between working colleagues and weekend friends. On the contrary, these people often only come together at the weekend, having little in common outside of the venue. They congregate to engage in a collective experience, to form a temporary community, which disperses after the experience is over. The notion of community has always been a central feature of rave, but unlike earlier subcultures it is not based on a lifestyle commitment. It might be viewed as part of the liberating force of postmodern fragmentation as described by Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p. 253) which frees the individual from “one sense of experience of being”. It is part of the acceptance of paradoxes where no one perspective is privileged and where the “juxtaposition of contradictory emotions and cognitions regarding perspectives, commitment, ideas and things in general” are part of the emancipatory condition of postmodern fragmentation.

SOME TENTATIVE AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

By confronting the “speculative approach” (Shields 1992) adopted by postmodern cultural theorists with empirical data of lived experience, we suggest that some key themes emerge that require further consideration.

THE SELF AND THE BODY

Although there has recently been a renewed interest in the role of embodied self in the sociology of consumption (e.g. Featherstone *et al.* 1992; Falk 1994) this has rarely been supported by empirical data. Ironically, one of the few works which connects what people actually do with their bodies with cultural theory is Mauss (1979/1936) who more than half a century ago showed that even the fundamental act of walking was influenced by nationality, gender and age. As Shields (1992) points out from a theoretical stance, the body is never exposed and without an identity. The individuals in this study demonstrate consciousness and agency in relation to their utilisation of the body to structure and communicate self identity in their consumption of popular culture.

LIVED EXPERIENCE AND MATERIALITY

A critical distinction between lived experience and mediated experience as influences on the project of the self has been made by Thompson (1988), who following the phenomenological tradition, characterises lived everyday experience as immediate, continuous and pre-reflexive. Although postmodern perspectives privilege mediated (hyperreal) experience over the mundane quotidian, as Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) point out signification through the media is likely to be much less potent than signification through actual behavioural experience. There is considerable empirical evidence that attitudes formed through direct experience are stronger, more accessible, held more confidently and are more predictive of behaviour than those derived from mediated experience.

Smith (1994) argues that perhaps the “postmodern perils of selfhood” apply only to the “middle-class life world” inhabited by academics and philosophers and that “it is essential to remember that for the great majority of people, the existential perils that trouble the elite are

eclipsed by real perils of survival and damage control.” The individuals in this study evince no signs of being overcome by the mediated aspects of the dance/rave experience, rather they are grounded in the materiality of the moment, enhanced by their practices of the body. A consumer act of creative consumption that would benefit from further research.

NOTES

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