

## Claire and Jose get off their cake: ecstasy, raving and women's pleasure in 1990s Britain

Peder Clark 

Centre for the Social History of Health & Healthcare, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

### ABSTRACT

Momentous shifts in British nightlife were catalysed by the drug ecstasy during the 1990s. This article explores the tension between older attitudes towards women's drug use and new discourses of feminine pleasure by using materials produced by Lifeline, a Manchester-based drugs harm reduction charity. These leaflets provided advice to young women about how to navigate nightclubs when taking ecstasy. By reading these sources against the grain, this article recovers the pleasures occluded by them and reconstructs what ecstasy and rave meant to young women, beyond the narratives of risk and harm presented to them through the media.

### KEYWORDS

Ecstasy; nightclubs; drugs; rave; gender

### Introduction

Writing in *History Workshop* in 1996, the author Marek Kohn discussed the recent death of Essex teenager Leah Betts, and her connection to one of the protagonists of his book *Dope Girls*, Freda Kempton, who died of a cocaine overdose in 1922:

Both women were young; both died as a consequence of taking illegal drugs; both became posthumous examples whose fate was suggested to express a fundamental truth about the nature of illicit drug use. Both took a stimulant drug associated with a popular dance subculture of questionable legitimacy.<sup>1</sup>

For anyone growing up in 1990s Britain, the name Leah Betts was inseparable from the psychoactive substance she consumed before slipping into a coma. Ecstasy, MDMA, or 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, was by this point a common feature of the nightlives of young people. Estimates ranged from 500,000 to a million regular consumers, and use had spread far beyond its initial subcultural enclaves of nightclubs and raves.<sup>2</sup> As journalist Dave Haslam has suggested, 'something that was originally a clear alternative to high street nightlife ended up *becoming* high street nightlife'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Betts and her friends took their ecstasy pills at a house party for her eighteenth birthday in her parents' home, reportedly dancing to Oasis, Nirvana and Green Day, rather than the insistent kick-drum of house or techno. A school photo of the young woman was projected on billboards across the country, warning that '[j]ust one ecstasy tablet took Leah Betts'.<sup>4</sup>

**CONTACT** Peder Clark  [pedermatthias@gmail.com](mailto:pedermatthias@gmail.com)  University of Strathclyde, Lord Hope Building, 141 St James Road, Glasgow G4 0LT, Liverpool, UK

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Kohn carefully noted that ‘the threads connecting the two tragedies [were] tenuous’ but nonetheless they point to a continuity in how female intoxication was framed over the intervening years.<sup>5</sup> The first widely-reported ecstasy-related deaths in the British media were also those of young women; twenty-one year old Janet Mayes, following a party in Hampton Court, south west London in the autumn of 1988, and Claire Leighton, sixteen, after a night at Manchester nightclub The Hacienda in July 1989.<sup>6</sup> Their fates were united, particularly in the tabloid imaginary, by their defencelessness to a dangerous drug, and the implication that their gender made them singularly susceptible to ecstasy’s potential harms.<sup>7</sup> As Kohn made clear in his study of interwar cocaine use, such gendering had continued for over seventy years, and carried a distinctly moral element.<sup>8</sup>

This article’s temporal reach is rather shorter, concerning itself instead with the few years prior to the death of Betts, after the arrival of ecstasy in Britain during the mid-1980s.<sup>9</sup> Through the momentous shifts in British nightlife that were catalysed by ecstasy, it explores the tension between these older attitudes towards women’s drug use, and new discourses of feminine pleasure. It does so primarily by using materials produced by Lifeline, a drugs harm reduction charity, that were specifically targeted at women between 1992 and 1996. These leaflets, such as *Claire and Jose Get Off their Cake*, *The E-Plan Diet* and *Mr Wonderful*, provided advice to young women about how to navigate nightclubs when taking ecstasy, and how such consumption might impact upon their bodies, emotions, and health. But in the response to these leaflets, as well as wider subcultural ephemera, it is possible also to reconstruct what ecstasy and rave meant to young women, beyond the narratives of risk and harm presented to them through the media. By reading these sources against the grain, this article recovers the pleasures occluded by them.

It also offers an intervention on two aspects of 1990s Britain. Firstly, the tendency, exhibited in popular histories such as Matthew Collin’s *Altered State* or Simon Reynolds’ *Energy Flash* as well as artist Jeremy Deller’s *Everybody in the Place*, to ‘write about ravers in terms of sexless, ageless, raceless and otherwise non-specific or unsituated generals’.<sup>10</sup> While recent sociological work on acid house has been more attendant to race and to a lesser extent gender, rave’s underdeveloped historiography focusses mostly on its socio-political significance.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, by paying close attention to these gender aspects of rave and ecstasy, it also opens up insights on female subjectivities in late twentieth-century Britain. At the same time as rave and ecstasy moved from a subcultural movement to the mainstream of British nightlife, ‘changing modes of femininity’ also emerged into cultural discourse.<sup>12</sup> As Lucy Delap has noted, ‘[i]n the 1990s, there was much talk of a “post-feminist world”, in which political power, economic riches and cultural riches were all for the taking’.<sup>13</sup> In this context, young women’s pleasure was highly contested. This article therefore explores the extent to which female intoxication and its culture of clubs and dancing became entangled with the controversial rise of ‘post-feminism’.<sup>14</sup>

## **Peanut Pete and A Trip Around Manchester, 1988 – 1992**

First patented by Merck in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and reinvented by the Californian chemist Alexander Shulgin in the 1960s, ecstasy had, from the summer of 1988 onwards, become inextricably linked with the nascent ‘rave’ scene in the UK. As author Sarah

Champion asserted, ‘Chicago’s house music and the drug ecstasy became a double-act like fish and chips’.<sup>15</sup> The psychoactive effects of ecstasy, reported to include euphoria and increased energy, were an apparently perfect foil for the new house and techno music sweeping through British nightlife. Manchester became a particular hotspot for the burgeoning ‘acid house’ subculture, with its clubs – in particular The Hacienda – quickly gaining national notoriety, before cementing its place in cultural mythology with the 2002 film *24 Hour Party People*. Indeed, pop cultural theorist Steve Redhead would write in 1993 that ‘Ecstasy . . . has become almost synonymous with what has become know[n] as “Madchester”’.<sup>16</sup>

This seemingly novel substance and its associated subculture presented new challenges to drugs workers that up until this point, had been preoccupied with heroin and crack users. Ravers represented a ‘new group of potential clients – young, recreational polydrug users who frequented rave dance venues [and] were knowledgeable about the effects of a range of drugs such as LSD, ecstasy, and amphetamines’.<sup>17</sup> For Manchester-based organisation Lifeline, ecstasy posed ‘real problems in working out how to respond to drug use that is an adjunct to fun and pleasure rather than the organising force of a lifestyle’.<sup>18</sup>

Lifeline had been formed in 1971 by psychiatrist Eugenie Cheesmond and former drug user Rowdy Yates. Initially started ‘as a “therapeutic soup kitchen”, offering food and a “place to crash” for drug users’, by the 1980s Lifeline had expanded its services and was providing harm reduction advice.<sup>19</sup> Its approach was avowedly ‘agnostic’, working alongside drug consumers, and believing their consumption to be neither ‘altogether “good” nor “bad”’.<sup>20</sup> Such even-handedness was at odds with the ‘evil of ecstasy’ described by tabloid headlines, or articles in medical journals which stated that users were engaged in a ‘dance of death’.<sup>21</sup> Lifeline’s response to drugs, and ecstasy in particular, was therefore often as much about addressing the surrounding hysteria as its actual usage. These principles also contrasted with official government campaigns, such as 1985’s ‘Heroin Screws You Up’ and 1990’s ‘Drugs: The Effects Can Last Forever’, which drugs workers criticised as ‘scare-mongering’, warning that such initiatives ‘alienated [consumers] from the help and information sources they might some day require’.<sup>22</sup>

Lifeline therefore attempted to engage with ravers on their own terms. As director Ian Wardle explained to a BBC documentary in 1992:

Lifeline starts from the position of what do you say after you’ve said ‘Just Say No’. What do you say to those thousands of youngsters who’ve just said ‘yes’? Are you simply to dismiss them? Are you to label them as unhealthy or pathological? Are you going to criminalise them? Are you going to essentially side-line them? Or are you going to listen to them, to listen to what they say, to see whether there is any value in the experience?<sup>23</sup>

Lifeline’s strategy was consequently based on providing advice to make consumption safer. In doing so, they drew on their experience with consumers of heroin earlier in the 1980s. The organisation had used comics as a visually attractive, vernacular method of providing harm reduction advice, hiring Michael Linnell to produce a comic in the vein of *Viz*, the satirical and bawdy magazine which drew on the aesthetics of punk fanzines and was reaching the height of its popularity in the mid-1980s.<sup>24</sup> Featuring characters such as ‘Tough Shit Thomas’, ‘Locker Room Lenny’ and ‘Grandpa “Smack Head” Jones’,

the resulting *Smack in the Eye* drew censure from some quarters. Lifeline were 'interviewed by the Director of Public Prosecutions and several agencies wrote to the Department Of Health trying to get [their] funding stopped'.<sup>25</sup> But Lifeline also evaluated the comic's effectiveness, and buoyed by its apparent success, began to look into how they might communicate with this new breed of drug consumers.<sup>26</sup>

Linnell therefore developed a character called Peanut Pete, based on the real-life ravers who had engaged with Lifeline's services: "[w]e produced an identikit profile of a user, drew up a cartoon strip incorporating advice and our address, and, sure enough, Peanut Pete walked in".<sup>27</sup> If *Smack in the Eye* had, via *Viz*, incorporated the aesthetics of punk fanzines, then Peanut Pete was also under the influence of rave fanzines. Like their subcultural antecedents, fanzines such as London's *Boy's Own*, Leeds' *Herb Garden*, and the de facto in-house 'zine of The Hacienda, *Freaky Dancing*, were irreverent and profanity-strewn.<sup>28</sup> Many included short cartoons, and discussed, in ribald fashion, the prevailing mores, substances and clothing favoured by the scene.<sup>29</sup>

Peanut Pete comics were distributed to ravers through much the same channels as fanzines; outside clubs, and in record shops and hairdressers. His exploits, across the course of several comics – *'E' by Gum*, *A Trip around Manchester*, *Paranoia and the Don't Care Bears*, and *Too Damn Hot* – not only dispensed information to ravers about legal issues and the risks of overheating, overdosing, and counterfeit pills, but also achieved 'cult' status.<sup>30</sup> Lifeline started to produce Peanut Pete t-shirts after discovering clubbers were making their own bootleg versions. Attuned to the baggy apparel preferred by the scene, the official version was available in three colours but only one size: Extra Large.<sup>31</sup>

### **'Entactogenic', 'transitions' and 'curiosity': appeals to the 'Sloane raver', 1992-1993**

Peanut Pete's success, distributing over a million copies in 1993, pointed to both an appetite for information about safer consumption of ecstasy in the wake of well-publicised deaths, and rave's transition from subcultural youth movement into a more mainstream phenomenon.<sup>32</sup> Despite this popularity, Lifeline suspected that his laddish feats were not cutting through to the significant numbers of female ravers. As Angela McRobbie has suggested, while '[g]irls appear, for example, to be less involved in the cultural production of rave, from the flyers, to the events, to the DJing', the emphasis on dancing, 'where girls were always found in subcultures ... gives girls a new-found confidence and a prominence'.<sup>33</sup> The specific medium of the Peanut Pete comics, and its emulation of the scene's fanzines, brought questions about inclusivity and feminine appeal. For example, the appositely titled *Boy's Own* was frequently accused of sexism, and as co-founder Terry Farley conceded, a line can be drawn from these fanzines to the so-called 'lads' mags' that launched in the mid-1990s: 'There was loads of magazines that came afterwards, *Loaded*, for example, totally ripped us off with an article about wanking techniques. *Loaded* was our enemy'.<sup>34</sup> While there was a distinction between these fanzines' boisterous humour – *Boy's Own* also included an article on female masturbation – and the blatant misogyny of *Loaded*, it nonetheless indicates why Lifeline sought to explore other means of communicating their message.<sup>35</sup>

Lifeline's response was to produce material intended to 'mimic the glossy fashion magazine style popular with young women and also the fliers that advertised raves and clubs'.<sup>36</sup> These postcards, with black-and-white photography of glamorously attired women offset by fuchsia pink typography, had a single word – 'entactogenic', 'transitions', 'curiosity' – on the picture side, the sort of allusive phrases that might easily be mistaken for the name of a new club-night.<sup>37</sup> On the back however, were the 'facts' about ecstasy, and an entreaty to remember the 'Golden "E" Rule: less is more'.<sup>38</sup> This implicitly feminine aesthetic failed to chime with the women surveyed by Sheila Henderson, a researcher for Lifeline. Her evaluation noted that they 'appealed more to the trendy, fashionable type, the "Sloane raver"', lacking mass appeal and that, contrary to expectations, Peanut Pete was just 'as popular with women as much as men'. Henderson concluded that 'targeting health messages in a gender sensitive manner is more complex than originally anticipated'.<sup>39</sup>

These abortive attempts illustrated two key aspects of gender in rave culture. Firstly, as the sociologist Maria Pini has suggested, despite widespread female participation, raves were framed, not least by the media, as overwhelmingly masculine environments.<sup>40</sup> Steve Redhead also noted that the 'public face of Acid House [was] white, male, middle-class'.<sup>41</sup> Once initial moral panics over raves had subsided, ecstasy's role in these settings was, at least to some extent, lauded as breaking down tensions between rival football firms, or more broadly, as the inspiration for (male) musical creativity.<sup>42</sup> It is unsurprising then that women weren't the first thought for Lifeline's harm reduction materials, or that these efforts were presented in such a stereotypical manner. Secondly, to follow Dick Hebdige's classic text on subcultures, the importance of style and clothes to ravers, and how this indicated resistance to the mainstream.<sup>43</sup> Clothing signalled a shift from a more glamorous, dressier era of nightclubbing that rave had more or less swept away:

In the late [19]80s, the (stereotypical) dress sense of the original raver, both male and female, was baggy over sized T-shirts, baggy shorts, track suit bottoms, baggy jeans, even baggy (shapeless) haircuts . . . Since the [19]80s could be seen as the Designer Decade, this type of attitude was a significant departure from, or a resistance to, the established trend of packaging.<sup>44</sup>

These sartorial choices lent ravers an androgynous and to a certain extent asexual appearance. Indeed, ethnographer Sarah Thornton contended that rave's appeal for women, its 'subcultural capital', was to a certain extent predicated on its distance from mainstream signifiers of femininity, the 'degraded pop culture of "Sharon and Tracy"'.<sup>45</sup> Peanut Pete was therefore closer kin than the waif-like models depicted on the postcards.

But if the glossy flyers were unsuccessful, they were not ill-considered. Lifeline researcher Henderson had thought deeply about the role of gender in rave, and spent 18 months interviewing women on the scene. She noted that

contrary to what previous accounts of drug use and youth culture would lead us to expect [women] are generally present in the same numbers as men . . . come from a range of class, race and ethnic backgrounds . . . Drug use is for them part of a popular culture involving music, clothes, magazines etc spilling over into large slices of the high-street retail and leisure industries.<sup>46</sup>

Clearly this indicated that rave and by extension ecstasy was tipping over from its subcultural origins into the mainstream, but more importantly, Henderson believed her research had distinct lessons for understandings of female intoxication, and feminism more broadly. She argued that rave's 'greater sexual equality reminds us that dependence and second-class status are not the inevitable lot of women, even in mainstream cultures'.<sup>47</sup>

For Henderson, the implications of this were a reckoning with second wave feminism; 'shifts in the ideological and economic basis of inequality mean '60s-style consciousness raising does not appeal to these young women'. Henderson took particular aim at Betty Friedan's popular 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, which 'typified and reinforced' an 'anti-consumerist analysis' that was 'out of sync with everyday life'.<sup>48</sup> Rather, the young women who she interviewed rejected what Henderson viewed as the victimhood of feminist analysis; they 'tend to be averse to feminist fundamentalism and embrace new forms of femininity . . . it is patronising and alienating to dismiss their energy and sense of independence as "false" or transient'.<sup>49</sup>

Henderson also alluded to the rapidly evolving sartorial trends of raves, which by late 1993 had evidently moved on from the 'baggy' stylings of the late 1980s, whilst still rejecting the glamour of earlier eras. Henderson wrote of the 'hair, make-up and skimpy clothes' alongside 'sexualised images of women on club flyers' which she believed would have drawn opprobrium from second wave feminists. According to Henderson, this clothing rather reflected an atmosphere in which women were free to choose what they wore, skimpy or baggy. This was facilitated, in her view, by ecstasy; 'the contribution of drugs to an environment in which "copping off" . . . was not a primary goal for the women or the men'.<sup>50</sup> This contrasted with Thornton's description of more mainstream clubs: "drunken cattle markets" where "tacky men drinking pints of best bitter pull girls in white high heels and Miss Selfridge's miniskirts".<sup>51</sup> Clubs and raves instead 'offered . . . a social space in which to explore a range of sensual and sexualized pleasures, yet one in which pursuing sex or being pursued for sex was downplayed'. While the focus was firmly on the music, dancing and the pleasures afforded by drugs, '[m]ost felt women should enjoy sex and be able to have casual sex on the same terms as men'.<sup>52</sup>

In short, Henderson argued for a post-feminist position that echoed a conflictual and transient period of gender relations in 1990s Britain, both in academia and popular culture.<sup>53</sup> Efforts to historicise these shifts are in their early stages, but as Kate Mahoney notes, they were typified by 'the negotiation of generational dynamics in contemporary feminism and debates about whether feminist activity should exist inside or outside popular culture'.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Henderson viewed herself as a 'an aspiring inter-generational envoy, an interpreter' drawing not just on her professional research, but also her personal experience, 'as a girl growing up in the fifties and sixties and as a parent since the seventies'.<sup>55</sup> As such, she espoused the position that ecstasy culture 'provided an important arena for working through new gender identities, new twists to the male/female dynamic'.<sup>56</sup> While expressing reservations about aspects of the 'irony and post-modern fun' of post-feminism, Henderson nonetheless welcomed that ideas of 'femininity [were] still on the change' and 'all up for grabs'.<sup>57</sup>

Henderson's research also anticipated the type of young woman whose self-confidence, sexual assertiveness and appetite for intoxicants, in its mainstream iteration, would be alternately celebrated and condemned by media commentators throughout the

mid-1990s; the 'ladette'. Carolyn Jackson and Penny Tinkler, like Kohn, suggest an useful historical comparison between the figure of the ladette and the 'modern women' of the 1920s.<sup>58</sup> While the ladette was more likely to sink pints and shop on the high street than the subcultural clubber, nonetheless they co-existed on a continuum of post-feminism. Accordingly, Lifeline faced the issue of addressing young women who appeared to reject second wave feminism, but also wanted hedonistic equality with men.

### ***Claire and Jose Get Off their Cake, 1994-1996***

Two female characters were subsequently developed by Linnell, in consultation with focus groups. Described by Lifeline researcher Kellie Sherlock as 'female version[s] of Peanut Pete', after 'considerable time . . . it was decided that the girls would be called Clare [sic] and Jose, who were about the same ages, (17/18), one of whom was black and one of whom was white'.<sup>59</sup> Claire and Jose also emerged from Henderson's research, and specifically her citation of two young women who appeared in *Mixmag* in the summer of 1993.<sup>60</sup> Victoria ('Vic') and Nicola ('Nic'), interviewed outside the rave Perception near Melton Mowbray had been asked 'what would you do with a million pounds?' Nic replied "'I'd spend it on sex, drugs, and more sex'" while her friend Vic answered that she would "'get off my cake"'.<sup>61</sup> Vic and Nic's forthright answers were interpolated and extemporised in Claire and Jose's adventures, across three comics.

The first comic, *Claire and Jose Get Off their Cake*, confronted how women might navigate the apparently masculine world of clubs, as well as the particular challenges that ecstasy seemingly presented to female reproductive cycles. Sitting in a van outside the club with their male friends, Claire is eager to demonstrate that her tolerance for recreational substances matches their peers. As a pre-club marijuana joint is passed round, she brags that 'I can smoke the bollocks off you any day matey', whilst when the pills are distributed with a suggestion that the women might want to moderate their consumption, Claire responds that she would 'neck what you do Stewy' [Figure 1].<sup>62</sup>

Inevitably, Claire runs into problems, as she realises she is 'losing control' and 'on a mad one'. Asking herself 'why didn't I take a half like Jose did?', Claire's dilemma represented a wider discussion about drug-intake, and whether half a pill, or even a quarter, was a more prudent – albeit feminised – strategy for a safer experience.<sup>63</sup> These difficulties are compounded by Claire's time of the month. Part of Claire's motivation to 'get right off my tits' is the desire to forget all about her 'tammy' (tampon). Lifeline's explanatory notes on the back of the pamphlet made the moral of the story explicit; women shouldn't try to match men, pill for pill. Noting that where once taking drugs and raving were thought of as 'boys only', Lifeline warned that 'a man and a woman can take the same amount of the same drug and feel totally different . . . because women's bodies are generally smaller than men's, making the effects of drugs feel much stronger'. As for Claire's unusual method for coping with her period, this was taken as a prompt to inform women that not only was such consumption inadvisable as a pain relief mechanism, but also that overindulgence could even make periods 'heavier or irregular . . . They may even stop'. Lifeline therefore leaned on biological differences between sexes, characterised women as both smaller physically and beholden to their menstrual cycles, to ask questions of their intoxication.



Figure 1. Claire and Jose Get Off their Cake (image courtesy of Michael Linnell).

Lifeline addressed further issues of embodied femininity in their second leaflet, *The E-Plan Diet*. Claire worries incessantly about her appearance in the club with Jose, comparing herself unfavourably to 'Destroy Girls' – other women in the club, 'all platforms and wonder bras'.<sup>64</sup> Jose tells her friend not to worry, and that in combination with 'some Whiz [amphetamines] we'll soon "E" the lard off our arses'.<sup>65</sup> This narrative was inspired by Lifeline research and wider cultures of self-optimisation, which Henderson explained to the *Guardian* newspaper:

The motivations for raving and keeping fit are similar. They are about pleasure-seeking, socialising, music and body image. The difference is that one's naughty and the other's nice. One makes you feel virtuous, the other you enjoy because it's a bit deviant. The combination of dancing all night and burning up calories is attractive to figure-conscious girls. Lots of women mess themselves up by going on crash diets. Many are now taking Ecstasy to slim.<sup>66</sup>

*The E-Plan Diet* also framed these practices in terms of a desire to be attractive, particularly to the opposite sex; Claire says she 'always dreamed of having legs like a Cindy doll. Legs so long you couldn't walk. I'd just lay there while people queued up to admire me.'



Lifeline also mobilised the presence of men in nightclubs to urge caution in their next comic, *Mr Wonderful* [Figure 2].<sup>67</sup> Claire was once again the unfortunate protagonist, falling victim to ‘ecstasy goggles’ when she spies an attractive man on the dancefloor, who Jose believes has a resemblance to the football pundit Jimmy Hill. Having made out with this ‘Mr Wonderful’, Claire loses him ‘in the crowd’ until he reappears at the night’s end, offering the two friends a ride to an after-party. As the effects of the drugs wear off, both women are the subjects of unwelcome sexual advances, but manage to make their escape. Lifeline warned its readers that ‘[h]e may look like Mr Wonderful, but remember, whilst under the influence of drugs, people may seem more interesting and appealing’, and that ecstasy ‘may also lead to loss of inhibitions’.

Across these three publications, Lifeline had presented an environment that they characterised elsewhere as ‘Club Dangerous’.<sup>68</sup> Women were, variously, at risk of intoxication to the point of overdose, easy sexual quarry for predatory men, and reminded that ecstasy could provide only temporary respite for both the social and biological travails of being a young woman.



Figure 2. Claire and Jose in *Mr Wonderful* (image courtesy of Michael Linnell).

## 'I was in a near orgasmic state': female pleasure and clubbing, 1995 – 2000

In presenting this image, Lifeline ran counter to both some of the research conducted under by Henderson their auspices, and an emerging wider conversation about ecstasy, pleasure, and (heterosexual) female desire. Sociologists such as Pini, Fiona Hutton and Sharron Hinchliff have suggested that for many women, the appeal of raves and clubs, particularly as the 1990s wore on, was in fact the freedom that these settings afforded.<sup>69</sup> The apparent effects of ecstasy – euphoria, empathy, and an intense affinity with the music pounding from the speakers – facilitated an environment of communality quite different from earlier eras of clubbing. Combined with the physiological effects documented amongst men in terms of sexual function, clubs seemingly afforded a safer space for women.<sup>70</sup> The cautionary tale of 'Mr Wonderful' instead seemed to hark back to tabloid scare stories from the period in which rave first burst into public consciousness. As Steve Redhead noted, headlines such as 'Acid Fiends Spike Page 3 Girls Drink' made explicit the danger of sexual violation that had previously only been hinted at in other lurid stories about 'outrageous romps and use of the "sex drug" Ecstasy at Acid House parties'.<sup>71</sup> In this way, women were 'the targets of a double threat', firstly from the drug itself, and secondly 'the danger of sexual abuse'.<sup>72</sup> The fact that Lifeline give credence to these urban myths, despite the research of Henderson which had concluded that 'the scene has provided a social space for young women to pursue these pleasures without uninvited sexual attention', illustrates the persistence of both anti-drug sentiment and its relation to the figure of the vulnerable female victim.<sup>73</sup>

Although desexualised, there was no lack of sensuality in these environments however. One of Pini's respondents attempted, unsuccessfully, to articulate these intense feelings:

You don't know exactly what it is that's happening to you sometimes. You think, oh my God, is that a sex sensation, or a peace sensation? Is it a love sensation or a panic sensation? Is it mellow, or 'rushy'? I don't know. There's a tingling going on somewhere. It's like shit, what is this? But I don't know what it is.<sup>74</sup>

This inarticulacy points to the similar sensations perhaps felt by Claire in *Off their Cake*; the point is that some women felt that this loss of control from ecstasy to be no bad thing. Likewise, some of Henderson's participants described their experiences in terms of intense sexual pleasure:

The thing I remember is the second time I took "E" at a club . . . I was in a near orgasmic state . . . I can't remember if I came or not but for a long time I was like really just about to and it was just brilliant really.<sup>75</sup>

Again, *Mr Wonderful* had portrayed such loss of inhibition in pejorative terms, making the assumption that women would regret casual encounters the following morning. Pini's research suggested otherwise, for example:

If you've got a horny man that's smiling at you, it's like 'yeah'. When you're off your head, he likes it you know. I think a man loves a woman that's off her face – 'cause that's when you'll get a smile.<sup>76</sup>

Claire and Jose's encounters also happened within the framework of a heteronormative club environment, surprisingly for an organisation based in Manchester, famed for its 'gay village' centred around Canal Street. Research conducted by Lifeline with female

users of amphetamines and heroin had revealed views that stereotyped feminists as 'butch, veggy . . . mindbenders who corrupt "nice" women and hate men – lesbians!' but Henderson was keen to stress that such opinions could hardly be representative of all young women or indeed consumers of ecstasy. Nonetheless Henderson felt that such associations between feminism and lesbianism were symptomatic of the complex fissure between genders and sexualities during the nineties. She argued elsewhere that while ecstasy had at one time proved a uniting force between disparate groups, by the middle of the decade, mainstream clubs had reverted to being a male-dominated domain:

[l]eaving the girls . . . where exactly? . . . Back to dancing with other girls and gay boys, like they had before [ecstasy] ever happened. Back to the gay clubs which had played such a formative role in dance culture.<sup>77</sup>

Lifeline's materials elided these queer roots of club culture, and this omission, alongside the overt homophobia uncovered by Henderson, arguably points to the lack of intersectionality in wider post-feminist sentiment.<sup>78</sup>

But despite the evidence that suggests that Lifeline's efforts misread or misrepresented women's experiences, the topics contained in the leaflets were suggested by focus groups of young women ravers, and the characters developed in collaboration with them. When Kellie Sherlock evaluated the three leaflets, they received almost universal approval. Participants commented that 'the characters are very realistic, just what me and my mates are like' and that the leaflets were 'informative, funny and have some good storylines'.<sup>79</sup> Reporting in 1997 that female callers to Lifeline's helpline outnumbered men by three to one, director Alan Haughton told *Mixmag* that this 'success is partly due to the fact that we target young female drug users and are trained to discuss issues relating specifically to them'.<sup>80</sup>

Sherlock's assenting voices could of course be read as participant bias; respondents telling researchers what they want to hear. But it also gives cause to reflect on the gender aspects of intoxication. While, as Nancy Campbell and David Herzberg have recently argued, gender should be an essential analytic category for historians of intoxication, that should not mean falling into the trap of treating women's experiences as uniform or unvariegated.<sup>81</sup> It is also worth noting that as ecstasy use increased and rave splintered into numerous micro-scenes at the same time as its more commercial exponents crossed over into mainstream Britain, it became increasingly difficult to discuss what constituted a typical experience.<sup>82</sup> Women used ecstasy in different settings, and for different pleasure-seeking reasons. For some, ecstasy was a thrilling release from everyday life, provoking intense, even erotic feelings of pleasure. Many women may have desired an experience that wasn't so all-consuming, perhaps using half a pill for a more conventional night out with friends. For others, raves and clubs may well have been dangerous places and ecstasy a dangerous drug, and of course this article began by discussing the tragic deaths of young women such as Mayes, Leighton and Betts that punctuated media coverage of ecstasy from the late 1980s into the mid 1990s.

## Conclusion

Indeed, this article concludes by returning to and reflecting upon Kohn's *Dope Girls* and his suggestion that hysteria around female drug use and its understanding as a 'crisis of young womanhood' was 'a remarkable cultural spasm, [a] discourse that has remained

immune to the passage of three-quarters of a century'.<sup>83</sup> Ecstasy and rave revealed both continuity and change in terms of popular conceptions of young women and their nightlife activities. While the popular press continued to view young women's intoxication as reckless, dangerous or unbecoming, there was also a shift in women's subjectivities, expressed in post-feminist sentiment and the rejection 'of notions of "lady-like" behaviour'.<sup>84</sup> Lifeline's materials reflected these tensions. Whilst attempting to be sympathetic to their new modes of expression and choice of new intoxicants, like their interwar antecedents, women were represented as highly vulnerable to the dangers of a wider subculture. Their sexual desires, agency and pleasures were obscured by rhetorics of harm, risk and ultimately, death. Photographer Vinca Peterson, who in books such as *Future Fantasy* and *No System* has documented her and her friends' transformative experiences of raves and its attendant intoxicants all over Britain and Europe throughout the 1990s, recently expressed the view that '[f]un is hugely underrated and its importance is underestimated by Western society'.<sup>85</sup> Drug historians have been suspicious of pleasure seeking in drug use, suggesting such motivations are indicative of the wider ills of 'limbic capitalism'.<sup>86</sup> This article resists that interpretation; pleasure and fun are essential elements of intoxication that have too often been underplayed, particularly for women.

## Notes

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3. Dave Haslam, *Life After Dark: A History of British Nightclubs and Music Venues*. London: Simon and Schuster, 2015, p. 312. Original emphasis.
4. Lorna Martin, "'Ten years have passed – yet I'm still haunted by Leah's death'" *The Observer* 30 October 2005 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2005/oct/30/drugsandalcohol.drugs> Last accessed 24 January 2021.
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8. Marek Kohn, *Dope Girls: The Birth of the British Drug Underground*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1992. See also examples in Virginia Berridge, *Demons: Our Changing Attitudes to Alcohol, Tobacco, & Drugs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
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14. A non-exhaustive list of key collections that discuss 'post-feminism' include Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (eds.) *Interrogating Post-Feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2007; Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon (eds.) *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009; Sarah Gamble (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. London: Routledge, 2006.
15. Sarah Champion (ed.), *Disco Biscuits: New Fiction from the Chemical Generation*. London: Sceptre, 1997, p. xiii.
16. Steve Redhead (ed.) *Rave Off: Politics and Deviance in Contemporary Youth Culture*. Aldershot: Avebury, 1993, p. 11.
17. Nancy D. Campbell and Elizabeth Ettorre, *Gendering Addiction: The Politics of Drug Treatment in a Neurochemical World*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 142.
18. Lifeline 'The New Drug Takers 2: Application Form' (1992) Wellcome Library SA/DRS/B/1/244.
19. Alex Mold and Virginia Berridge, *Voluntary Action and Illegal Drugs: Health and Society in Britain Since the 1960s*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 63. For a memoir of Lifeline's history up until the arrival of ecstasy, see Rowdy Yates, *If it Weren't for the Alligators: History of Drugs, Music and Popular Culture in Manchester*. Manchester: Lifeline, 1992.
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33. McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, pp. 163–164.
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## Notes on contributor

*Peder Clark* is a historian of modern Britain at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. He recently started a project entitled "The Effects Can Last Forever': Ecstasy's Risks and Pleasures in Britain, 1985-2000".

## ORCID

Peder Clark  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0851-4973>