

THE USE OF PSYCHOACTIVE PRODUCTS IN ROCK CULTURE PARTY ENVIRONMENTS

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The link between parties, music and the use of psychoactive products is not new. But although techno parties have attracted the attention of drug specialists to this party use, the use that takes place in other cultural environments is less well known. The OFDT (*Observatoire français des drogues et des toxicomanies* [French observatory for drugs and drug addiction]) therefore commissioned a survey on the use of psychoactive products in the rock music environment in order to supplement the observations on the techno party environments included in the TREND (*Tendances récentes et nouvelles drogues* [Recent trends and new drugs]) device.

The research took place from March to December 2001. Forty-four musical events of different durations were observed (representing around 273 hours of observation): 32 concerts (of around 3 hours), 3 evening parties (of around 9 hours), 9 mini-festivals (of around 6 hours, with a minimum of three bands) and 3 festivals for their entire duration (over three days). We took into account the different types of halls, according to their size and the organisation of the concert (official or alternative), including, among other things, the surveillance during the event (presence or otherwise of security officers, searching upon entry, etc.). We also wanted to observe the different music scenes, in order to have as global as possible a view of the drug use. Nevertheless, this survey remains exploratory since the sample of events cannot claim to be exhaustive.

Main substances uses: tobacco, alcohol and cannabis

This will come as no surprise since these are the three products used most in France. They are mixed together fairly often, whether or not they are actually used together. They are present at the vast majority of music events.

The use of tobacco varies principally according to age. The proportion of users often exceeds half the audience. The higher the age, the lower the use. But significant differences can also be observed among young people (aged 15 to 24). Although the proportion of users is high in this group, younger people smoke fewer cigarettes than their elders, even though they frequently use cannabis. This is probably linked to financial considerations. In some of these groups we were able to observe cigarettes being shared between two or three people. The age variable is emphasised by that of social class. Among the younger people, being a member of the privileged classes goes hand in hand with greater use. Among the older people, the use of tobacco is less in the middle and upper classes. **Alcohol is sometimes consumed to excess.** Alcohol is always present, if only because all the concert halls have a bar. The alcohol consumed most often at concerts is beer, probably also because it is the cheapest. In parties organised by people from the music scene, the cost of alcoholic drinks is more affordable (2.30 to 3 euros).

Sometimes the spectators drink before going to a musical event. This "preparation" may take paroxysmic forms when the young people arrive an hour or two before the event, park

themselves in front of the hall and consume excessive amounts of beer or whisky. This consumption ritual is particularly present in the metal environment, but has also been visible in gothic and hard-core (mixture of metal and rap) settings.

Sometimes, significant consumption of alcohol also takes place inside the halls. But usually the spectators drink one to three glasses without any appearance of blatantly drunken behaviour. Sometimes continuous queues of people are observed going to and from the bar, their arms full of beer for their friends and for their own needs. It is in the festivals that the greatest consumption appeared, with particularly extensive instances of drunkenness.

The use of cannabis is common in nearly all the events, usually in the form of resin. Depending on the music scene and the type of event, the proportions of users vary enormously. We did not observe any sales in and around the concert halls, even though these are significant at festivals.

The people who use joints are often to be found in greater numbers at the sides of the halls: they often lean against the walls to roll and also to escape the attention of the security officers, even though the latter in general pay little attention to the smokers.

The times for preparation and use vary according to the halls and the concerts. In those of short duration, the number of uses is often fairly high during the first part of the show and in the interval. This diminishes but does not disappear while the main band performs. But if the use of cannabis is inherent to listening to music, it then becomes an almost obligatory cultural use. In halls which are not subject to checks, the users can roll and use without arousing suspicion. The uses then take place before the shows begin, or during the breaks, between two performances. Small groups of spectators, seating down, pass joints round among themselves. Conversely, during concerts by well-known bands, at which a more mixed population is present, the uses subside as the show progresses. This can be explained by the lasting nature of the effects of cannabis.

The uses of other products are infrequent. We were able to observe popper users only twice, in a gothic environment, one occasion involving a single user, the other a very large number of users. In this environment, this product is frequently used partly as an aphrodisiac: it is linked to the very "sexual" connotation of the gothic environment.

On a single occasion, during a gothic mini-festival, three people inhaled ether. During another gothic party, the one where we observed multiple uses of poppers, we could see three people using cocaine by nasal inhalation and another injecting himself with heroin. A witness account of an earlier party in a gothic environment also reported the presence of cocaine. But we know for certain that these uses remain very much in the minority.

The same applies for the single use of crack observed, during a party in a squat. The users were of foreign nationality and did not belong to the squatter group. One cannot therefore deduce from their presence any repeated movement of crack in this venue (no other case was observed) or any link between alternative rock environments and use of this substance.

On the other hand, in the context of festivals, we observed cocaine, ecstasy and LSD dealers in some sites and we met some ecstasy users.

Drug use in the rock environment therefore concerns only a fairly limited sample of products: cannabis, alcohol, poppers, ecstasy, cocaine, heroin and crack. The uses observed correspond fairly closely to the proportions reported in a survey by the MDPT (*Mission départementale de prévention des toxicomanies* [Departmental mission for the prevention of drug addiction]) of the General Council of Seine-Saint-Denis. They are also fairly similar to those of the ESCAPAD survey 2001. In general, the uses appear fairly moderate and seem to pose few problems, but excessive behaviours can appear.

Many variables of use

Many variables combine to limit or increase the uses. They stem from the specificities of the

music scenes and the degree of integration in the cultural environment, the duration of the event and when it occurs in the week, and finally the age of the audience.

Although there seem to be more users and a higher level of use in certain rock sub-cultures, this criterion alone cannot explain the differences that appear from one event to another.

Three scenes, however, the best documented ones, show specific usage tendencies:

Hard-core (fusion of ragamuffin and rap): cannabis and tobacco are the main products used; then comes alcohol, beer in particular.

Metal (hard rock): beer is the product consumed most of all ahead of cannabis and tobacco. Polyuse is frequent.

Gothic: beer and strong alcohols are consumed here most frequently. Tobacco and cannabis come next, then poppers which are a recent arrival in this environment. Finally, some very rare uses of other products (cocaine and heroin) can be seen. Polyuse is frequent.

Few products correspond to a specific culture of the music scenes. Cannabis is found, in grass form, in ragamuffin and reggae environments, and poppers in gothic environments. But it is impossible to make a strict association between a scene and a type of use: after all, alcohol, cannabis and tobacco are the three products used most in France and the “goths” do not have exclusivity over the use of poppers.

In fact, a strict definition of uses cannot be made using the characteristics of a music scene. Being affiliated to a scene does not necessarily lead to the exclusion of all other activity or any other identification characteristic. Some environments do embody values, but these seem to be diffuse and something that can be manipulated by the participants at will.

A differentiated integration into the rock environment

We were clearly able to distinguish very different degrees of integration in certain music scenes, gothic and metal in particular: four categories of populations were identified.

The specialists: they attend all the concerts and know a lot of people. They include a significant proportion of musicians, who have themselves played or still often play this style of music. They mark the fact that they belong to the scene by their appearance (clothes, haircuts, body markings, etc.). They demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of the various bands in their favourite scene. Often in a group, they spend as much time discussing the bands that appear as they do watching them. They seldom go to musical events of a style other than their favourite.

The faithful: they have centres of interest other than rock music. They have totally mastered the codes of the genre, and also wear the clothing distinctions of the style. They are more open to other types of music and are less selective than the specialists. The faithful can be found affiliated to two similar rock scenes, metal and gothic, for example, or metal and hard-core.

The amateurs: they love rock music and in particular the scene that captures their interest. But their other centres of interest compete with it. They are often older than the faithful and the specialists. Among them can be found former specialists or faithful, whose pace of life has changed, or simple well-informed listeners. They display moderate branding in their dress. They arrive at the concert halls earlier and are seldom found in underground events.

The peripherals: they may go and see very different sorts of concerts and are not affiliated to any one style. Their dress branding and body marking is very weak.

These four categories are built up in concentric circles by their members. The specialists, in the centre, are the least numerous. The further out one moves (towards the “peripherals”) the more numerous the members are. Sometimes, only the specialists and faithful are present at certain concerts, whereas one never finds only the “peripherals” at a musical event.

These categories could be defined according to the relationship between the intensity of the feelings experienced for a music scene and the constraints of life which allow varying degrees

of investment in this music. These levels of support for rock music sub-cultures mean that musical events create breaks of varying quality. In fact, when a “specialist” goes to see a concert, it is merely one more in the series of events he attends. For an “amateur”, on the other hand, it may take on an exceptional value.

Variable duration of the musical events.

The alternation between leisure time and work time is a constituent part of the intensity of the breaks that rock events create. The structure of the concert times can be seen in relation to the distribution channels. The commercial channels try to limit the duration of concerts in the evenings, in order to be able to close around midnight, whereas those scenes that produce their own events – this is the case for the gothic scene – tend to start the concerts later in the evening and make them last longer. The timing of the concert, according to whether it takes place during the week or at the weekend, also influences the audience behaviour. Going to see a rock band play at the weekend or going to a festival during the holidays intensifies the break, in a certain way, by adding free time to the event. In those that take place during the week, the excesses are less numerous.

Most of the mini-festivals are held at the weekend. Some music scenes, such as metal and gothic, usually organise long events, mini-festivals and parties. Parties are more frequent in the gothic scene, and mini-festivals more frequent in the metal scene. The mini-festivals and the parties during the week are devoted to the scenes which the organisers know to be capable of mobilising themselves for a musical event, even during the week.

It is clearly apparent that the duration of the events is in relation to the proportion of users of psychoactive product and the intensity of their use. The diversity of the products increases with the duration of the event, even if tobacco, alcohol and cannabis still remain the substances used most.

The following reasoning can be, somewhat simplistically, put forward. The more “general public” the musical style and the more well-known the band, the more the concert takes place in a large hall. The larger the hall, the more mixed the audience is and, proportionally, the less use there is of psychoactive products. This phenomenon is linked partly to the users of illicit psychoactive products being diluted in a larger body of spectators, and partly to the relative social control which is exerted over excessive uses. But also, this type of musical event, built around well-known bands, causes a significant break with daily life, rendering drug use less necessary.

The more the musical style is reserved for the initiated and the more unrecognised the band, the more the concert takes place in small hall. The smaller the hall, the more homogeneous the audience and the more excess is present. As is often the case, people use drugs more when they are assured of the approval of their close circle. This is clearly a question of a watered-down form of social control, even if it is clear that its action is relatively marginal. Firstly because tolerance in relation to excessive behaviours is often greater at concerts, and secondly because the products used are not very stigmatised by the audience or by the organisers.

Drug use and breaks with daily life

The reasoning can be taken even further. For the audience at rock concerts, the use of psychoactive products is established according to the break caused with daily life, a break which is itself a function of the quality of the event and the level of integration in the scene. There are a greater number of users when the announcement of the event has been restricted or is underground. All the products other than cannabis, tobacco and alcohol are used on the occasion of events where the majority of people are specialists or faithful.

The logics of excess are more frequent in mini-festivals than in concerts. The former tend to bring together alternative underground music scenes, frequented by a young population. Here

too, the degree of integration predominates in determining the variables of use, both in the number of users and in the intensity of their use. Affiliation to a music scene or a style of music that is variously “pure” and hard is also a form of self-assertion. The multiplicity of scenes offers identity solutions to individuals whose social status is still uncertain, young people for the most part. They are often the most pronounced in their appearance and their body (tattoos, piercing). Nevertheless, older people are to be found in the more elitist (the more coded) scenes, people who require an affectation for the identification to take place. This is the case for example with the gothic and metal scenes. They are frequented by a minority of older people, aged 25 to 50, sometimes (seldom) older. They do, however, represent only a small minority.

Rock concerts and the use of psychoactive products are two possible ways for people to get rid of their internalised self-control which prevents them from expressing emotions and feelings. One provides medium for emotion by reproducing characteristics of controlled urge activities, the other heightens people’s awareness and removes their inhibitions, making the expression of emotions possible. Both can, of course, happen simultaneously.

In this sense, the intensity of usage behaviours can be compared with the intensity of the break opportunities. The different events do not in fact offer the same “quality” of split with daily life. There is a notable difference between the concert attended in a small hall that one goes to periodically, hosting artists who are not yet recognised, and the concert given by a rock star, sometimes anticipated for several years, which takes place in a large hall. The same applies for festivals, whose duration (often three days) and venue (sometimes close by, sometimes far away) emphasise the break with daily life. It is therefore in the combination of the break, offered by the musical event itself, and the methods of using the psychoactive products that the meaning of this use must be understood.

The need for the break seems even stronger for young people who are still learning self-control. Through belonging to a music scene, they can seek both an intermediate identity and a medium for releasing their emotions, the one enabling the other, and both relying on varying amounts of product use, according to the level of break sought, the medium on offer and the internalisation of their self-control.

Methodological notice

We adopted an ethnographic type of methodology: immersion in the rock music party scene and participant observations, monitoring concerts and evaluating usage behaviours, the researchers keeping a day-to-day log book and comparing their data.

Above all, this research is exploratory and, in many ways, experimental. In fact, it may be considered as an attempt to quantify drug use by empirical means suitable, in general, for attempts at qualitative description. The methods used were created for the research. They were tried out, adjusted and validated as the research proceeded.

We distinguished two categories of products, according to whether they were easy or difficult to observe. This is a purely operational distinction. It aims simply to reveal two levels of reliability in the data gathered. For the products that were easy to observe (tobacco, cannabis and alcohol), we perfected a counting method using “squares”. We selected a square of around 40 individuals, determined by a diagonal of around 18 people, which we observed for around 20 minutes, counting the visible instances of consumption (alcohol, cannabis, tobacco). The assessment of the number of users per event was projected onto the overall number of spectators which we estimated at the beginning of the concert. We thus obtained a percentage and then a proportion bracket (less than 1 %, from 1 to 10 %, etc.). We chose unequal brackets, preferring the meaning to the equilibrium of the brackets. We tried to

classify the populations by age range and social class where possible.

For the uses of synthetic products, we first sought out the vendors, observed the behaviours which made us think that uses had taken place and had discussions with the individuals concerned.

We also sought to assess the excessive behaviours by constructing a “signs of drunkenness” indicator. This is obtained by adding up the people who were ill, those who were visibly drunk (problems with balance, vomiting etc.) or those who were asleep, relating the figure obtained to the number of people present in the room. This indicator has no relevance for assessing excesses at a concert. Illnesses may occur that are unconnected with consumption; it is probable that there were some illnesses, as well as some drunken attitudes, that escaped our attention. On the other hand, it is a means of comparing the concerts with each other and identifying contexts that promote excessive behaviours. It can, in fact, be accepted that the margins of error are almost the same from one concert to another, with the exception of the instances where the observation scales are radically different.