

Identity, Discourse, and Self-Regulation: A Study of “Club Drug” Use Among Maltese Youths

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Abstract

The youthful recreational use of Ecstasy, cocaine, and other illicit substances that occur as ‘club drugs’ is widespread in Western societies. Although this type of drug consumption is a global phenomenon that is often addressed and analysed through positivist epidemiological models, it is localised and attributed with complex, culturally-specific meanings and functions by club drug users themselves.

In this thesis I analyse these meanings and functions among a group of upper-middle class club drug users in Malta. I argue that eminently social processes such as secrecy, discretion, and gossip fundamentally regulate, inform and index this type of drug use among these youths. In turn, these engender patterns of sociality, complicity, and specific collective behavioural strategies.

Further, I posit that drug consumption does not merely reflect an individual drive for ‘pleasure’ and ‘empathy’, or even pathological conditions of ‘addiction’ among these youths. Rather, carefully moderated and modulated club drug consumption allows them to construct their identity as more ‘virtuous’ consumers vis-à-vis others who consume these drugs immoderately and indiscriminately.

Referring to the Maltese structural dichotomy of *tajjeb* (good/well/benevolent) versus *ħażin* (bad/rotten/evil), I show how these youths categorise drug users according to whether they are willing and able to engage in ‘composed’ drug consumption or otherwise. Furthermore, for them local social class tensions and distinctions are also indexed through drug consumption, as those who engage in bacchanalian club drug-taking are disparaged and categorised as belonging to a lower social class (*ħamalli*).

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Part I: Introduction

Chapter 1: Beginnings

1.1 Vignettes: Kitchens, Clinics, and Pool Areas

It was a few weeks before Christmas, when Gennaro invited me over to the apartment that he shared with his partner Maggie for lunch. I gladly accepted the invitation, both because I needed to ask Gennaro, a key informant, some questions about my ongoing fieldwork and because I knew that he had a well-deserved reputation of cooking up savoury and rather sophisticated meals.

I arrived at the apartment at about 11.30 a.m., and as Gennaro ushered me in I immediately noticed that he had a thick layer of surgical gauze wrapped around the index finger of his left hand. I asked him about it, and he explained that as he was preparing ingredients for our meal the evening before, he had cut the finger as he was grating vegetables. He had gashed it quite badly, and Maggie had immediately driven him to the nearest State-run Health Centre to have it looked at, cleaned, and dressed. The staff at the Health Centre had told him that he would need to have the gauze dressing changed at some point the next day, but that he would need to go to another Health Centre in the harbour town of Hal Peprin¹ and have it changed there².

As Gennaro told me that Maggie was out for most of the day and he could not drive himself to the centre comfortably because of his injury, I offered to drive him myself before lunch. He accepted with reluctance - not out of politeness, but rather because he was postponing going to Hal Peprin for as long as he could, because as he explained he did not much like the town. Notwithstanding this lack of enthusiasm, we set out for the centre in my old Fiat Cinquecento.

¹ Throughout this thesis, the names of all people and places have been replaced with pseudonyms, unless otherwise indicated (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2.2).

² Whilst Gennaro now lived in an apartment with Maggie in a rather prestigious neighbourhood of a central town in Malta, the home address on his Maltese Identity Card was of the house where he had grown up, in the Northern Harbour area. The free Maltese Health Centre system follows the bureaucratic rule (that is flexible depending on urgency of the case) that one should always seek needed care at the Health Centre that is nearest to his or her place of residence, as this is listed on their ID card. The town where Gennaro grew up are themselves prestigious, in contrast to the relatively poor and bleak area in Hal Peprin that I describe here.

Gennaro had developed a habit of joking about the car, because of its ramshackle appearance and a speedometer gauge that, in his words, ‘always marks the same number’. I could only join in and laugh at his amusingly blunt wit. He was right, after all: my old car’s dated electronics offer none of the sophistication of his own car – which is small, but state of the art.

As I drove into Hal Peprin and reached the small square where the Health Centre is situated, we realised that all the parking spots were taken. I was not very familiar with the town, but as we searched for a parking spot, I could understand why this was not Gennaro’s favourite place. Characterised by crammed and poorly planned flats, white aluminium doors and a perceptible tinge of air pollution in the air, the area immediately came across as rather stark. Old men sat, staring vacantly, on some broken benches facing the centre. Every building in sight, including the Health Centre itself, looked grey, uninviting, and almost derelict, even against the Maltese Winter sun. The setting made me recall scenes from Alan Parker’s *Midnight Express*, and I could sense Gennaro becoming increasingly restless as we realised that there was no parking spot anywhere to be found.

As we drove further away from the centre without finding a vacant parking spot, we decided that I should drive back to the centre, station my car in a no parking spot closer to it and wait in the car whilst Gennaro went up for what would hopefully be a rapid operation of having his wound cleaned out and gauze changed. My wait was indeed brief, as I saw him rush back towards my car after less than ten minutes.

To my surprise, however, the gauze had evidently not been changed, as he told me: ‘Let’s get the fuck out of here, Jay³’. As I chuckled, drove away, and asked him about what had happened, he explained, in an irate tone of voice:

³ Jay, standing for the first letter in ‘John’, was the nickname my informants used when referring to me.

“I was just waiting in line, when two junkies walked in in a bad state (*kienu hażin*) ... they asked the receptionist for two ‘purple packets’ (*giex pakketti tal-vjola*⁴) ... there was an old woman in line next to me who was just making the sign of the cross ... man I hate this place and I don’t know how anyone can live here, what a horrible place and horrible people (*xi dwejjaq ta post u dwejjaq ta nies*), everyone is just in a very bad state” (*kulhadd hażin għageb*)”.

** ** **

I walked through the big gate leading into the swimming pool area of the house at about 4 a.m., on a still, hot July night. It was my first visit to the house, and I had spent half an hour driving around the area trying to locate it. I finally made it thanks to Eric, who was one of those already there, and who had sent and shared the exact location and address through our phones’ maps. As I walked in, I was immediately struck by the size of the place. Situated in the North-Western part of the island, it belonged to Peta’s family, and had been chosen as the venue for that night’s after-party.

The ‘domestic’ after-party followed the ‘public’ party that had spanned from the late afternoon of the previous day until around 3 a.m. It was much more of an internal and intimate affair than the actual party, and there was no official announcement and no publicity about it happening. Rather, the news was spread through word of mouth amongst a core group of my informants at the party itself. It was not the first time Peta had hosted an after-party at his house, and the words “after at Peta’s”, passed on from person to person as the actual party was ending were enough to direct the group of my informants to the place where the conviviality would continue.

As I walked into the area, I was greeted by Eric, smiling and happy to see that I had found my way there, and Russ, who upon my remarking about the place being big enough to hold a full-scale party, had told me “I love this place man, it’s ideal for an after-party”. Eric, Russ, Gennaro and a group of around fifteen others were sitting in smaller groups around the pool. I knew that

⁴ Referring to the purple colour of a type of pack of syringes which the Maltese health system offers freely through a needle distribution programme for intravenous drug users.

after-parties like this one provided the ideal settings to consume the Ecstasy tablets they bought from a dealer at the party, who was not himself invited to the after-party.

Music was coming through a makeshift set up of a pair of small home system speakers propped up on a picnic table, connected to a laptop. The tracks playing were being streamed through YouTube, and the selection of what would play next was left up to whoever wanted to put any song or mixtape on. The volume was kept at a low level, and the music served more to create some ambience and sustain the 'vibe' of the preceding party than anything else. Free flowing conversation between those present was instead more central at this stage of the night. There were about half a dozen deckchairs arranged around the pool, together with a couple of tables and chairs. Those present were sitting down, smoking and speaking to each other.

Notwithstanding the presence and consumption of drugs, the atmosphere was far from bacchanalian, but instead rather relaxed - all those I spoke to were capable and aware of perfectly 'normal' action and speech. Amongst other things, I was asked about how my research was proceeding: a question that in situations like this I would answer with a simple 'it's going well'. I had learned that the more nuanced conversations and questions that I had for my informants were best reserved for more 'sober' settings of one-on-one meetings, meals, and other gatherings where drugs were not consumed. I did, however, ask those I spoke with about how they were feeling, and they replied with 'I am good' (*tajjeb*). I spent the rest of my time there conversing with Russ and Mia about Albert Camus's Sisyphus.

1.2 Research Focus

Gennaro, Russ, Eric, Mia, and those present at the after-party at Peta's make up a network of twenty (20) youths aged between twenty-two (22) and thirty (30) who are recreational⁵ poly-drug users of 3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA, more commonly known as Ecstasy), cocaine, and other substances that occur as 'club drugs' (Parsons et al. 2013) in contemporary Malta. Through this thesis, I follow practice, custom, and discourse of this group of youths and concentrate on how, when, and why they consume club drugs. I concentrate on how they, as perfectly 'integrated' members of Maltese society, regulate their drug-taking through individual strategies of moderation and modulation of experience, knowledge that is shared between them, and a disciplined ethos of drug-taking that they collectively establish and sustain. Whilst I examine how sociality is engendered within the group through club drug consumption, I also analyse how the specific modalities of this consumption underpin identity politics and distinction between this group and other groups of drug-takers within the small-scale context of Malta.

Through the application of anthropological methodologies, I seek to understand and present what these drugs do *for*, rather than *to*, these users – a question that is often overlooked in drafting drug related policies that are otherwise founded on medical and legal inquiry. I suggest that ethnographic analysis has a great deal to contribute to knowledge in the field of the type of drug consumption. One main reason is that although drug consumption is a 'global' phenomenon that occurs across industrialised societies, youthful club drug-taking is given 'localised' and culturally-specific meanings by drug users themselves. It follows, therefore, that if one is to unpack and better understand why these youths take drugs, then one must look further than the domains of individual 'pathology', 'escapism' and even 'pleasure', and

⁵ I use the term 'recreational' in a specific context of the occasional (weekly, monthly, or less frequent) use of club drugs by my own informants, and therefore a stable frequency of use that is empirically recordable. This does not imply that recreational drug use is exempt from 'risks' (see Page and Singer 2010: 9 – 10) that my informants must contend with. Rather, the ways in which my informants mitigate these risks and inherent problems of their drug-taking is a central theme of this thesis.

examine the nuances of the local socio-cultural contexts within which drug-taking is embedded. Furthermore, one must consider that even within the same contexts, groups of drug users engage in and respond to different modalities of drug consumption and related behaviours.

The vignettes that I present above should serve to preliminarily illustrate my point. In the first vignette, Gennaro reacts to the presence of those whom he identifies as junkies at the Health Centre. He goes on to represent and situate them as part of determined social conditions of Hal Peprin and defines both these conditions and the junkies themselves as *ħazin*. Whilst I translate *ħazin* as ‘bad’, as it is used by Gennaro the term has a culturally-specific morally and politically ‘loaded’ meaning that is structurally opposite to the equally complex meaning of the term *tajjeb* (‘good’). The terms ‘*tajjeb*’ and ‘*ħazin*’ are clearly evaluative, moral, and even aesthetic. They are also, however, essentially used and referred to by my informants as states of being and acting. The notion of ‘*ħazin*’ as ‘bad’ stands for ‘dire’, ‘wretched’, ‘pitiable’, incapable of redemption and ‘poisoned’ from the depths of being. The notion of ‘*tajjeb*’ as ‘good’ by contrast represents ‘control’, the ability to ‘see’ and ‘act’, and ‘integrated’ in being and action.

Within this rubric, for my informants there are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ modalities of drug consumption. The context of the after-party in my second vignette constitutes what to them is ‘good’ drug-taking behaviour: moderated, controlled, and involving ‘consumption’ that will not ‘consume’ them like it consumes the junkies of Hal Peprin. The distinction between *tajjeb* and *ħazin*, however, does not only underpin ‘recreational’ versus ‘addictive’ types of drugs and drug use. For my informants there are, as we shall see, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ modalities of recreational drug consumption itself, which in turn reflect conditions of *being*. At issue here are concerns that are fundamentally anthropological for they centre round modalities of consumption of dangerous substances, how individuals and groups navigate this consumption, and the social interactions with and perceptions of others that results from it.

I suggest that club drug consumption is essentially embedded within the type of lifestyle that my informants lead and sustain. They are rather ‘sophisticated’ consumers of the latest technologies (ex. Gennaro’s state-of-the-art car), brands, media, food, and electronic dance music trends. They come from affluent, well-educated, Maltese upper middle-class families (see Section 1.3 below). These characteristics impact the representations and constructs of identity of these youths, particularly vis-à-vis others whom they regard as less sophisticated and ‘knowledgeable’ consumers. This distinction becomes particularly evident between my informants and other groups of Maltese ‘clubbers’ and is ‘brought out’ through the ways in which club drugs are consumed. These are some of the more theoretical and anthropological dimensions of my research, that I bring out fully and analyse in the chapters that follow.

My research also has broader implications, especially when one considers the gaps in knowledge about club drug-taking in Malta. The latest figures for MDMA/Ecstasy use for Malta presented by European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) are based on a population survey carried out in 2013. Here the EMCDDA (2016: 72 – 74) reports lifetime prevalence use of MDMA/Ecstasy amongst adults between the ages of fifteen and sixty-four is 0.7% of the total Maltese population. The same data also reveals lifetime prevalence use of cocaine within the same cohort is 0.5% of the total Maltese population.

The report, however, also presents the results of a more recent research exercise, which involved chemical testing of untreated sewage wastewater for cocaine residues and metabolites (mainly benzoylecgonine) carried out across various European municipalities. Testing over one week in Malta found 100 milligrams of the metabolite per 1,000 members of the population, present in wastewater per day (EMCDDA 2016: 40 – 41). When compared to test results from other municipalities, such as the 500 milligrams and 1,000 milligrams found in wastewater from Barcelona and London respectively, the figure for Malta may seem rather unimpressive. However, as also reported by the *Times of Malta*, it becomes more significant when weighing it against a total Maltese population of approximately 423, 000 (including an estimated number

of 23,000 residing foreign nationals) and considering that the same amount of cocaine metabolites was found in wastewater in Porto, where the use of cocaine and other drugs has been decriminalised (Martin 2016).

This data thus reveals that, when considered *per capita*, cocaine use in Malta is at least as prevalent as in other larger, more metropolitan European cities that are even more ‘tolerant’ or ‘accommodating’ of recreational drug-taking. Further, quite apart from evident discrepancies between the numbers for reported lifetime prevalence of cocaine by the Maltese and those for cocaine metabolites found in wastewater, overall these statistics paint a rather outdated picture which is in any eventuality incomplete.

The practical value of the research that I have undertaken is that it seeks to answer two questions that should interest anthropologists, medical professionals, and policy makers alike: First, what does club drug consumption *mean* for these youths in contemporary Malta? Second, what does it *do* for them? Answers to these questions can provide useful insight into whether club drug consumption is a localised, relatively contained phenomenon, subject to inherent social structural and cultural constraints, or whether it is close to being or becoming an ‘epidemic’ over which local culture may have little endogenous controls.

1.3 My Informants, the ‘Fairfielders’

In referring to my informant group throughout this thesis, I choose the pseudonym ‘Fairfielders’. I derive the name from ‘Fairfield’, a pseudonym for the club in Paceville⁶ where in 2015 I first approached Gennaro and Russ – both DJs and event organisers who would

⁶ This is the real name of a small district on the North-Western coast of Malta, characterised by a large and concentrated number of nightclubs, strip clubs, hotels, bars and restaurants. By 2016, in a shift that may be linked to ongoing gentrification and privatisation of public space in Paceville and the surrounding area (see Billiard 2014, Camilleri 2011), Fairfielders had moved all of their events to other locations and rarely went back to the Fairfield club. From this point onwards, apart from holding smaller and more exclusive parties in private residences and unlicensed ‘makeshift’ venues, Fairfielders held different big events across different clubs in Malta, and occasionally Gozo.

become key informants and gatekeepers – and spoke to them about my intentions to do doctoral research about club drug-taking in Malta.

As they introduced me to their network of close friends who also at the time frequented Fairfield and these expressed their consent to participate in my research, I initially identified a sample of between twenty (20) and thirty (30) individuals. Although throughout my fieldwork I kept in touch with all of these, by the time I started fieldwork in May 2016 I had reduced my sample to the twenty (20) individuals whom I identify as the ‘core’ members of the Fairfielder group. The group can be diagrammatically represented, according to Sex and Age, as follows:

Table 1 - Core Informant Sample by Age and Sex (N=20)

Ages / Sex	Males	Females
22 – 26	4	8
27 – 30	8	0

I define this as my core group of informants, as it consists of a tight-knit cluster of individuals who know each other well, spend plenty of time together, and organise and hold their own night-time events that serve as settings for collective club drug-taking. Members of this core group include event organisers, promoters, and DJs, whom I also refer to as the ‘senior men’ of the group.

This sample consists of those whom I spent most time with on the field, within club and ‘party’ settings, but also in more relaxed domestic settings where I could enquire better about what they referred to as ‘the scene’: the events that they produced and attended, the ‘crowds’ at these events, the behaviour of those present, and so forth. As such, this sample represents a wider network that consists of others who are equally central to the group but who may have been less forthcoming as research participants, as well as of rank-and-file members whom I also refer to in later chapters of this thesis.

The main salient characteristic shared by all group members is their recreational use of club drugs in Maltese nightclubs, at parties, and at music festivals, and this may occur at varying degrees between individuals across the group. They know one another because of associations formed in part through common tastes, shared territory, and social networking. They also, however, share other important commonalities. All of them come from affluent families living in the Northern and North-Western parts of the island. All of them also attended prestigious primary and secondary private and church schools in Malta. Many of them went on to obtain University degrees in Malta or abroad, and during my fieldwork were starting their careers as professionals. Others are either comfortably self-employed or occupy senior positions within businesses, some of which are run by their own families. By all measures, they come from an upper middle-class background.

An indicator of this is the language in which they communicate. Although the men of the group often use Maltese when speaking to each other⁷, they primarily converse in English. They develop this tendency during their upbringing: all members of the group come from families where English, rather than Maltese, is the first language. As Sciriha (1994: 117 - 118) notes with reference to Bourdieu (1984), language in Malta is an indicator of cultural capital, and serves as a powerful symbolic and positional good that is used to 'create or close social distance'. Sant-Cassia (2000: 283) observes that English is seen as denoting 'high status' and 'social pretence' of those said to constitute a segment of Maltese society that are '*tal-pepe*' (derogatory, implying 'the pretentious') or '*puliti*' ('the polite'). *Puliti* are often represented as coming from the Northern and Western districts of the island, well-educated, affluent, and belonging to the upper-middle classes. When positioned against these local connotations of those who use English as a first language, those who use Maltese represent a second (and in a

⁷ Many of my own conversations with Fairfielder men were either in Maltese or characterised by code-switching between Maltese and English. In line with Sant-Cassia (2000: 283), my impression was that the use of Maltese engendered a sense of 'egalitarianism' between the men of the group. Furthermore, it also delineated temporarily gendered spaces as these were occupied by Fairfielder men and women (ex. 'discussions' in Gennaro's and Maggie's apartment in Chapter 7, event backstage areas in Chapter 9).

sense ‘opposing’) segment of Maltese society consisting of those who belong to the lower-working classes, come from Southern and Southern Harbour districts, and are less educated - epitomised by those derogatorily referred to as *hamalli*⁸.

This main significance of this ideological divide for my research is that Fairfielders present characteristics that are typical of the local construction of *puliti*. Although they never themselves articulated this during my fieldwork they did, as I shall illustrate, classify others who engaged in excessive and indiscriminate drug use as *hamalli*.

Fairfielders, therefore, not only categorise modalities of drug consumption and drug users as *tajjeb* or *ħazin*, but also draw upon Maltese constructs of class to categorise those that are ‘bad’ modalities of drug use as belonging to *hamalli*. In this sense, Fairfielders create social distance and reproduce historical class tensions through their modalities of drug consumption that contrast with those of these disparaged others.

1.4 The Club Drugs

Like other illicit drugs, Ecstasy and cocaine are ‘peculiar’ (Sherratt 1995) substances. They are illegal, tabooed and stigmatised, and yet they have immense capital power and potential for commoditisation, as the demand for them remains high and widespread. They are also potent psychoactive items that can transform consciousness, experience, behaviour, and even appearance of those who consume them. Additionally, because there are no standardised procedures of quality-control through which they are tested these drugs are particularly liable to adulteration and contamination. As a result, they often occur as ‘faulty’ commodities, of which composition and purity is inconsistent and unpredictable. It is important to briefly discuss this property of these drugs, with reference to available data about how Ecstasy and cocaine occur in Europe and Malta, here.

⁸ I define *hamalli* in more detail in Chapter 6.

The point that I intend to highlight through this brief discussion is that Fairfielders - like drug users elsewhere - must contend with the fact that when it comes to these drugs, they can never be sure about what they are consuming. This is an equally problematic dimension of drug consumption as illegality and stigmatisation, and as such it is an integral component of the club drug consumption experience that Fairfielders must consider and navigate.

1.4.1 Ecstasy

The active pharmacological component of Ecstasy tablets is the stimulant MDMA (3-4-methylenedioxy-N-methamphetamine) in its powdered or crystallised state. MDMA was first synthesized by Merck laboratories in 1912, and as it became popular for its empathy-inducing or 'empathogenic' (Tramacchi 2010: 202) properties in the 1960s it was considered for potential uses in psychotherapy as late as the 1970s. The substance gained popularity as a recreational drug in the United States through the 1980s, whilst it was classified as a Schedule I illicit drug in 1985 (Davenport – Hines 2001: 389, McDowell et al. 1994: 127).

An authentic Ecstasy tablet should, in theory, be composed of 30% - 40% powdered and compressed crystals of the chemical MDMA, and 60% - 70% 'filler substances' that are pharmacologically inactive and only serve the purpose of 'binding' the active component together in a tablet that can be easily ingested like any other pill. In these terms, an average Ecstasy tablet today would be expected to contain around 125 milligrams of MDMA (EMCDDA 2016: 7 - 8).

There are, however, many types of Ecstasy tablets, with each variant being 'branded' with a specific and identifiable mark such as the 'Superman', 'Ghost', or 'Bacardi' logos (See Figure 1). Each logo is meant to indicate the ratio of MDMA to filler substance that is found in that specific type of tablet, and therefore the relative purity, potency, and perceived quality of the product; 'Superman' tablets may have a higher percentage of MDMA component than 'Bacardi' tablets, 'Bacardi' tablets may have a higher percentage of MDMA component than

‘Ghost’ tablets, and so forth. Forensic testing of seized Ecstasy tablets, however, indicate that quantity of MDMA contained within them may vary widely, ranging from 0 milligrams found in weak or altogether ‘bogus’ pills (Singer 2006: 128), to 340 milligrams contained in what are known as ‘super pills’.

Figure 1 – Branded Variants of Ecstasy Tablets



Source: www.erowid.org (2017)

The EMCDDA (2016: 8) reports that In Europe significant fluctuations in chemical composition are frequently found to occur both *across* and *within* tablet batches (ibid. 2016: 8). In addition to fluctuating MDMA content and potency, forensic testing has evidenced that a wide range of adulterants and contaminants are present in Ecstasy tablets, some of which may themselves have psychoactive and other effects on the user. Innocuous everyday substances such as caffeine are widely found to be used as a bulking agent for tablets. Other adulterants and contaminants such as the mescaline related PMA (Paramethoxyamphetamine) are of

greater concern, as they may have immediate toxic effects and are thus especially hazardous to the user (EMCDDA 2016: 8).

1.4.2 Cocaine

First extracted and identified as a psychoactive substance by chemist Albert Niemann in 1859 (Stolberg 2011: 137), cocaine (C₁₇H₂₁NO₄) occurs naturally in the leaves of *Erythroxylum coca Lamark* and *Erythroxylum novogranatense*, more commonly known as coca plants. Throughout the 19th and early 20th century, cocaine was legally extracted and produced from coca leaves on an industrial scale by Dutch, German, and Japanese pharmaceutical companies (EMCDDA 2010: 8), and at this time it was widely used in a number of forms for its properties, most notably as an anaesthetic and a stimulant, either as a medicine or as an additive in commercially available wines (Stolberg 2011: 137 – 138, Davenport – Hines 2010: 112 – 115). Following reports of adverse effects and deaths associated with the use of cocaine, reform and prohibition acts led to the substance being banned in the early 20th century in Europe and America (Stolberg 2011: 138).

As an illicit drug today, cocaine may be found either as a hydrochloride salt (cocaine hydrochloride), which is a powder that is taken through the nose (snorted), or in its free base form, which is a solid known as ‘crack’ that is smoked and sometimes injected. In Europe, the substance is more commonly found as a powder (EMCDDA 2010: 8), and Fairfielders only take the drug in this form through snorting.

Following production in the Andean-Amazon region, cocaine hydrochloride that is to be sold in Europe must be smuggled into the continent. According to the EMCDDA, the larger percentage of the drug that reaches Western Europe is transported by sea to the Iberian Peninsula, which thus serves as a major ‘gateway to the European market’ (EMCDDA 2010: 25). Prior to transportation, cocaine hydrochloride is usually readied for transport and ‘masked’ by mixing it with other ordinary materials such as liquids, clothing, plastic, and herbs. Before

being sold in Europe, the drug must be isolated from these other materials by specialized illegal ‘secondary’ laboratories that are set up on the European mainland (EMCDDA 2010: 25).

Apart from being unpackaged at these secondary laboratory sites, the EMCDDA (2010) reports, the extracted cocaine hydrochloride is also adulterated with cutting agents, and re-packaged as ‘cocaine bricks’ that are marked with logos (see Figure 2), as this glosses up the appearance of the product and may give any prospective buyer a false impression that it is pure and free of adulterants. It is as this adulterated brick composite that cocaine hydrochloride is sold on to distributors across Europe (ibid.: 25 – 26).

Figure 2 – Cocaine ‘Brick’ with Lyre Logo



Source: EMCDDA (2010)

As in the case of Ecstasy, ordinary household substances that have little to no adverse effects when taken, like caffeine, glucose, and flour, are very often found to constitute a significant ‘bulk’ of cocaine that is available to the average user in Europe and America (Lapachinske et al. 2015, EMCDDA 2010, Fucci 2011). A more dangerous chemical that has been increasingly

detected as an adulterant in seized cocaine is levamisole, which is an anti-parasitic agent used in veterinary medicine, and which when inadvertently taken with cocaine over long periods of time is known to cause agranulocytosis in users (EMCDDA 2010: 26). Agranulocytosis is a condition by which the human immune system is suppressed, thus leading to rapidly developing life-threatening infections in extreme cases (see Garg et al. 2015, Chapman and Khodae 2011, Herms 2011).

The EMCDDA (2017b) reports that the cocaine hydrochloride seized and tested in Malta resulted as only being between 10% and 22% pure (ibid.: 15)⁹, thus placing its level of purity amongst the lowest in Europe¹⁰. Whilst the EMCDDA does not specify which cocaine adulterants and contaminants have been found here, a later report in the Times of Malta has confirmed that levamisole is one of the adulterants detected in quantities of the drug that have been seized in Malta (Martin 2017).

There can be no doubt, therefore, that as they occur at ‘purchase point’ for Fairfielders Ecstasy tablets and cocaine powder are often impure. This has two implications, that are important for the context of this thesis. First, that potentially dangerous adulterants and contaminants like PMA and levamisole may occur in Ecstasy and cocaine respectively. Second, that unlike other commodities, the composition of these drugs fluctuates greatly, over time but also within batches of the same product. Thus, the problem is not only that ‘doses’ of these drugs may contain substances that are either harmful or innocuous and do not have any effect on the user, but also that the user, as a consumer, is never sure of what he or she is buying. Thus, even if one obtains 100% pure cocaine (which is highly unlikely in Malta, in view of the EMCDDA data presented above), one does not know this. They may then go on and consume that cocaine

⁹ As of 2017, the EMCDDA reported that it did not have any similar specific data available for Ecstasy that is found in Malta (ibid. 2017: 15).

¹⁰ Compared to, for instance, cocaine that is up to 84% pure in Estonia (EMCDDAc), up to 88% pure in France (EMCDDAe), and up to 87% pure in Italy (EMCDDAf).

in the same dosage and way that they have consumed cocaine with a tenth of that purity before, and in this case the high purity may, of course, be the cause of undesired and potentially dangerous effects. The point, therefore, is that Fairfielders are consumers that are always ‘in the dark’ about the drugs that they consume. This, as I shall argue, transforms the ways in which club drugs are treated and consumed by my informants.

1.5 Thesis Structure

I present an overview of the structure of this thesis and the content of each of the subsequent chapters below.

In Chapter Two I present a discussion of the main argument and recurring themes of this thesis. I draw upon key theoretical sources as I concentrate on secrecy, discipline, and distinction that as I argue constitute three central dimensions that underpin Fairfielder drug consumption.

I present my research methods in Chapter Three. Here I discuss the epistemological dimensions of my identity as a ‘native’ ethnographer studying ‘illicit’ behaviours and contexts. A discussion of ethical issues and the measures that I have taken to safeguard informant confidentiality is also included in this chapter.

In Chapter Four I address the question of whether drug-taking is at all ‘normalised’ by my informants. I begin my discussion by presenting a critical overview of the normalisation thesis and its main proponents. I provide ethnographic examples to support my argument that for my informants, drug consumption is appealing not because it is normalised but rather because it retains a ‘problematic’ or ‘challenging’ component that necessitates the engagement of discipline and moderation.

In Chapter Five I present instances of when my informants exercise autonomy in choosing which drugs to consume, where and when to consume them, and whether to consume them at

all. With reference to the theoretical concept of ‘Tamed Hedonism’ proposed by Roberta Sassatelli (2001), I suggest that Fairfielders are not only capable of choice and autonomy as consumers of these drugs, but also ‘source’ and test drugs (particularly different Ecstasy tablets), effectively becoming each other’s ‘pharmacists’ and generating their own ‘market research’. I suggest that this testifies an ‘empowering’ agency, that distinguishes Fairfielders from other types of drug users, within structures of distribution of drugs that are essentially and otherwise ‘disempowering’ or ‘dispossessing’.

In Chapter Six I discuss how drug-taking is ‘localised’ by Maltese society and Fairfielders. I suggest that, because it is a small island, Malta presents conditions in which negative judgments about those who engage in morally subversive practices like drug consumption are rapidly formulated. This contributes to anxieties that are felt and dealt with by Fairfielders. I also show, however, that Fairfielders themselves draw upon Maltese structural dichotomies (of ‘good’ [*tajjeb*] versus ‘bad’ [*ħazin*]) to formulate their own judgments about others who engage in what they consider undesirable modalities of drug consumption. Broader inferences about social status and class, I argue, are in turn derived from these judgments.

In Chapter Seven I discuss forms of gossip and their significance for the maintenance of the Fairfielder group. I argue that as an inherently ‘ambiguous’ form of communication and evaluation, ‘good’ gossip (*diskussjonijiet*) serves to assess drug-taking behaviour of others (external to the group, but also rank-and-file members of the group) and set sanctions for undesirable behaviour in motion. I also argue that because all members of the group may become subjects of gossip, it serves as a form of social control through which the group keeps its own members and their drug-taking behaviours in check.

In Chapter Eight I concentrate on how discipline engenders discretion amongst Fairfielders. I argue that as a ‘practice’ discretion is not only central to the establishment of complicity and intimacy between group members, but also to the distinction or delimitation of the group from

others. In this sense, the capacity to practice discretion is directly correlated to the domestication and domination of both undesirable visible effects and the pleasures of drug consumption. Furthermore, I show how discretion serves to produce and protect, but most pointedly enhance, drug-taking as an unarticulated 'secret' that is shared by the group.

In Chapter Nine I illustrate different 'trajectories' that drugs and other items may take at a Fairfielder event. With reference to Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986), I argue that in this respect club drugs have a 'social life', and they may shift from gift, to commodity, to singularised item. I show how Fairfielders 'sanitise' these drugs after they acquire them as commodities, acknowledging both an unpredictable 'singularity' and extraordinary property of these drugs. Here I also present instances of the circulation of 'licit' materials (chewing gum and water) that I call 'drug peripherals' at a Fairfielder event and argue that these serve to signal both a vulnerability to the effects of drugs and the ability to dominate over them.

Throughout these chapters, I concentrate on drug use and the uncertain nature of drugs as 'commodities', but also more broadly on anthropological issues that have to do with the attribution of value, moral evaluation, identity and social differentiation, and control. Whilst this thesis becomes progressively more ethnographic, I refer to key theoretical sources and texts relevant to the topic or theme that I discuss in each chapter. In this respect, as well as presenting some evocative accounts of my fieldwork, my intention is to present a theoretically subtle ethnography with valid contributions to offer to both the 'drug field' and anthropological theory.

Chapter 2: Thematic Frameworks

2.1 Argument and Themes

The argument of this thesis is that amongst the group of Maltese youths that I have worked with, recreational club drug-taking is constituted of a set of meanings, practices, and codes of behaviour that are *socially* rather than *individually* circumscribed. This type of drug-taking is thus embedded within a structural framework of culturally-specific values and meanings shared by the group, that not only engender sociality through patterns of collective use, interaction, and exchange, but also modes of engagement in complicity and discretion, establishment of modalities of consumption, and negotiation of ethical practices of drug-use.

Through active membership in this group over time, members develop social behavioural strategies of navigation through club drug-taking, that allow for a balance between ‘pleasure’, participation in social processes both within and without settings where drugs are consumed, and mitigation of the problems that are attached to drug use. These strategies are not immediately guided by a fixed and dominant line of medico-legal discourse that drives official public perspectives and approaches to club drug-taking in Malta. Rather, they are informed by a fluid pool of local information, knowledge, and an ethos that is continuously being adapted, selectively shared, and applied amongst the members of the group themselves.

These youths sustain an ethos of club drug consumption that draws upon Maltese conceptualisations of what is ‘good’ (*tajjeb*) versus what is ‘bad’ (*ħażin*) in their constructions of selfhood and collective identity, vis-à-vis others with whom they share access to Maltese ‘club space’. This both reflects and reproduces contrasts and tensions between self and otherness – most notably class divisions - that are characteristic of Maltese quotidian reality.

In practice, Fairfielders position themselves as drug-takers who *know how, when, and whether at all* to consume drugs in relation to others who are perceived as less *discreet, disciplined*, and

discriminative in their drug-taking. For Fairfielders, these other drug-takers represent a less 'virtuous' type of consumer. As I shall be discussing later in this chapter, similar underpinnings of distinction through drug-taking have been noted elsewhere. The proposition that groups of young recreational drug-takers - and more broadly 'clubbers' - sustain aesthetic and other values that distinguish them from other drug-takers and youths, especially those whom they consider representative of a so-called 'mainstream' and potentially 'inauthentic' part of the societal context within which they are found, is not a new one. I am however applying this argument to my own research field and developing it in three ways.

First, I ethnographically locate and analyse the phenomenon of club drug-taking as it occurs amongst youths in Malta, where it remains largely unexplored. The subject has to some extent been previously touched upon locally through some dissertations by students within departments of social work, youth studies, and sociology at the University of Malta (see Demanuele 2009; Coleiro 2009; Taliana 2007; Cassar 1999). These dissertations, however, tackle the subject as part of undergraduate degrees, and although instructive to my work, do not present the type of exhaustive ethnographic analysis of the field that I have undertaken through my doctoral research. In this respect, I present an in-depth exploration of how my informants navigate club drug-taking whilst essentially contextualising it within a distinctly small-scale Maltese context.

Second, rather than framing club drug-taking as a hedonistic form of consumption that is a means to unbridled sensuous abandonment, I suggest that in the case of my informants it involves an inherent disciplinary component through which a balance between 'pleasure' and 'composure' - a state which they refer to as 'being good' (*qiegħed/qegħda tajjeb*) - must be actively sought and negotiated each time these drugs are taken.

Here I propose that Fairfielder club drug-taking is a multi-dimensional and 'disciplined' experience that begins with how these drugs are treated with certain care and respect, because

they are extraordinary, potent, and extraordinary items. Additionally, Fairfielders recognise that unbridled consumption and ‘misuse’ of these substances may lead to dysfunctional and undesirable behaviour. Because of this, one needs to regiment their use. The centrality of this regimentation becomes particularly evident in patterns of discourse and behaviour that I bring out in my ethnographic chapters: how my informants formulate judgements of others, gossip, and engage in practices of secrecy and discretion. From the emic perspective it is precisely this careful navigation of drug-taking, promulgated by the Fairfielder ethos, that sets my informants apart from other drug-takers and clubbers.

Third, I also develop a notion of club drug-taking as a simultaneously ‘possessing’ and ‘dispossessing’ type of consumption. When Fairfielders engage in moderate and disciplined drug-taking whilst successfully participating and contributing to group events, they are engaging in what to them is desirable drug consumption. This because they are essentially demonstrating to themselves that whilst they know how to ‘enjoy’ club drug-taking, they do not let these substances deprive them of an ‘Apollonian’ rationality: the capacity to remain composed, be critical, judge others, and so forth. In other words, they are showing that they can ‘domesticate’ both the pleasures and the problems that this type of drug-taking inherently entails. In this sense, drug-taking becomes possessing because it is ‘empowering’ for my informants: they harness the power of the drug rather than allowing it to take over and govern their bodies, actions, and judgment – they consume it without being consumed by it. Additionally, unlike ‘addicts’ and other groups of club drug-takers, they also exercise choice and autonomy in choosing when, how, and whether to take these drugs, effectively restraining themselves from consuming club drugs excessively and indiscriminately.

Here I also consider, however, that the structures of distribution of these drugs are in any eventuality themselves inherently dispossessing because, particularly within a small-scale context like Malta where drug ‘selling points’ and ‘dealers’ are limited, the drug-taker as consumer neither possesses the luxury of choice between different available ranges or brands

of products nor reliable information about the product: what the drugs contain, where and how they were made, and so forth. Because of this, my informants can only choose between careful self-administration or total abstention from consumption of a very restricted - and restrictive - 'line' of items that are in any eventuality going to be of unknown purity and quality. The possessing dimension of this type of drug consumption thus only emerges within this dispossessing structure of un-sanitised production, 'faulty' products, and limited choice. In bringing out these tensions, I pay equal attention to the drugs themselves, how they are circulated, consumed and treated, as I do to the drug users and their social interactions.

As I have stated in in Chapter 1, in each of the subsequent chapters of this thesis I closely refer to theoretical sources whilst tackling several dimensions of Fairfielder drug-taking. In this sense, my own observations and descriptive accounts are woven with and supported by theoretical references throughout this thesis. Nevertheless, it is useful to introduce and discuss three overarching motifs that recur throughout my ethnographic analysis here: the first of secrecy, the second of discipline, and the third of distinction. I present and discuss these separately below.

2.2 Club Drug Use and the Construction of Secrecy

Because drug use, either individual or collective in small group contexts, is both illegal and surrounded by taboos, drug-users operate in a context of 'secrecy'¹¹. This is a sociological given that must be considered when studying drug use because it governs action, organisation, discourse, and psychic conditions amongst users. For the anthropologist, therefore, this social fact is a 'given' but also needs to be disassembled, especially in terms of how the sharing of

¹¹Although in this sense 'secrecy' may be understood as a similar device to 'concealment', I shall argue that for drug takers its function and meaning may span further than keeping drug use hidden from law enforcement, peers, and other members of their communities to avoid stigmatisation and legal sanctions. The view that 'secrecy' and 'concealment' imply the same thing is often assumed, rather reductively, by epidemiological and criminological models of drug-taking (see Palamar 2012, Saxe et al. 2001, Hughes et al. 1982).

secrets creates confidences, intimacy, complicity, and shapes the formation of 'groups', however ephemeral they may be.

In theoretically framing this point, I briefly draw upon Georg Simmel and his work on secrecy. In his complex essay on the secret and secret societies, which is more concerned with the nature and process, rather than the content of, the secret Simmel (1906) proposes that secrecy operates at the foundations of all human social relations. It determines the images and expectations individuals draw of each other in the active interplay between concealment and revelation of information about themselves, under and across different circumstances and social contexts. Essential patterns and types of reciprocity between individuals must in turn depend on these 'conceptions' and knowledge, of which body is performatively constructed and situational (ibid. 1906: 443 - 444).

All affairs and communication between individuals and groups, as Simmel (1906: 462) argues, draw their character and nature from the 'ratio of secrecy' – implying a factor of incomplete knowledge that is to some extent implicit to all social relationships - that not only guides what is shared between actors, but also determines the behaviour of the concealer and consequently the dynamics of the relationship. Therefore, according to Simmel, whilst it is indispensable for the parties engaged in functional social relations to know about each other that which is relevant and pertains to their interaction in different situations, reciprocity does not in practice depend on a full disclosure and transparency between them, but rather on the acceptance of the fact that the relationship will itself involve a degree of incomplete and assumed information. In this respect, mutual confidence as the basis of 'practical action' is characterised by 'a mediate condition between knowing and not knowing another person' (Simmel 1906: 430)¹².

¹²A similar point is made by Goffman (1959) in his application of a dramaturgical model to everyday relations, as he posits that in any human interaction between two parties consisting of 'audience' and 'performer' the audience must sustain 'the right to treat the performer at occupational face value' because 'urban life would become unbearably sticky' if every interaction otherwise required the actors to reveal 'personal trials, worries, and secrets' (Goffman 1959: 57).

Simmel holds that, in contrast with primitive societies within which specialisation and division of labor are not pronounced, a modern society that depends on interactions that hinge on indirect ‘credit’ and ‘faith in the honour of others’ (ibid. 1906: 446), the role of such acceptance of incomplete knowledge and concealment essentially becomes more conspicuous. This implies that contemporary relations, which markedly involve dealings with extended networks of people we know little about, increasingly lead to a resignation to the fact that such dealings will involve incomplete and partial information about those we are dealing with. In some sense, therefore, the unfamiliar is made familiar, not through its uncovering, but rather through a gradual naturalisation of the hitherto-undisclosed.

Later in his analysis, Simmel shifts towards a cautionary tone in shedding light on the somewhat ominous side of this process. His approach becomes rather cynical in focusing on the extortive advantages that may be gained through administrations of secrecy that are guided by profit and self-interest. There is little doubt that such operations are active within the illicit drug world, and as others have shown in this context secrecy is particularly open to manipulation by drug dealers seeking to maximise profits, expand their business and reputations, and remain undetected by police (see Zaitch 2002, 2005; Williams 1989). Secrecy, however, may work well beyond these chains of underground trade in a less conspiratorial or even functional manner. A continuous interplay between revelation and concealment of information - as indeed takes place in club drug-use - and the *acceptance* of the latter, permeates drug user networks in also guiding forms of code, etiquette, and meaning.

In Fairfielder club drug-taking there is a naturally aware perception that drugs are being consumed, that is often consciously ‘betrayed’ and discerned through actions and behaviours of users¹³. Yet, there is natural and passive complicity in not openly precipitating this apprehension in an interrogatory statement (ex. “Are you on Ecstasy?”). Club drug user

¹³Several aspects of this behaviour are brought out fully, discussed and illustrated in Chapter 8 and Chapter 9.

etiquette enjoins people to intuit but not openly articulate this observation, but at most to respond to that situation through the offering of natural solicitation (ex. “Do you want water?”). This implies an implicit recognition of a neutrality of condition and being that implies consumption of these substances, and that is transformative. Rather than being corrosive and resulting in distrust and suspicion, a ‘tension’ emerges from the form of secrecy that is attached to this type of drug-taking. This tension may be implicitly cohesive, in that it creates a mutual sharing of condition that Fairfielders maintain and service through solicitations of care-actions such as sharing of water, that contributes to a shared vulnerability.

Secrecy, therefore, does not only imply ‘concealment’ that serves to hide drug-taking and drug dealing, but is rather more pervasive and its operations more complex. It does not only characterise illicit business relationships between dealers, or between dealers and their ‘clients’, but is also a significant – if not the most significant – component of relations between drug users themselves. If this ‘positive’ transformative function of secrecy towards sociality amongst drug users is to be harnessed and maintained, however, drug-taking needs to be moderated and its effects kept under control by the user. It is here that discipline comes into play.

2.3 Club Drug Use and Discipline

Patterns of self-regulation and discipline amongst recreational drug users have been previously ethnographically recorded (Bahora et al., 2009; Green and Moore 2009; Pennay and Moore 2010; Pennay, 2012). These authors note how recreational drug users may discriminate between different types of drugs and self-administer their use depending on context. Pennay (2012) notes how her informants in Sydney only took Ecstasy in private settings whilst taking methamphetamine to counterbalance the intoxicating effects of alcohol in public clubs. Greene

and Moore (2009) observe similar discriminative consumption patterns in following a group of young polydrug users in Australia¹⁴.

These cases reveal an awareness and capability of some groups of recreational drug takers to moderate their use and control the effects that result from it. Such agentic regimentation of drug use allows for individual experiences of pleasure but does not lead to states of excessive intoxication that would not allow the user to engage in appropriate social interactions and exchanges with other users within an environment where club drugs are being collectively consumed. Moreover, through this regimentation, states of excessive intoxication that are discouraged and considered unbecoming *by the group itself* are avoided. A culture or ethos of club drug-taking, therefore, may in and of itself incorporate a code of *moderation*. In furthering this argument, I draw on some points advanced by Michel Foucault in the second volume of ‘The History of Sexuality’ (1986), specifically those that have to do with what he terms ‘arts of existence’ (ibid.: 10).

2.3.1 Arts of Existence

In ‘The History of Sexuality’ (1986), Foucault proceeds in his examination of the medicalisation of sex through discourse, and consequent development of a hermeneutical ‘problematization’ of sexual conduct and attached desire - which he considers distinct from ‘pleasure’ - that is upheld and mutually administered by all ‘modern’ individuals as ‘subjects’ of ‘sexuality’ (ibid. 1986: 5 – 6). Foucault hence develops an argument introduced through his first volume in the History of Sexuality (ibid. 1979) that conceptualizes the ‘power’ that governs sexual conduct as essentially decentralised and ubiquitous.

¹⁴ Interestingly, in both these cases excessive alcohol used was discouraged as it was perceived as the most intoxicating or ‘messier’ (Green and Moore 2009: 406) substance of which effects were counterbalanced by consuming other drugs. As I shall show in Chapter 5, at times Fairfielders similarly sought to counterbalance the effects of alcohol by taking cocaine.

The influence of this power, as posited by Foucault, is one that is maintained and reinforced by all individuals as subjects rather than administered and exerted in a top-down manner by dominant governing bodies. In substantiating this thesis in *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault is primarily concerned with tracing a genealogy of sex and the forms of discourse, ‘ethics’, and ‘aesthetics’ that are associated with it, and in doing so closely draws on historical contexts from antiquity and Greek and Greco-Roman cultures¹⁵. He argues that within these contexts, sexual conduct was not predominantly regulated and problematised by institutions, but rather by ‘practices of self’ (Foucault 1986: 12) through which individuals came to value moderation as a necessary aspect of pleasure, and thus incorporate it within their practices and experiences.

Foucault defines practices of self, or ‘arts of existence’ as ‘those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria’ (ibid. 1986: 10 – 11). ‘Practices of self’ do not imply ‘canonical’ rules and codes that are set in stone to regulate and prohibit practices, but rather a calculated and active negotiation of ‘modalities of a “use”’ that allows for desire to be satisfied through an ethical and optimal management of pleasure (Foucault 1986: 52 – 54).

Foucault argues that within the context of Greek antiquity this strategic use of pleasure was threefold in requiring a consideration of the strategies of need, time, and status. In summary, the strategy of need guided the individual in practicing restraint, rather than abstinence, in

¹⁵ The ‘ethics of the self’, as conceived by Foucault, may be based upon a rather idealised reading and treatment of ancient Greek culture. From this perspective, the concept may be interpreted as restricted to a school of ‘elite’ philosophy and may not be simply transposable onto an understanding of moderation as it is practiced by club drug-users in contemporary Malta. The moral and other pressures guiding this form of moderation in club drug-taking may well be different from those active among the Ancient Greeks, and it is these pressures that I unpack in this thesis. Nonetheless, the Foucauldian concept of the ethics of the self remains useful and relevant here, for it configures moderation as a form of self-administered restraint that is empirically discernible in patterns of club drug-taking among my informants.

indulging desire, timeliness informed judgment about where and when desire could be indulged, and status implied an awareness of the role one occupied in society in negotiating an appropriate indulgence of desire. Engaging these strategies in complex guided an individual in implementing a 'regimen' of the self, and their application resulted in an ethical use of sexual pleasure (*chresis aphrodision*, also means: 'sexual use', 'sexual need', 'sexual obligation', and 'sexual realisation') that was grounded in moderation (Foucault 1986: 53 – 62).

Foucault observes that the Greeks thoroughly examined and mastered practices of self within philosophical and moral domains, and they valued their effective translation into ethical practice as virtuous. The virtue attached to 'sexual austerity' was not limited to the sexual domain but was more widely related to 'an axis of experience and to a cluster of concrete relationships' (Foucault 1986: 23). The ability to exercise practices of self was highly regarded as indicative of a synchronicity between the body and health, as well as between the individual and the roles he occupied within society, and it was also perceived as being attached to those 'spiritual conditions that enable one to gain access to wisdom' (Foucault 1986: 23).

Effective self-regulation of sexual conduct, therefore, was linked to a wider project of 'stylisation' of the self that was carried forward beyond the sphere of sex to other domains of everyday life. Exercising moderation through practices of self was also regarded in terms of more pragmatic utility that is especially emphasised through the strategy of need; the less one indulged desire through pleasure, the more pleasurable and intense each experience of indulgence became. The coupling of ethical and functional values of the moderation of pleasure thus directed a cultural ambience that allowed for a situational gauging of appropriate behaviour, rather than a strict regulation through institutional governance.

2.3.2 Towards an 'Ethics' of Club Drug Use

The Foucauldian concept of the arts of existence, and how this may be applied in a translation of moral thought into ethical practice, may stretch further than the sphere of sexual conduct.

As others have recently noted (Race 2008, Duff 2004), the concept may be usefully considered within the field of contemporary drug use, in better acknowledging and understanding themes such as pleasure, ethics, and moderation in drug-taking practices, and the effective role these have on the construction of drug user identity.

Referring to contemporary Australian drug policy, Cameron Duff (2004: 388) argues that official strategies that target the problem of drug use only do so at the individual level at two extremities of a spectrum: on one end prevention in the case of those who have not tried and used drugs, and on the other treatment in the case of those whose use of drugs has become 'problematic and/or chaotic'. Such strategies tend to be founded on an epidemiological approach and tentatively applied universally by central regulatory agencies throughout the industrialised world, including in Malta. As Duff also validly notes, the result is a problematic 'gap' in policy and failure to consider active social and recreational users who invisibly occur between the poles of prevention and treatment, and do not 'arouse the interest of law enforcement authorities or treatment services' (ibid. 2004: 388).

Through a 'failure of political will and policy imagination' (Duff 2004: 388) such official approaches that are solely based on prevention and treatment thus obstinately focus on total prohibition and elimination of drug use – aims which as history strongly indicates are all but unattainable (see Rudgley, 2014; Agar, 2007; Davenport-Hines, 2002) - without offering any type of more practical guidelines about how behaviour can be modified in making recreational drug-taking safer.

A model of drug use as a practice of self, that accommodates a conscious 'use of pleasure' and an ethics of self-regulation and moderation as implicit traits of drug-taking practices that are upheld and administered by drug users themselves, remains both a 'conceptual lacuna' (Duff 2004: 391) within the field of drug-taking studies and undervalued in drafting drug policy and instructing harm-reduction campaigns.

2.3.3 Disciplined Leisure

Before proceeding to a discussion about how discipline may underpin distinction between club drug users, a brief consideration of the notion of ‘disciplined leisure’, as proposed by Coleman and Kohn (2007) and contributors to their volume *The Discipline of Leisure* is instructive. Coleman and Kohn challenge the notion of an often taken for granted analytical dichotomy between ‘work’ and ‘leisure’ where the former is conceived as requiring order and the latter as a ‘site of release’ (ibid.: 9) where disciplinary rules of practice are suspended. Instead, these authors argue that discipline is an inherent dimension of sport and other forms of leisure, through which practices of recreation and the bodies, actions, and feelings of those involved in them are legitimised and given meaning. Furthermore, Coleman and Kohn argue that whilst actor subjectivities within leisure practices are both embedded in and informed by broader socio-cultural structures, leisure with its rules and codes of etiquette presents its own cultural complexities through which agency is exercised, experiences of the body are generated, guided, and understood, and conceptualisations of identity and selfhood are forged (ibid.: 15).

In other words, Coleman and Kohn argue, leisure should not be analytically treated as the inevitable result of the need to temporarily release oneself from and mitigate the ‘stresses’ of work and labour, but rather understood as a powerful meaning-making and ethically self-sustaining practice itself. Thus, in the case of Bob Hume - the bodybuilder who works as a hospital porter followed by Rapport (2007) - the hospital and the gym serve as equally significant and overlapping sites of identity negotiation. Bob, Rapport (2007: 33) tells us, is neither a ‘porter’ nor a ‘bodybuilder’, but rather a ‘hospital bodybuilder’ – an identity that allows him to maintain ‘a sense of integrity’ that does not depend on or fluctuate according to the work/hospital or leisure/gym setting he finds himself in. This identity – constructed through adherence to equally significant rules of the hospital and the gym – is thus made possible as a summation of Bob’s equally disciplined approach to both work and leisure.

In another contribution to *The Discipline of Leisure*, Garry Marvin (2007: 91 - 93) describes how in England ‘fox hunting’ is distinguished from ‘fox killing’ because whilst the aim of the latter is to cull foxes with as little effort as possible (and is therefore a form of pest-control), the former is a sport that presents ‘self-imposed challenges’ to the hunter and is characterised by specific rules, preparation, and skills¹⁶. Unlike fox killing, fox hunting is a group activity that is ‘shaped into an elaborate performance’ where there is the possibility that the fox escapes the hounds and mounted hunters, and thus emerges as ‘the winner’ (ibid.: 92). What legitimises fox hunting as a sport and sets it apart from fox killing, then, is the preparation, navigation and performance that the hunter must undergo to increase his chances of outsmarting the fox in this challenge: disciplining hounds and horses, anticipating animal behaviour, understanding the pace of the group hunt, and so forth.

Here, I do not wish to draw reductive parallels between drug-taking and bodybuilding, fox hunting, or other sports¹⁷. Nevertheless, these examples and the notion of disciplined leisure are instructive in considering two points that I shall also bring out through my own analysis. First, practices of leisure may engender identity formations, on which broad personal representations and categorisations of self and otherness in turn depend. These, however, transcend the sites and times where leisure is practiced and are carried forward to other settings: Rapport’s informant carried his ‘bodybuilder persona’ outside the gym, and this allowed him to ‘negotiate the transition’ (Rapport 2007: 33) between ‘work’ and ‘leisure’ settings whilst maintaining a fixed sense of selfhood, as he also identified himself as unique and distinguished from his hospital porter colleagues. Similarly, as we shall see, for Fairfielders the will and

¹⁶ These involve, for instance, intricate relations between ‘animal’ or ‘non-human’ bodies (fox, hounds, horses) and ‘human’ bodies (hunter) that are varyingly, either physically or imaginatively, ‘disciplined’ and are ‘created for this event and as a result of this event’ (Marvin 2007: 105, original emphasis).

¹⁷ Coleman and Kohn (2007) and many of the contributors in *The Discipline of Leisure* primarily discuss sports activities, and there are therefore several differences between the ethnographic focus of these authors and my own. Sports activities, for one, are usually licit and commonly thought of as healthy pursuits, whilst club drug-taking is illicit and widely thought of as damaging to the user’s physical and mental health. The essential point here, however, is that club drug-taking and clubbing constitute a type of collective leisure or ‘play’ that is ‘tied up with ... complex notions of identity and identification’ (Malbon 1999: 181), and that may only be sustained and given meaning when drug takers follow certain codes of conduct and etiquette.

ability to exercise discipline in their drug-taking makes them ‘knowledgeable consumers’, especially vis-à-vis others who, because of their apparent lack of discipline and composure when they take drugs, ‘do not know how to consume’. As we shall see in the case of Fairfielders the implications of this are more far-reaching than the spaces of leisure where drugs are taken, because the indiscriminate and unmoderated consumption of club drugs not only defines a ‘clubber’ who is engaging in undesirable behaviour, but also informs broader notions of disparaged otherness.

Second, as in the case of fox hunting, a component of difficulty may give leisure its meaning. This not only in distinguishing or ‘elevating’ it from other similar practices that do not require performative skill or knowledge, but also in underscoring distinction and hierarchy between those performers who are disciplined or skilled and others who are less so. In other words, even when considered in opposition to ‘work’, leisure as ‘play’ may entail specific complications and problems, and how one tackles and overcomes these determines his or her position and role within the framework of ‘the game’, perception of self as a skilful or less skilful player, and value in the eyes of other players. In this respect and as I shall argue in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, the appeal of club drug-taking for Fairfielders is not only in the ‘chemically-induced’ pleasures that it results in, but also in the fact that drug consumption is an inherently challenging or problematic type of consumption. Through disciplined and moderated drug use, the Fairfielder emerges as not only capable of *domesticating* both the pleasures and the problems of drug consumption, but also of *dominating* them. This is the crux - or to put it metaphorically, the endgame - of the Fairfielder club drug-taking experience: one consumes the drugs and ‘flirts’ with their pleasures and problems, but never abandons himself or herself completely to either. In this process, discipline is neither drawn upon as an external ‘influence’ or ‘device’ nor generated laterally as a by-product, but instead is an integral and essential component.

2.4 Club Drug Use and Distinction

This brings us to a discussion of how modalities of club drug-taking may first be categorised and appropriated as markers of distinction and divisions between groups of users. Here, some consideration of the work done by Sarah Thornton (1995) with British clubbers in the early 90s is useful. Whilst in her text Thornton (1995: 132 – 135) offers some insight about how Ecstasy was presented in the media and how this fuelled moral panic at the time of her research, her analysis is more about hierarchies of aesthetic tastes that club cultures present than on Ecstasy use *per se*. Nevertheless, I outline her main theoretical argument below - largely derived from Bourdieu (1984) - as I wish to suggest that different modalities of club drug consumption also correspond to the hierarchies that Thornton brings out.

In emphasising the plurality and complexity of the ‘club cultures’ that correspond to similar forms of youthful night-time leisure, Thornton (1995: 3) identifies these as ‘*taste cultures*’, or cultures that are sustained by ‘crowds’ of youths who ‘generally congregate on the basis of their shared taste in music, their consumption of common media and, most importantly, their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves’. She is primarily concerned with exploring the hierarchies amongst young British clubbers and ravers that are related to these taste cultures. Thornton posits that these hierarchies correspond to specific cultural organisations and discourses amongst clubbers, which complexly function to engender and sustain scene-specific ‘cultural agendas’ and ‘ideologies’ of young clubbers vis-à-vis those of other social groups and wider society (Thornton 1995: 10). As Devereaux (2007: 324) has also more recently observed, in this sense the first merit of Thornton’s work is that it is particularly instructive in proposing that youth club culture as a form of ‘popular’ culture is as distinct as ‘high culture’, because in her work it is framed as inherently characterised by an equally complex ‘aesthetic order’. Through her work, Thornton seeks to abolish the analytical divide between high culture as ‘vertically ordered’ and organised through ‘standards of excellence’ and popular culture as a conversely ‘horizontally ordered’ form of ‘flat folk culture’ (ibid.: 8).

Thornton (1995: 3 – 4) maintains that there are three ‘overarching distinctions’ or dichotomies that characterise club cultures, which she defines as the ‘authentic’ versus the ‘phoney’, the ‘hip’ versus the ‘mainstream’, and the ‘underground’ versus ‘the media’. Whilst each of these three dichotomies presents specific properties that are delved into by Thornton, what unifies them is that they may all be situated on a scale of ‘judgements of value’ (ibid.: 7) that clubbers engage with in distinguishing that which is desirable from that which is not.

In relation to this overarching scale of taste, Thornton goes on to develop a theoretical framework that draws upon Bourdieu (1984) and his argument for the correlation between empirically identifiable predispositions of taste, cultural capital, and socio-economic structure. She detaches Bourdieu’s theory from its original focus on ‘institutionalised cultural capital’ of the bourgeoisie and the corresponding academic qualifications and upbringing that ‘confer social status’ (Thornton 1995: 10), in turn revising it whilst applying it to the ‘terrain of youth culture’ through a careful and meticulous analysis of young nightclub frequenters and dance music enthusiasts.

Thornton proposes that amongst these youths, cultural hierarchies of taste are woven together with the recognition of ‘hipness’ and a corresponding accumulation of what she defines as ‘*subcultural capital*¹⁸’ – which as she argues may be framed as a ‘subcategory’ of cultural capital as developed by Bourdieu (Thornton 1995: 10 – 11). For Thornton (1995: 11 – 12), subcultural capital may be both ‘*objectified*’ and ‘*embodied*’ in a similar way to cultural capital, but in a specific and relational manner within the domain of youth club cultures. An extensive

¹⁸ Thornton’s choice of the term ‘subcultural’ should not be taken as implying that groups of young clubbers may be theoretically categorised as *de facto* ‘subcultural groups’, at least not in the sociological sense that is often implied when the term is used in an academic context. Rather, Thornton argues that the concept of ‘subculture’ as it is usually used in sociological texts is rather too proscriptive and theoretically loaded, and thus ‘empirically unworkable’ (ibid. 1995: 8). In her analysis, Thornton instead favours an approach that is primarily focused on ‘researching empirical social groups’ in precedence to an ‘elaboration of theory’. She thus argues that club cultures should not be analytically treated simply as the offshoots of ‘mainstream’ cultures, but rather as novel and elaborate frameworks of meaning with their own distinctive ‘cultural worth’ (ibid. 1995: 92).

dance music record collection or a fashion sense that follows the latest trends in dance music culture is indicative of objectified subcultural capital, using ‘current slang’ or knowing the title and artist of a record that a DJ is playing out is indicative of ‘being in the know’ and embodied subcultural capital, and so forth.

It has been suggested elsewhere that club drug-taking may also be usefully analysed through the rubric of subcultural capital. With reference to a case study of young Finnish clubbers, Salasuo and Seppälä (2004: 219) for example note how Ecstasy takers learn to ‘read’ and attribute positive symbolic value to the embodied signs of consumption of the drug (ex. ‘enlarged pupils’), in contrast to signs of other types of drug use (ex. heroin use and excessive alcohol consumption) to which they attribute negative symbolic values. Salasuo and Seppälä (2004: 222 – 223) note that this allocation of symbolic value allowed Ecstasy users to distinguish themselves from ‘traditional’ Finnish alcohol culture, as they collectively perceived themselves as more sophisticated, cosmopolitan, and intellectually superior. As my opening vignette in Chapter 1 illustrates, in the case of Fairfielders a similar process of attribution of symbolic value serves to distinguish between different types of drug takers – and here, as in the Finnish case, heroin users are certainly looked upon unfavourably. I am also suggesting, however, that in the Fairfielder case there is a more nuanced emphasis on different modalities of use of the same club drugs that are attributed with positive and negative values. In practice, this implies that Fairfielders do not only position and identify themselves as Ecstasy users who are more functional, knowledgeable, and virtuous than heroin users, but also vis-à-vis other groups of Ecstasy users who consumed these drugs immoderately and indiscriminately¹⁹. Thus, whilst signs of discreet and moderate Ecstasy use (ex. the subtle exchange of water) are

¹⁹ A similar point is made by Allaste and Lagerspetz (2002) in their study of young club drug users in Estonia. Following Thornton and Bourdieu, these authors note that ‘subcultural’ groups of club drug users may altogether desist from consuming club drugs when this consumption becomes a practice of ‘mainstream’ youths, because to them it loses its value as a marker of subcultural capital (ibid.: 191). Whilst I acknowledge this as a valid and instructive observation, I wish to suggest that there are more nuanced dimensions and ‘shades’ of practice and distinction that occur between ‘consumption’ and ‘non-consumption’ or use and desistance. A capacity to discipline and control drug-induced pleasure, for instance, may act as an even greater marker of ‘subcultural capital’ than desistance.

considered desirable, overt signs of excessive Ecstasy use (ex. facial contortions) are undesirable and associated with disparaged others.

A factor that undoubtedly contributes to this establishment of opposite values is that those who engage in excessive drug-taking often come across as 'trying too hard' to fit in, be 'hip', and configure themselves within club drug-taking culture. In this respect, Thornton observes that to be effectively taken as markers of subcultural capital, indicators must be presented as 'second knowledge' (ibid. 1995: 12), which in Bourdieu's terms would translate to those practices that are seamlessly 'bound up with the systems of dispositions' (Bourdieu 1984: 6) or habitus of the individual. In other words, for markers of subcultural capital to be positively received as such by the beholder, current slang must be used but not over-used, or one should be fashionably dressed but not over-dressed, or knowledge about music must appear to come effortlessly to the interlocutor, and so forth. Thus, also in line with Bourdieu's observation about the 'gratuitous' nature of the bourgeoisie notion of 'art-for-art's sake', of which value cannot be reduced to terms of 'mercantile exchange' (ibid. 1986: 242), the implication here is that markers of subcultural capital may only be taken as authentic when these appear to be disinterested and detached from processes of maximisation of profit or even of enhancing social status, as they may otherwise be taken as inauthentic and banal markers of 'exaggeration' and of 'trying too hard' (Thornton 1995: 12). In this sense, subcultural capital must also be 'unrecognised as capital and recognised as legitimate competence' (Bourdieu 1986: 18), for it to be favourably accepted and result in scene-specific prestige.

There are three main differences between Thornton's notion of subcultural capital and Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital. First, Thornton (1995: 12) notes that cultural capital may be more easily converted to economic capital than subcultural capital. This does not mean that this conversion does not occur, but only that it may be less direct: as Thornton notes, DJs, event promoters, and other professionals occupied within the club scene may benefit financially as a direct result of the subcultural capital that they accumulate. This is partly applicable to my own

field, as Fairfielder men who are DJs and event promoters stand to make some money from the organisation of public parties. Coupled with the small size of Malta itself, however, the specialised nature of the Fairfielder scene does not allow for the organisation of parties that are big and frequent enough to sustain the livelihoods of even the most senior Fairfielder men²⁰. What must be noted is that in any eventuality, in their organisation of events Fairfielders will value and prioritise authenticity that is associated with a smaller and more exclusive crowd over financial profits and will, for instance, intentionally limit the number of tickets that are issued for an event, even one that is public and open to people outside the Fairfielder group.

Second, Thornton (1995: 13) argues, mass media as a ‘network crucial to the definition and distribution of knowledge’ play a central role in the ‘circulation’, reinforcement and transmission of subcultural capital. Here Thornton is suggesting that rather than acting as ‘symbolic goods’ media channels and their consumption by clubbers are in themselves crucial to the delineation between ‘what is *in* and *out* of fashion’ (ibid.: 13 – 14, original emphasis), and therefore to the classification of markers of subcultural capital. As I shall illustrate in Chapter 4, some specialised global media outlets (ex. periodical electronic dance music magazines) through which club drug harm-reduction strategies (ex. taking ‘half’ instead of a whole Ecstasy tablet) are promulgated influence Fairfielder drug-taking behaviour. This should indeed be taken as evidence of how a tactful promotion of ‘safer’ club drug-taking practices is more effectively received and accommodated by young drug users than a prohibitive imposition by medical, legal, and other authorities. It also tallies with Thornton’s point that such media have a central role to play in defining, for instance, that taking half an Ecstasy tablet is both safer and more ‘fashionable’ than taking an entire or more Ecstasy tablets – not least because

²⁰ The implication here is that in larger European cities such as London or Paris, a scene that promotes and sustains the same music, taste and style as Fairfielders do in Malta would in practice provide the opportunity for greater financial and professional stability and rewards for DJs, promoters, and other professionals involved in it, even if just because the ‘market’ is larger, the selection of clubs and places where events can be held wider, and the masses of clubbers it attracts more numerous. In other words, it is reasonable to assume that it would be less difficult to turn DJing and event promotion into a stable full-time job in a metropolis in mainland Europe than it is for Fairfielder men in Malta, who quite apart from their role in Fairfielder event organisation are all occupied in ‘daytime’ jobs.

taking half a pill might indicate that one is up-to-date with not only the latest trends in dance music, but also those in club drug-taking. There are, however, other more localised social forces that define modalities of drug-taking as ‘in and out’ and ‘good and bad’, and in Malta these are inextricably tied to class divisions.

We now come to a point where Thornton’s theoretical position diverges from my own. The third difference between Thornton’s notion of subcultural capital and Bourdieu’s cultural capital is that the former is, at least partially, ontologically unfettered from hierarchies of social class. Whilst Thornton (1995: 12) concedes that class is not ‘irrelevant’ to how subcultural capital is accumulated and circulated, she maintains that ‘class is wilfully obfuscated by subcultural distinctions’. Subcultural capital, Thornton continues, is more strongly bound to generational differences between youth and parent cultures:

“Subcultural capitals fuel rebellion against, or rather escape from, the trappings of parental class. The assertion of subcultural distinction relies, in part, on a fantasy of classlessness” (ibid.: 12).

I do not intend to contest the contextual validity of Thornton’s point here. The argument that subcultural capital is more about scene-specific knowledge that is circulated between youths of similar tastes than it is about knowledge circulated through ‘domestic transmission of cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1986: 17) - and therefore that is highly bound to class, familial, and educational background - may well have been a correct one at the time and place of Thornton’s fieldwork. However, in this thesis I will illustrate how my own ethnographic evidence contradicts this position in two ways. First, because for Fairfielders how one consumes drugs - the quantities of drugs one takes, one’s comportment during a drug-taking event, whether one takes drugs discreetly, and so forth - indexes his or her positionality and worth not only with respect to the domain of club culture and night-time leisure, but also to wider Maltese society. Second and following, because Fairfielders’ judgments of how one consumes drugs is a

‘judgment of taste’ that directly leads to inflections about the social geography of the drug-taker in terms of his or her social class. It follows, therefore, that for Fairfielders the capacity to accumulate what Thornton defines as ‘subcultural capital’ through ‘desirable’ club drug-taking depends on predispositions that reflect broader Maltese conceptualisations of class belonging.

Chapter 3: Methodological Frameworks

3.1 Settings

The primary aim of my fieldwork was to note and gather first-hand information, accounts, and narratives from Fairfielders within environments in which they use club drugs, but also within others where the use of these drugs does not occur. Observing patterns of behaviour within settings of night-time leisure where Fairfielders were consuming club drugs, whilst informally chatting with them and noting their interactions with each other was thus an important process in my fieldwork. Equally important was establishing and building rapport with key informants and regularly meeting and having conversations with them about their drug use, but also about other subjects such as their recollections of events where they did not take drugs, impressions about other local drug scenes, and views about general developments or occurrences in the Maltese club scene.

In view of these aims, the main data-collection method that I used was participant observation, complemented by semi-structured interviews²¹ with Fairfielders at different points in time. Here, I adopted Michael Agar's suggested approach in letting 'observation and interview mutually interact with each other, either simultaneously or sequentially' (ibid. 1996: 159). In practice, between May 2016 and October 2017 I attended parties – also referred to by my informants as 'events' – that were organised and promoted by Fairfielders, where I observed their behaviours and interactions. These parties could either be 'public' events that were held in licensed venues (ex. clubs) and were open to attendees who are not members of the Fairfielder group, or 'secret events'²² that were held in unlicensed venues (ex. remote fields, private villas) and to which access was strictly regulated and limited by event organisers. Both public and secret events presented the opportunity for drug-taking, and each involved a 'night

²¹ A general schema for these interviews, which was also approved by the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee (UREC) in May 2016, is presented in Appendix 2.

²² This is an emic term that is used by Fairfielders to describe this specific type of event. A discussion about the significance of this terminology and a descriptive account of this type of event is presented in Chapter 8.

out' that was often divided into three subsequent phases: pre-drinks, the party, and the after-party²³. The frequency of these nights out peak between mid-June and mid-September, when Fairfielders usually organise an event on every weekend. During the Summer of 2016, I attended several of these events, usually meeting my informants for the pre-drinks phase in the evening and following them through the party and after-party phases, which often spanned the night until the late hours of the next morning. Whilst during these nights out I took advantage of opportunities to chat with my informants, my main aim was to observe and note behaviours and exchanges²⁴ that I could talk to them about at later times when I met them in other places where drugs were not being consumed.

These other places included cafes, bars, and restaurants where I would either join groups of Fairfielders for occasional meals or meet them individually. More importantly, they included the homes of some of my key informants to which - once I established strong relations, trust, and presence within the group - I was often invited together with other Fairfielders for drinks or meals. My presence in these 'domestic' settings was central to my fieldwork, as here I had the opportunity to note some of the most interesting retrospective Fairfielder narratives about drug-related experiences and related matters²⁵.

As I spent more time in both party and domestic settings, I realised that whilst it was central to the 'eventfulness' of Fairfielder parties, the act or process of drug-taking consists of a rather repetitive - even banal - process that, *per se*, did not require extensive hours of observation to understand. The conversations that I had with informants about drug-taking away from party settings - about how they moderate their use, how they evaluate other drug takers and events,

²³ These three phases of a 'night out' were also identified by Pennay (2012) in her work with Australian club drug users.

²⁴ At these events, I briefly noted my observations in point form on a 'Notepad' application of my mobile phone. I then used these points to write up lengthier fieldnotes, either immediately after the party when I returned to my apartment or on the following day.

²⁵ For instance, as I illustrate in Chapter 7, being present for intimate 'discussion sessions' with Fairfielders over coffee at Gennaro's apartment was crucial to my learning about drug-taking behaviours that were considered 'bad' and sanctionable.

how they organise their own events, and so forth – on the other hand grew more revealing and interesting as I progressed with my fieldwork. Here I do not mean that attending Fairfield parties became unimportant with time, but only that I would have been unable to fully explore and understand the significance of drug-taking for Fairfielders by solely following them within club or party settings.

The establishment of familiarity and intimacy within domestic settings was indispensable for my complete grasp of what may be framed as the Fairfielder ‘idiom’ (Evans-Pritchard 1937) and thus of the broader significance and role of drug-taking (ex. as a process of disempowering/empowering consumption, in the judgments of persons, in the practice of discretion, and so forth) for my informants. Undoubtedly, it was following these quiet and ‘sober’ conversations with my informants that I could return to party settings with fresh insight that allowed me to notice the more subtle and discreet exchanges that were taking place in contexts where drugs were present. It was also the trust and familiarity that I managed to establish with my informants within domestic settings that led to both my continued access to these settings themselves and invitations to other intimate settings where my informants held their more secretive events.

3.2 ‘The Drug Field from Within’: Methodological Challenges

Irrespective of where it is conducted, ethnographic research of the ‘drug field’ presents specific methodological and ethical challenges that must be considered and addressed by the ethnographer. The magnitude of these challenges, of course, corresponds to the type of population that the ethnographer is working with. Ethnographers following communities of marginalised ‘addicts’ or so-called ‘junkies’ (ex. intravenous heroin injectors and crack cocaine users) presenting high risks of sudden death from overdose, crime-related violence, co-morbidity with diseases such as HIV, and ‘social suffering’ (see Bourgois 2003; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Agar 2007; Taylor 1993) must undoubtedly develop an ‘ethnographic toolkit’ (Page and Singer 2010: 113) that is different from the one that is used by ethnographers working

with groups of individuals who use club drugs recreationally and lead otherwise ‘functional’ lives. This is not to maintain that the complexities of ethnographic practice amongst party drug users require any less thought than those of fieldwork amongst heroin or crack cocaine users, but only that there is an undeniable epistemological difference between these two categories of drug users and that in the case of the former the ethnographer is – at least under ‘ordinary’ circumstances of the field – less concerned with the possibility of being faced with matters of drug-related violence, disease, and fatalities during his or her fieldwork. In this respect it should be made clear that - notwithstanding some initial personal apprehension during the initial stages of fieldwork²⁶ – at no point did I feel that any of my informants were at risk from any of these factors. Nevertheless, there were two key issues that I had to carefully think about.

The first had to do with my own identity and role as a ‘native’ ethnographer who was concentrating on illegal and stigmatised behaviour in small-scale Maltese society. In this respect I needed to consider that, because of the nature of my research topic, I would be putting myself in situations that were subject to various risks and sanctions²⁷, and moreover that I would be doing this in my own ‘backyard’ - not to mention the backyard of my relatives, friends, academic supervisors, and so forth. Furthermore, I also needed to reflect upon the native ethnographer’s ‘baggage’ (Richards-Greaves 2013) that I, as a Maltese man in his early 30s who was as much a subject of my informants’ impressions and judgments as any other local person, was inevitably carrying with me on my field. The second issue had to do with safeguarding the anonymity of my informants and ensuring that confidentiality was always prioritised and respected. This matter becomes increasingly complex given the secretive nature of the phenomenon I was interested in on the one hand, and the relative ease with which –

²⁶ This principally stemmed from my previous inexperience working with drug users, but also from the fact that at the beginning of fieldwork I was not aware of the extent to which Fairfielders moderated their drug-taking. I neither wished to find myself in environments where ‘overdosing’ was a real possibility, nor where informants or people with whom they were in contact behaved erratically, incoherently, or violently. My apprehension subsided as I realised that Fairfielders were consistently disciplined and moderated their drug-taking to the extent that it could be considered ‘responsible’.

²⁷ I present a description of one such instance, which involved my presence at an ‘illegal’ Fairfield event, in Chapter 8.

because of the ‘smallness’ of Malta – locales, settings, and to a lesser degree my informants themselves may eventually be recognised by readers of my ethnographic text on the other. I outline the measures I took in tackling each of these two issues separately below.

3.2.1 Features of my Identity as a Native Ethnographer

There are three main features of my identity as a local ethnographer, which impacted my subjectivity during my fieldwork. First, I have been an active member of the Maltese ‘alternative’ music scene - forming part of various local bands as a synthesizer player and producing my own tracks - since I was in my teens. My ‘indie’ band-oriented music preference and artistic direction, however, does not generally correspond to the DJ and club-oriented ‘house’ music that is central to the Fairfielders scene²⁸. Notwithstanding this difference, when I initially introduced myself to many of my informants they were already familiar with who I was and with some of my work as a musician, as well as with my reputation as an avid collector of synthesizers and drum machines.

My reputation as a ‘synth collector’ worked particularly well as a topic of initial conversations with the senior men of the group, many of whom have a keen interest in the ‘production’ side of music. My own interest in music also established my presence as an anthropologist who was researching club drug use, but who at the same time had other attributes and personality traits that I was willing to talk about and share with my informants. Without a doubt, this was pivotal to fostering rapport and trust with Fairfielders, and to the progression of my work as an

²⁸ My overall feeling was that Fairfielders were acutely aware of this difference in musical taste, and this became especially evident when they would mention foreign DJs and tracks with whom I was unfamiliar. On these occasions I never tried to mask my relative lack of knowledge, however, and I openly accepted and acknowledged that they have a much vaster knowledge of ‘house’ music than I do. Coupled with the fact that I was never involved in the organisation of any Fairfielders events and therefore I held no ‘political’ or ‘economic’ stakes in these events, this meant that I was never treated as a ‘complete’ active member of the scene on the same level as other Fairfielders men. At the same time, however, I felt that this contributed to my earning a positive reputation as a ‘diplomatic’ and ‘neutral’ individual who had no personal agenda to demonstrate to them.

essentially ‘collaborative’ (Agar 1996: 4) learning exercise that I undertook together with informants.

The second significant feature of my identity is that as a member of Maltese society, during fieldwork I was subject to parental and other concerns about the possibility of becoming ‘contaminated’ by the drug scene that I was exploring. When I first told my parents about my intentions to conduct fieldwork with recreational drug users, for instance, they were concerned about the possibility of me ‘getting involved with the wrong crowd’ or ‘running into trouble’. Similar types of concerns were also raised by well-meaning senior colleagues at the University of Malta, who advised me to take special care with my field inquiries and choose my informants wisely lest someone with vested interests in the drug economy takes my questions the wrong way.

I thankfully reached the writing phase of my doctoral degree unscathed. This does not mean, however, that these concerns were unjustified and that I could ‘mute’ them whilst not allowing them to have a tangible impact on the way I negotiated my identity and presence on the field. Quite the contrary. I did not, for instance, seek to identify and frequent drug dealers in the same manner that I did users. I was aware that - also because a significant part of my argument rests on the notion that these drugs are either contaminated or adulterated within the structures of their distribution - getting a dealer’s perspective could enrich my final thesis. I chose to forfeit this, however, because whilst I was confident that the trust that I cultivated with Fairfielders was mutual, I could not be sure that I could foster the same type of rapport with dealers who were ‘outsiders’ to the group²⁹. In this respect I acknowledge that my ethnography may come across as ‘safer’ than, for instance, Philippe Bourgois’s ethnography of cocaine users and dealers in East Harlem (ibid. 2003), and this may be taken as a limitation of my work. Heeding

²⁹ I discuss this property of the Fairfield dealer as an ‘outsider’ in detail in Chapter 9.

the advice of choosing my informants wisely and limiting their pool to those I deemed trustworthy was nevertheless a precaution that I considered essential.

Finally, I also needed to consider my own upbringing as a member of a middle-class family in a town in the Southern part of Malta, which contrasts with the upbringing of my informants as members of upper-class families in Northern regions of the island. This results in some significant and tangible differences. It corresponds to, for instance, the fact that unlike my informants I come from a home where the principal spoken language has always been Maltese rather than English. Whilst I was comfortable using English in everyday conversations with my informants, I only became familiar with the nuanced valence of speaking Maltese and code-switching as an egalitarian form of conversation between Fairfielders men as I lived and experienced it through fieldwork. Another related fact is that unlike many of my informants, I never attended one of the few exclusive mixed-sex Maltese private schools, but instead went to a boys-only church school where the student population was rather large and included students presenting varying and contrasting social geographies. My overall impression or ‘hunch’ was that partly because of this, my informants’ conceptualisations of group membership, intimacy, and complicity were different from my own.

Notwithstanding my position as a ‘native’, therefore, traits of my identity resulted in both positive and negative ‘tensions’ that characterised my role as a fieldworker: in other words, these traits facilitated participant-observation at times and rendered it more complicated at others. Rather than attempting to distance myself from these complexities, I chose to embrace them. In working towards this, I found the consideration and application of ‘Gonzo’ anthropology (Wozniak 2014, Federowicz 2013) and methods particularly useful. Although ‘gonzo’ is a term borrowed from journalism – specifically Hunter S. Thompson’s pioneering and ‘unorthodox’ journalistic methods (Federowicz 2013: 58) – it is arguably closer to ethnography in being rooted in intensive participant observation, ‘going native’, and ‘being there’ (ibid. 2013: 58 – 59).

As defined by Federowicz (2013: 62 – 64), gonzo anthropology implies the study of cultural performance through active engagement with research subjects as performers on the field, and through the ethnographer also ‘becoming’ an agent of cultural performance, and ethnography becoming a form of performance itself (ibid. 2013: 62 – 64). The ‘voice’ of the ethnographer, therefore, becomes ‘one voice, albeit a primary/soloist one, within a chorus of others’ (ibid. 2013: 60). Gonzo’s aim to ‘transcend ... binary notions [of power] and instead focus on a collaborative, mutually beneficial production of knowledge’ (Wozniak 2014: 468) guided my approach towards interacting with and learning from my own informants.

In applying this approach, I aimed for an understanding of my informants and their drug-taking, but also other dimensions of their lives, through a full immersion in their day-time and night-time activities. I positioned myself as a subject of my field: whilst my informants were fully aware and consented of my presence as an anthropologist, I became part of the group to the extent that I, like them, had to follow and reproduce its ethos. Quite apart from the professional requirement of following rules of ethical anthropological practice throughout both my fieldwork and writing up, therefore, I was also subjected to the rules of the Fairfielder group itself. I had to be as discreet as they were, and my continued access to the most interesting nooks and crannies of my field depended on this. This implied, for instance, that when I was invited to exclusive parties I had to be as secretive about them as my informants were. It also meant that I needed to learn to ask my questions tactfully at the right times, and eventually recognise when it was time to stop asking them altogether³⁰.

3.2.2 Ethical Considerations

One of the major issues all ethnographers working in the drug field are faced with is that populations and cohorts of drug-takers are in the first instance often ‘invisible’ - in the twofold

³⁰ Around July 2017, I could intuit that some of my informants were not so forthcoming and responsive to my questions as they had been over the previous months. My impression was that, to them, my inquiries were becoming repetitive and even dull. I thus realised that I was growing close to overstaying my welcome as a fieldworker amongst them, and that the time had come to conclude my fieldwork.

sense that they do not openly engage in drug-taking behaviour in public and that they are hard to locate and access - and in the second instance will wish to remain so during, but also importantly after, the times when the ethnographer working them³¹. In this respect, protecting my informants' confidentiality and ensuring that they could not be recognised or 'traced back' through my work was my priority throughout the duration of my research.

I did this in three ways. First, by using pseudonyms to replace names of people, places, and event names. I apply this strictly throughout my text, apart from when I refer to rather non-specific localities in Malta that are in any case inevitably recognisable (ex. when I refer to Paceville in Chapter 1, or Malta's sister island, Gozo, in Chapter 7). Even in these cases, my informants or the specific places they frequented are not identifiable through the disclosure of the names of these places.

Second, by largely forfeiting the inclusion of photographs of recognisable people and places. Whilst during my first months of field 'excursions' I took photographs of Fairfielder event settings on my mobile phone (which also aided in my recollection of events as I wrote up my fieldnotes), I decided against including any of these or similar photographs here³². This especially because of the small size of Malta and the easily recognisable architectural and topographical characteristics of local places, such as clubs and outdoor unlicensed venues where some of the secret Fairfielder events took place.

Third, by ensuring that there was no paper or any other type of document 'trail' through which my informants may be identified, including forms of written consent for participation of

³¹ A notable exception here is the photo-ethnography of homeless heroin addicts by Bourgois and Schonberg (2009), in which the authors complement their text with striking photographs of their fully consenting informants and the environments within which they took drugs. In this case it was the informants themselves who requested for their photographs to be included, as they believed that the reality and full extent of their 'suffering' could only be conveyed visually (ibid.: 9 - 10).

³² I have also 'destroyed' these photos and disposed of the mobile phone on which they were taken since completing this thesis.

research subjects that are usually required by the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee (UREC). Here, I had to present a case to the ethics committee for the rule of written consent to be waived in favour of a *verbal* process of consent. In this respect, there were four main considerations that I put forward to UREC, and that I am reproducing below:

1. My research is concerned with illicit drug use, as it is practiced by fully autonomous adults, who would certainly know better than signing a document through which they directly or indirectly incriminate themselves by declaring that they indeed use or have used drugs, or even 'know something' about drugs. It would be unethical itself to even request written rather than verbal consent, and I would feel very uncomfortable asking for them to 'empower' me with such a document.
2. Seeking written consent would greatly compromise the measures I will be taking in safeguarding informant confidentiality, by using pseudonyms throughout the research process, at all stages of writing. Identities of my informants shall always be concealed, even from my supervisors, and through the measures that I have outlined in my proposal³³, I shall be exercising great care in not producing any data that may in some way or other traced back to them. A signed written consent form would therefore in itself be a source of 'risk' for my informants, and as the American Anthropological Association (2009) states in its guidelines for ethical practice, this reason alone is enough to justify waiving written consent, for '*it is the quality of consent, not the format, that is relevant*' (ibid. 2009: 3).
3. My own role, and to some extent safety, in 'owning' documents of consent may also be compromised. I do not wish to be running any risks in my informants becoming

³³ The approved ethics research proposal is presented together with the relevant documentation in Appendix 1 to Appendix 3.

suspicious of my role as researcher, and them thinking that I have any ulterior motive for speaking to them about their illicit drug use.

4. Seeking written consent may have negative consequences on my research in turning my role as an ethnographer, that requires a conscience and awareness for what is 'culturally appropriate' to specific circumstances, to a contractual agreement. Given the nature and main topic of my research, it would in fact be culturally inappropriate to ask for written consent, and therefore traceable evidence of their drug use, from this particular 'sub-group' of people. It would arouse great suspicion, and in doing so would greatly compromise my fieldwork.

Following the submission of my detailed research ethics proposal, together with these points attached to a carefully thought-out cover letter written by my principal supervisor - which UREC meticulously audited - I formally met with the committee accompanied by my supervisor, and there I had the opportunity to directly clarify pending questions and issues which they raised. Notwithstanding some initial apprehension about the ethical sensitivities of the topic, they understood and appreciated the validity of my research as cutting-edge and necessary and were satisfied that my methodology and approach adequately covered their directives for ethical research practice. I was therefore granted UREC approval with no revisions to my proposal, in May 2016.

Throughout both my fieldwork and my writing process, I am confident that I have been meticulous enough to satisfy both my obligations as an anthropologist working in line with the guidelines for ethical practice (American Anthropological Association 2009), but more importantly my personal obligations towards my informants. By the end of my fieldwork most of these people were not only informants of which identities I was professionally bound to

protect but had also become close friends, and this made me take the issue of confidentiality even more seriously as I was writing up this thesis.

Part II: Antidotes

Chapter 4: ‘Normalisation’ and the Appeal of the Problem

4.1 Introduction

In the anthropological exploration of club drug use in contemporary society, a consideration of the ‘normalisation thesis’ originally proposed by Howard Park, Judith Aldridge and Fiona Measham (1998) in their seminal work on increasing use of recreational³⁴ or ‘non-addictive’ drugs amongst youths of North-Western Britain in some detail is essential, for two reasons.

First, because it raises the question of whether the growth in prevalence of youthful experimentation with recreational suggests their use is today being treated - by both users and abstainers - as a ‘normal’ type of behaviour. Here the normalisation thesis casts serious doubts on the hypothesis previously advanced by Howard S. Becker (1963) that recreational drug use was a ‘deviant’ and ‘pathological’ practice limited to marginalised subcultural groups of youths.

Second and more importantly for my research, because as a ‘conceptual tool’ (Parker 2005) it continues to be pivotal to theoretical developments in anthropological and sociological drug studies that have been increasingly focused on the subtler and ‘processural’ dimensions of the increased prevalence of youthful recreational drug use (Pennay and Measham 2016). This implies that, rather than concentrating on the question of whether normalisation has over the past two decades ‘occurred’ or otherwise, it is more useful to think of it as *fluid, selective, and culturally-specific* process that may occur in different ways and to different degrees. Rather than on a concept of normalisation as the inevitable ‘outcome’ of an increased cultural accommodation of and access to recreational drugs in industrialised societies, therefore, it is

³⁴ In their original study published in 1998, Parker et al. argued that cannabis, amphetamines, LSD and Ecstasy to some degree all fall within the recreational drug category, whereas those that they defined as ‘harder’ drugs like heroin and cocaine do not. In a later text about club drug consumption (Measham et al 2001), however, the same authors note that cocaine has increasingly also come to be considered a recreational drug.

more useful to focus on the ways in which cultural, political, and economic conditions transform the ways in which different users themselves ‘normally’ engage with these drugs.

In this chapter I concentrate on this conceptual utility of the normalisation thesis as I apply it to my own work. Whilst I critically engage with the thesis and related texts to bring out its limitations, my principal aim is not to empirically invalidate it or otherwise. Rather, I use it as a departing point for reflecting on how Fairfielders situationally engage with club drugs – items that, as I have shown in Chapter 1, in any eventuality occur as ‘extraordinary’ and ‘problematic’ commodities³⁵. From this perspective, I frame normalisation as a process of active negotiation engaged in by Fairfielders, that does not preclude considerations of the inherently problematic aspects of these substances and their use. It is rather the challenge of facing and overcoming these problems that gives club drug-taking its appealing and distinctive value for Fairfielders.

I begin by presenting an overview of the normalisation framework together with some of the most prominent lines of criticism that have been addressed towards it, followed by some of the more recent developments about the topic. I closely refer to these texts to develop an important dimension of my argument that has to do with how Fairfielders moderate and modulate the drug-taking experience. I also feel that summarising these texts in some detail is important because they have informed some broad initial questions that I asked myself as I set out to organise my fieldnotes and begin to write up this thesis: Is club drug-taking indeed a *normalised* - and therefore not *problematized or pathologized* - enterprise amongst Fairfielders in Malta? If yes, does this mean that Fairfielders ‘drug culture’ is an extension of wider contemporary and ‘mainstream’ youth culture, at both the global and local levels? What criteria do Fairfielders themselves set to satisfy the condition of ‘normal’ or ‘acceptable’ versus ‘problematic’ forms

³⁵ The notion of club drugs as ‘commodities’ is one that I explore further through this and the next chapters. Here I use the term broadly in implying that club drugs are items that have saleability and are bought as commodities, but as we shall see there are significant peculiarities in both their structures of distribution and the ways in which they are treated and ‘sanitised’ after they are acquired by Fairfielders, which render them different from other ‘ordinary’ commodities. I return to this and discuss it fully in Chapter 9.

of drug-taking behaviour? Are patterns of Fairfielder consumption of Ecstasy and cocaine analogically similar to patterns of other so-called 'ordinary' forms of consumption?

The process of unpacking these questions requires the determination of three facets of Fairfielder drug-taking that I shall be addressing in this and the following chapter. First, whether Fairfielders normalise their drug-taking in the sense of regarding it simply as an ordinary type of consumption, or whether on the other hand they more complexly engage in active strategies to navigate through problems that they still themselves attach to Ecstasy and cocaine use. In more practical terms, whether Fairfielders simply take these drugs as they would any other consumable, and thus treat their consumption as a mundane and quotidian component of leisure and their participation within the Maltese night-time economy, or otherwise.

Second, whether the substantive nature of these drugs as 'faulty commodities' and potentially dangerous consumables is still of concern to Fairfielders, may at all allow for the normalisation of club drug-taking. Here, it will be particularly important to determine whether this inherently problematic nature of club drugs may be situated *within* or *outside* the model of normalisation; in the first instance the model would still be supported, in the second instance less so.

Third and finally, whether Fairfielders weigh and qualify their drug-taking, as a normalised practice or otherwise, against both 'popular' conceptions of club drugs as well as against other forms and modalities of drug-taking.

4.2 The Normalisation Thesis: A Critical Overview

The normalisation thesis emerged from a longitudinal study of drug-related attitudes and behaviours of around eight hundred adolescents in Britain, which Parker and colleagues carried out over five years in the early to mid-nineties. Based on both quantitative and qualitative results of the study, the thesis rests on the premise that late modernity is marked by rapid social

shifts and a relative instability in terms of key features such as the labour market and education, parenting and marriage, and increasingly commoditised forms of leisure. Embedded within a general cultural framework of individualisation, risk consideration and risk taking, these shifts lead to a distinct ‘experience of growing up’ in contemporary Western society that requires a mitigation of high societal expectations and the stressful ‘impacts of successes and failures’ through ‘self-medication’, which Parker et al. support through evidence for widespread consumption of recreational drugs – also categorised as ‘time out’ drugs in a later text by Measham and colleagues (ibid. 2001: 4) - by British youths during times of leisure. In turn, this results in a tension between official medico-legal discourse of the ‘war on drugs’ that is upheld by the state and recreational drug consumption that is ‘socially accommodated’ (Parker 2005: 206) through a process of normalisation that is not limited to a minority of ‘deviant’ groups but rather spans from the ‘margins towards the centre of youth culture’ (Parker et al. 1998: 151 – 153).

As first proposed by Parker et al., the normalisation of recreational drug use can be unpacked into six constitutive dimensions which have driven it to become a tangible and widespread phenomenon of late modernity. First, the dimension of commoditisation of recreational drugs that has led to them becoming increasingly available on a global scale, also as an inevitable direct result of relatively flexible regulation of ‘licit’ channels for free market and trade that no less facilitates mobility and transportation of ‘illicit’ commodities. Second, the heightened frequency of trying these drugs that is not limited to one particular social demographic of youths, but is rather equally incidental across class, race, and gender. Third, the marked incidence in trajectories of continued use after trying that become especially pronounced and marked by poly-drug use amongst youths who participate within the dance music club scene and corresponding night-time economy. Fourth, an inevitable exposure of young people to recreational drugs and the resulting permeation of ‘drug knowledge’ in the wider society, by way of which even abstainers become - at least to some extent - familiarised with these drugs and their effects. Fifth, an ‘open-mindedness’ in terms of using recreational drugs in the future

by both users and abstainers, which suggests that a consideration of and possibility for, 'sensible recreational use' (Parker 2005: 207) and experimentation with these drugs is to some extent allowed for, and accommodated, within the present bracket of youth culture. The sixth dimension consists of a less easily quantifiable 'cultural accommodation' of recreational drug use as a sensible type of drug use that in contrast to other forms of use that interfere with ordinary practices of daily life, may be upheld alongside both productive working lives and other forms of leisure that do not involve drug-taking (Parker et al. 1998: 152 – 157).

In a later paper, Parker (2005) also suggests a seventh dimension of normalisation as consisting of the distinction between problematic and sensible illicit drug use that is being increasingly accommodated, albeit 'quietly executed' (ibid.: 213), in official drug policy and related state legislature. Parker evidences this dimension whilst considering the example of cannabis that has been declassified from a Class B to a Class C illicit drug in Britain, as a result of which possession of small quantities of the drug for personal adult use constitutes an offence that does not lead to arrest (ibid.: 213 – 214). Here, it is worth noting that in 2009 – five years after the publication of this later paper by Parker - cannabis was reclassified as a Class B drug under the Gordon Brown administration in Britain. Yet, also accompanied by a generally and undeniably more favourable shift in how the consumption of the drug is projected and perceived by some channels of mainstream Western media and public (see Stringer and Maggard 2016), the debate about whether cannabis should be classified as a scheduled substance and whether its use should be controlled at all or otherwise in Britain and elsewhere has gained considerable momentum over recent years (see Braakmann and Jones 2014, Pudney et al. 2010).

As the EMCDDA (2017a: 12 – 13) notes, there has also been a 'general trend' across several European countries (including Malta) to depenalise simple possession of small amounts of cannabis as well as other drugs like Ecstasy. Whilst trafficking and dealing in all types of illicit drugs remains a serious criminal offence, this further suggests that at the level of Euro-American state policy there is an ongoing shift towards softening the official approach to

possession and consumption of these types of drugs, with Portugal having notoriously decriminalised possession for personal use of all drugs in 2001, and some cases such as that of the Netherlands and a growing number of American states even bringing direct and indirect state capitalisation on providing licit channels for the commodification and recreational use of marijuana.

Thus, the later observation made by Parker with respect to at least some types of recreational (and in the case of cannabis, also medicinal) drug use being accommodated by the state seems to remain relevant, correct, and also applicable to Malta. Notwithstanding this important shift in official policy that is a move away from blanket prohibition and towards a 'harm-reduction framework', however, Parker (2005: 213 – 214) argues that especially with respect to poly-drug use amongst youths there still is a 'rubicon to cross' in the appropriate and timely coordination of official interventions that acknowledge recreational drug use as inevitably embedded within contemporary youth culture and the attached consumption of leisure.

4.2.1 Critiques of the Normalisation Thesis

A number of critical readings of the normalisation thesis as it was originally proposed by Parker and colleagues have been put forward. Shildrick (2002) for example argues that the normalisation thesis falls short in failing to consider that different groups of young people, presenting variances in both social backgrounds and style, relate differently to drugs. She instead proposes a theory of 'differentiated normalisation', that she suggests more adequately frames attitudes towards drugs as these are presented differently by three contrasting groups ('Ordinary', 'Spectacular', and 'Trackers') of young Britons, with each group being more or less tolerant of particular kinds of drug use than the other (ibid.: 41 – 44). Shildrick thus refutes a 'one-dimensional meta-narrative' that she argues is 'imposed' by the normalisation thesis with respect to how youths relate to and approach drug use. Instead she stresses that the availability and use of certain types of drugs like solvents, for example, remains more prevalent amongst youths who belong within the lower socioeconomic class bracket and the pattern of

normalisation that applies to this group of youths cannot simply be transposed onto others (ibid.: 45 – 46).

Shiner and Newburn (2017: 58) propose a similar counterargument to the ‘apparent ubiquitousness of youthful drug use’ that is suggested by the normalisation thesis. In their critique, these authors note that an increase in ‘frequency’ in the lifetime prevalence of drugs *tried* by young people is not necessarily followed by *regularity* of use. Nor does it imply an overall attribution of ‘normalcy’ to and a cultural accommodation of drug-taking behaviour. Contrarily, young drug users still seem to have conflicting views about drugs as they must navigate through a problematisation of their own use, whilst abstainers tend to associate drug use with forms of behaviour that are ‘traditionally’ viewed as deviant such as crime. A failure to differentiate between frequency and normalcy, Shiner and Newburn suggest, is therefore a fundamental shortcoming that leads to a projected acceptance of recreational drug use that is both oversimplified and overstated within the framework of normalisation (ibid.: 58 – 63).

Michelle Gourley (2004) also challenges the normalisation thesis on the grounds of her own analysis of a group of young adults who used Ecstasy at music events in Canberra and Sydney. For Gourley, the normalisation thesis forms part of a wider body of postmodern thought that has erroneously and too quickly dismissed the role of youth subcultures in drug-taking practices (ibid.: 60). She argues that subcultural theory, which considers a stratification of many subcultural groups of young drug-takers rather than a singular ‘youth-drug culture’ continues to be a most useful analytical tool in the study of recreational drug - and specifically Ecstasy - use. She considers an over-arching view that holds recreational drug-taking as a normalised enterprise of all youth groups and contemporary Western culture to be problematic. Instead, she argues that consumption of Ecstasy is better situated within Becker’s framework of subcultural deviance that maintains the user may only become ‘equipped’ with the knowledge necessary to ‘organise’ the drug-taking experience through membership within a specific subcultural group of drug-taking peers (Gourley 2004: 59 – 60). For Gourley, therefore,

experiences of and attitudes towards recreational drug use are eminently shaped by peer-to-peer interaction that occurs within what may still be framed as subcultural groups. These experiences and attitudes in turn remain situational, as they may change over time with the collective experience and dynamics of the group.

4.2.2 Micro-Strategies of Normalisation

As the normalisation thesis has continued to stimulate debate over recent years, there has also been further research that has been concerned with the normalisation of recreational – and most specifically club – drug taking. Rather than treating normalisation at the macro level in terms of the links between prevalence and social accommodation of recreational drug use, this research considers it as an active process by way of which users mitigate the conflicts between perceived benefits and drawbacks that are attached to drug-taking through the engagement of ‘micro-strategies’ (Shiner and Winstock 2015, Ravn 2012, Pennay and Moore 2010, Rödner Sznitman 2008). These authors have focused on different components of these strategies: Rödner Sznitman (2008) and Pennay and Moore (2010) have explored the discursive micro-elements of normalisation amongst club drug-takers in Sweden and Australia respectively, Ravn has focused on some practical and performative elements of normalisation amongst clubbers in Denmark, and Shiner and Winstock have most recently analysed data gathered through two surveys (the ‘Global Drug Survey’ and the ‘Crime Survey of England and Wales’) to suggest that intra-psychic processes are equally important as the socially prescribed dimensions of normalisation. It is important to consider these further studies for the purposes of my own research, not only because they usefully bridge the gaps between the normalisation thesis as a conceptual framework and youthful recreational drug use as a practice, but also because in doing so this research itself unveils some further subtle complexities of club drug-taking.

More specifically, the exploration of micro-strategies or ‘micro-politics’ (Pennay and Moore 2010) of normalisation provides valuable insight into how club drug-taking is managed by users

in parallel to otherwise perfectly functional lives. As Pennay and Moore (2010: 563) note, and as is certainly the case with Fairfielders, recreational drug users are often ‘well-integrated young people with diverse social networks’ in the sense that they lead what are by societal standards considered to be productive and normal lives apart from when they are taking drugs. Rödner Sznitman similarly categorises informants whom she interviewed as ‘socially integrated drug users’ which she defines according to three criteria: ‘structured everyday lives’ as students or workers with access to ‘legal economic resources’, the lack of contact with rehabilitative or other drug-related social establishments, and ongoing poly-drug use (ibid. 2008: 466). As these authors observe with reference to these properties of their respective groups of informants, recreational drug users must often navigate through both direct and indirect pressures that may be sustained by at least some of their peers and others, and through which any type of drug-taking remains perceived as a morally questionable and stigmatised practice. These conditions may thus result in conflicting roles that recreational drug users must take up as con-currently active participants within both drug-taking circles and wider society which includes abstainers.

Mitigating this conflict involves a process of normalisation of drug use that may be activated through two different mechanisms. The first mechanism is normalisation through adjustment (Rödner Sznitman 2008: 459 – 451) or *assimilation*. Clearly drawing upon the notion of the ‘neutralisation’ of stigma proposed by Erving Goffman (1963), assimilative normalisation implies the process through which users recognise their drug-taking behaviour as ‘incongruent’ with ‘mainstream’ societal values, but effectively manage this behaviour for it to not carry any *observable* negative impacts on their other practices and duties. Assimilative normalisation, therefore, does not involve challenging mainstream representations of drug use, but rather an acceptance of these representations and a modification of drug-taking behaviour to accommodate them (Pennay and Moore 2010: 559). Here, I am emphasising the lack of ‘observable’ properties of the negative impacts of drug use that mark assimilative normalisation, because in drawing upon Goffman the notion itself assumes that the recreational

drug-user is a potentially '*discreditable*' but not a '*discredited*' individual (Goffman 1963: 41). In other words, in contrast to those who are visibly 'stigmatised' through conditions that are immediately discernible such as disabled or disfigured individuals or even individuals who are addicted to 'hard' drugs and who manifest signs of their addiction (the discredited), recreational drug users may only potentially become discredited if their drug use is revealed, and as far as this does not occur they may only be categorised as discreditable (Rödner Sznitman 2008: 450).

Essentially, therefore, assimilative normalisation implies strategies through which a user's drug-taking behaviour remains discreetly 'hidden' or not indexed to other parties, and at least in terms of what may be readily noticed uninfluential on other societally-approved activities within which he or she participates. In this sense it is a strategy through which the user is able to externalise or 'project' an image (Goffman 1963: 71) of the self that he or she believes will be perceived as 'nondeviant' (Rödner Sznitman 2008: 450) by others, and in this way maximise the benefits of what Goffman terms 'passing' (ibid. 1963: 42) as normal.

At the same time, however, assimilative normalisation also involves a process through which users negotiate means of compromise between their own practices and narratives and societal disapproval of drug-taking. This follows a process of internalisation of 'mainstream representations' of drug use (Pennay and Moore 2010: 559), which users appropriate and reframe in relation to how and when they take drugs in reaching a sort of compromise between 'pleasure' on one hand and 'social control' on the other (Shiner and Winstock 2015). Through this process, users normalise their drug-taking to *themselves* as well as, and prior to, concealing it from others. In practice, this may translate to self-limitation and regimentation of use, using drugs at only certain times and in certain places, moderating use, desistance, and even an underestimation in self-reported frequency of drug use that Shiner and Winstock argue may evidence a 'bias' that serves to neutralise 'anxieties that might otherwise encourage users to reassess their patterns of use' (ibid. 2010: 254 - 255). In cases when these strategies of self-limitation fail and users are faced with what they deem to be failings through self-assessment

of their own drug-taking patterns, a sense of failure or 'inadequacy' may be expressed; with reference to Australian club drug users, for example, Pennay and Moore (2012: 568) note how this becomes evident in the case of informants who perceive themselves as 'weak' because they engage in what they deem to be 'excessive' drug use. One important point to take in here, therefore, is that assimilative normalisation works both ways, in the sense that it involves an 'intimate connection' (Shiner and Winstock 2015: 255) between what is individual-psychological and what is collective-social.

The second type of normalisation of drug use involves a mechanism of *transformation*, which contrarily to assimilative normalisation does not entail attempts by users to pass as normal through any sort of assimilation of or partial conformity with societal representations of drug-taking, but instead involves processes through which those representations are challenged. *Transformational normalisation* of drug use can occur at both the 'formal' and the 'discursive' levels (Pennay and Moore 2010: 559). At the formal level, drug users may publicly question a dominant anti-drug ideology and in doing so may project their choice to use drugs as the 'right' or 'more enlightened' one versus what they perceive to be an overly conservative or outdated ideology. This does not mean that drug users come to perceive themselves as better or superior than abstainers, although this may indeed occur in cases of users who believe that taking certain hallucinogenic drugs can bring them to experience some higher level of consciousness or spiritual enlightenment, for example. In all cases, however, a dominant societal perspective that prohibits and stigmatises is regarded as inadequate and openly challenged through formal transformational normalisation.

As Rödner Sznitman also notes with reference to various kinds of activist groups including those unrelated to drug-taking, transformational normalisation at the formal level is often set in motion by 'identity-based social movements', which through activism and protest seek to subvert and either 'redefine' or 'reinterpret' the negative stigma that is otherwise established as attached to their identity. It implies actions through which the stigmatised openly display,

disclose, and celebrate their stigma as a point of difference, thus promoting a shift towards ‘a way of interacting with normals which does not entail an internalisation of devalued personal identities’ (ibid. 2008: 452).

Rödner Sznitman considers this motive to be at the core of the ‘transformational agenda’ of drug users as ‘lay people’ or ‘deviants’, but on a reflexive note she also posits that researchers who are active within the field of drug use and who subscribe to the normalisation thesis may themselves indirectly be advancing a transformational agenda with respect to a reinterpretation and social accommodation of deviance that is connected to drug use, and thus themselves be part of the ‘normalisation project’ (ibid.: 458).

In contrast to formal transformational normalisation, *discursive transformational normalisation* of drug use is generally a much more low-key affair, as it does not involve activism or protest but rather a private reinterpretation of meaning or ‘alternative readings of drugs, pleasure and desire to those provided by mainstream discourses’ (Pennay and Moore 2010: 559 – 560). These alternative interpretations may figure centrally in user narratives about their own drug-taking, not least when these are externalised and discursively presented to the ethnographer. Pennay and Moore (2010: 568) note how this occurred in the case of two informants who rejected a dominant view that upholds ‘self-control’ and instead emphasised the importance of achieving pleasure through ‘unrestrained’ drug-taking.

A less straightforward type of discursive transformational normalisation is noted by Rödner Sznitman (2008: 470), as she observes that whilst her informants sought to ‘be viewed in the way that non drug-users are viewed’ and they deemed their own manageable drug use as ‘acceptable’ unlike drug ‘abuse’ or ‘addiction’, they were at the same time not generally keen on advertising their drug use or overtly attempting to project it as acceptable practice. Rödner Sznitman (2008: 469 – 470) observes that her informants employed what she terms a ‘covert openness’ in their responses to her, as they tried to detach their own image from the

‘stereotypical image’ of the morally compromised Swedish drug addict. In this way Rödner Sznitman’s informants did not seem to perceive nor present their drug use as a point of difference and pride like a drug reform activist might have, and the dominant Swedish perspective of disapproval towards drug use was still incorporated as a source of concern in their narratives. As a result, Rödner Sznitman argues, these users did not attempt to pass as normal in the sense implied by Goffman, but instead tried to discursively reframe their drug use ‘outside the realm of stigma and immorality’ that were otherwise sustained by Swedish attitudes towards drugs (ibid.: 470).

Apart from acknowledging both assimilative and transformational types of normalisation that were explored by Pennay and Moore and Rödner Sznitman, Signe Ravn (2012) argues for another type of normalisation, which she suggests was employed by some members of a group of Danish club drug users whom she followed, as they took drugs inside nightclubs. *Opportunistic normalisation*, according to Ravn, involves strategies through which users find ‘loopholes’ for taking club drugs within the setting of public nightclubs that are restrictive in this sense because of the presence of club bouncers and other means of surveillance (ibid.: 270 - 271). Rather than impractically seeking transformation of prohibitive nightclub protocols, Ravn observes, some of her informants sought a way around these protocols by choosing which types of drugs to take, how, and where to take them when inside nightclubs. This was for example observable in users choosing to take Ecstasy over cocaine because consuming the former through ingestion is quicker and less conspicuous than snorting the latter, at a place in a club where there were no security cameras present (ibid.: 269).

Opportunistic normalisation is in this way a selective type of normalisation within the same type of setting; similarly-experienced clubbers may tolerate, support, and normalise each other’s drug use within the nightclub, but it must be discrete and hidden from the view of nightclub staff and security, and of abstainers or less experienced clubbers who may be present. Ravn develops this argument to support the concept of ‘differentiated normalisation’ proposed

by Shildrick (2002) and summarised above, as she suggests that different nightclubs and different groups of clubbers comprising different ‘club scenes’ may be more or less tolerant of certain types of drugs and connected behaviours. For Ravn, therefore, normalisation is subjective and dependent on the ‘meanings’ of drugs as these are ‘framed’ differently across different club scenes, and the varying experiences and levels of tolerance of different groups of clubbers who are active within these scenes (ibid. 2012: 271 - 272).

4.3 The Persistent Functionality of the Problem

The arguments for and against different types of normalisation of recreational drug use that I have presented above are useful in drawing up the following four key considerations as these are directly applicable to Fairfielders.

First, accommodation of drug-taking amongst Fairfielders is both conditional and selective.

Some distinctive properties of Fairfielders fit well within dimensions of the normalisation model as originally proposed by Parker and colleagues, yet this does not imply that club drug taking amongst Fairfielders is to be considered normalised in the way implied by these authors. Fairfielders are all upper-class young adults who, through membership and participation within the Fairfielder group and night-time economy that is attached to dance music culture, have access to club drugs. They consume Ecstasy, cocaine, and alcohol, so they are in this way poly-drug users as defined by Parker et al.

Here, however, one should emphasise that physical access or ‘exposure’ to drugs like Ecstasy and cocaine in Malta only occurs through specialised channels and connections. In other words, in Malta one does not find dealers who in relative openness sell drugs on ‘street corners’ of any particular town districts, but one must rather either know a dealer or belong to a peer network that is connected to a dealer in order to have access to these drugs. The main implication here is that access to and acquisition of drugs as commodities in Malta must be sought, and even within a Fairfielder event does not occur unless it is. For in practice, drugs are not ‘marketed’

or offered by dealers to users under any circumstances at Fairfielder events. Fairfielders also have access to direct experiential knowledge (through equally ‘drug-smart’ peers) as well as other types of information (through global media) about these substances and their effects. These factors contribute to the social accommodation of club drug-taking within the Fairfielder circle, but this does not mean that Fairfielder drug-taking can be taken as reflective of any hypothetical global shift towards the normalisation of recreational drug use in the sense implied by Parker et al, nor indeed that Fairfielders do not problematise their drug use. My own analysis of Fairfielder club drug-taking indicates that, even within the Fairfielder circle, taking drugs is only accommodated when it is done in a certain ‘sensitive’ and ‘discreet’ way, and more importantly when the problems and undesirable effects that are attached to it are actively taken into account and mitigated by the user.

I did not find ethnographic evidence for normalisation strategies that allow for the consumption of club drugs with abandon amongst Fairfielders. In this sense my analysis is incongruent with a view holding that contemporary youth culture has become homogenised as singularly liberal in accommodating unbridled recreational drug use. Even whilst evidencing that Fairfielders in Malta, like dance music enthusiasts elsewhere, are inevitably in contact with recreational drugs and drug-taking behaviour that may also to an extent permeate popular culture today, my research does not suggest that they have become desensitised to the problematic issues that are attached to illicit drug-taking. Contrarily, the ways in which a Fairfielder mitigates these problems, and is able to balance out pleasure with self-restraint through sensitive and discreet drug-taking, is a means through which membership within the group is maintained and reinforced and access to the Fairfielder inner circles is obtained. In line with the main proponents of criticism for the normalisation thesis, this leads me to argue that whilst recreational drug use may well have become more ‘visible’ if not more socially accommodated, any patterns of its normalisation cannot be viewed as implicitly aligned to ordinary or mundane youth behaviour but must rather be qualified and contextualised.

A blanket application of normalisation, therefore, too easily dismisses *conditions for recreational drug-taking* that as I would like to suggest are often set by drug users themselves, in their navigation through both an individual ‘moral ambivalence’ (Shiner and Winstock 2015) that remains attached to drug-taking as well as in their maintenance of a specific peer-generated or group ethos by way of which drug-taking is regulated. From this perspective, the fallacy of the normalisation thesis is that it presents youthful recreational drug-taking as a self-justifying and self-legitimising phenomenon; an inevitable and autonomous structural condition of young adulthood in a contemporary fragmented and late modern world. It is true that in their analysis Parker and colleagues allude to some conditioning by carefully qualifying a specific form of drug use in bracketing normalisation within the rubric of ‘recreational’ and non-addictive drug-taking that is self-limited to times of leisure, but the thesis still falls short as it does not consider important nuances that continuously underpin and modulate the way in which even this type of what may be regarded as ‘experimental’ or ‘benign’ drug use must come to be actively negotiated depending on time and place of use. I am thus arguing against the treatment of normalisation as a fixed condition, but instead for negotiation as a context-dependent dynamic process that users engage in every time they decide which drugs to take and when to take them, or whether to take these drugs at all.

This leads to my second consideration, through which my own views to some extent diverge from the positions held by normalisation critics, most notably the one held by Gourley: *contextualising Fairfielder consumption of Ecstasy and cocaine does not imply that it can be attached to a subcultural or deviant framework of practice and meaning*, but can be rather more adequately framed as involving ‘scene-specific’ patterns of drug-taking behaviour. Throughout my fieldwork, Fairfielder drug-taking never came across to me as in any way being a politically charged practice that evidences a youthful generational ‘resistance’ to a mainstream or popular culture. Nor did I come across any evidence which indicated that Fairfielders themselves regard their drug-taking as a ‘deviant’ and ‘pathologized’ practice in a symbolic interactionist sense, as implied by Becker.

In this respect, I acknowledge the view proposed by Parker and colleagues that bracketing the practice as limited to minority and marginalised groups of youths would not adequately reflect the extent of the phenomenon today, as this would in itself be over-simplistic and would also risk producing a ‘fetishism of struggle’ that has been validly presented as a shortcoming of subcultural theory (Kellner 1995: 38). Here the argument for ‘differentiated normalisation’ proposed by Shildrick and later taken up by Ravn to develop the concept of opportunistic normalisation is more instructive, as it allows for the consideration of the Fairfielder group as representative of a more fluid ‘scene’ previously qualified by David Moore as characterised by ‘loosely defined’ ideologies and practices (ibid. 2004: 201) rather than ‘subculture’.

The concept of scene is also more fitting because Fairfielders, especially those who were involved in event organisation and promotion, often used the word ‘scene’ themselves to refer to physical and social components of Fairfielder culture (ex. particular type of music, clubs and places where events are organised, people who attend events) as well as less easily gauged dimensions that were taken as markers of a scene that was healthy or otherwise at any particular time (ex. enthusiasm and participation in events).

Partially in line with Ravn’s argument for opportunistic normalisation, therefore, the Fairfielder scene provides a context within which club drug taking is tolerated more or less, or altogether differently, in relation to other club scenes in Malta. This means that even within the Fairfielder scene there are rules of drug-taking that need to be followed, in order to eliminate the risks of the group becoming like others that are regarded as less fashionable or prestigious. Coupled most prominently with the specific type of dance music they listen to, in this way Fairfielders distinguish themselves from both scenes where more unbridled drug-taking is tolerated and scenes where drug-taking is not tolerated at all.

Fairfielders do not, in any way, aspire or work towards behaving like members of neither one of these other types of scenes that are marked by excess or abstention. The boundaries of

acceptability and transgression of drug-taking within the Fairfielder scene are not set by surveillance that comes from the ‘outside’ as proposed by Ravn (club bouncers, surveillance cameras, etc.), as by and large these means are either absent from Fairfielder events, or in the case of bouncers and security staff (see Chapter 8), even privy to Fairfielder drug-taking and bound to shelter it. Rather, these limits are ‘produced’, set and enforced by and within the group itself.

Fairfielders certainly do not engage in strategies of formal transformational normalisation that characterises politically active drug reform groups, and during my time spent with them I could never note any overt sign of pretension that their drug-taking behaviour should be accommodated by mainstream policy and discourse. Rather, they re-appropriate mainstream preoccupations about drugs, especially ones that have to do with health risks, excessive intoxication, and loss of control, to incorporate them within the group ethos – rather than to challenge, to turn the stigma attached to consumption of these drugs on its head.

My third consideration here therefore is that *it is through the successful navigation, and not normalisation, of these dangers and ‘markers of stigma’ that membership and prestige within the group is acquired and consolidated.* The key point to understand here is that it is not in the interest of Fairfielders to ‘neutralise’ the problems through one-time strategies of normalisation that are attached to club drugs, for it is the methods through which these problems are continuously tackled and the efficacy of these methods over time that distinguish Fairfielders from each other and from members of other scenes.

My fourth consideration that follows draws upon the same methodological approach and attention to context and politics of club drug-taking that characterises more recent explorations of micro-strategies of normalisation. This is that *a problematisation of drug-taking carries a function within the Fairfielder group.* If not in method, my research here in some respects diverges from arguments proposed for micro-strategies of normalisation that have been

summarised above. I am here challenging the assumption that club drug-taking strategies should be evaluated against what is universally and societally valued as ‘normal’.

Whilst the normalisation model remains a most instructive and valid conceptual and methodological tool in the understanding of contemporary youthful drug studies, its main shortcoming lies in the fact that, by definition, it assumes that many youths today strive to engage in forms of leisure that involve recreational drug use, naturally and un-problematically. Furthermore, the normalisation model seems to be underpinned by the assumption that recreational drug users seek to reconcile their use with that which is societally upheld, or in other words using abstinence as a universal benchmark against which a compromise for appropriate or normal drug-taking behaviour is negotiated. This approach overlooks the possibility that the problems attached to club drug-taking may themselves serve an important purpose in the ways in which drug-taking groups may be distinguished, from both the *emic* and the *etic* perspectives.

The theoretical limitation that I mean to emphasise here also comes across in the interpretations of micro-strategies of normalisation. Rödner Sznitman, (2008: 470) for example, uses the phrase ‘early stage of “coming out”’ to suggest that her informants may have been at a point between covertness and openness in their narratives of their own drug use, and ‘on a journey into self-respect’ towards accommodating their identities as drug-users by challenging a dominant Swedish ideology and ‘social reactions to their leisure pursuits’ through which drug-taking is stigmatised. I would like to suggest otherwise with respect to my own informants; they do not want or seek this, but rather they want the problem to remain unresolved, for the perpetual tension between problem and effective solution gives a distinct valence to Fairfielders drug-taking. In this sense to Fairfielders, the point between ‘overtness’ and ‘covertness’ does not mark a temporary stage of transit between self-respect and self-depreciation but is rather a permanent state on its own merits. For to use Rödner Sznitman’s term, Fairfielders want to ‘come out’, but only triumphant over the problem by successfully and fashionably managing it

and achieving the desirable state of being between drug-induced intoxication and control, night after night.

Especially in the case of Ecstasy, of which physiological and other effects last longer than those of cocaine, achieving this state is by no means simple, as it involves exercising a combination of two interlinked types of control. The first type involves self-restraint through which the dosage of the drug is self-regulated and monitored, also in the light of knowledge about one's own limitations and previous experiences. A subsequent more complex type of control, which also depends on the capacity to regulate the dosage of substance taken, involves internal control over oneself when under the influence of the drug, through which intoxicating effects are themselves dampened and in Fairfielder terms 'kept under control' (*inżommilha*, which translates to keeping the effects of an Ecstasy pill, in the feminine, under control) that results in 'not showing' (*ma nurix/ma turix*) but also enhanced when necessary through what Fairfielders define as a process of 'letting go' (*titilqilha*, also referring to an Ecstasy pill in the feminine). When employed correctly, these strategies of administering dosage and effects of Ecstasy (and to some extent cocaine) result in 'being good' or 'being well' (*tkun tajjeb/tajba*).

The complexity of this interplay may be illustrated through one of my conversations with James, who on this occasion was telling me about how at a recent event he had taken Ecstasy together with Bryan:

"Sometimes when I take [Ecstasy] I keep myself back too much (*inżommilha wisq*). Last time when DJ [here James referred to this event by citing the name of the foreign artist who was brought down to perform for it, which I am omitting] came I was with Bryan, we had taken one [pill] each, and we were hanging out in a corner of the *Vector* club ... Bryan noticed that I was controlling it too much (*induna li kont qed inżommilha wisq*) and he just told me 'Can you not control it so much?' (*'Tista ma żżommiliex daqshekk?'*), so then I let go a bit [shrugs], and I became well (*gejt tajjeb*)".

Here, therefore, the way in which Fairfielders actively guide the Ecstasy experience becomes evident; knowing how to 'control' the effects of the drug is equally important to knowing how to 'let go' in attaining a desirable state that lies somewhere between the two. Moreover, as

evidenced through the conversation between James and Bryan, this navigation may result from both individual strategies as well as suggestions from close peers with whom the experience is shared. Whilst one should take care in not becoming excessively intoxicated, a total normalisation of drug-taking through concealment of its effects during a collective Fairfield experience as in this case is thus not enough. A Fairfield needs to display just enough subtle signs that he or she is not ‘keeping back’ too much to fit within what is considered to be the appropriate shared state during the experience.

To be clear, here I do not mean to dismiss the role of strategies of assimilative normalisation through which Fairfielders are able to ‘pass’ as normal in their daily lives. The state of ‘being good’ is a rather specific one that is only desirable during drug-taking events. Put in Goffmanian terms, Fairfielders are aware of the importance of remaining ‘discreditable’ and not becoming ‘discredited’ by allowing drug-taking to have any negative impacts on their professional lives and on their relationships with those who do not take drugs. Fairfielders certainly never seek to wear their recreational drug-taking habits on their sleeves when they are engaged within these other activities and relationships, as they are clearly aware that this would be counter-productive, especially within a Maltese moral terrain. Indeed, measures such as moderation, taking drugs only during weekends, and alternating phases of frequent drug-taking with ones of abstention throughout the year, are all strategies that Fairfielders take up in ensuring that their drug-taking can remain concealed in this sense.

These strategies, however, are effective on two levels that are not distinct but rather inseparable from one another: on one hand they ensure that Fairfield drug use remains concealed from members of wider society who may disapprove of it, and on the other they consolidate the collective self-ratification of Fairfielders as individuals who are capable of successfully managing their drug use. For in practice, it is not drug-taking itself that is necessary for membership and prestige within the group to be achieved, but being able to balance out drug-taking and an otherwise ordinary life in the long-term (a balance between leisure and work),

and being able to achieve a type of intoxication that allows for social interaction between group members in the short-term (a balance between drug-taking and functional participation). The ‘benchmark’ against which desirable drug-taking is weighted for Fairfielders, therefore, is not abstinence, but rather a successful management of club drugs and their problematic nature, that *includes* just the right amount and type of intoxication. Concealment and moderation are in this respect not only profitable within the framework of relationships between Fairfielders and other ‘normals’ or abstainers in the sense implied by proponents of assimilative normalisation, but most importantly profitable strategies in relationships between Fairfielders themselves.

Fairfielder culture simultaneously incorporates morality and ethics from and extends beyond dance floors and Fairfielder events. This may be illustrated through the example of the Fairfielder event *Southsound*, which was organised and promoted by Fairfielders Russ, Eric, and Bobby, and was held weekly at a seaside bar on Wednesday evenings during the summer. The Fairfielder attendance at these events was as strong as for other events that were held on weekends, but the dynamics of the event were much different and were grounded in what Fairfielders called a ‘relaxed’ or ‘chilled’ atmosphere.

Southsound events were held between five and twelve in the evening rather than overnight, the records that were played out by DJs here were less bass-oriented and at much slower tempos than ones that were played out during weekend events, and the consumption of food and cocktails at tables replaced the consumption of drugs on dance floors. *Southsound* events thus accommodated the working lives of Fairfielders during the week, whilst still providing a platform for a mid-week gathering of the group that allowed for commensality and sober conversation. These events were not less enthusiastically organised or considered to be any less important than events that took place during weekends, and the sobriety that characterised them was as important as the more pronounced ‘effervescence’ that characterised weekend events to the consolidation of the group. On the morning after, it was not ‘hiding the hangover’ that was important for Fairfielders, but not having a hangover to hide in the first place, and this

testifies that Fairfielder culture not only ‘accommodates’ but also encourages abstinence in parallel to drug-taking.

4.4 Safer Practice versus Normalisation

Thus far, I have suggested that club drug-taking amongst Fairfielders is not a normalised and free for all practice without its own problems for the user but is instead marked by conditions of use that include moderation. These strategies neither serve nor are meant to neutralise problems and ambivalences that are attached to club drug-taking, but rather underpin distinctive rules of engagement with club drugs for members of the group. This premise in itself departs from an acknowledgment of the fact that drug-taking may otherwise result in a problematic type of behaviour that may lead to the interference on otherwise functional normal lives during those times when drugs are not being taken, but the more immediate aim of maintaining control over excessive intoxication whilst still deriving pleasure from the drugs during drug-taking events is equally important to Fairfielders.

Apart from the values and desirable traits that Fairfielders positively attribute to moderation and abstinence, individual concerns about potential health risks of taking these drugs are also incorporated within Fairfielder discourse. These two dimensions of Fairfielder drug-taking overlap and feed into each other, as they underpin behavioural patterns for the group. It is useful to explore how these dimensions are linked, not least in revealing how specific valences of club drugs as ‘dangerous’ substances are shaped and used in a consolidation of the Fairfielder group.

We have seen how Ecstasy and cocaine that are available to Fairfielders, as to recreational drug users elsewhere, are illicit substances that are tainted with various types of contaminants and adulterants. Whilst this may not be perceived as a big enough issue to permanently keep Fairfielders from altogether taking these drugs, they certainly remain conscious of the potentially harmful short-term and long-term consequences of consuming these substances. As

a result, Fairfielder consumption of these drugs inherently involves a level of problem-assessment, which in turn guides modes and frequencies at which Fairfielders consume them, and at times also makes them consider and go through phases of abstention, or more precisely temporary or even permanent 'desistance' (Shiner and Winstock 2015: 251).

Such Fairfielder concerns about health risks of taking club drugs may certainly lead to feelings ranging from guilt to a less grave awareness of the negative health impacts of drug use, and these become especially pronounced as being healthy and keeping up appearances are attributes that are highly valued amongst Fairfielders. A resulting conflict is exemplified in the following statement from Fairfielder Bobby. Being one of the most introspective Fairfielders, Bobby also often openly spoke to me about what he thought were the repercussions of taking club drugs, and on this occasion, I had asked him for his views about the consequences of drugs on his own health:

"There are times when I feel guilty after taking because I know that the stuff is damaging for my health, and I'm a gym type of person, I like keeping fit and doing sports, you know, I try and go to the gym when I have time and enjoy working out ... and when I take, it just goes against all of that".

Similarly, at a point during the later phase of my fieldwork, Amelie seemed to express a new-found intention to desist from taking Ecstasy, also importantly linking this desistance to growing older:

"Sometimes I feel bad about taking [Ecstasy] because I think to myself that I should not be giving myself that stuff ... I know it's very bad for my health and in fact this Summer taking has become less frequent for me, even because I feel that I'm growing too old for it and I don't really find enjoyment in it anymore, so I'll probably be stopping completely soon".

In a slightly more carefree manner and without suggesting an intention to desist from taking drugs in the future, Fairfielder Mia had this to say to me when I asked her about whether she considers club drugs as posing a serious health threat:

J: Do you ever worry about the consequences of taking these drugs, is that ever a serious enough problem for you to think 'I should stop taking'?

M: Well, yes sometimes I think about it. I mean I enjoy taking stuff, it's fun and I'm not going to say that I want to stop, but sometimes I just wake up after a night out and look in the mirror

and tell myself that I'm going to grow old and get wrinkles so early on in life because I'm taking this stuff, and I'm doing this to myself.

J: Would you say that you feel guilty because you take then?

M: Not really guilty, I don't know ... I mean I don't go through any crisis or anything, I just say I'm going to grow old fast, and that's it ... so saying that I feel guilty would be a bit of an exaggeration I think.

J: So obviously you're not thinking of stopping any time soon.

M: Not really ... not permanently ... I take breaks, I mean, I stop for a while after a heavy summer for sure, but I don't feel bad enough to think about stopping permanently right now.

Here my informants all directly refer to long-term impacts of varying severity (from deep and unspecific in the case of Bobby and Amelie, to specifically aesthetic in the case of Mia) on their health of taking 'stuff'. The choice of this term over 'Ecstasy' or 'drugs' is again revealing, for apart from avoidance of these latter terms in partially and verbally concealing their use, it also suggests an awareness of the fact that they do not know the exact composition of the substances that they are taking. Although these informants state they feel 'guilty', they do this without expressing feelings of resignation to their 'failures' and 'inadequacies' in the same way that Australian club drug-takers did with Pennay and Moore (ibid. 2010: 568).

Furthermore, most notably in the cases of Amelie and Mia, they highlight their intention and capacity to desist or cease, permanently or temporarily, from drug-taking as a solution to these problems. Of note here is Mia's statement about 'taking a break', which as was a common Fairfielder strategy of moderation. Together with 'holding back', such strategies mitigate the 'guilt' and anxieties that Fairfielders experience when they are taking these drugs – negative tensions of drug-taking that are taken in stride, as part of the experience. This does not mean that it is discursively normalised, but contrarily that it is a dimension of drug-taking that should and must be sooner or later faced and tackled directly by the user.

Awareness of risks of taking club drugs that are tainted with secondary substances is not only created and shared by Fairfielders but has also been propagated through a growing body of global specialised channels and organisations that promote practices that reduce harms and risks associated with these drugs. In this respect one must note that if through global media

over recent years there has indeed been a propagation of discourse that appears to be more tolerant towards the use of certain recreational drugs, there has also been the propagation of a parallel discourse that advocates principles of harm-reduction and that stresses the importance of consuming these drugs carefully and in moderation. What follows, therefore, is that if youths have become more exposed to a popularisation of recreational drug-taking they have also become equally exposed to information about the dangers that are associated with taking these drugs, and the strategies that may be engaged to reduce, if not altogether eliminate, these dangers.

Undoubtedly, Fairfielders also consider and utilise these cues for harm-reduction that are often spread through specialised media channels. Figure 3 below shows one example of an advert carried by the popular electronic dance music and culture magazine '*Mixmag*' in collaboration with the 'Global Drug Survey' (GDS³⁶) in 2016, which was sent to me by a Fairfielder over a smartphone instant messenger application following a conversation that we had, to illustrate how Ecstasy should be 'sensibly' taken. The advert promotes the practice of taking half an Ecstasy tablet to 'self-test' the particular pill and make sure that it does not contain adulterants and contaminants that will make the user feel ill, before he or she consumes a whole pill with potentially more grave consequences.

The practice promoted by this advert corresponds to Fairfielder practice and a shared knowledge that the 'safer' and 'proper' way of consuming Ecstasy is through a type of 'incomplete', 'partial', or 'regimented' consumption in terms of quantity or dosage of the drug. Harm-reduction campaigns like the one this advert represents should not be viewed as themselves normalising or promoting drug-taking, as the adage from which they depart and

³⁶ The GDS is one well-known online drug-related survey that is coordinated from the United Kingdom by Adam Winstock and colleagues and invites users from across the world to anonymously answer questions related to their drug use through a data-collection period in November and December of each year. The data gathered through the survey is used to inform various harm-reduction campaigns. In 2017, responses from over 120,000 participants from 25 countries were analysed and the findings presented in the GDS report (Winstock et al. 2017).

which Fairfielders are aware of is that the only sure way of making sure drug-related harms are nulled is to abstain from taking drugs altogether. At the same time, however, they are designed in response to an undeniably more widespread phenomenon of youthful recreational drug use - in this case Ecstasy use - that is sustained by survey data that continues to be collected and analysed through quantitative explorations of the phenomenon such as the one undertaken by the GDS (see Winstock et al. 2017).

Figure 1: “Don’t Be Daft Start with a Half” Advert



Source: Mixmag Magazine / Sent to me by Fairfielder

The fact that this advert was sent to me by a Fairfielder suggests that such harm-reduction campaigns are influential, and the strategies they offer are more effectively adopted by my informants than blanket prohibitive directives that are advocated by state authorities. For whilst discourses of abstention from Ecstasy may be regarded as unreasonably alarmist by Fairfielders, harm-reduction campaigns undoubtedly carry direct impacts on the way they take Ecstasy, as ‘starting with a half’ and sometimes even with a quarter of a tablet is indeed a habit that is taken up by them. Significantly, there were also occasions during my fieldwork when

certain Fairfielders only consumed as little as half an Ecstasy tablet on a night, not only because of any outright concerns about the quality of specific tablet but rather because the quantity was enough to get them to the desired level of intoxication.

Also in view of my previous discussion, there is more to self-regulation of drug-taking than harm-reduction; minimising the amount of drugs that are consumed feeds into a group ethos that values a level of control of one's actions over excessive and unbridled intoxication, but even in this eventuality the extent to which Fairfielders engage in such strategies in order to follow 'safer' drug-taking practices should not be overlooked. These two dimensions of Fairfielder drug-taking go together, and this becomes evident when considering a conversation that I had with Maggie about the 'start with a half' campaign:

M: I saw the "don't be daft, start with a half" campaign on Mixmag, I think it's cool and I do that [start with a half] ...

J: Do you do it to be safe, or because if you take more you'd look wasted?

M: Both, for sure both. I know it's safer to follow that and take half a pill before a whole one, or even just take half and stop ... that's what I do most of the time ... and because I don't like to feel or look too wasted as well, half is enough for me most of the time ... and I don't like people around me who are excessively wasted, I don't want to look like that ... like last time at *Mute*³⁷ I could see people all around me who were so fucked, their faces and mouths like [contorts face and mouth] and squirming, I didn't enjoy it, and I definitely don't want to look like that, it's disgusting.

At another Fairfielder event that was held over an afternoon and night in August, I asked one of my older contacts Sergio, who at the time had just come back from a dance music festival in the Netherlands, for his thoughts about the same 'start with a half' campaign and club drug harm-reduction strategies in general. Being one of the older Fairfielders, Sergio often adopted a patronising tone when speaking about the younger members of the group and the Maltese dance music scene in general, and our conversation here was no exception on this sense. Also drawing upon his recent Netherlands festival experience, the discussion turned to how,

³⁷ *Mute* was one of the recurring Fairfielder events, and the one particular event that Maggie is referring to here had been rather negatively retrospectively talked about by Fairfielders, as it consisted of a significant number of attendees who were from outside the Fairfielder network and scene.

according to Sergio, Fairfielders tend to consume their drugs ‘like people over there’, whereas other types of ‘clubbers’ who constitute other scenes in Malta do not:

S: I just came down from the Netherlands Jay, and you see people over there ... they start slowly and early, and by the early afternoon they’re already out and dancing at the festival, but they take it slowly and it’s so much better that way, not like over here, you get people going out at 1am and they just take stuff, swallow ... swallow ... swallow... [*ibla ... ibla ... ibla*] all at once for a few hours and that’s it.

J: Is that what people of this group [Fairfielders] do as well?

S: To be fair, no, I think even the younger ones here [younger Fairfielders] are learning how to do it the right way, and as you see today this event started in the afternoon, and they were here early, they took it slowly ... but in general, if you look at other scenes and clubbers in Malta, Maltese clubbers are pigs [*ħnieżer*].

The implications of my conversations with Maggie and Sergio with respect to my discussion here are twofold. First, according to both these Fairfielders, Ecstasy should not only be consumed in moderation, but also gradually over an extended period of time of an event. This is not only the safer way of taking the drug as promoted by the “start with a half” campaign, but it also contributes to two other factors: not getting excessively intoxicated (as emphasised by Maggie) and a maximization of enjoyment of an event over a longer period of time (as emphasised by Sergio).

Second, both Sergio and Maggie are here reflecting the Fairfielder perception that excessive drug-taking will inevitably lead to ‘disgusting’, and therefore undesirable, behaviour. The Maltese term for pigs [*ħnieżer*] that Sergio uses is particularly revealing, as it is a rather impolite term that is often used by the Maltese with reference to gluttony for food, and in this case it is used by Sergio in a similar way to describe those who consume many Ecstasy pills over a short period of time³⁸ (this also comes across through his repetition of the Maltese term for ‘swallow’). Moreover, Sergio is here also implying that the stereotypical Maltese Ecstasy user or clubber is unlike both Fairfielders and clubbers elsewhere in mainland Europe.

³⁸ One may draw parallels between *ħnieżer* and *opsophagos* (plural, *opsophagoi*), of Greek classical antiquity. As Davidson (1997: 143 – 147) notes, the *opsophagos* was one who greedily and unceremoniously consumed fish and fish-cakes, and - together with those who drank excessively or were otherwise considered to be ‘enslaved’ by material ‘desires’ - constituted the ‘*akolastoi*’ (‘the uncorrected’ or ‘the unchecked’) or the ‘*akrateis*’ (‘the powerless’).

There is a further point that has to do with regulating the dosage of Ecstasy tablets amongst Fairfielders, which is contrasting with the argument for opportunistic normalisation proposed by Ravn (2012) discussed above: at times, this practice comes at some expense in terms of both what are practical and what are pleasurable or smooth experiences of the act of consuming Ecstasy. This again may be best illustrated by considering the example of swallowing Ecstasy. MDMA and a number of binding agents that are found in Ecstasy tablets are known to have a bitter and unpleasant taste. Swallowing an Ecstasy tablet whole and rapidly (in the way that any other pill is taken) would minimise exposure to this taste, whereas biting a portion of the pill with one's front teeth is bound to make the half or quarter of the pill that is bitten off to be ingested break up in the user's mouth, resulting in an enhanced unpleasant taste and texture of the powdered substance that is impossible to avoid.

Thus, swallowing the whole pill is certainly a more rapid, convenient, and smooth way of ingesting Ecstasy; Fairfielders are naturally experienced enough to be aware of this, and yet they still many times go through the biting process. Fairfielder Amelie, whom over my time in the field I came to know as a Fairfielder who was particularly squeamish and easily nauseated by even the taste of alcohol, made me aware of this as we were talking about Ecstasy one night. When I asked her about whether she takes any measures to counteract the risks associated with ingesting the drug, she affirmed that although she does 'not like to bite the pill' instead of swallowing it whole, she still did this to be 'safer' and reduce the 'anxiety' that she associates with the experience:

A: I don't like biting the pill, I don't like the feeling of it crumbling in my mouth and the taste is horrible, last time I almost threw up because of it.

J: And you do it because it makes you feel safer?

A: Yes, I just feel it's the right thing to do because it does feel safer, and apart from that I feel less worried and anxious about what might happen if I don't take it [Ecstasy pill] all at once.

Apart from the unpleasant experience described by Amelie, biting an Ecstasy tablet in half may - especially in what is a relatively 'open' or 'porous' scenario such as that of a Fairfielder club

event – betray the much more unassuming way in which it may be rapidly through a singular motion swallowed like any other pill. For in the way proposed by Ravn, it would be much more ‘opportunistic’ to swallow the pill without going through the motions of biting it in half, and thus reducing the risk of being seen or caught doing so by anyone. Yet, as in the case of Amelie, the safer practice is favoured.

I have observed in this respect that external surveillance is usually of little concern for Fairfielders during their own events, but this does not remove the positive valence that is attributed to discretion³⁹ when taking drugs by the group. The more visible act of taking half a pill is nevertheless supported and even encouraged, because going through the trouble of biting a pill in half to be ‘safe’ and ‘moderate’ is considered to be ‘virtuous’ in itself, and within the context of Fairfielder events even more ‘virtuous’ than total abstention as it is taken as a marker of the capability for self-restraint. To Fairfielders, the act also suggests a consciousness of both what leads to a more desirable level of intoxication and knowledge of the ‘right’ and ‘safe’ code of taking Ecstasy that is advocated by scene-specific channels like *Mixmag*.

4.5 Conclusions

In this chapter I have explored and applied the thesis of the normalisation of recreational drug use to Fairfielder drug-taking. Whilst I have found it to be a useful analytical tool in this sense, I have argued that Fairfielder drug-taking may only be partially situated within its framework. This is not only because, as critics of the thesis argue, it overlooks a hegemony that still presently and actively distinguishes drug users from abstainers, and types of drug users from other types, but also because it overlooks the inherent and unavoidable problems that are attached to drugs and their undesirable short-term and long-term effects. Rather than being

³⁹ Here it is important to note that even when biting and swallowing half a pill during parties, Fairfielders were always discreet and never ‘publicised’ or openly talked about what they took. Conversations about these strategies of drug-taking, the quality of the drugs taken, and so forth were usually reserved for later more private gatherings when drugs were not taken, which occurred in the days and weeks following the event.

destructive, the perpetuation of these problems, and more importantly their successful management, serve a functional purpose in the maintenance and distinction of the Fairfielder group.

Problematisation in terms of the risks posed by taking club drugs is a present and concerning dimension that Fairfielders factor into their drug-taking practices and narratives. In this respect, the risk and potential dangers of club drug-taking are as tangible and transformative as its pleasures and appeals. Fairfielders may consider desistance in altogether eliminating these problems, and often engage in temporary ‘breaks’ from drug-taking and Fairfielder events as a measure to mitigate them. At times when club drugs are being taken, strategies of safer drug-taking are sustained by the group and through references to past collective experience, but also internalised from an emerging discourse of harm-reduction propagated globally across dance music culture by specialised media channels.

As we have seen, one method of harm-reduction involves limitation of dosage. This method is regarded by Fairfielders as both effectively reductive of potential long-term harms of taking drugs on health and more immediately beneficial as the level of intoxication that results may be more easily administered than if higher quantities of the drug were consumed. This regulation of dosage allows for the achievement of a state of being ‘good’ (*tajjeb*) – implying a state in which one enjoys the effects of the drug without allowing these to ‘consume’ him or her - during the drug-taking experience. Reaching this state also requires the Fairfielder to engage in an ‘intra-psychic’ process through which both the positive effects (that is, the chemically-induced pleasures) and the negative or undesirable visible effects (that is, contortions of the face, erratic movements of the eyes, and so forth) of the drug are internally ‘resisted’ on the one hand and ‘flirted with’ on the other. As we shall see, this modality of consumption is central to how Fairfielders distinguish themselves from others who do not seek to control these effects, who consume drugs excessively and indiscriminately (in my informant

Sergio's words, 'pigs'), and are therefore classified by Fairfielders as being in a state that is bad (*hazin*).

Chapter 5: Possessing Agency in Dispossessing Structures

5.1 Introduction

The point of my discussion in the previous chapter has been that the valences of club-drug taking for Fairfielders are engendered by the fact that the practice retains a problematic dimension that is tackled through the engagement of highly valued strategies. In this respect attitudes towards drug-taking remain differentiated, and it is not enough to bracket all ‘recreational’ drug use as ‘normal’ ‘acceptable’ drug use, for following Shildrick ‘what constitutes “recreational” drug use is not self-evident or obvious, and what constitutes recreational use for one young person may represent ‘problematic’ use to another’ (ibid. 2010: 45).

What, then, notwithstanding the inherent problems and risks that are attached to the practice, constitutes ‘acceptable’ or rather ‘desirable’ drug-taking for Fairfielders? The first evident condition that comes across from my discussion so far is that it must be ‘recreational’ in the sense of being manageable and not addictive drug-taking, but even this requires further qualification, because whilst for Fairfielders all addictive drug use is taken as undesirable, not all undesirable drug use is addictive drug use.

I begin my analysis in this chapter by discussing the theoretical concept of ‘tamed hedonism’ developed by Roberta Sassatelli (2001). As with the normalisation thesis in the previous chapter, I emphasise both the validity and the shortcomings of this concept in the light of my own ethnographic evidence. I do this to develop two dimensions of my argument. The first has to do with the role of volition, which is central to how Fairfielder drug-taking acquires a distinctive value as a process that depends on agency, choice, and discrimination between types of drugs. As we shall see, in this sense Fairfielders are able to exercise choice in whether to take or not to take Ecstasy, depending on the type and quality of tablets that are available. I

shall also show how they may choose to take cocaine rather than Ecstasy, because the former has specific functions under certain circumstances and conditions.

The second dimension has to do with the limiting structures of distribution of these drugs as 'products' because, especially within the small-scale Maltese context, there is neither a vast choice of dealers, nor a choice or range of drug 'brands' to choose from during drug-taking events. This is a limitation that Fairfielders must contend with as they choose whether to consume these drugs or otherwise.

There is therefore a structural tension or contradiction in place here: on the one hand Fairfielders are 'empowered' and show that they possess agency when they act as knowledgeable and 'responsible' consumers of these drugs, and on the other they are 'dispossessed' of the possibility to choose between different brands of drugs (as they are able to do with other 'ordinary' commodities) and are thus only left with two structurally opposite choices - that is, to consume or not to consume. It is within this matrix, however, that Fairfielders drug-taking acquires a distinctive valence from both drug addiction or dependency (where one is dependent on these substances, and not able to choose to abstain), as well as indiscriminate club drug use (where one consumes club drugs indiscriminately and excessively, without considering abstinence).

5.2 Tamed Hedonism

The concept of tamed hedonism (Sassatelli 2001) may be taken as similar to the thesis of normalisation as in principle it does not distinguish between recreational drug consumption as 'deviant' versus 'ordinary' consumption of other commodities. Here the frameworks of tamed hedonism and normalisation are equally problematic in their assumptions. The key difference between the two theoretical approaches is that tamed hedonism does not assume that recreational drug-taking has 'caught up' with other forms of normal consumption through conditions of late modernity. Rather, according to Sassatelli these two apparently divergent

forms of consumption share similarities in the socially prescribed rules that determine them in the first place. In other words, when it comes to recreational drugs such as Ecstasy, tamed hedonism situates their consumption within the framework of consumption of other ordinary commodities that are made available to youths on the market.

My own evidence does not entirely support this claim, because as I have emphasised club drugs are extraordinary commodities in that first they cause intoxication that left uncontrolled may become disruptive and undesirable, and second unlike ordinary consumable goods they are imperfect or tainted substances of which production and distribution is not overseen by state or other regulatory bodies. Club drug consumption thus involves problems and risks that are different from those attached to consumption of other 'ordinary' goods.

Nevertheless, the framework of tamed hedonism is most instructive within the context of my research, as it more closely considers the two factors that are crucial for sustained Fairfielder drug-taking: user choice and autonomy. Strategies of control, moderation and desistance in Fairfielder drug-taking all serve to emphasise choice and autonomy of the club drug user as an individual who is in control of and 'sovereign' over his or her own behaviour and practices. In this sense, choice and autonomy may be conceptualised as components of a Fairfielder toolbox, as the ability to 'invoke' and resort to them is a further indicator of distinction between desirable and undesirable types of drug-taking.

The concept of tamed hedonism is therefore also useful when linked to my previous discussion, but a caveat needs to be introduced: choice and autonomy are not essential because they normalise club drug-taking to the level of ordinary consumption, but it is the ability to show capability of choice and autonomy of self in the face of the problematic (and enigmatic in terms of their components) nature of illicit drugs that renders the consumption of these substances not only acceptable, but also distinctive and desirable.

Sassatelli developed the concept of tamed hedonism in exploring different forms of social consumption and the norms that guide and define them as deviant or otherwise. The concept is founded on the notion that local norms of consumption, whether ‘ordinary’ or ‘deviant’, in contemporary society are underpinned by a common structure that is in turn based on an ‘over-arching rhetoric’ of the consumer as an agent of choice (ibid. 2001: 93 – 94). Here, Sassatelli qualifies individual consumer choice as an ‘ambivalent normative claim’, implying that whilst it essentially constitutes the normative model upon which all consumption is built and learned as it situates the consumer as a free agent or voluntary ‘chooser’, it does not translate to modalities of practice, as decisions made by consumers with respect to what and when to consume are always guided by socially pre-defined and pre-assigned structures and values (ibid. 2001: 94 – 95).

The normative claim of choice, Sassatelli continues, is also paradoxical in another sense, as its perpetuation comes in the form of ‘assurance’ through a directly negating premise that ‘functions as a warranty that we have actually voluntarily chosen it’ (ibid. 2001: 95): the consumer is free to choose one product because he is free to not choose another. It is therefore the concept of the self as a conscious and active agent that is freely capable of opting to *not* use a good, to switch from one good to another or from one category of goods to another entirely, that establishes consumption as a means to autonomously fulfil desire, and as a result a ‘self-possessed self’ that ‘is in charge’ of his or her own desire (ibid. 2001: 96).

Sassatelli situates what she refers to as the ‘so-called post-Fordist economy’ within a world of continuously expanding consumer options, which in turn reinstates consumer choice and autonomy:

‘... the ceaseless innovation of consumer goods, the continuously superseded fashions, the endless combination of styles appear to grant consumers a continuous liberation from the specific objects which they have chosen’ (ibid. 2001: 96).

Sassatelli frames these conditions as characteristic of contemporary reality, but she also attempts to trace them back to the birth of 'modern' consumer practices and the reconciliation between a 'personal' rational drive to satisfy one's desires through pleasure and a 'political' order that positively encouraged the bettering of oneself in the 18th century. It is this reconciliation, she argues, that has given rise to the identity of the 'merchant-consumer' as 'sovereign', who simultaneously rules over and controls both desires and the market that satisfies those desires (ibid. 2001: 96). Within this order there is space for indulgence, as long as the self remains sovereign over and is able to exercise control over his or her desires.

The pleasures that satisfy these desires must be monitored and preceded by the self, and whilst they must be effectively intense enough to satisfy desire and affirm self-indulgence, they must never overwhelm to the point of which the self is lost to them. To sustain this order, the choice to not indulge desire through pleasure, or to abandon one pleasure for another, must remain an easily accessible and readily executable prerogative of the consumer, at all times. This, Sassatelli suggests, has led to the emergence of the 'tamed hedonism', that polarises the indulgence of consumer desire into pleasure that is either justifiable because it fits onto a wider scheme of long-term 'self-realization' and 'well-being' on the one hand, or because it does not lead to a complete loss of the self when one pursues it within the rubric of 'self-experimentation' on the other (ibid. 2001: 97 – 98).

For Sassatelli, therefore, hedonism is justified and realised when it is tamed through its normalisation as a project that fulfils a wider scope of self-realisation and a practice that remains subject to self-autonomy and choice. In what are rather implicitly Foucauldian terms, she stresses the importance of the divide between what may be considered normal versus pathological pursuits of pleasure. In directly drawing on the example of substance use, she contrasts addiction as a manifestation of the latter to calculated intoxication within the confines of a rave party or the self-limiting phase of youth as a manifestation of the former. Addiction, as she posits, implies an unacceptable loss of the self to the indulgence of desire as it denotes

hedonism that is no longer tamed, and it is because of this that it is pathologized (ibid. 2001: 98 – 99).

Without a doubt, as Sassatelli notes, the use of drugs (especially those that are classified as ‘addictive’) as ‘marginal’ and ‘equivocal’ goods may on the one hand still be broadly stigmatised, because ‘seizing some moral boundary’ may lead to complex debates about the degree to which doing drugs is an active choice and thus to which it involves an autonomous self. On the other hand, certain types and modalities of drug use be rather popularly ‘normalised’ through references to either wider ‘projects of well-being’, as in the case of the way marijuana use is openly promoted in the Netherlands, or ‘unserious, inconsequential involvement in the present’, as in the example of the main protagonist of the Irvine Welsh novel (and later cult film directed by Danny Boyle) *Trainspotting* who unlike his friends is able to manage his heroin use to emerge as the Byronic hero in the plot (ibid. 2001: 102).

In her application of tamed hedonism to both alcohol and illicit drug use, Sassatelli emphasises the role of assigned space where these practices occur and are more or less ‘domesticated’ and normalised. Whilst, as she points out, alcohol and drugs are distinguished from one another by their legal status, and I would add by their pre-inscribed valences as problematic substances, she argues that the bar in the case of the former and the rave club in the case of the latter both serve a similar function as avenues within which the use of the two substances is ‘contained’ (ibid. 2001: 103).

The separation and specialisation of space that is characteristic of modernity, as she argues, facilitates the creation and maintenance of these locales, which allow for temporary indulgence in substance use whilst also sustaining the autonomous self that is central to tamed hedonism: within pre-assigned spaces and at particular times one can become intoxicated, as long as he or she remains composed enough to be able to ‘switch to appropriate moods, manners and habits whenever required’ (ibid. 2001: 103).

5.3 Ecstasy as a Commodity?

Notwithstanding the property of drugs as illicit, impure, and extraordinary items, Sassatelli's argument raises the important question of whether club drugs like Ecstasy should be treated and understood as commodities of which consumption is subject to consumer agency, rather than as substances on which the user is or may become dependent. Let us consider this question specifically with respect to Ecstasy, and to the choices Fairfielders are presented with when considering whether to acquire and use this drug.

Michael Agar (2007) has suggested that the sort of tamed hedonism and the 'normalisation of abnormality' proposed by Sassatelli may neatly be applied to the consumption of Ecstasy. For Agar, particularly because of its empathogenic properties and the relative ease with which its use and effects may be managed, Ecstasy represents an 'intersection' between a contemporary consumerism that satisfies short-term desire and social disconnection that marks contemporary reality (ibid.: 218). From this perspective, Agar and Reisinger (2004: 254) have also argued that Ecstasy should be dislocated from the model of a '*disease that is transmitted*' and viewed instead as a '*product for a market*'. As such, unlike other drugs such as crack cocaine and heroin, Ecstasy consumption is not confined to any specific demographic, but rather 'like any successful product' with variable assigned purposes, under ideal historical conditions it may not only appeal locally across social class and status, but also to a global demographic (ibid.: 260)⁴⁰.

Here, Agar and Reisinger refer to a longitudinal study – one of the first explorations of drug-taking that focused specifically on Ecstasy - by Jerome Beck and Marsha Rosenbaum (1994),

⁴⁰ For Agar and Reisinger (2004), Ecstasy use is different from the use of drugs like heroin and crack cocaine, because whilst both types of use may 'diffuse' through populations when their distribution is facilitated by ideal historical conditions, diffusion of the former is better understood through a 'marketing' model in which the user is a consumer who chooses to use the drug, rather than an addict who is being 'infected' by it. This implies that in contrast to the use of these other drugs, the use of Ecstasy is 'occasional and not impulsive', does not 'cluster' in 'particular populations', and is not pathologic (ibid.: 254).

through which Ecstasy use is specifically explored and situated within different ‘social worlds’, ‘contexts’, and ‘scenes’ (Beck and Rosenbaum 1994: 27). Through this study, Beck and Rosenbaum posit that Ecstasy users may range from ‘college students’ to ‘spiritual seekers’, to ‘professionals’; and ‘prostitutes’, who use the drug for various reasons including the enhancement of intimacy, creativity, and sensuality, depending on the context within which it is used.

Such selective and carefully situated use indeed suggests that a physical dependence, at least the kind in which the sole purpose of using the drug is to counter the throes of withdrawal, is extremely rare in the case of Ecstasy. In other words, it is context and situation rather than a psychosomatic condition (as in the case of other drugs), that stimulate its use. Moreover, a number of external factors such as criminalisation and concerns about how the drug is adulterated, as well as intrinsic factors such as an eventual loss of enthusiasm for the experience coupled with an increasingly cumbersome ‘recovery period’ and a resulting condition of ‘diminishing returns’, Ecstasy use for many users and ex-users whom Beck and Rosenbaum had spoken to seemed to be moderated and self-limiting (Beck and Rosenbaum 1994: 95 – 111).

Agar and Reisinger’s invitation to a paradigm shift in terms of considering Ecstasy as a commodity rather than a disease is instructive, on both analytical and empirical fronts. Beck and Rosenbaum’s study indeed supports this claim, as it suggests that even at the earliest stages of sociological analysis of Ecstasy use, the drug could more easily fit within a model of a tool that is selectively used to enhance subjective experiences, rather than an addictive substance that needs to be taken to maintain objective function.

Key to the argument here, therefore, is that when it comes to Ecstasy the incidence of *dependence* – which as Agar and Reisinger note often leads to both DSM-IV-type symptoms and ‘deterioration at the personal and community level’ (ibid. 2004: 253) – seems to be

negligible. Here, there is an opportunity to begin to slightly revise a part of Sassatelli's locus of tamed hedonism as it applies to drug use: it is not addiction as a socially prescribed condition or problem (see Truan 1993), but rather dependence on one product or type of product, which acts in opposition to consumer choice and autonomy. Ecstasy is no exception in this sense.

Some observations from my own fieldwork should illustrate my point here. In Malta as elsewhere, different batches and brands of Ecstasy tablets are subject to availability on any week or night out. In my fieldwork experience, the dealers who are known to Fairfielders had batches of some brand of Ecstasy or other. Even if in this sense there seldom was a shortage of Ecstasy, Fairfielder Ecstasy dealers could not guarantee the availability of the same type and brand of tablet from one event to the next.

This meant that the types of tablets available to Fairfielders may have changed over even a brief span of a week, and as a result there may have been considerable variance in the potency of the drug and the range of effects that were attached to it. Indeed, throughout my fieldwork Fairfielders reported several brands of Ecstasy tablets that they bought and took, with some of these having unwanted side effects. In Table 2 below I am presenting a list of some of these Ecstasy brands and summing up some of their properties in terms of relative availability at Fairfielder events, potency, and any remarkably positive or negative effects attributed to each type by Fairfielders.

Table 2 – Types of Ecstasy Tablets and Effects as Reported by Fairfielders

Type / Brand of Ecstasy	Reported Potency	Remarkably Positive Attributes / Effects	Remarkably Negative Attributes / Effects
Ghosts	Moderate	Very Manageable	None
Skulls	Very Strong	None	Unmanageably Strong
Diamonds	Moderate / Strong	None	Spells of Fatigue
Cookie Monsters	Moderate	Manageable	None
Tigers	Moderate	None	None
Harley Davidsons	Moderate	None	None
Tasmanians	Moderate	None	None
The Black Ones	Very Strong	None	Nystagmus, Bruxism
Doves	Moderate	Very Smooth	None

Some of the brands of Ecstasy that are included here were more frequently found than others at Fairfielder events, over some extended periods of time. The moderately strong Cookie Monsters, for example, were commonly available to and popular amongst Fairfielders during the summer of 2016. Even during that summer, however, there were two consecutive weekends when Cookie Monster tablets were not available at Fairfielder events, and the only other available tablets on these two weekends were Skulls. Following the first weekend when Skulls were consumed on Saturday night, Fairfielders talked about how excessively strong they were. I was not present at this Saturday event, but as Maggie recounted to me when I met her on Sunday evening:

“I don’t like these pills [Skulls], I just took half as usual and I felt out of it. A lot of us got so completely fucked as well, eyes rolling everywhere ... I don’t know what’s in them but they are too strong for me, I won’t be taking them again”.

The following weekend, at a Fairfielder event I attended and when Skulls were still the only pills available, I also asked Sybil and Flo about them. They both separately echoed Maggie’s

sentiment, as they declared that unless they found someone who could offer some other brand of pill, they would not be taking Ecstasy that night:

“No Jay, Skulls are too much and I won’t be taking this week. If someone comes along with a half of some other [type of] pill I might, but not Skulls for sure. Last week I took and I got too fucked, I felt like I overdid it and I didn’t take more than usual or anything, it’s just the pills ... so no if they are the only pills going around I’m taking it easy tonight”. (Sybil)

“Take Skulls? No way. Last week I got really bad on just one of them. I just couldn’t stop grinding my teeth and I even felt sick at a point, they’re not worth it”. (Flo)

At a later stage of my fieldwork, I noted similar instances when pills that Fairfielders called ‘The Black Ones’ were the only Ecstasy brand available on a number of subsequent weeks. Fairfielders reported uncontrollable bruxism (grinding of the teeth) and nystagmus (rapid eye movements), and some general feelings of malaise following consumption of these pills. This kept a number of them from consuming these pills a second time, opting to abstain instead.

Another type of Ecstasy tablet that was available over some weeks in the spring of 2016 was the Diamond. Unlike in the cases of the other two types mentioned, Fairfielders did not report feeling ill or out of control after consuming Diamond tablets. Some of them did, however, talk about how these pills made them feel fatigued or sleepy following consumption, at the point where the euphoric effects of the drug should instead have been felt. Fairfielder Amelie even told me how taking these pills made her take a break from taking Ecstasy for some time, not because she felt ill during or after taking the drug, but rather because she did not enjoy the experience:

“I took a Diamond at *Mute*⁴¹, and it just made me sleepy, so I just went and sat on a wall alone when I was supposed to be coming up and having fun. It was not fun at all and it just put me off pills, so I haven’t taken since then. I’ll probably give it a break and try something else when there are other pills, but I really didn’t enjoy those Diamonds at all”.

⁴¹ A *Mute* event had taken place two weeks before I had this conversation with Amelie.

Positive properties of other types of pills were also conversely reported by Fairfielders. A few days after trying White Doves, for example, Eric remarked to me about how ‘smooth’ they were and that he would be looking out for them and doing them again:

“I tried White Doves last Saturday, they’re really smooth. Coming up was great and even the come down wasn’t too bad. They are probably the best pills I’ve taken, I will definitely be taking them again if I find more”.

The accounts presented above evidence Fairfielder awareness of different types of Ecstasy tablets, and a shared knowledge about those that were perceived to be positive or negative properties of each type of pill respectively. Significantly, this knowledge was most of the time acquired through direct Fairfielder experience, by trying a new type of Ecstasy pill that is available on any given night and thus directly ‘sampling’ or ‘testing out’ the drug.

Experiences and information of and about the drug were also shared between Fairfielders, both in the immediate instance of when the drug was being taken, and the following days and weeks. User narratives about the drug experience were shared and valued, not only because through them Fairfielders became aware of any adverse effects, but also because they were the means through which the *quality* of the type of tablet was recognised, evaluated and qualified. Familiarity with different types of Ecstasy tablets and attached effects were thus acquired in this way, and this information became part of a collective oral knowledge of the group, which in turn guided future choice in terms of which types of Ecstasy tablets to take or avoid. As I shall be discussing shortly, the fact that acquiring this type of information was left to Fairfielders as buyers and consumers, and rarely, if ever, asked about or expected to be disclosed at ‘purchase point’ from the dealers, should also be noted as functionally important.

5.4 The Fairfielder as Chooser, Pharmacist, and Consumer

Through the examples presented above, the practical ways in which choice and autonomy become clear, in the instances when they differentiate and discriminate between those that are

good and bad brands of Ecstasy, and especially when they choose to not take Ecstasy altogether – on some occasions over extended periods of time - because there is only a type of pill which is known to them as having unfavourable side effects available. Here therefore, Fairfielders are not abstaining because of health concerns or to moderate intoxication, but for another reason altogether that sustains Agar’s argument for framing Ecstasy as a commodity: abstention here has to do with a perceived *poor quality of the product*. Yet, and this is key to my own contribution to Agar’s argument, it is not apart from the problematic nature of Ecstasy as an illicit drug that it becomes a ‘mere’ commodity in the way that the normalisation argument would sustain, but because of its problematic nature that it becomes a special and imperfect kind of commodity. Fluctuating between consuming it and abstaining from it engenders a perception of control, and thus a more ‘total’ sovereignty over the self.

The capacity for abstention contrasts rather sharply with practices that have been documented through ethnographic accounts of other types of drug-taking. In the case of homeless heroin injectors of San Francisco presented by Philippe Bourgois (2009), for example, daily ‘begging, working, scavenging, and stealing’ or ‘hustling’ (ibid. 2009: 5) underpinned a moral economy through which users indiscriminately shared any type and amount of heroin they could get their hands on between themselves, in order to keep opiate withdrawal symptoms at bay. In other accounts the use of heroin (Wenger et al. 2014) and crack cocaine (Bungay et al. 2010) has also been documented as a perceived necessity for the self-medication of mental and physical health problems and the alleviation of adverse social conditions, rather than as a means to indulge desire.

Here, I am not suggesting that users of these other types of drugs do not seek to obtain the best or purest drug that is available to them. Agar (1975) has shown that even heroin users may engage in a selective cognitive process in basing their choice of where and from whom to buy the drug on criteria such as reputation of the dealer and value for money of his product. By all accounts, however, the capacity for abstention in these cases remains limited at best, as in the

case of Agar's urban heroin users the question is not about whether to acquire or 'cop' (ibid. 1975: 47) the drug or not, but rather where and who to get it from. There is *necessity* that determines function of the user for any version of the drug that leads to dependence upon it, and therefore these cases of other types of drug use are distinguishable from Fairfielder Ecstasy-taking, because they are marked by a lack of capacity for total abstention.

A further point that needs to be made on the above accounts of Fairfielder modes of choosing Ecstasy has to do with the fact that the Fairfielder dealer, as the seller and provider of the product, was not asked about and neither trusted with information about the type of pill and its effects. Rather, in my field experience Fairfielders took it upon themselves to source this type of information, through careful and moderated consumption of the drug. Thus, whilst acknowledging Sassatelli's argument that patterns of indulgence in 'deviant' and more 'ordinary' types of consumption may follow a similar rubric, this is a significant peculiarity of this type of illicit drug-taking that must be considered. For unlike in the case of other more ordinary commodities, including licit drugs and pharmaceuticals, the effects - whether favourable or adverse - of different brands of Ecstasy were never advertised by those who sold them to Fairfielders.

The key point here is that the measures by which the quality and effectiveness of different Ecstasy brands are tested are possessed by Fairfielders themselves. In a sense, this results in the ultimate 'empowerment' of the drug-taker who is simultaneously acting as the merchant (or more precisely, the pharmacist) who is testing out the product for the market, and as a particular kind of consumer who is entirely guiding the demand for the drug through his or her own individual experience, which in turn immanently contributes to a collective knowledge about the product that is shared by the group. Through this process, the consumer of these drugs gains an even more pronounced sense of empowerment than the consumer of ordinary commodities. In another opposite and more profound sense, however, the Fairfielder is also 'disempowered' by the fact that, unlike in the case of any other ordinary goods that are available

on the market, the Fairfielder does not have the luxury of choice from a whole range of different brands and ranges of Ecstasy tablets. In economic terms, therefore, the consumer market and the commoditisation-potential of Ecstasy is rather restricted by its structures of its distribution. In turn, this dispossesses Fairfielders as it reduces consumer choice to its most extreme denomination: they can either take the tablet 'brand' that the dealers have to offer, or not take anything at all.

We have seen how Fairfielders choose the latter option when they are aware – either through their own previous experience or that of their peers - that the pills on offer lead to effects that are hard to control and undesirable. The capacity to exercise this will in and of itself distinguishes the Fairfielder from both the 'addict' and the 'indiscriminate drug-taker': Fairfielders do not only moderate the *quantities* of drugs they consume, but also base their decision of whether to consume or not on the *quality* of the drugs.

From this perspective Fairfielder events also become peer-to-peer laboratories for product-testing, platforms for sharing feedback and impressions about the product, and occasions during which force-feeding information about the benefits or repercussions of consuming the product by outsiders is ineffective. Fairfielder Ecstasy-taking may thus represent a satisfaction of the conditions for tamed hedonism, at both poles at the same time. On the one hand, it is a practice that is limited to points in time and space and that is characterised by choice and autonomy. On the other, *because of this*, a shared pool of knowledge about the product that transcends these spatial and temporal boundaries is generated, which fulfils the wider scope or 'project' of obtaining control over and taming not only hedonism, but the process of consumption itself.

5.4 The Case of Cocaine: From Desire to Function

In my discussion above I have shown how, within the limiting structures of distribution of Ecstasy, Fairfielders may choose to take or not to take the drug, and this depends on the types of tablets that are available. This suggests that in this case drug-taking is not simply a matter

of indulging 'desire' immediately and at all costs, but rather requires sound and autonomous evaluations to take place. Fairfielders' autonomy also presents itself in cases when the indulgence of that desire is forfeited, because drugs are taken for other more 'functional' or 'utilitarian' purposes: to counterbalance or neutralise the effects of other drugs, to substitute the use of other drugs, or to lubricate social interaction and reinforce alliances. My point here may be illustrated through the presentation of some instances of when and why cocaine was taken by Fairfielders.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I was not aware of multiple uses and functions of cocaine, as I was under the impression that the drug might just be used as a pleasure or empathy enhancer, similarly to how Ecstasy is used. As I progressed with my fieldwork, however, it became evident to me that Fairfielders considered cocaine an appropriate drug to take in a wider variety of contexts than Ecstasy, and the purpose of its use went beyond both the enhancement of pleasure and a straightforward engenderment of complicity between members of the group.

To be clear, I do not wish to suggest that Fairfielders do not derive any pleasure from taking cocaine, or that the drug is not used to satisfy cravings and desires. Pleasure and function may well be interlinked in this sense. I am only rather suggesting that there were instances when cocaine for Fairfielders served purposes that may be less easily anticipated by those unfamiliar with Fairfielders' drug-taking, and that as such were initially no less striking to me as well. I categorise these purposes as 'alternative', in the sense that they are contrasting to an apparently hedonistic (tamed or otherwise) drive for pleasure through regulated intoxication that may be attributed to Ecstasy use. The central function of drug-taking in these cases was restoring or maintaining bodily control and composure. There were three main alternative functions of cocaine use that I came across during fieldwork:

1. Counterbalancing some of the intoxicating effects of alcohol, in the sense of restoring and enhancing alertness and cognitive function that is offset by excessive drinking, and

that facilitates performance and action both without and within the dynamics of the group;

2. Replacing Ecstasy-taking during day-time parties or other situations that called for a relatively greater degree of control and composure than night-time events when Ecstasy was taken;
3. Engendering interaction and conversation following occasional big meals (usually day-time lunches) that served as congregations between those who were immediately active within the Fairfielder group and those who were less so during the period when the meal took place but would have been in the past.

5.5.1 Counterbalancing the Effects of Alcohol

I first came across evidence of cocaine being used to counterbalance alcohol intoxication one night during the first months of my fieldwork, when the Fairfield club still served as the central place for Fairfielders to meet, and I met Fairfielder Phil at a small and quiet bar where the group was having drinks on a Saturday evening. I had seen and spoken to Phil at the Fairfield club the night before, and that Saturday I asked about whether he had enjoyed the previous night. The conversation turned to drug-taking, as he told me about how he had felt that he got excessively drunk and had ‘sobered up’ by taking some ‘bumps’⁴² of cocaine, and as at this point of fieldwork this sounded rather counterintuitive to me, I asked surprised, “You took cocaine to sober up?”:

P: Yeah sure, I don’t just take coke to enjoy my night, it sobers me up when I feel like I overdid it.

J: That’s new to me, how does that even work?

⁴² For Fairfielders, bumps of cocaine were different from ‘lines’ in that they involved snorting smaller doses of the powder, usually by dipping a car key into a small plastic bag of the drug and picking up a small amount of the powder on the edge of the key. This was a more rapid way of taking cocaine and was especially useful in situations when Fairfielders took the drug in the bathrooms of public places such as clubs and bars.

P: Like last night, I went out ... I had a long lunch and just went and stayed out after that. I had been drinking for quite some time and I was really drunk by 1 a.m. I knew I had to drive, I did a couple of bumps and sobered up before driving home, it made me good to drive. It works like that, I do it sometimes ... just a couple of bumps bring you back to your senses after having had too much to drink.

As I progressed with my fieldwork, I realised that Phil was far from being an exception in using cocaine for this purpose. It was not uncommon for Fairfielders to take cocaine as a means of counteracting the effects of alcohol, or even share the drug and give a bump of cocaine to another member of the group who appeared to be either inebriated or tired as a result of excessive drinking. Moreover, whilst during club events cocaine was used predominantly by male Fairfielders, some female Fairfielders also used the drug for its 'sobering' properties on other occasions. My conversation with Sybil, following a Fairfield meal held in Valletta, exemplifies this observation:

S: I love taking some coke after lunches like this, I think it's the ideal drug, especially after drinking some wine like I did today ... it helps you sober up and at the same time keeps you going, and you can socialize and just chill at the same time.

J: So you actually use cocaine as a drug to keep you going, as a tool, not to get wasted in this case.

S: Yes definitely. Like now I have just had a bump, and I'm feeling great. I can talk to you and the others normally and I'm not feeling drunk or tired although I drank quite a bit at the lunch - it's ideal.

5.5.2 Choosing Cocaine over Ecstasy

Of note here is that for Phil and Sybil cocaine was - at least to some extent - associated with regaining bodily control. It was also attached to retaining control in the first place, when it was the drug of choice for events that took place during the day, or for the day-time hours of events that stretched from the afternoon to the evening and night. In other cases - especially of day-time parties - when Ecstasy may not have been taken at all, cocaine provided a suitable compromise: one could still successfully participate in drug-taking practices without investing too much effort in containing the effects of intoxication.

My impression was that during these day-time events even the most experienced Ecstasy users found it difficult to successfully manage the effects of the drug, with every twitch of the face

becoming obvious in the daylight. Attempting to manage these effects was regarded as impractical. This impression was reinforced by Gennaro, when he told me about how he did not like to take Ecstasy and instead preferred cocaine during day-time parties:

“I hate taking pills when we have an event during the day ... I’m not really one who likes to socialise and talk to people I don’t know at a day party by some pool anyway, so I’ll just put my sunglasses on, have two whiskeys, get a gram [of cocaine] and mind my own business ... it’s easier ... then I’ll see how the party is once it gets dark, I might not even take anything else then and just save the pills for the after-party”.

Gennaro’s words here have a twofold implication. First, the choice of which drugs to take, or whether to take drugs at all, was made whilst keeping the setting, time and place of an event in mind. The tendency of not taking Ecstasy and either opting for abstention or taking more manageable and small doses of cocaine during the day-time phase of an event was indeed taken up by Fairfielders during my fieldwork. Thus drug-taking behaviour was grounded in an ethos that guided a gradual and selective process of drug-taking over the time of an event, in this case also separated by times of day and night.

Second, taking cocaine (and abstaining from Ecstasy) here has less to do with what was appropriate in terms of ‘concealment’ and more with an intimate knowledge of how to get the best or most desirable outcome out of club drug-taking. For whilst, as I have suggested, taking cocaine instead of Ecstasy may have been due to not wanting to appear intoxicated during day-time hours, there was another factor at play in this: the conscious maximization of pleasure over time.

In other words, Ecstasy was seen by Fairfielders as a greater source of indulgence than cocaine; and given that the quantity of pills taken was often regulated and even regimented one had to make sure that the effects of Ecstasy would not have faded early in relation to the time of the event. Here there were therefore both external and structural factors (anonymity and peer pressure) and internal factors (strategies of maximisation of pleasure) that guided the Ecstasy

experience, which in themselves included, and indeed required, the choice of not taking Ecstasy until later in the night.

5.5.3 Taking Cocaine after Occasional Big Meals

I had been invited to a big lunch together with Fairfielders males Russ, Gennaro, and Tyler. The lunch had been organised as an annual get together by several of their friends, and we were there together with around fifteen other Maltese men at a restaurant in the Southern part of the island. Most of the men present were abstainers, who from what I later learned from Gennaro had previously experimented with club drugs but had not remained, as he put it 'in the scene'.

Once lunch was over and a considerable amount of wine and spirits had been consumed, Gennaro and Tyler spoke to some of the other men present, whom they knew had taken drugs before, and discreetly proposed getting some cocaine. The proposal was accepted, and one of the Fairfielders gathered the necessary shares of money from the other men and phoned a dealer to place the order. Within an hour, a number of those present were taking turns to visit the bathroom of the restaurant, in twos or threes, to consume the drug.

At this point I was seated next to Tyler, and I asked him about whether taking cocaine was something he did regularly after lunches:

J: When you're out at something like this, you think that coke is good to do?

T: Well I don't do it regularly, but it is Christmas. I think coke is more of the kind of drug you would take after a lunch like this, it goes well with these times when you're just with people and socialising, catching up with people you haven't seen in ages ... you know, having some wine, and just enjoying it.

J: And I assume you would not take Ecstasy at something like this.

T: Definitely not With pills it's different, I would never take pills at a lunch like this because it would be crazy, I mean can you imagine? [laughs] ... but some coke is good.

On this occasion and as suggested by Tyler, therefore, taking cocaine served a further purpose of re-establishing connection and ties through complicity between current and past members of the Fairfielders group. It may also have served in the establishment of 'common ground' between those who were familiar with the Fairfielders scene, past and present, as well as those

who were not but who were still up for consuming cocaine together at this specific time. This function of the drug thus carries implications that are more far-reaching than the domains of pleasure and the self in this sense, and that should not be overlooked.

5.5.4 A Parenthesis on Negative Attitudes towards Cocaine

As my fieldwork progressed, I noticed that the popularity of cocaine in its capacity as a drug with the uses and functions discussed in the examples above gradually increased. By all accounts, Fairfielders started their ‘drug careers’ with Ecstasy, and later incorporated what tended to be more occasional use of cocaine in their drug-taking patterns. They therefore learned to use it in the ways described above over a relatively short period of time. During this time, I was especially struck by what to me seemed to be a paradoxical association between the drug and the apparently ‘sobering’ values that were attributed to it by Fairfielders. Whilst these values were regarded positively by Fairfielders, they could also be considered to have some detrimental effects by some others, especially when contrasted with the ‘empathogenic’ properties of intoxication that is characteristic of Ecstasy use.

This became clear to me on one occasion when, during an event at a night club that was not organised by Fairfielders, I was speaking to a thirty-five-year-old Maltese man about my research interests. Whilst not being a Fairfielder, he was familiar with the Maltese dance music scene. He told me about how he had been ‘going to parties’ in Malta for years, and about how he much preferred times when people were taking just Ecstasy instead of cocaine:

“I’ve been coming here [implying the club we were at] and going to parties since the 90s, and I can tell you that cocaine has ruined the local scene ... even just ten years ago, when I was in my twenties, it [cocaine] was not big here – it was too expensive and no one used to take it at parties, so it was just pills. We used to just do a pill and enjoy it on the dance floor over here [pointing to the centre section of the club], and it was just all feel-good, no stuck-up behaviour [carries arm up towards nose and motions index finger to emphasise ‘stuck up’, and simultaneously emulating the motion for ‘snorting’]. You got people dancing together, smiling, just on pills ... now you get people who are on coke, and that just makes them act stuck up, the scene is not like it used to be, and cocaine is what ruined it”.

Although I was by no means a frequenter of dance music parties in Malta at the time that is being referred to by the man I was speaking to here, I had no reason to doubt the veracity of his statement. I found it to be rather suggestive, in three ways. First, it confirms that cocaine seems to have become both more available and accessible to recreational drug users in Malta over the past decade. Presently with the right contacts, it may be relatively easily procured on the island. This may have occurred as the drug, albeit in one of the most impure formats recorded in Europe, has become more cheaply available on the island⁴³.

Second, the increased accessibility of cocaine may have led to shifts in clubbing behaviour in Malta. My interlocutor above suggests, with nostalgia, that this has indeed happened; in his statement he almost seems to bemoan a time when Ecstasy was the only drug available and used by clubbers on the island. Here as well, the sobering effects of the drug are emphasised.

Third, rather than valuing them negatively, Fairfielders have learned to take the drug and advantageously use its effects as in the situations described above. This sustains the argument that the valences of drugs cannot be defined and qualified as fixed over time but are rather flexible and may be attributed differently even within the same generation of clubbers, as evidenced through the sharp contrasts between Fairfielder statements and uses of cocaine and the statement by my other informant.

5.6 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have presented a discussion of choice and autonomy as essential components of Fairfielder drug-taking. I have emphasised the ways in which Fairfielders employ agency to assess and decide which drugs (and types of drugs) to take and when to take them, and more pointedly, whether to take drugs at all. In view of this evidence and my discussion in the previous chapter, I suggest that the use of these drugs may be better understood in terms of

⁴³ This is indeed an impression that was confirmed to me by both the latest EMCDDA drug data (ibid. 2017b, see Chapter 1), as well as sources on the field.

processes of economy, albeit of a special kind, rather than as causative of pathology. This does not imply, however, that club drugs are regarded in the same way as ordinary commodities by Fairfielders, or that their use is normalised in this sense. Rather, because club drug-taking may potentially lead to specific problems (of health, excessive intoxication, and dysfunction) and therefore club drugs are inherently not ordinary commodities, the successful navigation of the practice that leads to just the right amount of intoxication, in the right place and at the right time, is attributed with desirable valences. This desirability is not weighted against total abstinence and a 'normal' culture, but rather engenders a culture of its own.

As I have presented it in these two chapters, Fairfielder drug-taking thus essentially involves strategies through which the potentially 'dispossessing' properties of club drugs (as both problematic 'intoxicants' and 'faulty commodities') are mitigated through strategies that show - to themselves and others - that they 'possess' and retain agency notwithstanding this powerful valency of drugs to dispossess the user. That is what Fairfielders seek to 'do': the process of mitigation is not a means to an end (of indulgence of desire or pleasure), but rather it is what gives Fairfielder drug-taking its distinctive value and meaning. This has two implications, that will be explored and brought out ethnographically in the following chapters.

First, when the drug use is confined to specific points in time and space - that are both physically and socially defined - within the short-term of a week (the weekends, at night), and in the long-term of a stage of life (youth), it is deemed to be acceptable. For in this way, the user performs and functions *outside* the group, in his or her other roles (a worker in the short-term, a partner, mother, father in the longer-term) once the hangover subsides, and the drug use does not keep him or her from performing this function⁴⁴. Contingent upon this premise, Fairfielders not only consider club drug use to be a self-limiting type of consumption, but also a means by which

⁴⁴ As I show in Chapter 6, maintaining their identities as 'functional' members of Maltese society is a particularly challenging task for Fairfielders, especially in view of strong societal disapproval of all types of drug-taking within Malta's small-scale context, where the concept of anonymity becomes especially hard to pursue.

identity and the ‘triumph’, as it were, of the self over that same consumption is marked, particularly in contrast to other types and differing modalities of drug use. And it is at this point that ‘acceptability’ is shifted up to ‘desirability’.

Second, and in a less self-evident manner, the Fairfielder must also be able to evidence autonomy of the self *within* the space and time of drug use. In other words, even within the context of the ‘heaviest’ Fairfielder event, agency must be employed in the submission of excessive drug use to the point where the user is able to participate in sociality and exchange that are attached to it and adhere to the group codes that moderate it. Discipline and the maintenance of composure figure centrally in this sense. Therefore, contrarily to the view that club drug use is attached to spaces within which ‘anything goes’ as ‘carnavalesque’ behaviour and a great degree of experimentation in sensual pleasure is regarded as normal (see Jackson 2004), the type of indulgence of the desire to use drugs that is desired by Fairfielders inherently brackets and necessitates a further degree of taming within itself, through behavioural composure that does not allow for a total immersion (or in Sassatelli’s terms, loss of self) into bacchanalian pleasure. The desirability of maintaining composure is not engendered by the successful normalisation of the problems that are proscribed to drugs and drug-taking. Rather, it is the challenge of achieving the ‘perfect’ balance between sobriety and intoxication, and therefore simultaneously emerging as sovereign over the risks and undesirable effects of drugs on the one hand, and the mundaneness of sobriety on the other, that gives Fairfielder drug-taking its appeal.

Part III: Poisons

Chapter 6: '*Tajjeb u Ħazin*' – Modalities of Drug Consumption

6.1 Introduction

In the introductory chapter to their volume '*Maltese Society: A Sociological Inquiry*', Sultana and Baldacchino (1994) identify three distinctive sociological properties of Malta as a 'Lilliputian' (ibid.: 14) neo-colonial microstate: 'intimacy', 'totality', and 'monopoly'. Whilst Malta has undoubtedly gone through some significant transformations over the past two decades, most notably at the institutional level following EU accession and membership (see Baldacchino 2014), the social and cultural setting of the island-state remains largely and significantly distinctive in the ways originally identified by Sultana and Baldacchino.

It is useful to consider and discuss the properties of Malta identified by them here – particularly the properties of intimacy and totality – and discuss them in relation to some broad local attitudes about drug-taking, for three reasons. First, to 'ground' this ethnography, and thus contextualise Fairfielders within some wider social and cultural frameworks, ideologies, and spaces that Malta presents. Second and more specifically, to explore how the social dimensions of Fairfielder club drug-taking may be framed as distinctive from those of club drug-taking in other parts of the world. Finally, situating Fairfielders within Maltese society may be equally revealing in terms of how Maltese social structure is sustained and reproduced.

My intention here is neither to essentialise Maltese culture, nor to argue that Fairfielders may be analytically framed as a group of dance music enthusiasts or clubbers that are altogether distinct from others in more urbanised metropolitan centres of mainland Europe. There are certainly values and patterns of behaviour that Fairfielders share with other dance music enthusiasts who are active elsewhere, and it is essential to keep this in mind. However, as Thornton (1995: 3) notes, whilst dance music culture is quintessentially 'global' and involves a flux of importation and exportation of music and styles, it remains 'firmly rooted in the local',

and crowds of enthusiasts thus also remain ‘municipal, regional and national’. The ways in which Fairfielder practices are local, ‘culturally informed’ (Kirtsoglou 2004: 1)⁴⁵ and embedded within Maltese culture, must therefore be considered to provide a well-rounded analysis how Fairfielders consume drugs within a wider context that remains largely marked by Maltese, and many times prohibitive, values.

This also becomes essential in view of my proposition that Fairfielders evaluate and ‘localise’ modalities of drug consumption as either ‘good’ (*tajjeb*) or ‘bad’ (*ħażin*). In this chapter, I explore how these judgments are formulated by Fairfielders. I argue that these are not only judgments of persons and their behaviours within the time and space of a drug-taking event, but they also more broadly inform and perpetuate conceptualisations of social class. In practical terms, for Fairfielders club drug-takers who are undisciplined and indiscriminate are not only ‘irresponsible’ drug-takers or party-goers, but also represent the ‘hoi polloi’ of the lower classes who consume ‘irresponsibly’ and ‘indiscriminately’.

6.2 Locating *Drugati*

The first of the properties identified by Sultana and Baldacchino is ‘intimacy’. Within the small-scale context of Malta ‘social visibility’ is magnified, and information about persons and events may be ‘even inadvertently’ spread and acquired through gossip (Sultana and Baldacchino 1994: 16). This leads to an enhanced sense of familiarity between the Maltese, which is in turn distinguished by contact and interaction between people of different backgrounds, not least through active systems of patronage between laymen and those in power - a type of relationship that is also ritualistically mirrored in the physical interaction between people and patron saint through the traditional village *fešta* (Mitchell 2002, Boissevain 1993).

⁴⁵ Elisabeth Kirtsoglou makes this point with reference to a ‘company’ (*parea*) of lesbians in a Greek town, who never overtly reveal their sexual orientations and ideologies to others yet draw upon wider Greek cultural practices (ex. dance and alcohol consumption) to discursively and performatively ‘articulate’ their identities in public space. For Kirtsoglou, the *parea* manages to remain both exclusive and ‘concealed’, and at the same time ‘integrated’ within the wider socio-cultural setting in this way (ibid. 2004: 1 – 2).

Intimacy is followed by the second property of ‘totality’, which leads to a climate of ‘surveillance’ from both community and state, as these become especially ‘aggrandised’ and engaged in social and economic matters of more or less significance. This in turn results in a ‘dense psycho-social atmosphere’ that Sultana and Baldacchino compare to a ‘Goffmanesque scenario of total institutions’, engendering a context within which both ‘face-to-face’ and ‘back-to-back’ types of relationships and corresponding patterns of information control are expected as inevitable occurrences (ibid. 1994: 17).

Third, there is a propensity for the establishment of ‘monopoly’, implying that any individual may relatively easily be perceived as an expert or leading producer within an area of knowledge or skill when he or she is able to demonstrate ‘even a modest edge’ (ibid. 1994: 18) in that area. The reason for this, Sultana and Baldacchino tell us, is twofold: first, a single expert may be enough to fulfil the total demand for expertise in that area within the territory, and second that expert many times goes uncontested:

“It is thus relatively easy to become a big fish when one operates in a small pond, unless one takes the risk and challenges of testing the ocean deep” (Sultana and Baldacchino 1994: 18).

Whilst a consideration of monopoly is less implicative on my analysis than intimacy and totality or surveillance, one should note that monopolism itself further evidences a small-scale context and a comparatively small population of which limited numbers of individuals would be expected to be involved in the specialised culture that Fairfielders follow and uphold. As I shift my focus to intimacy and surveillance and their implications on Fairfield practices in the following discussion, this brief reflection should serve to provoke some thoughts about how - to use the small pond analogy referred to by Sultana and Baldacchino – the Fairfield universe represents an even smaller puddle that entails a particular tension: on the one hand Fairfield culture aspires to uphold global values of dance music culture that are in place across major

cities in mainland Europe and North America, and on the other it is embedded and inevitably guided by wider social norms that are in place in contemporary Malta.

Intimacy and proximity, which lend themselves to both solicited and unsolicited familiarity in Malta, have profound effects on those private – or ‘concealed’ – aspects of life of individuals that may involve practices and behaviours that are considered to be ‘illegitimate’ and as acting against established principles (Mitchell 2002: 81) because like drug use they may be legally, but even more significantly for the Maltese morally, questionable. This begets an enhanced awareness of community surveillance that is also felt, considered, and needs to be navigated by Fairfielders when they are taking drugs. In more practical terms, this implies that even in the case of club-drug taking that occurs once a week and allows for the maintenance of otherwise functional and productive lives, it is less simple for Fairfielders to conceal their association with drug culture than it may be for club drug takers in other larger and more metropolitan parts of the world where relative anonymity on a ‘night out’ may be more practically ensured. It therefore becomes more difficult to maintain segmentation.

Moreover, precisely because Fairfielders maintain successful professional lives, which often entails formal and informal interactions with Maltese people and clients from all walks of life, they need to be particularly vigilant and discrete about being associated with club drug-culture. Fairfielders must uphold *reputations* as individuals who subscribe to values congruent with Maltese normative behaviour. Illicit drug-taking is locally viewed as being far removed from these values in a threefold way.

First, all illicit drugs are perceived as inhibitors of a person’s function in terms of an active social, personal, and professional life. This is substantiated by the local use of the word ‘*drogat*’ or ‘*drugat*’ (feminine: *drogata* or *drugata*) to describe someone who is a drug user or addict, but also more casually as a manner of speech to refer to someone who appears to be tired or dazed, and who generally seems to be unproductive. Someone who does not work and

is unkempt may be referred to as *drugat* (*qisu drugat* – he looks like a druggie), and in this way the word could be taken as having a semantic function that is similar to that of the word ‘bum’. The word *drugat* also itself conveys a sense of undetermined or infinite time: if one is *drugat* he is perpetually so, and not only on the weekends or simply occasionally when he chooses to take drugs. This, therefore, implies that to be *drugat* is an ontological state of being, and hence of essential identity.

The second point that follows is that an identified drug user is treated as a victim of drugs (*vittma tad-droga*), implying that drugs and ‘drug barons’ (*barunijiet tad-droga*) who supply them are insidious, and that the drug-taker needs help to be rehabilitated away from these as a functional member of society. Drugs have a malicious controlling influence on the victim, and actions and interactions are rooted in, and guided by, his need to take drugs. In this sense there is a subscription to a discourse that situates drug-taking as a pathology that needs to be treated through the intervention of medical professionals.

Third and in parallel, together with sexual promiscuity and other behaviours that challenge moral values, drug use in Malta has also been associated with ‘wayward youth’ and others who are engaged in practices that are associated with the Devil (Mitchell 2001: 88 – 90). If one opens himself up to the Devil (*xitan*), then one opens himself up to drugs, but the inverse is also possible: if one takes drugs, then he or she is likely to engage in other sinful practices to the extent of becoming susceptible to demonic possession. In this respect, as Mitchell notes, drug-taking amongst local youths has been perceived as symptomatic of an overall ‘erosion’ of traditional moral values and general ‘decline’ of Maltese society in modern Malta (ibid.: 90) - anxieties that were especially discernible in the years preceding the nation’s accession into the European Union. This view evidently stems from the traditionally strong influence of the Catholic Church; and here it is not coincidental that two out of the three main drug rehabilitation facilities that are currently active in the Maltese islands are run by the church.

An important point here is that this framework of reference is indiscriminative, implying that users of all types of illicit drugs – whether club drugs, or heroin, or any other kinds – are widely categorised through it. All those who take drugs may therefore be perceived as suffering from a condition or affliction that is pathological or spiritual, or both at the same time. In any eventuality, all drug use is synonymous with dysfunction and a condition of flawed personhood. This locks drug users (even occasional, recreational users) into a categorisation as socially disaggregated, dysfunctional, unproductive, morally flawed, and in dire need of (medical) rehabilitation.

This narrative, therefore, classifies Fairfielders as ‘*drugati*’ (plural), who are severely compromised in their ability to maintain ‘healthy’ and ‘successful’ social and professional lives. Even weekend recreational drug-taking that is limited to the weekend is in turn not culturally accommodated, as it is believed to be reflective of more deeply-seated flaws that impede the individual from being, for instance, a good architect, or a good entrepreneur, a good husband or wife or mother, and so forth.

Consequently, Fairfielders feel the necessity to exercise particular vigilance in their drug use. The challenge is as much about what drugs they consume and when they take them as it is about who to consume them with, or more pointedly, in *whose presence* to take them. This may well involve dissimulating drug-taking from others, but more importantly it orients Fairfielders towards positively valuing discretion and moderation in drug-taking.

Discipline, ‘holding back’, and the management of cues and information in Fairfielder drug-taking are therefore not only devices that conceal drug-taking. The possibility of being ‘outed’ as a drug-taker by disapproving others is certainly one that Fairfielders consider, but this is merely a ‘negative’ or precautionary utility of these strategies. There is a more important positive value to them for the group, as they engender complicity and discretion between its members. Not ‘showing’ that one has taken drugs, therefore, is an essential part of the social

fact as it testifies one's ability to take and 'enjoy' drugs whilst domesticating their effects and retaining functionality as a member of Maltese society.

6.3 Drugs, Compromising Information, and Multiplex Ties

Within Malta's small-scale context, strategies of reputation maintenance present their own determined challenges for Fairfielders. More specifically, Fairfielders face major pressures that work against them as functional drug users, which emerge in large part from the heightened degree of unsolicited intimacy or familiarity that characterises Maltese society. There are two important factors that come into play in this respect, which I draw from F.G. Bailey's discussion on reputations in 'Gifts and Poison' (1971).

First, intimacy engenders a 'face-to-face' type of society, in which access to a 'fund of common knowledge' (Bailey 1971: 4) about individuals and their actions is facilitated. The implication here is, as Bailey posits, that one may not be familiar with another individual, but even then, they are likely to be familiar with someone 'who will be able to talk about him' (ibid. 1974: 4). Groups, communities, and networks in Malta may be found to be connected through individual 'nodes' across social geographies in this way. Those sharing common backgrounds in terms of both geography and class may be even more intimately connected, and Fairfielder families were no exception in this sense. Fairfielders Tyler and Bianca came from two families, for example, who knew each other well and often met and dined together in each other's homes. The mothers of Maggie and her partner Gennaro - two key informants - also met frequently at a shop owned by Maggie's mother. At times this led to conversations that bothered Maggie, as she once revealed to me:

"My mother knows Gennaro's mother well, and they meet often at the shop. They talk about us and about what we do, and that bugs me ... like if I say something to my mother, and then she goes to tell Gennaro's mother, and she goes to tell Gennaro and it comes back to me ... it just bugs me so much".

Here it is important to acknowledge that all Fairfielders, including the majority who lived apart from their parents and immediate families, maintained and enjoyed close relationships with

parents, siblings, and other close kin. It was therefore no less significant for them to maintain sound reputations with family members as it was with those to whom they maintained professional relationships.

The prevalence of familiarity and the face-to-face interactions referred to by Bailey may also be further evidenced by the fact that it was not uncommon for a Fairfielder who was asked about whether he or she knew a particular person – in conversation about an individual who was not an immediate member of the group, for example - to reply with ‘I don’t know him personally, but I know who he is’ (*ma nafux, naf min hu*). This often implied that the person being asked about the other knew not only who he (or she) was, but also had further information – as trivial and irrelevant to the immediate conversation as it might have been – about him or her. Such information could have been either acquired through first-hand experience - of once having been at the same event this other person was at, or more remotely of having attended the same primary school, and so on – or, alternatively, through learning from common acquaintances. In short, ‘reputation’ precedes direct knowledge and interaction, and individuals manage their lives around this fact.

Second, Fairfielders are bound with other Maltese members of society in what Bailey refers to as ‘multiplex’ relationships (ibid. 1971: 6). This implies relationships that, because of the same inevitable proximity that characterises small ‘moral communities’, involve actors who may possess information about each other, which reveals more than what would have otherwise been sufficient for those relationships to be sustained. Here, Bailey presents the general

example of the interaction between a civil servant and his client⁴⁶ who also happen to be cousins. Because they are related, the interaction between these two actors would inevitably, favourably or unfavourably for the client, go beyond the capacity of them as civil servant and his client. Multiplex relationships are therefore ones that are constituted ‘of many different roles’, with some of these conceivably turning out to be conflictual, that each actor may take in relation to another at different times. The smaller the scale of the society, the greater the possibility for multiplex relationships to develop and come into play, and the greater the weight of reputation that is carried forward from behaviours of actors as they occupy their different roles (Bailey 1971: 4 – 7).

Reputations of individuals may thus depend on their private activities and behaviours: even in a social context that may be thought of as ‘private’, one needs to be vigilant about the behaviours of guests. Indeed, in this respect even the most apparently well-intentioned neighbour may be regarded as someone who is ‘called upon in times of trouble’, but at the same time one who has direct access to ‘a lot of potentially dangerous information’ (Heppenstall 1971: 151). This has three significant implications.

First, given the smallness of the island, individuals can almost expect to meet family members, remote acquaintances or public figures almost anywhere or everywhere: from an urban centre to a country stroll. In this sense the concept of anonymity can hardly be pursued in Malta. Individuals expect to meet, and to be recognised by people they know or even may not know. This engenders a specific stance and anticipation that influences behaviour. As I shall be

⁴⁶ This is a scenario that is also familiar to the Maltese. Indeed, the most direct example of the applicability of Bailey’s analysis to Malta is the one of local members of Parliament, who maintain ‘full-time’ professions as lawyers, medical doctors, architects and so forth. Within a socio-political scenario that remains highly polarised and conflictual in terms of the two main Labour and Nationalist political parties, factions, and groups (see Boissevain 1964), any imputed unethical behaviour of members of parliament in the pursuance of their ‘full-time’ occupations reflects on their positions as representatives. Reported connections of exponents and supporters of one of the two parties to illicit drugs have in this way been politicised. In one case in 2013, for instance, the Nationalist Party accused senior Labour Party officials of being aware of the presence and use of cocaine during a celebration at one of the many Labour Party clubs found across the island (see Balzan 2013).

illustrating shortly, it also leads individuals to cognitively situate others within social categories and of belonging: to 'groups', families, geography, political parties, class, and so forth.

Second, there is ample space and reason for multiplex relationships, and a reputation that is woven together with these relationships, to be developed and maintained. In this sense individuals give particular attention not only to their behaviour and activities and those of others, but also to the company that they keep. The local proverb '*ma' min rajtek, xebbahek*' (I liken you to those I see you with) attests this. Additionally, value is also interpolated from those one 'frequents' (*ikun ma*', literally 'stays with'), as well as those one 'is related to' (*jig'i minn*). Fairfielders share this tendency with other Maltese, and it was common for a person who may have been relatively unfamiliar to be spoken about by group members in terms of who he or she 'stays with', or less often in terms of relatives who may have been better known within the group.

Third, the reputation one maintains in one role affects upon his or her reputation in another, and thus a reputation as *drugat* overlaps and impacts a reputation as anything else. One might reasonably suggest that this occurs elsewhere as in Malta, yet because of the high degree of intimacy and the relative ease through which information about any ethically or morally questionable activities of a person may be acquired and spread, the level of social distrust and vigilance one exercises in Malta in this respect are notably more pronounced. Whilst politicians and well-known individuals are evidently more prone to public scrutiny, the relative absence of anonymity in the lives of private individuals also opens them up to the possibility of unintended revelations that may have similar consequences on their reputations.

6.4 Drugs and Surveillance

Illicit drug use in Malta thus, by and large, remains problematic, as both the moral and functional worth of those who are found to be even passively connected to drug-taking practices may be publicly questioned. Functional recreational drug users must contend with their

inevitable proximity to abstainers who hold unfavourable views of drug-taking as an immoral practice, as well as to those who, although possibly subscribing to somewhat more liberal views, may still advertently or inadvertently, with intents that may be malicious or otherwise, disclose drug-taking practices to others. Within the small-scale island context, any piece of such information that is passed on to others travels fast, and here the ramifications may be profound. Awareness of this contributes to a pervasive sense of ‘Goffmanesque’ surveillance that Sultana and Baldacchino have identified.

Here an illustration may be apt. One morning I happened to be speaking to a local businessman about my work. Testifying the importance of awareness of peer surveillance in terms of drug-taking, he emphasised that in Malta one must be especially cautious if he or she intends to take drugs, in his words, ‘even if they just take a line [of cocaine] at a wedding’:

“In Malta today you can go to a wedding and you get people doing cocaine in the bathroom, it has become widespread and everyone knows that, but one still has to be careful here because people talk and everyone will say that he is *drugat* ... here in Malta one cannot fart (*Hawn Malta ma tistax tboos*)⁴⁷”.

A similar uneasy foreboding was in another instance highlighted by one of my informants, when she told me ‘*over here, everyone just assumes all the time*’. She said this following her lining up to the bathroom of a club one night, where she ran into someone whom she worked with:

“There was a long line and I was just waiting there, and there was this girl from work who spoke to me and looked at me suspiciously as if she assumed I was waiting for my turn to take coke in there ... and I wasn’t even doing anything, I was just waiting to go to the bathroom, but I could tell that she was just assuming that I was just waiting to take ... and this happens all the time, just because I go to these parties and my friends go to these parties ... over here, everyone just assumes all the time, and then they will just go and talk about it and say that you do this and that, I can’t stand it”.

In another conversation, Fairfielder Amelie told me about how she had just started to work for a local interior design agency based in Valletta, and how her manager had ‘*assumed*’ that she ‘*goes to these parties*’:

⁴⁷ This is a local idiom.

“I just went in on Monday, and she asked me about whether I had been to *Wide Shut* on Saturday ... I mean *Wide Shut* is supposed to be a secret event, but even my boss knows about it and that I usually go and I don't know how I feel about that ... she's young and I wouldn't be surprised if she's been to these parties herself and saw me there, or whether she got to know because she saw some of my posts on Facebook or because we have common friends, or she just assumed that I go to these parties - because of how I look maybe? ... but I'm not so sure that I should feel comfortable with it either way”.

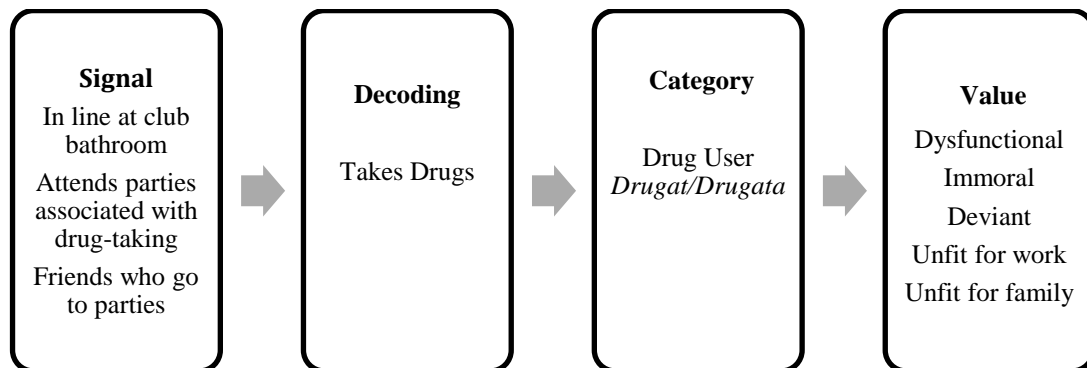
In view of being close to completing her studies at university, Fairfielder Tracy also expressed a similar type of concern about how others may draw negative value from the fact that one goes to parties or looks intoxicated from drugs or alcohol consumption, suggesting that this could directly impact her employability:

“I am working on finishing my thesis now, and I feel that I have to be more careful ... I can't just be seen around fucked or stay with people who just get fucked all the time, and I tell my friends this as well, in fact I don't really enjoy staying with people who go out to get wasted any more ... we have to be more careful because we're growing up and we're going to be looking for good work and you never know who might see you at a party or in a video or photos from the party, and who might talk about how you were at a party ... you can't just be at the front of a crowd at a party and be careless like that ... for example just a few weeks ago my boyfriend [Tracy's boyfriend was not a member of the Fairfielder group] and I decided to go to JIVE, and we had tickets for it already and everything was planned, and I was planning on taking [Ecstasy] ... but then he [the boyfriend] told me that his cousin was going to be there as well, and I just got so paranoid because I don't want members of his family to see me when I'm taking, so I just decided that we should not go at all”.

These cases evidence the conflictual nature of the roles that Fairfielders, as well as any other occasional users of drugs in Malta, inevitably have to contend with: conflicts which - even when adjusted to well - materialise as anxieties that are exacerbated by the impression that people in Malta 'talk', and even information that is thought of as protected or confidential may be accessed with relative ease. These anxieties also reflect an awareness about the possible inefficacy of strategies of concealment of drug-taking: retiring to a bathroom to take cocaine privately within a space and at an event where others are present (for example at a wedding, or in a nightclub) may not be enough to prevent those others from discovering, or more vexingly assuming, that one is *drugat*. Moreover, even apart from these times and places, others may assume that one is *drugat* if he or she meets certain pre-determined criteria: if one is young, known to frequent certain places, to have affiliations with a particular group of people (*klikka*), and so on.

The process that is being acknowledged here is therefore one that essentially has to do with judgement of the person, that is felt as ubiquitous, and that involves the derivation of ‘values and categories’ from ‘codes and signals’ (Bailey 1971: 12). This is the conjecture of ‘*assumption*’ that my informants refer to, and that as Bailey suggests involves a cognitive yet culturally-bound deciphering process of sorts: a ‘signal’, registered from behaviour, is ‘decoded’ and linked to ‘elements’ implying a set of culturally determined categories with which the received signal is associated by the receiver. These categories are in turn associated with negative or positive valences, which are also eminently determined by a ‘set of rules’ that is culturally-bound (Bailey 1971: 12 - 13). When considering the way through which the category and values of *drugat* are derived from cues by those who do not use and may disapprove of drug-taking as the above statements suggest, this process can be diagrammatically represented as follows:

Figure 4: Derivation of Judgement from Cue by Abstainers



Bailey suggests that this process remains essentially the same across cultural contexts, but the values that are derived from the signal conversely vary across societies. Here therefore, the category ‘drug user’ should be taken as impregnated with negative values that are in the first instance incongruent with normative behaviour – and in this sense values that are undoubtedly more or less shared across contemporary Western societies (see Yardley 2014: 1 - 8). In the second instance, the *drugat* is also associated with values that are specific to the Maltese context and which for example unfold, as I have suggested above, from the influence of strong moral

principles in Malta. Even if Fairfielders do not subscribe to these values, they remain subject to them. They represent the fundamental units by way of which Fairfielder reputations are formulated by others. Indeed, as Bailey posits:

“This jump from the small cue to the large judgement is nowhere more apparent than in the field of making and breaking reputations” (ibid. 1971: 11).

To summarise, therefore, surveillance results in Fairfielder anxieties, that may be conceptualised as threefold. First, they are caused by the process of assumption others are believed to engage in - an impression that is by all accounts justified - especially when these others obtain information or get cues that may reveal or suggest participation in, and frequentation of, certain types of events perceived as being connected to drug-taking. This is not specific to Fairfielders, but rather is pervasive, to various degrees across Maltese society and may equally and particularly be felt with respect to other morally problematic and potentially compromising types of behaviours.

Second, these anxieties stem from an acute awareness that one’s reputation does not depend on ‘qualities’ that are ‘possessed’ by a person, but rather ‘on the opinions others have’ of the person (Bailey 1971: 4). In other words, even if Fairfielders see themselves as ‘functional’ drug-takers because their drug consumption is recreational, disciplined, and confined to specific times and places, they are aware of being susceptible to being labelled *drugati*, and that, in the eyes of other members of Maltese society, this would situate them within the same bracket of debilitated heroin addicts and other drug-takers.

The third point that follows is that there is a concern with the possibility that such reputation-compromising information – based on assumptions and impressions – may be circulated and

reach *gossip*. The subject of gossip requires some careful analysis⁴⁸, as it represents a crucial point of intersection between the unsolicited intimacy and surveillance that characterise Maltese society, and which was particularly impactful on the dynamics of Fairfielder practices during my fieldwork.

6.5 Structural Polarity of Modalities of Drug-Taking

Thus far, I have argued that together with negative values attributed to drugs and drug users, a determined set of conditions that characterise Maltese society lead to specific anxieties that are felt by Fairfielders as they attempt to reconcile their identities as recreational drug-takers and functional members of Maltese society. This process requires an acknowledgment of both the negative valences attributed to *drugati* by the Maltese and the importance of maintaining a sound reputation, in a social context that is distinguished by a notable prevalence of familiarity and multiplex relationships.

Fairfielders, therefore, do not seek to transform negative societal values attributed to *drugati*, but instead operate within the same system that holds those values. In other words, Fairfielders understand and subscribe to those same values as they acknowledge that if mismanaged, drug-taking can easily spiral out of control and lead to undesirable behaviour and dysfunction. This was readily admitted, as the following extract from a conversation that I had with Bruno clearly suggests:

B: I think one has to be careful (*trid toqgħod attent*) when taking [drugs], things can easily get out of hand.

J: So you think that with, for example Ecstasy ... that it could still lead to problems.

B: For sure, if it is overdone and one loses control over it, for sure ... you know, it can maybe lead to other things and then one ends up at *Caritas* or *Sedqa* [local agencies offering drug rehabilitation programmes], so sure it can lead to problems.

It follows that Fairfielder drug-taking does not simply involve a unilateral process through which they maintain reputations by concealing their use of club drugs from disapproving others.

⁴⁸ See Chapter 7.

Rather, it is a practice that is rather more complexly guided by an ethos and pressures that are exerted by and within the group itself. Maintaining a reputation as someone who is a functional member of the group, capable of managing drug-taking, and who is not a 'victim' (*vittma tad-droga*) is as important within the group as it is without.

A key difference between Fairfielders and others who subscribe to a view that all drug use is associated with problems and dysfunction is that the former acknowledge that there are *degrees*, and therefore different types, of drug-taking behaviours. This not only means that they make a distinction between, for example, heroin and Ecstasy use, but also that they distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable – or desirable and undesirable – variants of Ecstasy-taking and effects.

Whether this view may be substantiated from a medical and legal perspective or otherwise is not quite the point here. It is rather more instructive to consider two poles of evaluation of drug-taking, which figured importantly in Fairfielder narratives: the positive pole is denoted by the word 'good' (*tajjeb* – also translated to 'benevolent') and the negative pole is denoted by the word 'bad' (*ħazin* – also translated to 'rot' or 'rotten', and 'evil'). Here, similarities may be drawn to what Robert Layton defines as discursive poles that act in 'structural opposition' to each other, which in the case of his villagers of Pellaport in Northern France were marked by the words '*gentil*' (positively) and '*fier*' (negatively). Layton notes how these words were used by Pellaport villagers in 'informal' evaluations of types of behaviour, 'for which no precise procedures are laid down and which are not subject to organised sanctions' (ibid. 1971: 105).

Layton suggests that in practice these terms were not always used absolutely, as one could be seen as both *gentil* and *fier*, and the 'range of meaning' and weight attributed to these terms may have varied with circumstances and individuals who were using them. He also recognizes the implications of a third word - '*fou*' – which seemed to render one exempt from the

implications of the *gentil* and *fier* dichotomy: if one was informally referred to as crazy (*fou*) following certain behaviour, then he or she could not be held accountable for that behaviour. Notwithstanding this flexibility of meaning, these terms marked and defined shared ‘cultural constructs’ according to which behaviour in Pellaport was informally categorised and accordingly sanctioned:

“... broadly speaking, *gentillesse* refers to the willingness to participate in the reciprocity of social relationships between equals, and *fierté* to the deliberate refusal to do so. The range of applicability of this construct is, I would argue, wilful behaviour: it excludes those who, because they are *fou*, cannot be held responsible for their acts” (Layton 1971: 109 – 110).

The *tajjeb* versus *ħazin* dichotomy could be conceptualised similarly in terms of how Fairfielders evaluate drug-taking, as well as other, types of behaviour. For them, *tajjeb* implies feeling good and remaining functional following drug consumption, both in the short term in the immediate context of a drug-taking event, and in the longer term in terms of work life, family life, and so on. The expression ‘I am good’ or ‘I was good’ (*kont tajjeb*) was often for example used by Fairfielders when I enquired about how they were feeling during a party when drugs were being taken, but also when I asked them about how they felt at work on a Monday or during a week following a weekend during which an event had taken place. During drug-taking events, Fairfielders also reassured each other about their state with this expression. When the desired effects of Ecstasy were achieved, for example, a Fairfielder could tell another that he or she ‘was good’, thus suggesting that the drug was working as it was expected to in a subtle and discrete manner.

At the opposite structural pole, *ħazin* often implies that one has overdone it and engaged in excessive or undesirable behaviours that may have included drug-taking. This is a condition that Fairfielders were wary of and took all measures to avoid. ‘Being bad’ or ‘becoming bad’ (*tiġi ħazin*) was used to describe feelings of physical malaise that could or could not have been

directly associated with taking drugs: a Fairfielder could say ‘I was bad’ when Ecstasy or alcohol consumption led to some undesired effects, but also when he or she was not enjoying the music or the crowd at an event, or even more generally when feeling unwell for any other reason. A Fairfielder could also be ‘made bad’ through direct or indirect interaction with another person who was acting inappropriately or being otherwise irksome: when someone who was not a member of the group was being unwelcomingly chatty and familiar at an event, for example, a Fairfielder could say that person ‘made them feel bad’ (*gabni ħazin*).

Ħazin also implies a condition of the person, which Fairfielders discern and draw certain valences from with respect to others. Similarly to how the term *drugat* is used by the Maltese to denote one who has a drug problem or who generally comes across as dysfunctional, the term *ħazin* - or when conveying greater emphasis *ħazin għageb* (awfully bad) - is used by Fairfielders in describing someone who regularly exceeds what is deemed to be an acceptable degree of drug-taking and intoxication, or who generally acts erratically, is not composed, is indiscrete, and so forth.

In view of Layton’s analysis, it is also instructive to note that a third term - *mignun* (translated to ‘crazy’ or ‘mad’) - was also informally used by Fairfielders when referring to someone who engaged in what were deemed to be excessive types of behaviour that, conversely to *ħazin*, were not necessarily bothersome to others or conceived as outright negative by the group. If one spent long hours going from one event to another during a weekend without resting or eating, for example, one was *mignun*. Although *mignun* was never *tajjeb*, the implications of this term seemed to be much less negative and permanent than those of *ħazin*. Indeed, it was more freely used by Fairfielders in conversations with each other, in a manner that was almost endearing: when one morning following a night out Mia suggested going to the beach, for example, other Fairfielders promptly turned to her and asked her whether ‘she was going mad’ (*qed tiġġennen?*).

Another term with a similar meaning to *mignun*, but which had different connotations is the word *iblah* ('daft', 'idiot', or 'fool'). This term was occasionally used by Fairfielders to denote behaviour that whilst not usually meriting the weight and permanence of *hazin*, implied actions that were still sanctionable. It was most frequently used with reference to rank and file members of the Fairfielder network or those who regularly attended Fairfielder public events but who were not part of the core group. An *iblah* is a person known to have a poor tolerance for drugs and alcohol, and yet attends events and drinks and consumes drugs regardless, only to behave erratically, or even simply in an over-enthusiastic or over-empathetic manner. Whilst someone who is *iblah* is still included and considered a familiar participant in the case of public events, he was usually kept at arm's length by Fairfielders, and is never allowed membership into the inner circle or invited to private events. It is important to understand that like *mignun*, *iblah* is different from *hazin*, as the full implications of the latter term should become clear through the following discussion.

I could get a better sense of how and when others were perceived as *hazin* by Fairfielders at an *Out of Sight* event during the spring of 2017. This event that year had marked the beginning of the most active season for Fairfielder events, which usually spans from end May to early September. It took place at an outdoor club on a sunny and warm afternoon, lasting until late in the evening. Most Fairfielders were present, and whilst some of them had limited themselves to a few drinks and were saving drug-taking for the private after-party, others may have been taking bumps of cocaine, or 'halves' of Ecstasy tablets. In any eventuality, all of those whom I spoke to then came across as sober and composed.

The overall shared feeling at the time was that the party was a success: the 'vibe' was good and 'relaxed', as the event generated a tangible sense of anticipation for the event season that was to come. The foreign DJ that event organisers Gennaro and Russ had booked and brought to play had gone down well with a crowd of around two hundred people, which largely consisted of the core Fairfielder group with its various sub-groups (*klikek*), rank and file members of the

group, and other ‘regulars’ with whom Fairfielders were more or less familiar. Any drug use that took place here was only either revealed by Fairfielders to each other in private, or through subtle and carefully managed cues.

During the last couple of hours of the event, however, I could see a group of four young men who seemed out of place; I could not recognise them, and partly from their isolation from the rest of those present I deduced that they were equally unknown to Fairfielders. They were visibly and clearly intoxicated, clustered together just in front of the DJ booth. Most of them wore vests, shorts, and flip-flops, and I could notice a ‘tribal’ tattoo running down the arm of one of them: a type of attire and style that contrasted sharply with what to me came across as a much more refined and ‘alternative’ Fairfielder sense of taste and fashion. A couple of them were wearing sunglasses, and with the sun having set hours before, it was clear to me that this could only have served the purpose of tentatively hiding the visible effects Ecstasy has on the eyes. They were all holding bottles of water, yet they seemed to be covered in sweat, and their heads were tilted upwards and swaying out of time with the music, that at this late point was not particularly ‘heavy’ as the party was winding down. Occasionally, one of them would move behind another and rub or massage his back⁴⁹.

I could see Gennaro, who was the DJ at the time, looking at them and shaking his head from the booth. James, who was having drinks at the bar with Eric and myself, had also noticed them and was smiling, and when he realised I had noticed them as well he nodded and told me ‘*hazin qeghdin*’ (they are in a bad state). Maggie, Mia, Sybil and Beth were also close by and I could tell they had noticed and were speaking about the newcomers between themselves. As I looked at the girls and nodded, Maggie came up to me and said ‘Can you see those at the

⁴⁹ Reciprocal massages and rubbing of backs between Ecstasy takers is a method through which the Ecstasy rush is ‘augmented’, as for example noted by Kaplan (2002) in an ethnographic study of Ecstasy takers in Ireland. These types of massages and back rubs were, however, never administered by Fairfielders in both public and private settings.

front? How bad!', as she grinned. I met Gennaro and Tyler for lunch a few days after the party, and as we spoke about the event they asked me about whether I had noticed the group:

G: Jay did you see those four that came at the end when I was playing? They were awfully bad! (*kienu ħażin għaġeb!*)

T: Yes, they were quite bad, they came there wasted after another party I think.

J: I noticed them as well yes, I could see you looking at them [to Gennaro].

G: They made me feel bad (*ġabuni ħażin*), I don't know where they came from, chavs for sure (*ħamalli żgur*).

I translate the term *ħamalli* to the British slang term 'chavs' for practicality here, yet this does not convey the full meaning of the Maltese term and, especially because it figured centrally in Fairfielder narratives⁵⁰ as a term used to refer to a 'disparaged *other*' (Thornton 1995: 111), it requires some further qualification. As Cauchi (2015) notes with reference to Serracino-Inglott (1975), the term *ħamallu* (singular) has been etymologically traced back to the Arabic word '*ħamel*' through to the Andalusian and Sicilian dialectical terms '*alħamel*' and '*camàlu*' respectively. These terms were used to refer to port workers or dockhands, but in contemporary Malta the derived term has taken quite a different meaning as it is used to refer to those who are 'uneducated', 'vulgar', and 'subaltern subjects' (Cauchi 2015: 3).

From this perspective, three main properties distinguish *ħamalli* from those who are conversely regarded as affluent and 'polite' members of Maltese society (*puliti*). First, *ħamalli* epitomise the lower working classes in Malta, implying that they are less educated, but also less 'wealthy' and 'well-connected' (Mitchell 2001: 91) than *puliti*. Second, in terms of provenance, *ħamalli* are generally associated with harbour towns situated in the Southern parts of Malta. This view is consolidated by what Boswell refers to as 'proverbial reputations' (ibid. 1994: 134) of regions and towns in Malta: broadly, a number of Southern areas (especially Southern harbour towns) are associated with the lower working classes and *ħamalli*, whilst Northern areas are domains of the middle to upper class echelons of *puliti*. Third and to a lesser degree, *ħamalli* represent

⁵⁰ The term *ħamalli* was used by both men and women of the group, and it was common for Fairfielder women to code-switch from English to Maltese in their speech when they referred to it.

the ‘traditional’ or ‘grassroots’ supporter base of the Labour Party (Cauchi 2015: 4). The term is both reflective of some sociological identities and used as a weapon of social classification.

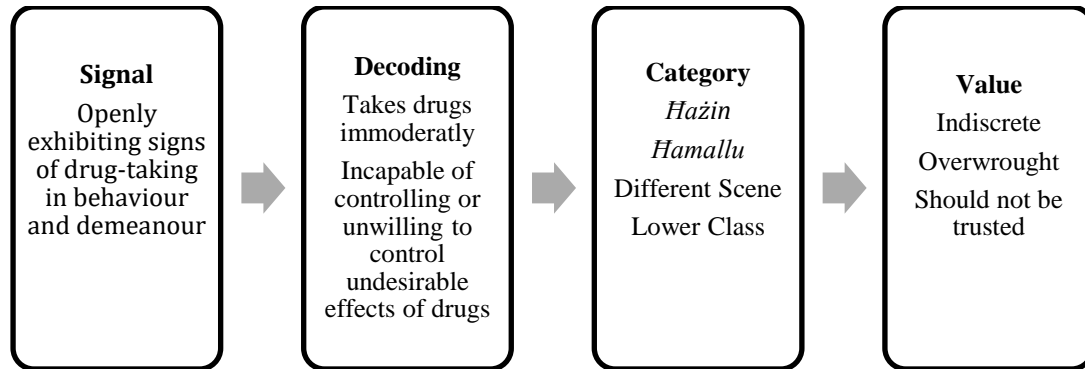
The implications here, therefore, are twofold. First, *hamalli* broadly presented traits of a type of social and class identity that many Fairfielders felt – and in some respects decisively were – distant from. As I have illustrated in Chapter 1, the majority of Fairfielders came from affluent families that resided in the Northern and Western towns of the island, and albeit they themselves rarely seemed to get caught up in discussion about political matters, my occasional enquiries about the political affiliations of their families led me to believe that they were largely Nationalist-leaning. In this sense there were therefore broad inferences and judgements about social geographies and class distinctions that were eminently Maltese, and that were specifically derived from drug-taking behaviour.

Fairfielders thus saw themselves as engaged in drug-taking that was marked by composure and moderation, and that was ‘*tajjeb*’ and therefore belonging to ‘*puliti*’, versus others who took drugs less moderately and discretely – a type of drug-taking regarded as ‘*ħazin*’ and belonging to ‘*hamalli*’. This association between subjectivity, consumption and social status was also clear in how Fairfielders retrospectively evaluated a public event that they would have attended: if one said that a party had been marked by an overwhelming presence of ‘*hamalli*’ (*tal-hamalli*), then the assumption was that the party was not good and thus *ħazin*. It also followed that *hamalli* were often associated with dance music event scenes and promotions that were separate from Fairfielders.

The second point is that Bailey’s model is – at least in form – as applicable to Fairfielders as it is to other Maltese, as they clearly derive judgements from cues and – by way of those judgements – determine hierarchies and eligibility for group membership. Moreover, the derivation here is from cues that are eminently related to drug-taking; in other words, the values that are inferred depend on modalities of drug-taking, on the capability of knowing one’s limits,

and on whether one is able to cope and neutralise those that are regarded as unattractive or undesirable effects of drugs. Modalities of drug consumption thus both reflect, and orient, class and status membership and identity. Diagrammatically, the process of evaluation may be represented as follows:

Figure 5: Derivation of Judgement from Cue by Fairfielders



6.6 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have argued that Malta's smallness and wide societal disapproval of all types of drug-taking create and compound conditions and anxieties that Fairfielders, as 'functional' drug users, must contend with. They are aware of the consequences that being publicly 'outed' as associated with drug culture may have on their reputations, and therefore also of the fact that in that case they will be judged negatively by disapproving others. Rather than stemming from the inherent dimensions of drugs as *items*, these anxieties and problematics originate from the meaning and value that Maltese society attaches to drug *use*. Undoubtedly, the discipline and restraint that are employed by Fairfielders when they consume drugs partly serve to mitigate this, because these devices work well in 'concealing' club drug use. These conditions and anxieties, however, also result in a type of mutual vulnerability that is shared by Fairfielders and engender a sense of complicity and discretion between them. I discuss this fully in the next two chapters.

A commonality between the evaluations of drug use by ‘abstaining’ members of Maltese society and Fairfielders is that they both disparage a failure to conceal drug-taking. There is also, however, a key difference here. Abstainers are *assuming* that Fairfielders take drugs (because they see them in line near a bathroom in a club, because they go to parties, and so on). The ‘blame’ for this disclosure, so to speak, therefore does not fall upon Fairfielders, but rather because of assumptions others make, which Fairfielders conceive as an inevitably negative consequence of Maltese society. Contrarily, in the case of *hamalli*, the negative judgement is being derived precisely because there is no such effort to conceal drug use. The strategy of wearing sunglasses, for instance, may at first come across as one that works towards this effort, yet in the face of how other behaviour and demeanour of *hamalli* so evidently gives drug-taking away, it only comes across as a caricature, or an overproduction of signs. All of this represents a blatant dismissal of both the anti-drug values sustained by Maltese society, and at the same time the ethos of discretion that is sustained by the Fairfielder group.

Values that are derived by Fairfielders – both with respect to those who are familiar and to those who are less so - from modalities of drug-taking clearly span beyond the context of the club and rave party. The direct association between *hazin* and *hamalli* not only suggests that the differences between classes that are generally sustained in wider Maltese society are not eliminated within the club space and within the boundaries of the Ecstasy experience, but also that these differences are reproduced through the experience itself. Relative proximity and the lack of ‘specialised’ club space in small-scale Maltese society only serve to exacerbate this process.

Chapter 7: Evaluations of the “*Wasted*” – Forms and Functions of Gossip

7.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I have suggested that Fairfielders are anxious about becoming subjects of judgement and of being labelled as *drugati* by most Maltese who disapprove of club drug-taking. At the same time, they formulate their own judgements about others who engage in drug-taking and related behaviours that, by Fairfielder measures, are considered undesirable. In this respect the implications of the values that are in turn derived from these judgements are two-fold: first, they underpin self-presentations and identities of Fairfielders as distinct from others⁵¹, and second, they determine the allocation of prestige and the structure of hierarchies within the Fairfielder group.

This chapter examines instances when these types of distinctions were reproduced, as core group Fairfielders exchanged information amongst themselves through gossip. In further supporting my previous discussion about how Fairfielders discursively categorise behaviours, persons, and events on a scale of value between *tajjeb* and *ħażin*, I suggest that gossip as both an ‘act’ of exchanging information as well as a form of ‘information that is specialised’ (Heilman 1976: 152) serves a central function in the reproduction of these values over time. In practice, this means that whilst *tajjeb* and *ħażin* act as structural poles of a framework of reference through which Fairfielders individually classify behaviours and events, they are validated – collectively and often retrospectively - as a social fact through gossip. It follows, therefore, that the process of value attribution to drug-taking is in this respect essentially a social one that is determined *within* the group: if judgements of one’s drug-taking behaviour as

⁵¹Within the context of this chapter, it is especially important to consider the factor of limited space and the resulting inevitable proximity that characterises Malta: a point that was also raised in the previous chapter. Following Bourdieu (1984: 60), this implies that distinction in ‘aesthetic choices’ of one group or class becomes most pronounced in opposition to other groups and classes ‘closest in social space’. As I shall illustrate, behaviours that were most strongly disparaged by Fairfielders through gossip were often seen as characterising other groups and individuals with whom they inevitably came in close contact with.

hazin in opposition to *tajjeb* can be derived and internalised by the individual. Following the evaluation of information through gossip, actions that might correct or compensate for behaviour that is sanctionable or that otherwise acts against the interests of the group are in certain cases also set in motion.

Gossip, especially as ‘privileged information’ and ‘secret gossip’ (Heilman 1976: 175 – 180), is an ideal method of exchange of information about drug-taking and related behaviours between drug-takers themselves, for two reasons. First because it is difficult to access and pin down, but also because, contrary to other types of communication, it allows for innuendos and *double-entendres*. In this respect one who takes drugs and is familiar with their effects may communicate information discretely through gossip about others who take drugs without explicitly referencing his or her own drug use. This type of information exchange in itself engenders complicity and sociality between Fairfielders – but also contributes to their sense of vulnerability.

Second, as Heilman (1976: 155) also observes, gossip grants access to the evaluation of those facts that constitute what Goffman (2010: 38 - 39) defines as one’s ‘information preserve’. Gossip thus exposes those facts that can be ‘perceived about an individual ... and his current behaviour’ (Goffman 2010: 39); facts that the object of gossip might expect to possess and withhold in his or her ‘privacy’. Fairfielders primarily gossip about those who fail to retain this faculty when they take drugs: that is when one is *hazin*. Gossip is in this sense ‘empowering’, because in emphasising the dispossessing effects of drugs on others, the Fairfielder gossiper highlights his or her own capacity over those very same effects.

7.2 The Ambiguities of Gossip

Gossip has been the subject of significant research in the anthropology of Southern Europe, as well as of other world areas and societies (Cox 1970; Layton 1971; Blaxter 1971; Heilman 1976; Haviland 1977; Gilmore 1984; Brenneis 1984; Johnson 2002; Besnier 2009). In

anthropological theory this has led to important questions as to whether it primarily serves the ‘community’ in maintaining group values and cohesion (Gluckman 1963), or conversely whether its primary objective is to further and maximise the interests of its individual agents (Paine 1968). The line of thought that I follow here is one proposed by Heilman (1976) in his analysis of how gossip is practiced in Kehillat Kodesh, an Orthodox Jewish synagogue in the Eastern United States.

Heilman draws upon both the structural-functionalist and transactionalist arguments to propose a symbolic interactionist approach that maintains one’s sense of membership within a group or community and one’s individual interests mirror each other in their exchange and reproduction through gossip. Gossip, Heilman argues, benefits its agents as it marks their membership within a group and provides them with a means to ‘exhibit, both to themselves and to others, their status as members and insiders’ (ibid. 1976: 158). The gossiper is thus empowered as he or she is able to assert superiority over those being gossiped about, in a way that is not directly aggressive and confrontational. One however inevitably always gossips with others, and the practice of gossip must thus follow determined rules of conduct that are set by a group. Trespassing beyond these rules is itself sanctionable, whilst gossip that follows these rules benefits the group as well as its agent. Apart from serving to externalise and perpetuate rules of conduct and normative behaviour of the group, gossip serves to remind the gossiper that he or she is not exempt from those rules lest he or she becomes the target of gossip. In this sense it engenders a sense of collective vulnerability, that in turn ‘creates a sort of universal hegemonic weakness which cannot help but foster communal interdependency’ (ibid. 1976: 161).

Whilst a great deal of analysis has focused on the questions of what gossip ‘does’ and what gossip ‘is about’, gossip remains categorically ‘ambiguous’ in terms of ‘what it is’ both as a term as well as a subject of ethnographic analysis (Heilman 1976: 152; Besnier 2009: 13; Brenneis 1984: 487 - 488). It is instructive to briefly consider some of those properties that

render gossip ambiguous here, because these correspond to some challenges that I have had to navigate in my own exploration of Fairfielder gossip, and also because, as I have suggested, it may be these properties that give gossip a certain flexibility necessary for information exchange about tabooed and illicit behaviours such as club drug-taking. Considering some broad properties of gossip here should also serve in approaching a more comprehensive qualification of Fairfielder gossip with respect to both what it is and what it does.

Niko Besnier notes a common definition for gossip as:

“... the negatively evaluative and morally laden verbal exchange concerning the conduct of absent third parties, involving a bounded group of persons in a private setting” (ibid. 2009: 13).

Besnier argues that this definition presents three main theoretical problems. The first has to do with the affirmation that gossip is ostensibly a ‘private’ type of information exchange. This is equivocal primarily because it leads to the complex question of what constitutes a ‘private’ setting or otherwise, or of where the boundaries of ‘private’ and ‘public’ domains begin and end. Quite apart from the fact that ‘public’ gossip that is run by tabloids and other media does not fit within this categorisation⁵², even those who partake in gossip in ‘private’ settings are often aware (and at times even expect) that the information they reveal in these settings may reach others, and thus may have more or less significant impacts at the wider public level of a group or community. The second related problem identified by Besnier is that even the category ‘absent third parties’ is flexible, as under certain conditions gossip may take the subtle

⁵²Paine (1967) and Heilman (1976) suggest that by definition gossip primarily involves the exchange of information through verbal conversation (i.e. ‘talk’ [Paine 1967: 283]) and not, conversely, through text. Whilst this view may overlook gossip that is presented through both ‘traditional’ media (ex. tabloid magazines) and ‘new’ media (ex. public Internet fora), it is suggestive because it frames information transmitted through gossip as ‘ephemeral’ rather than as present in a body of text that might be accessed and referred back to at will over time.

form of ‘innuendos’ about others who are present⁵³, or even of statements through which an interlocutor might question his or her own moral worth. The third problem is that whilst the above definition emphasises the ‘morally laden’ property of gossip, the moral undertones of any other form of conversation cannot be simply dismissed when treating gossip as unique in this sense (Besnier 2009: 12 - 13).

These problems may be partially overcome if focus is shifted to a context-specific analysis of gossip and the ‘perspective of the actors themselves’ (Besnier 2009: 13). Even such a relativist approach, however, presents its own problems. Those who engage in gossip, for example, may not always directly acknowledge it as such, but may rather refer to it and other similar forms of conversation through multiple descriptive terms that convey more or less varying meanings. On the other hand, one finds cases where agents altogether ‘fail to recognise gossip as a significant interactional category’ (Besnier 2009: 13), and thus lack any descriptive terms through which to refer to it. Matters here become even more complicated as one considers, in line with Heilman (1976: 152), the dual meaning of the term ‘gossip’ as both ‘substance’ and ‘actor’ of verbal exchange, and those negative implications of being labelled as the latter: one who engages in gossip is a ‘gossip’, yet he may want to distance himself from being identified as such lest he comes across as envious, slanderous, and even untrustworthy.

This problem is at times mitigated through careful emic qualifications of different types of gossip. Lorraine Blaxter (1971: 122 – 123) for example notes how in a village in the French Pyrenees one finds a distinction between ‘good’ gossip (*bavarder*), and ‘bad’ gossip (*mauvaise langue*); whilst Blaxter acknowledges that even *bavarder* as ‘idle chatter’ begets some ambivalence, it is only *mauvaise langue* that is ‘indisputably’ associated with slander and envy (*jalousie*). Another example is provided by David Gilmore (1978) in his ‘typology of gossip

⁵³ One example here may be found in the *parbacan* speeches that occur in Bhatagon, which whilst public and outwardly religious, may also convey ‘oblique’ messages that the agent uses to publicly contest the reputation of his rivals (Brenneis 1984: 491).

forms' in a commune in southwest Andalusia, where eleven variants of gossip range from the intentionally slanderous and malicious '*rajar*' that is gossip intended to 'reach its object', to 'speaking secretly' or '*hablar occulto*' about the powerful, to the relatively innocuous '*criticar*' (ibid: 94 – 96).

Other methodological hurdles can also render gossip 'ethnographically difficult': gossip often occurs within exclusive and intimate circles of agents that are difficult to access by the ethnographer, for example, and even when this access is obtained comprehending gossip requires a deep knowledge of the subtleties of the language that often underpin gossip (Besnier 2009: 14 – 15).

To summarise, therefore, gossip is a type of information exchange that may not always be suitably defined in broad theoretical terms. Instead, defining gossip requires configuring it in relation to specific settings and agents. In working towards this, however, the ethnographer is faced with the difficult tasks of accessing those settings in the first instance and, in the second instance once within them, whilst considering the possibility of ambivalence between gossip and its agents, deciphering what gossip means and does for those agents in connection to a broader social reality. These difficulties correspond to the properties of gossip as both hard to access and 'encrypted', that in turn lead to its utility as a method of information transmission about drug-taking.

A further point about the function of gossip that is central to Besnier's wider argument is that even if gossip is framed as 'one of the most "hidden" of hidden transcripts', it has a political capacity to determine and shape the most public structures 'from below', rather than through more overt types of authoritative narratives and manifestations, wherever it is active (ibid. 2009: 12 - 13). In other words, one might theoretically frame gossip as an essentially private exchange, yet its impacts are usually more far-reaching than the private settings within which it is initially activated. As I shall illustrate shortly, Fairfielder gossip serves to distinguish

drug-taking behaviours that are ‘acceptable’ or ‘desirable’ from those that are not. In turn, based on this type of information exchange, Fairfielders exclude those who become known to engage in undesirable behaviour from the most exclusive group activities, which themselves include settings within which gossip is exchanged. In this respect, therefore, gossip not only reinforces group values and ethos within a ‘private’ setting, but also determines group structure and composition.

This discussion raises two important questions that are relevant to my analysis of Fairfield gossip. The first has to do with access and function: how gossip is practiced, and how the tensions between its characteristic as ‘private’ conversation on one hand and its ‘public’ ramifications on the other might be constructively navigated by Fairfielders in their evaluations of drug-related matters. The second has to do with substance and form: how Fairfielders themselves define gossip, and how they might distinguish between forms of gossip that, in parallel to values of modalities of drug-taking, imply different and structurally opposing valences. I address these issues below, but before proceeding some considerations on the broader significance of gossip in Malta should be noted here.

7.3 Gossip in the Maltese Context

Mitchell (2002: 81 - 83) observes that whilst gossip in Malta has ‘direct economic and political significance’ in matters of public social life, there is at the same time a sense of distrust and caution that is expressed about letting others know about one’s private affairs because of the possibility that these might become the object of public scrutiny through gossip. Furthermore, similarly to elsewhere in Europe (see Bailey 1971; Blaxter 1971), an association between gossip and envy [*ghira*] is also strong in Malta. Taken together these factors lead to a necessary care that one should take both in protecting information about his or her own private affairs (because that might result in the establishment of a reputation as a drug user), as well as in ‘gossiping’ about the private affairs of others (because that might result in the establishment of a reputation as a scandalmonger).

This, however, neither discourages nor reduces the significance of gossip for the Maltese. In another account of gossip amongst women living in the Maltese south-eastern harbour town of Senglea, Sybil O'Reilly Mizzi (1994) suggests, following Gluckman (1963), that gossip maintains a 'pervasive role' (Gluckman 1963: 308) in Maltese society as a mechanism of 'social control'⁵⁴ through which reputations of members of the community are controlled and kept in check - effectively resulting in pressure against 'deviation' from established principles and normative behaviour (O'Reilly Mizzi 1994: 378 – 379). O'Reilly Mizzi concentrates on gossip to the domain of Maltese women. She suggests that, because of the lack of social divisions underpinned by differences in income and education that are present amongst men, women are distributed and connected in a more egalitarian fashion within Maltese communities, and this in turn facilitates the exchange of information through gossip between them (ibid. 1994: 376 – 377). This aligns with a commonly held view, as noted by Herzfeld (1987: 96), that gossip is the exclusive practice of women whereas 'rational' conversation about issues of wider public relevance that is engaged in by men. There are two points, however, that must be raised in this respect.

First, the view that gossip is a practice reserved for Maltese women, and therefore not men, is rather misrepresentative. Apart from the fact that Malta's process of accession and integration within the European Union has involved considerable efforts to reduce the social divisions between men and women⁵⁵ noted by O'Reilly Mizzi during her fieldwork in the 1980s, gossip in Maltese society is pervasive because it is – as a practice and as a means through which information is strategically controlled - equally significant to men and women. Mitchell (2002: 81 – 82) also makes a similar observation as he notes that men and women were equally

⁵⁴ Boissevain (2013: 104) also refers to gossip as a mechanism of 'social control' in an Italian community of ex-pats in Montreal, where women evaluate and scrutinise behaviours of other women and also authoritative figures in the community, and in this way are able to 'exert pressures' to 'enforce the group's norms of behaviour'.

⁵⁵ This process included the setting up of the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) in 2004, of which operations included efforts for gender equality and fuller integration of Maltese women into the workforce through 'gender mainstreaming'.

engaged in trading gossip in Valletta, and recognises that this trade of information amongst men had particularly significant impacts on formation of political, social, and economic allegiances. This is also the case for Fairfielders: gossip has equally significant value and impact for Fairfielder men as it does for women, with respect to their conceptualisations of both individual and collective identities.

Second, the dichotomy of gossip as 'idle' or 'irrational' versus other forms of conversation that are 'rational' may only be analytically useful in so far as it is recognised as arbitrary. Herzfeld (1987) notes the shortcomings of this type of categorisation, as does Bailey (1971) in observing that the significance and impacts of gossip are much more far-reaching than the domains of so-called trivial 'small politics' and the 'former peasant communities of the mountains of Southern Europe' (ibid.: 4 - 5). In any eventuality, framing gossip as 'irrational' would certainly betray the rules one must follow in practicing it in the first instance, and its own rather 'functional' and 'rational' utility in the second.

Gossip can thus neither be framed as 'irrational' nor as a marker of 'backwardness' of marginal or peripheral societies. Testifying this is the fact that Europeanisation has all but resulted in a loss of significance and pervasiveness of gossip in Maltese social life: even with respect to recently imported phenomena as is club drug-taking and dance music culture, gossip occupies a central role through which modalities of consumption of drugs are actively scrutinised and regulated by Fairfielders. In cases when such scrutiny exposed behaviour that was negatively valued as *ħazin*, the structure of the group itself accommodated measures that were taken against those who engaged in such behaviour. In other words, gossip about drug-related behaviours determines access to and standing within the Fairfielder group. It follows that collective evaluations of modalities of consumption of drug-taking are central to the establishment and maintenance of the group. Additionally, differences in drug-consuming behaviour between Fairfielders and *ħamalli* are also externalised and reinforced through gossip. In this latter case the corrective measures imply altogether avoiding rather than reprimanding

these ‘others’ (because they are outsiders), and gossip serves to distinguish the more ‘virtuous’ patterns of Fairfielder drug-taking against the bacchanalian and excessive behaviours of *hamalli*.

7.4 Fairfielder Gossip: Access, Definition, and Function

If a fundamental property of gossip is that it is evaluative, Fairfielders did not trade in it publicly during parties. In this respect Fairfielder gossip is different from ‘small-talk’ and other types of chat that occurred at times when drugs were being taken. Whilst during such events attention could be drawn to certain behaviours through general statements (ex. ‘Jim is wasted’), such statements were not immediately followed up with evaluative dialogues in these settings. Rather, evaluations were reserved for either the day following a party when Fairfielders would meet and nurse their hangovers and ‘comedowns’ together over an evening meal, or more frequently when the core group members met in the weeks following an event. An exception to retrospective evaluation was presented in cases when Fairfielders were not consuming drugs themselves but were in proximity to others who were. In these cases, collective evaluations occurred on the spot.

In any eventuality, the fact that the evaluative function of Fairfielder gossip about drug-related matters itself required sobriety was striking to me. I could recognise three key reasons for which gossip was not exchanged during parties in public settings, when drugs were consumed. The first is practicality. During these events Fairfielders would spend a considerable amount of time moving between one or more bars of the event venue, to the dance floor, to the DJ booth, to the bathroom, greeting and speaking to any friend or acquaintance they run into in the process. This was a particularly time-consuming process for core group Fairfielders who enjoyed prestige in the scene and could therefore be approached multiple times on these ‘journeys’ across the space where a party was taking place. Indeed, public Fairfielder events that were accessible to rank-and-file members of the group and outsiders were more remarkably characterised by movement of people and the cliques they belonged to rather than by any single

organically harmonious crowd of dancers. On many of these occasions Russ and Gennaro explained to me how they felt obliged to go through this process of acknowledgement of those present at events they organised. Congregation for gossip was thus impractical under these circumstances.

Second, with the exception of brief exchanges of information about the quality of drugs that were available during an event, under ordinary circumstances there was little actual talk about drugs at the points where these were ‘purchased’ and consumed. Undoubtedly, this had to do with the tabooed dimension of drug-taking, but more importantly with not wanting to betray the tension that was important to the establishment of Fairfielder complicity, that meant that one Fairfielder would not tell another that he or she had taken drugs, instead alluding to this through indirect statements such as ‘I am good’. Gossiping about what and how many drugs others have taken would have been counterproductive in this respect, not least because such a conversation would have probably required disclosure of what and how many drugs the interlocutors themselves have taken.

Third, Fairfielders recognised that valid evaluations of behaviours and events required level-headedness. Otherwise gossiping at times when drugs were being taken was reprimanded and referred to as *paroli fil-vojt* or *paroli vojt*⁵⁶. *Paroli vojt* does not necessarily always constitute gossip: ‘gibberish’ and other statements that were considered out of place were also referred to as *paroli vojt* by Fairfielders. Long-winded and morally charged statements about the conduct of others at times when drugs were being consumed, however, were likely to be immediately dismissed as *paroli vojt*. In this sense *paroli vojt* can be framed as a form of gossip that, in itself, is perceived as indicative of excessive intoxication, and therefore as another undesirable signifier of excessive and therefore conspicuous drug-taking. One who engaged in *paroli vojt* therefore himself or herself risked becoming the target of gossip.

⁵⁶ The literal translation of this term is ‘empty words’ or ‘talking nonsense’, but my informants used it interchangeably with the expression ‘talking shit’.

Two things become clear here. First, Fairfielders exchange gossip in private and intimate settings, and the information and evaluations that are exchanged within these settings are not divulged to other absent parties. In practical terms, if Fairfielders met and gossiped about the questionable conduct of Jim at a party that had taken place some days before, it was expected that none of those present would tell Jim that his conduct had been the subject of such gossip. As I shall illustrate further on such gossip, however, would directly impact Jim's access to and prestige within the group.

Second, Fairfielder gossip is not a process that is 'chance and haphazard' but instead one that involves 'its own customary rules' (Gluckman 1963: 308); rules of time, place, and sobriety. If one fails to respect these rules, then one is engaging in *paroli vojti*. This further reveals the crucial role of sobriety in the maintenance of Fairfielder group structure, but the adherence to the rules of gossip should equally tell us something about the Fairfielder drug-taking experience itself. This is: that being under the effects of drugs does not render one exempt from these rules through their temporary suspension, but rather contrarily these rules also inherently serve as rules of conduct for times when drugs are being taken. Furthermore, the capacity to *not* engage in gossip when drugs are taken is, in itself, a marker of discretion and control over both one's own actions and the intoxicating properties of the drugs. Composure in this respect, therefore, further marks a 'triumph' over the inherent problems of drug consumption: the 'chatter' that might result from both the empathogenic properties of Ecstasy and the excessive confidence-inducing properties of cocaine are strictly regulated and abated by the unwritten rules of gossip.

7.4.1 Gossip about Other Groups

Let us now move on to the political economy of Fairfielder gossip and to the related matter of gossip as an eminently 'tactical' (Heilman 1976: 155) form of information transmission. A prime setting for Fairfielder gossip was the apartment Gennaro and Maggie lived in together, to which other core group members were often invited for meals and evening drinks. I was lucky enough to have cultivated a particularly strong and deep friendship with Gennaro early

on in my fieldwork, and Maggie developed a sort of motherly affection towards me as she often expressed concern when I might have come across as slightly overworked, and when she baked sweets or cooked meals it was her custom to invite me over for dinner or coffee. I thus became a regular at the home, and I was there often when other inner circle Fairfielders with whom I developed equally good relationships as time went by were present.

On these occasions the exchange of gossip was referred to as ‘discussions’ [*diskussjonijiet*], implying that – conversely to *paroli vojt* - these were conversations that made sense and had value. A Saturday afternoon gathering over coffee at Gennaro’s would be referred to as a time for ‘meeting and having a word’ [*niltaqghu u nghidu kelma*] or for ‘meeting and discussing’ [*niltaqghu u niddiskutu*]. Such discussions often at first involved conversations between the men in the living room area of the apartment, as the women sat at the dining room table engaged in what may be more closely defined as ‘idle talk’, in the sense of it being about matters that were unrelated to the Fairfielder scene. There was a substantive gendered difference in conversations for a time in this sense: the men might have been talking about the financial aspects of an event they were organising and other related ‘economic’ matters, for example, whilst the women might have been more likely to be talking about their next trip out of the country and showing each other photos on their phones. These gendered and spatial differences between *diskussjonijiet* and idle talk, however, were temporary: the women would soon bring coffee and snacks to the living room table, and idle talk and *diskussjonijiet* would merge into one stream of evaluative conversation about the scene that encompassed subjects like the quality of the ‘crowd’ at an event, which in turn invariably incorporated evaluations of behaviours of constituents of that crowd.

On these occasions my own contributions to the gossip trade were considered limited at best, especially by the men who in spite of the mutual trust that was established between us considered me to be an ‘outsider’ when it came to a personal dedication towards maintaining and improving the Fairfielder scene, in the sense that they reasonably did not see the full

commitment towards the scene in me that they saw in each other⁵⁷. Nevertheless, Fairfielders were always happy to provide me with the latest pieces of not only ‘news’ but also ‘privileged information’ - that is gossip that necessitates a level of trust (Heilman 1976: 175). Without a doubt this coincided with them acknowledging my dual role as an ethnographer: my presence and the mutual trust that was established meant that I was on the ‘inside’, yet the fact that I could seldom offer anything new in exchange (except for, and admittedly naively, some abstract ‘academic’ perspective about what I thought was going on), simultaneously marked my ‘outsider status’ (Besnier 2009: 15). Nevertheless, it was on these occasions that I could most clearly observe the types of exchanges that went on between core group Fairfielders and think about the differences between these exchanges and others that went on in more public settings.

If by good fortune access to the physical settings of gossip came fairly easily, gaining enough knowledge and familiarity with Fairfielder discourse to fully understand what they were gossiping about presented a greater challenge. Because here especially, the *tajjeb* and *hazin* dichotomy was continuously and ambiguously used with reference to drug-taking, but this had wider political implications that I only became aware of with time. The following instance should illustrate my point here.

Late one Saturday afternoon, Russ and Mia joined me and some other core group Fairfielders for drinks at the apartment. As they walked in, the rest of us were all seated in the living room, chatting over drinks, when Gennaro immediately asked them about how a *JIVE* party they had attended the night before had been. “How was it?” Gennaro asked in the way Fairfielders always asked about an event they had missed to others that had not. Russ grimaced and remarked that it had been bad – “*hazin*”, as Mia nodded and agreed. To the uninitiated outsider,

⁵⁷ This could be attributed to two factors: the first that I did not follow and consume the same type of music they did (see Chapter 3), and the second that unlike Gennaro, Russ, Eric, and others who congregated at the apartment I was not a Fairfielder event promoter or DJ and therefore did not hold any ‘economic stakes’ within the scene. The combination of these factors meant that I could not be viewed in the same light as a scene ‘producer’.

this statement could easily come across as having very little meaning beyond that the party was not enjoyable for Russ and Mia. To the other Fairfielders present, however, it immediately conveyed two things: first, that the overall ‘vibe’ at the party was characterised by excessive intoxication, and second that the crowd at the party was marked by the presence of *hamalli*. Both these facts were explicitly acknowledged by Russ as the discussion naturally progressed to how there was a ‘big crowd’ composed of a majority who went to the party with the sole purpose of ‘getting excessively wasted’ [*biex jinfaqqhu*]⁵⁸.

This instance thus exemplifies the ‘conventional’ definition of gossip, as presented by Besnier (2009: 13) referred to above. It involves a presentation of information by Russ and Mia to other core-group Fairfielders in an insulated setting. Importantly, the statement through which that information was presented (that is, “The party was *hazin*”) was neither transmitted nor taken as a statement of fact, but rather as one of negative impression or judgment. In other words, others apart from Fairfielders who were at that party might have enjoyed it and thought that it was very good; and this was conceded by Fairfielders themselves, albeit from the perspective that this type of ‘enjoyment’ was less ‘virtuous’ than the type experienced by themselves at more exclusive events. In this sense the statement should be essentially framed as one of gossip also because, in line with Heilman (1976: 153), it implies a ‘social construction’ of an event, with ‘accuracy’ and ‘substance’ of the statement ‘remaining necessarily secondary’. The key point here is that the statement is only ‘socially legitimate’ (Heilman 1976: 158) within the Fairfielders circle, firstly because of the shared valences attributed to *hazin*, and secondly because of the assumption of shared tastes.

⁵⁸ This contrasts with the Fairfielders ideal of a ‘party-goer’ as one who attends an event with the objective of appreciating the music that is played together with the crowd of like-minded people with whom he or she shares tastes, without engaging in the excessive drug-taking suggested by the term ‘*jinfaqqhu*’. Another evaluative term that was used in implying a divergence from this ideal was ‘*biex jidhru*’ (‘to show off’), with reference to those who attend parties and take drugs only to appear ‘hip’ but are perceived by Fairfielders as ‘inauthentic’ followers of the music and scene. The distinction between ‘hip’ and ‘inauthentic’ is also brought out by Thornton (1995: 3).

The statement in itself was about an *event*, yet for all those present its valence went beyond a casual remark about the quality of that event as it also led the other Fairfielders present to draw inferences about the conduct and dealings of two groups of individuals respectively: the *crowd* at that event and the *promoters* of the event. The criterion of ‘absent third party’ is thus here fulfilled dually: the statement conveyed value about the people who bought tickets and attended the party (the consumers), but also about the promoters of the party (the producers). In fact, the statement indirectly suggested that the latter favoured maximising ticket sales over limiting entrance to the party to a more exclusive crowd consisting of only those with ‘good taste’ - and here there is an implicit reference to the trope of quantity over quality, in terms of which Fairfielders took pride in the fact that they always favoured the latter.

A further dimension that has to do with the political undertones of gossip emerges here. The promoters of the *JIVE* party that Russ and Mia were talking about might not have been competing, *prima facie*, with Fairfielder event promoters under these circumstances (in that there was no overlap or direct competition with Fairfielder promoters like Russ and Gennaro)⁵⁹. Russ and Gennaro cooperated with the *JIVE* promoters ensuring that Fairfield events would not ‘clash’ with *JIVE* events in this way. Working relationships between Fairfielder promoters and some other event organisers of other scenes were much less cooperative, and more openly antagonistic. There was clear rivalry (*pika*) between Russ and Gennaro and two promoters of *Supersonic* events, for example, and *Out of Sight* and *Supersonic* parties were at times purposefully organised on the same night, thus marking an overt type of competition for a ‘good crowd’ between the two groups. Correspondingly, Fairfielder gossip about the *Supersonic* promoters was often more directly and openly disparaging than it was about *JIVE* promoters: during conversations at the apartment it was often said that *Supersonic* promoters were ‘playing dirty’ [*qed jghamlu tan-nejk*], for example.

⁵⁹ Events in which Fairfielders were directly involved were *Southsound*, *Pals*, *Vector*, *Out of Sight*, *Future*, and *Wide Shut*. Whilst the *JIVE* events might have attracted some Fairfielders, they were different in that they mostly targeted bigger crowds of a more varied constituency.

Affirming that a *JIVE* party was *ħazin*, however, still allowed for the message that ‘we’ are better than ‘them’ to be conveyed in a more subtle, non-aggressive manner. The full comprehension of this statement necessitates not only an intimate knowledge of the Maltese language, but also insider knowledge of Fairfielder values. Otherwise *ħazin* can be interpreted as meaning many things that could have been wrong with the party: adverse weather conditions, poor staffing of bars, and so on. In this sense, therefore, the inherent ambiguity of gossip allows for multiple interpretations, but the one interpretation that it is meant to convey can only be deciphered through Fairfielder group ‘membership’ (Heilman 1976: 153).

In this case gossip thus provided a means through which Fairfielders could assert their perceived superiority (and ‘virtuosity’) to the *JIVE* party attendees and promoters, without being overtly competitive. In other words, gossip provided a discursive channel through which the distinctions between Fairfielders and ‘competing cliques’ (Gluckman 1963: 308) were emphasised in this way without the display of ‘surreptitious aggression’ (Heilman 1976: 156).

In another instance, the distinction between Fairfielders and *ħamalli* was more explicitly referred to and brought out through gossip. In this case gossip was about the conduct of a group of party-goers during a Carnival weekend event, in Malta’s sister island Gozo. Before proceeding to the description of the specific event, an account of circumstances that surrounded the event is useful, as this may also more clearly bring out the differences between Fairfielders and other Maltese party-goers.

Gozo, the smaller and less developed island of the Maltese archipelago, is popular amongst the Maltese as the place where major and increasingly commercialised Carnival celebrations occur. Apart from the so-called ‘traditional’ carnival parades that peak on Saturday night, each year during the last weekend before Lent what is known as the ‘Gozo Carnival’ presents an opportunity for many Maltese youths to attend the various parties that are organised by many of the major local party promoters on the island over this three-day period.

Fairfielders themselves travelled to Gozo for this weekend, where they organised and attended their own events⁶⁰. At these times a group of up to fifteen core group Fairfielders rented either one or two neighbouring farmhouses⁶¹ in one of Gozo's villages, where they spent most of their weekend together engaged in rather ordinary activities: relaxing, chatting, cooking, and eating and drinking commensally. Late on Saturday night, Fairfielders would move the furniture out of one of the larger rooms of the farmhouse, and the group would gather here. A small sound system, usually consisting of two small home speakers connected to a lap top or cd players through which a prepared track list of music could be played would be set up, and here Fairfielders would take Ecstasy.

Even at this time there was a sense of order that permeated Fairfielder activity. They sat on the floor in small clusters, talked between themselves over drinks, and occasionally stood up to move and briefly danced in the central part of the room. Topics of conversation here ranged from music, to experiences at foreign festivals and travel plans for the coming spring and summer, to general goings on. Composure and control over one's behaviour were particularly important under these circumstances: excessive noise could potentially be disruptive to neighbours, and care was taken not to break anything, litter, and respect the property, also in order to minimise the amount of cleaning up that Fairfielders themselves would need to carry out before leaving the farmhouse on Sunday.

The night between Saturday and Sunday represented the 'peak' of the Carnival weekend for Fairfielders. Over the same weekend they would however usually take part in the organisation of two public events that took place in clubs, which all Fairfielders present in Gozo would

⁶⁰ My most recent observations indicate that the popularity of the Gozo Carnival with Fairfielders is waning, as in 2018 they in fact did not travel to Gozo during this time. This could be attributed to a general feeling that all of the related activities have become overly commercialised, and moreover characterised by a strong presence of the hoi polloi.

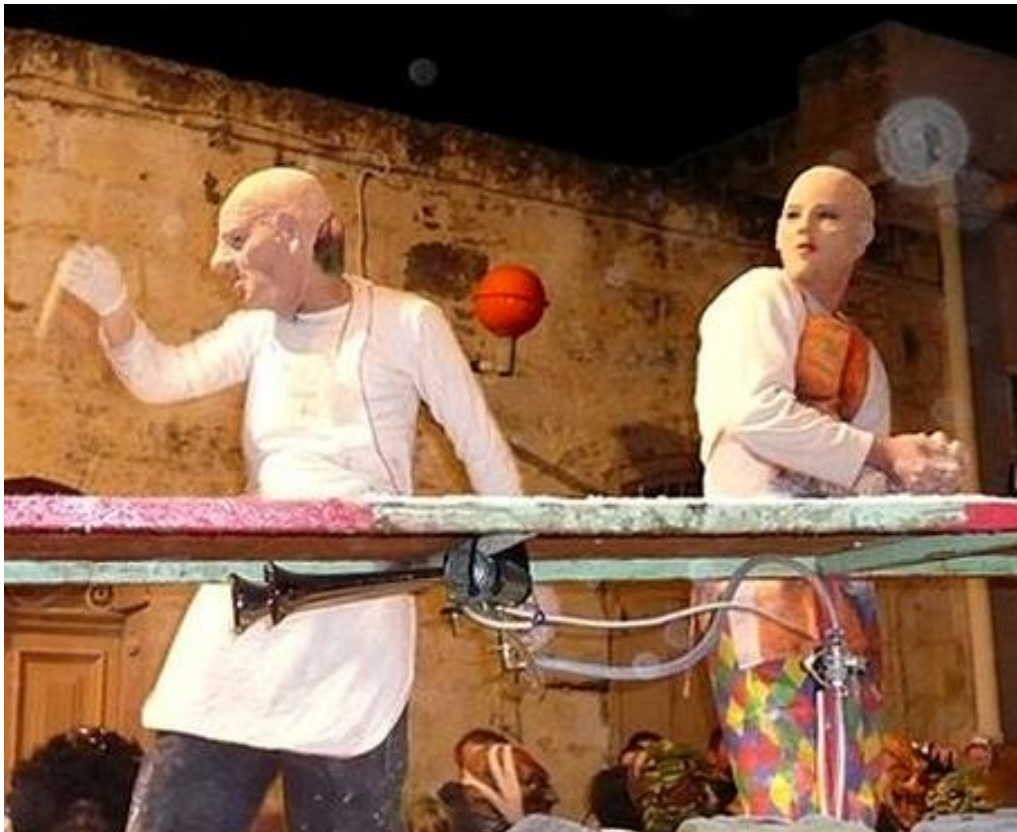
⁶¹ Whilst Fairfielders would invite me to spend the weekend with them at the farmhouse, I preferred to rent a room on my own in a nearby hotel at these times. This allowed me to follow Fairfielders as I visited the farmhouse often over the weekend, and at the same time my hotel room provided the necessary space to think about my observations and write up my fieldnotes.

attend. The first and larger party was organised on Friday night, and a second much smaller party on Saturday afternoon. No drugs would be consumed during these parties, as drug-taking would be reserved for Saturday night and the privacy of the farmhouse.

Whilst public revelry was frowned upon by Fairfielders under these circumstances, other groups of Maltese youths who took part in the carnival activities were more likely to engage in bacchanalian behaviour, dress up in carnival costumes, and participate in street parties that took place at this time (see Figure 6). This type of behaviour became more evident here, as the movement of large numbers of youths from Malta to Gozo resulted in an inevitable overcrowding of the tiny island at this time. Furthermore, because there are only a limited number of clubs and party spaces available in Gozo, it was not unusual for a Fairfielder event to take place in the smaller section of a club, whilst another completely different and bigger event was simultaneously taking place in another neighbouring section⁶².

⁶² The majority of big clubs in Malta and Gozo are split into a number of different areas or 'rooms'. Because the Fairfielder scene is specialised and events target a comparatively small number of regular attendees, Fairfielder events in these big clubs usually took place in the secondary smaller areas known as 'second rooms' (in winter) and alternatively other open-air areas known as 'rooftops' (in summer). Larger, more commercial or 'mainstream' parties were organised in the larger areas known as 'main rooms', sometimes simultaneously.

Figure 6: Revellers at a Carnival Street-Party in Nadur, Gozo (Source: www.Gozonews.com)



On one of these Saturday afternoons in Gozo, I, together with Russ, Gennaro, Tim, and Red were in a small area or second room of one of the larger clubs, that would serve as a venue for the afternoon Fairfielder party that was about to take place in a couple of hours. I was helping them with preparations for the party or what they called ‘setting up’ - hanging banners, making sure that the sound system at the club was working properly, and other small tasks, before the other Fairfielders arrived and the party could begin. At this same time, another party organised by the *Big Guns* promoters was taking place and in full swing. The party had attracted a large crowd of youths, and we could clearly hear the sound of loud ‘commercial’ music spilling from the larger section of the club to the section we were in, which was enough to prompt frowns and looks of disapproval from Russ and the others. At one point, we could hear the track *Kernkraft 400* by the German electronic music producer *Zombie Nation* being played, to which the crowd erupted and loudly sang along in Maltese with the words:

“*Ux'ala żobbna min kulhadd, mit-Tnejn sal-Ħadd*” (A vulgar phrase that more or less translates to “From Monday to Sunday, we don’t care about anyone”)⁶³.

On hearing this, Tim turned to the rest of us: “Are they serious?” [*“Dawn bis-serjeta?”*], he rhetorically asked in an expression of disbelief. Gennaro replied with ‘they’re in an awfully bad state, true *ħamalli*’ [*ħażin għaġeb qgħedin, ħamalli ta’ veru*], as Red shook his head and said ‘damn’ right, they’re in a bad state’ [*veru, ħażin qgħedin*]. With a facial expression that suggested outright disgust, Russ as well emphasised that this behaviour was *ħazin*, and I could discern that he was very unhappy to be organising an event in close proximity to a *Big Guns* event.

This was one of those instances that was referred to later during discussions at Gennaro’s and Maggie’s apartment. During one such discussion I remarked to Russ about how he had looked particularly disapproving of the behaviour of the *Big Guns* crowd. He replied, referring to *Big Guns* events and crowd in broader terms:

“I think it’s all toxic and creates a toxic environment ... I don’t mean that the *Big Guns* promoters are doing anything wrong ... they’re doing what they love I think, and there’s nothing wrong with that, but it’s just so bad, it’s toxic”⁶⁴.

Russ’s use of the word ‘toxic’ here is suggestive. It implies a type of ‘harm’ that underpinned the behaviour of the *Big Guns* crowd in Gozo, and more generally under other circumstances behaviour and conduct that Russ and the other Fairfielders associated and even expected from such big commercial parties and crowds. Whilst, by all accounts, excessive consumption of club drugs and alcohol may have contributed to the behaviour of the *Big Guns* people (as Fairfielders present with me at the club had suggested through statements about them being *ħazin*), this was secondary to Russ’s point here. Rather his focus was on observed behaviour which may very well have been ‘symptomatic’ of consumption of drugs, but only occurred

⁶³ This particular track is popular in Malta, as it is often played out by DJs at big ‘commercial’ parties and events, where the same re-appropriation of the melody through these words occurs. Also because of this, the song has a strong association with parties attended by *ħamalli*.

⁶⁴ Russ was code-switching from English to Maltese during this conversation. The English term ‘toxic’ was one that he actually used here.

because it was generally enabled by the *Big Guns* parties and thought of as 'normative' by the crowd, as opposed to normative behaviour at Fairfield events. Russ's premise that Big Guns promoters are 'doing what they love' is also revealing, as to some degree it served to moderate his condescending disapproval, and thus to dissipate some of the aggression of his statement.

The term 'toxic' also suggests the possibility of 'contagion'. Whilst Russ maintains that the *Big Guns* people are free to do as they wish, he is thus at the same time implying that such party crowds should be avoided; not because of any potential dangers of coming into contact with drugs at their events, but rather because of the possibility of getting associated with or even 'caught up' in the sort of behaviour they engage in. One might therefore infer that if there is an 'epidemiological' dimension to club drug-taking and more broadly club and dance music culture, it has more to do with conduct as the 'effect' of drug-taking than with drugs as the cause. This is not to imply that the two are mutually exclusive, but only that 'toxicity' here refers to the type of 'profane' and 'polluting' sociality that characterises *Big Guns* events as a 'platform' that enables an unbridled type of consumption.

7.4.2 Gossip about Known Individuals

In the two cases presented above, gossip served to bring out differences between the collective identity of Fairfielders and other groups with which interaction was unavoidably proximal but limited. Gossip about the conduct of specific individuals who were closer to the Fairfield group was also practiced and had an equally important role of delineating 'acceptable' from 'unacceptable' behaviour of rank-and-file members of the group. Such evaluations directly reflected on access and membership within the group. Consider for example the following discussion that took place at the apartment. Here Mia and Gennaro were recounting an experience of an after-party, during which Fabio, a rank-and-file member of the group, was present. Whilst being a regular at Fairfield parties, Fabio was known to have a poor tolerance for drugs and alcohol, and yet to engage in excessive drug-taking and in the sanctionable type of behaviour that followed.

Fabio was not considered to be representative of *hamalli* in the sense of belonging to a different social class than Fairfielders, but his behaviour after taking drugs still limited his privileged and regular access to the inner Fairfielder circle. Nevertheless, Fabio sustained a friendship with Eric, a senior member of the group who often held after-parties at his home. It was on one such occasion following an *Out of Sight* party that Eric invited Fabio together with a group of Fairfielders to his home. I had not been present on this occasion, but some time later during a discussion at Gennaro's and Maggie's apartment, Mia and Gennaro recounted what had happened:

M: Last time after *Out Of Sight* we were at Eric's, and he invited Fabio there as well, he was wasted ... bad.

G: Ah yes, I couldn't stand him [Fabio] that night, and I could see everyone was getting a bit pissed off and uneasy because of him as well.

J: So what was he doing?

G: He's the kind of guy who gets wasted and talks nonsense [*jigi ħara u joqġhod iparla fil-vojt*] ... and he was just making a lot of noise.

M: Noise and he was just being an idiot ... he was kissing his biceps and asking people 'What do you think of these puppies?' ... just so stupid.

G: [In a serious tone of voice] He was bad, really bad... I just stood up and asked Eric to have a word, and I asked him to speak to Fabio and calm him down, I told him that I was going to leave if he kept doing what he was doing because he was making me 'feel bad' [*kien qieġhed igibni ħażin*] ... I also told him that everyone would leave if he [Fabio] was going to keep doing what he was doing [*kulhadd ħa jitlaq l'hemm jekk jibqa sejjer hekk*].

J: So then Eric spoke to him?

G: Yes, he just told him to calm down and then it got a little better, but someone like Fabio is really not good for these things [*mhux tajjeb għal dawn l-affarijiet* - implying taking drugs and maintaining appropriate composure at events like Fairfielder after-parties], I know that he's a friend of Eric's and that's why he invited him, but he's just not good for these things, he is a fool [*iblaħ*].

Following this event, whilst Fabio remained a regular at public Fairfielder events, he was not invited to after-parties and other inner circle events. Indeed, even Eric seemed more cautious about this, as a few months later he organised a private birthday gathering for a group of ten Fairfielders at his house, to which Fabio was not invited. Instead for this occasion, an invitation was extended to Aldo, who had only been an attendee of Fairfielder events and a known acquaintance of Eric and other senior men of the group for a relatively short period of time. I was struck by this, and some days following Eric's birthday gathering I brought it up in conversation with Gennaro and Tyler, who had both been present at Eric's party, during a discussion at the apartment:

J [To Gennaro]: So Eric invited Aldo, but not Fabio ... was it because of what you and Mia were saying happened last time at the *Out of Sight* after-party?

G: For sure, everyone knows that if Fabio comes, he's going to bug everyone, because he is a fool ... Aldo is not like that, he's much quieter and he doesn't act foolishly or talk nonsense [*mhux ha joqghod jibbellah u jparal fil-vojt*].

T: Everyone knows that Fabio is bad, no? That's why.

J: ... and is that because he takes too much drugs and cannot control himself, and Aldo can?

G: Yes there's that, but it's not just the drugs ... when you take drugs it all comes down to you and how you act ... it's not even so much about the drugs, it all comes down to personality.

This sequence of events is revealing, for three reasons. First, it represents the process through which Fairfielders employ corrective strategies for undesirable behaviour that occurs more closely to them in social space than the behaviour of *hamalli*, and therefore behaviour that cannot so easily be 'distanced from' or 'dismissed', because it does not belong to a disparaged other. In the case of Fabio's behaviour, there is in the first instance an immediate reaction through which it is temporarily corrected (Gennaro approaching Eric discretely and telling him to have a word with Fabio), and in the second instance – following a subsequent evaluative discussion of related events at the apartment - more permanent sanctions that see Fabio being partially ostracised by the group and excluded from its more exclusive events and gatherings.

Second, this sequence of events conveys a clear message to the group collectively: that no one is 'exempt' from evaluations of their behaviour through gossip, and therefore from the sanctions that might follow. In this respect friendships and alliances outside of the group, such as the friendship between Eric and Fabio, also mean very little and certainly do not grant one permanent privilege and access to the group.

Third, for Fairfielders the consumption of club drugs necessitates a close adherence to a code of conduct, and further, the *capacity* and the *will* to adhere to that code, in order for it to be sustained by the group. In a sense this precedes the actual 'act' of consumption, because as Gennaro puts it, 'it all comes down to personality'. A Fairfielders understanding of this is what gives club drug consumption its 'social' valence to them, because in the absence of that capacity

and will (that is, if one is a ‘fool, *iblah*) one is not allowed access to the social setting where drugs are consumed.

7.5 Conclusions

Heilman (1976: 162 – 163) states that gossip represents the ‘wealth of information’ that is ‘stored’ and referred back to and retold by members of a community over time in their construction and reproduction of social reality and the values that set it apart from others. In this respect it is information that can be accessed and administered by inner circle Fairfielders, first in the determination of what constitutes ‘good’ and ‘bad’ drug-taking and related conduct, and second in the allocation of access and prestige within the group. Additionally, it contributes to the establishment of a ‘history’, ‘memory’ or ‘lore’ of the group, as it is referred to during times of commensality where it enhances the sense of intimacy and complicity between the core members.

Gossip is in this sense doubly effective within Malta’s small-scale context, because the relative lack of anonymity that characterises other more metropolitan settings where club drug-taking occurs makes information about the conduct of drug-takers more likely to be incorporated within that pool of ‘community wealth’ and as such be scrutinised, by other members of ‘wider’ Maltese society as well as by Fairfielders themselves. The ‘hegemony over ... [one’s] ... self’ (Heilman 1976: 161) that gossip threatens must thus under these circumstances be more carefully protected, not only because gossip leads to one’s ‘disempowerment’ through access to one’s information preserve, but also because through it a drug-taker becomes labelled: as a *drugat*, *hamallu*, or ‘fool’.

Drug-taking certainly opens one up to becoming the target of such scrutiny, but this is a dimension that sets drug-taking apart from other types of consumption and gives it a significant part of its appeal for Fairfielders. In other words, drug-taking for Fairfielders constitutes a sort of ‘trial by fire’ (or in this case, ‘trial by consumption’) through which one’s ‘true colours’ and

'personality' (as in Fabio's and Aldo's cases above) become 'exposed'. Inner circle Fairfielder gossip plays a pivotal role in this 'trial': first in delineating its rules and what would constitute one's 'success' or 'failure' in navigating it, and second in evaluating whether one should be allocated prestige and granted continued access to the more exclusive events of the group, that in themselves include those settings within which the 'wealth' that is gossip is administered and exchanged, and in turn, within which the delineations between what is 'hip' (desirable) and what is 'inauthentic' (undesirable) behaviour (Thornton 1993: 3) are established.

There is also an aspect of 'power' in gossip, through which the group internally 'polices' itself. This serves the practical purpose of ensuring that every member of the group is in control of his or her drug-taking under all circumstances, and thus of reducing the possibility of exposing the group to unwanted attention of authorities and disapproving others. More importantly, this ensures that conditions and practices of 'discretion', discussed in the next chapter, are sustained at all times.

The flexibility of gossip allows for it to be categorised as 'good' (within the context of *diskussjoni*) or 'bad' (as *paroli fil-vojt*). One who takes drugs and engages in the evaluation of other's behaviours at public events is trespassing the rules of appropriate time, place, and most importantly sobriety and level-headedness, and is thus engaging in 'bad' gossip. In this respect the 'customary rules' (Gluckman 1963: 308) of the *practice* of Fairfielder gossip also serve in distinguishing between those who engage in 'good' modalities of consumption of drugs and those who do not. Additionally, gossip allows for 'ambiguity' because conversely to other types of conversation that imply 'statements of fact' it does not always require full disclosure of the details and facts that support one's judgement. Gossip is, rather, in itself a form of conveyance of 'judgement of taste' that assumes that those to which it is being transmitted will agree and approve of that judgement, because this approval testifies both their own 'good taste' and their entitlement to membership within the group of gossipers. In this respect for

Fairfielders, it also creates the opportunity for using innuendos through which other drug-takers can be disparaged in a subtle, non-aggressive manner.

Gossip thus 'pervades' Fairfielder sociality as much as the consumption of club drugs; both are 'social practices' that converge and thus cannot be analysed as mutually exclusive. Both these practices may, if left unexamined, come across as rather banal and 'irrational' and as only satisfying immediate individual interests, 'cravings', or addictions. They rather however necessitate intimate knowledge and adherence to specific – and at times intersecting - rules of conduct.

Chapter 8: “*Behind Closed Doors*” - Discipline, Discretion, and the Production of the Secret

8.1 Introduction

We have thus far established that Fairfielders positively value club drug-taking behaviour that is composed, rather than bacchanalian. The Fairfielder must be willing and able to not only be ‘moderate’ and ‘disciplined’ with respect to quantities of drugs he or she takes, but also to his or her behaviour following drug-taking. In turn, access to the Fairfielder group and allocation of prestige within it are determined by this will and capability, because a judgment of whether one is *hamallu/a*, or ‘foolish/idiotic’, or otherwise is derived from the way he or she consumes club drugs. This leads to Fairfielders self-regulating the quantities of drugs that they consume during a drug-taking event, as well as to their subsequently negotiating a state of being that falls between pleasure or ‘abandonment’ and ‘composure’ on the other.

In this chapter I concentrate on this dynamic between abandonment/pleasure and composure/discipline. More specifically, I examine how it coincides with a transformative ‘tension’ between concealment and revelation of drug use as a secret that is shared between Fairfielders. I connect my analysis to Lilith Mahmud’s ethnographic work with Italian Freemasons (ibid. 2014, 2012), as I argue that the engagement of ‘discretion’ as ‘a set of embodied practices that simultaneously conceal and reveal knowledge’ (Mahmud 2014: 28) is central to a mutual recognition of condition that in turn engenders intimacy and complicity between Fairfielders. Further, drawing upon the argument that all secrets are essentially ‘public’ (Taussig 1999), I argue that discretion allows for the interplay between concealment and revelation of drug-taking to remain unresolved, and this is pivotal to the configuration of Fairfielder sociality.

When Fairfielders consume Ecstasy or cocaine at an event, they do so discreetly and without overtly articulating or signalling this consumption⁶⁵. Soliciting a Fairfielder with a direct question about whether he or she has taken drugs (ex. ‘What have you taken tonight?’) and even offering direct information about one’s own drug-taking (ex. ‘I took two pills’) during an event is discouraged and considered ‘inauthentic’ and ‘foolish’ behaviour, and certainly inappropriate because this ‘stance’ is one of distance from personal discretion. Rather, one Fairfielder must be able to discern that another has taken these drugs by reading subtle bodily and dialectical cues that the other spontaneously discloses. Patterns of exchange of certain ‘licit’ goods such as water between Fairfielders also serve this function of indexing drug-taking without overtly revealing it, and this shall be brought out fully in the next chapter. In all eventualities, Fairfielders only indirectly allude to the fact that they have taken drugs to each other. My discussion in this chapter stems from this observation, and from further considerations about how the meaning of a drug-taking event – and particularly the ‘secret’⁶⁶ type of Fairfielder event, which I shall describe in detail – is ostensibly underpinned by the unresolved tension between concealment and revelation of drug-taking.

8.2 Behind Closed Doors, Beyond Concealment

When I first started to regularly attend public Fairfielder events during the initial months of mapping my research field, I was faced with a problem. Earlier conversations with key informants had provided me with some certainty that Fairfielders were taking club drugs (particularly Ecstasy) at these events, and yet the phenomenon was proving difficult to observe

⁶⁵ I have previously shown that Fairfielders talk about specific ‘brands’ and batches of drugs in evaluating their quality. This type of direct statement, however, almost always occurred retrospectively when a Fairfielder was externalising judgement about a type of Ecstasy pill that he or she had taken the week before, for example. These were therefore statements about drugs as products from which one was at the time completely ‘detached’, rather than for example an Ecstasy pill that he or she had just taken. In this respect, similarly to gossip, direct conversations about drugs during drug-taking events were discouraged.

⁶⁶ In this chapter, it is particularly important to note that this is a term that Fairfielders themselves used in specifically referring to these types of events. They for instance referred to the *Wide Shut* party that I describe later in this chapter as a ‘secret party’, that took place at a ‘secret venue’. Thus, whilst other etic terms (ex. ‘cryptic’ or ‘crypto’) may be used in giving a more nuanced sense of how the group establishes a sense of community through sharing common symbols that distinguish it from others, I choose to use the term ‘secret’ as an emic term here.

first-hand. There were, of course, no individuals who marketed themselves as ‘drug sellers’ – and that was to be expected - but any clear signs of consumption of these drugs were also, at the time, seemingly absent to me here. I began to consider the possibility that Fairfielders were just about growing out of some proverbial ‘life phase’ of drug-taking as they reached a later stage of adulthood, or even that drug-taking was simply not as central to Fairfielder events as I had initially thought. I therefore approached a few of my informants privately and voiced my surprise (and concern) about not being able to ‘see’ or ‘detect’ the phenomenon I was interested in writing about. When I asked Sybil about whether she thought club-drug taking amongst members of the group was becoming less frequent, her answer was particularly striking:

“Definitely not ... just because you’re not seeing it does not mean that it’s not happening ... you need to look at what’s going on behind closed doors”.

Sybil’s tone came across as slightly patronising to me at the time, but at least her reply was reassuring: Fairfielders were still using club drugs, and the impression that there was no longer any drug-taking to write about was only a hasty and inaccurate one of my own. I took Sybil’s answer as meaning that to be able to document Fairfielder drug-taking ‘in real time’, I needed to modify both the degree of magnification and the angle of my ethnographic lens: I had to look more *closely* at what was going on ‘behind *closed* doors’.

I therefore assumed that the challenge I was facing here was primarily a methodological one that I would overcome through fostering stronger rapports with Fairfielders, and once I accessed those settings where they took drugs more openly and where they would be more inclined to talk about their immediate experiences with these drugs. Sybil’s advice was reasonable, after all, because Fairfielders needed to be careful with respect to where they overtly take drugs, especially in view of the small-scale context of Malta (see Chapter 6). My provisional hypothesis at this stage was that, like the young clubbers in Sydney located by Pennay (2012), Fairfielders were essentially maintaining their ‘mainstream identities’ by

concealing drug-taking at public events and engaging in more overtly transgressive behaviours at secret parties and in private spaces (ibid.: 408 – 414).

As I spent more time with Fairfielders and I started to get invited to their secret and private events⁶⁷, however, I realised that I had once again been a little too hasty in my assumptions. Gaining access to these events was certainly crucial, and it was here that I could begin to formulate my representations of group hierarchy and thus identify the core members of the Fairfield group. These smaller events also provided the opportunity for all Fairfielders to enjoy themselves freely of obligations that public events entailed: less effort needed to be invested by Russ, Gennaro and the other senior group members in ‘meeting and greeting’ and ‘socialising’ with rank-and-file members of the group that usually attended more public events (see Chapter 7), for instance.

This meant that drug use at these events was expected. Outward signs of drug-taking here, however, were far from being as obvious as I had expected. Fairfielders were not engaging in ‘scatter talking⁶⁸’, role-playing, or child-like behaviour that Pennay’s informants engaged in when they took Ecstasy in private settings (ibid. 2012: 415). If in these settings Ecstasy-taking for those followed by Pennay provided the opportunity for ‘grotesque forms of intoxication’ (ibid. 2012: 420) and allowed the production of ‘grotesque bodies’, similar settings and types of drug use in my case resulted in behaviour that came across as remarkably ‘ordinary’. Furthermore, the slightest signs of ‘unusual’ behaviour were also quickly picked up on and discouraged by Fairfielders at these events as well. During one such private gathering at Russ’s apartment, for example, Mia came out from a bathroom and sprawled herself on the floor (as

⁶⁷ Fairfielder private events are domestically embedded parties and gatherings that were usually held in Fairfielders’ homes, to which between five and ten Fairfielders were usually invited. These types of parties are even more exclusive and restricted than secret events.

⁶⁸ Random conversations and ‘incongruous comments’ that do not follow a logical sequence (Pennay 2012: 415).

the other Fairfielders present were lounging on chairs and sofas) when Gennaro addressed her in a reprimanding tone:

“What are you doing there? Wiping the floor? There are many places where you can sit properly...” (*‘X’qed tgħamel hemm? Timsaħ l-art? Hawn tant postijiet fejn tpoġġi sew...’*)

Mia did not reply, but after a short period of time – as if snapping out of a stupor - stood up from the floor and joined the others on the sofa. On another occasion, Mia herself recounted an instance of when she reproached someone who was behaving erratically at a private after-party to me:

“We were at an after-party at a place with a pool, and there was someone’s foreign friend who had come to visit and because of that we invited him to join us that night, you know, and he kept swimming in the pool... we were all sitting down and speaking normally, and I kept telling him not to swim but he insisted, I kept thinking he was being stupid because he was in no state to be in the water... I know that he wasn’t going to drown or anything, but it was just not the time for it... it made me feel bad and anxious...”

As I encountered more similar cases during fieldwork, it became increasingly clear that Fairfielders were also regulating and disciplining their drug-taking at these private events⁶⁹. Sybil’s suggestion to seek drug-taking ‘behind closed doors’ therefore needed to be reinterpreted and reconsidered more closely, because for Fairfielders keeping drug-taking ‘private’ was not, as I had assumed, simply a matter of keeping up appearances in public settings, or ‘concealing’ it from others who might disapprove of it. Rather, even in the case of secret and private gatherings where they took drugs together in the absence of others, they seemed to be actively restraining any behaviour through which their drug use was outwardly revealed and ‘externalised’. To take and use Sybil’s own terms figuratively, therefore, once I looked at what was going on behind closed doors I only found more closed doors that seemed to be ‘surrounding’ or ‘enclosing’ drug-taking. As I thought about this new problem I was struck by a sort of epiphany: if my aim was to understand the meaning of drug-taking for

⁶⁹ Further evidence for disciplined drug-taking in private settings is presented in Chapter 7, where rank-and-file members of the Fairfielder group were ostracised because of their erratic behaviour following drug-taking. My example here suggests that even established ‘core’ members of the group were not immune to being ‘called out’ and sanctioned in cases when under similar circumstances they behaved erratically.

Fairfielders, then I had to shift my attention towards *those doors themselves* rather than seek to uncover what was behind them. In other words, now that I was certain that discipline was an inherent dimension of Fairfielder drug-taking in all settings, I needed to delve deeper into the phenomenon by approaching it from a different angle and by asking myself a new question: what do discipline and moderation themselves do and *produce*?

8.3 Discipline and Pleasure

There may be several valid ways of approaching this question. One possibility is that although Fairfielders are themselves not practicing Catholics, strong Maltese Catholic traditions and beliefs through which drug use is directly associated with the Devil and demonic possession (Mitchell 2001: 93, Ghirlando 1997: 119) may latently influence Fairfielders and lead them to exercise some degree of caution in their drug-taking behaviour. More pragmatically, especially in the case of potentially ‘dangerous’ behaviour such as in the case of the foreign guest who insisted on swimming whilst intoxicated, Fairfielders like Mia may simply feel concerned and seek to minimise the risks associated with such behaviour⁷⁰.

These perspectives frame discipline as resulting from processes that are either external to - and therefore not consciously activated by - the group, or that have to do with one’s ‘personal’ inclination to feel ‘anxious’ or even ‘irritated’ about another’s erratic behaviour. I am suggesting, however, that discipline is a social fact that originates from within and is sustained by the group itself. In this respect, discipline itself ‘does something’ as it operates against the overt revelation of the fact that one has taken drugs, instead allowing for the mutual recognition or ‘reading’ of the subtle signs of drug-taking. Discipline is in turn valued by Fairfielders because it sets the stage for interactions that are based on this intuition to occur between them;

⁷⁰ Undoubtedly, what compounded Mia’s anxiety in the example above was that the guest in this case was foreign and an outsider who had only been invited to the private after-party because he was a friend of one of the core members of the group. His tolerance for and ability to moderate drug-taking was, therefore, unknown to the group; and from this perspective that night he could well have taken an excessive amount of drugs that could have resulted in him experiencing difficulties whilst swimming.

and in this context what one Fairfielder intuits about another is not only the fact that he or she has taken drugs, but also and equally significantly that he or she is attempting to navigate and mitigate the effects of those drugs. In other words, there is mutual recognition of both the pleasures and empathy that are chemically induced by the drugs, but also of the very efforts that are necessary to discipline – and more pointedly, ‘dominate’ - those pleasures. Underpinning this, there is also the awareness that one is taking precautionary steps to minimise the risks associated with drug-taking, which themselves also require discipline and moderation. In this light, the domination and eventual triumph over ‘pleasure’ and ‘problem’ that is connected to Fairfielder drug-taking becomes equally significant.

The Fairfielder drug-taking experience, therefore, is a rather laborious affair. Evidence for this can be found in how Fairfielders signal that they are experiencing the effects of Ecstasy to each other. The frequent exchange of water between two Fairfielders at a drug-taking event⁷¹, for example, not only serves to indicate that both have taken Ecstasy, but also that they are actively mitigating the potentially dangerous dehydrating effects of the drug. In other instances, a Fairfielder man who has taken Ecstasy may look at another, pout, slightly shake his head and sigh to signal that the effects of the drug have ‘hit him’ - motions that are not unlike those one might expect from an athlete who is running a marathon, for example. This behaviour expresses both the pleasure that is induced by the drug, and the efforts that are being made to control it. Further, Fairfielders may use narratives of ‘suffering’ in describing a drug-taking experience. Consider for example the following extract from a conversation that I had with Red, when I coincidentally ran into him on a Monday morning in a central town street, sometime after I had completed fieldwork:

R: Long time since I’ve last spoken to you, how’s it going? You haven’t been to parties in a while, right?

J: Good to see you. No, I haven’t been out in a while, I’m writing up my thesis now so I’m spending a lot of time at my desk... are you still going? [*ghadek ghadde?*]

R: Yes, we just had a big one on Saturday...

J: Great, was it good? [*tajjeb kien?*]

R: Very good, [smiles] we suffered! [*tajjeb hafna, bghatejna!*]

⁷¹ See Chapter 9..

The concept of ‘suffering’ was commonly referred to by Fairfielders in their narratives about a weekend during which a drug-taking event had taken place, and because of this it deserves some further elucidation here. The term served to indicate the entire drug-taking or weekend experience, that consisted of both the drug-taking experience itself and the following hours of ‘hangover’ or ‘comedown’. Especially when uttered by Fairfielder men, it was particularly striking as it seemed to simultaneously conjure both masculine ‘poetics of manhood’ (Herzfeld 1985) and feminine ‘poetics of suffering’ (Kirtsoglou 2004). Red’s own use of the term above, for instance, evidences self-presentation and assertion that – most clearly through his usage of the Maltese term for ‘we suffered’ (*bġhatejna*) rather than ‘I suffered’ (*bġhatejt*) – also connects to and asserts the collective identity of the Fairfielder group. The expression at the same time draws upon and re-appropriates the concept of suffering, in projecting both the individual speaker *and* the group as ‘**unique**’ (Kirtsoglou 2004: 206, original emphasis). Whilst the use of the term therefore clearly does not testify ‘competitive suffering’ (ibid.: 206) between Fairfielders themselves, it serves to distinguish them from other drug-taking groups (*ħamalli*, but even others) who do not ‘suffer’ or ‘suffer less’: because these others neither go through the tasks of disciplining and moderating their drug-taking behaviour, nor of negotiating a state between abandonment and composure. Rather, they abandon themselves completely to the drugs and their effects.

8.4 The Practice of Discretion

Like other ways in which Fairfielders signal drug-taking to each other, narratives of suffering effectively convey both pleasure and effort (if not ‘pain’ in the conventional sense) of club drug-taking, in a way that is *codified* and only fully understood by other Fairfielders. Moreover, they allow for this duality of meaning to be conveyed discreetly: and here we come to another key aspect of the Fairfielder ethos, or another ‘closed door’ that gives Fairfielder drug-taking its significance.

The following extract from a conversation that I had with Luna illustrates how, for Fairfielders, exercising discretion in the way one talks about drugs is as important as exercising discipline in how one behaves when taking drugs:

L: I just hate it when someone comes up to me and starts telling me what he took and asking me about what I took.

J: Is it because they would be invading your privacy?

L: Not just that... they do it to look cool as well, it's like they're trying too hard to belong and to be part of the group because they think that by telling you how much they took or 'I took a Skull [Ecstasy pill]' or whatever you're going to think they're cool... like last time there was this guy I know who never really came to parties before... he was at *Out of Sight*, and he came up to me and told me that he took one, and then he kept asking me 'What did you take?'... that's just too much, and he's just doing it to try to show that he's cool and he's part of the scene now... there are too many people like that around I think.

My question to Luna here reveals my own immediate reading of her first statement: that she was irritated because her acquaintance was asking her for information that was private. In other words, he was being indiscreet because he was violating her 'information preserve' (Goffman 2010, see Chapter 7). After all, as Simmel posits, discretion may be qualified as 'nothing but the feeling that there exists a right in regard to the sphere of the immediate life contents' (Simmel and Wolff 1950: 322). For Simmel, in fact, discretion implies a tactful recognition of the right of 'possession' that one has with respect to his or her own 'intellectual private property'. Whilst it is exercised to varying degrees according to the type of social relation between interlocutors, discretion becomes especially significant in interactions between acquaintances (Simmel and Wolff 1950: 320 - 322). From this perspective, the indiscretion of Luna's acquaintance – no doubt compounded by the empathogenic effects of his own Ecstasy consumption - is evident. However, as her own explanation suggests, Luna's problem was as much about the question that her acquaintance asked as it was about the information he *revealed*. In other words, he was being indiscreet not only in his attempt to obtain information from Luna about her own drug-taking, but also in his overt *articulation of his own drug-taking*.

This raises an important point: that discretion not only implies the recognition of one's privacy and respect for one's 'space', but also a knowledge of what to reveal about oneself or others and, more pointedly, *how to reveal it*. It is here that discretion becomes a matter of intricate

active practice, rather than one of passive concession that ‘what is not revealed must not be known’ (Simmel and Wolff 1950: 321). In better understanding this concept, I turn to Lilith Mahmud (2014, 2012) and her recent work with Italian freemasons, through which she posits that an ‘anthropology of discretion’ has a great deal to offer to the understanding of how cultural meanings and knowledge are formed and interpreted.

Lest one be tempted to immediately dismiss a comparison between Italian freemasons and Maltese club drug-takers as overly reductive, a brief clarification should be noted here. Mahmud concentrates on freemasons, who are widely known as a global ‘secret society’. It is obvious that Fairfielders are neither a secret society (at least they are not ‘officially’ recognised as such, a point that I shall return to in the conclusions of this thesis), nor part of an established global organisation with the same reach, influence, and notoriety as freemasons. Nevertheless, there are some key similarities between Mahmud’s freemasons and Fairfielders. Both must for instance contend with the fact that some of their practices are stigmatised and illegal - a fact that whilst Mahmud (2014: 44) notes should not be taken as the sole reason for which discretion is practiced⁷², undoubtedly leads to the two groups sharing a common property of being subversive and marginal. More importantly, both groups configure themselves through knowledge and meaning that are produced and communicated through the practice of discretion. From this perspective, Mahmud’s work can be usefully applied to my own with respect to how discretion functions towards coding and decoding knowledge about drug-taking, but also to how through it Fairfielders may contest ‘ordinary’ or ‘mainstream’ representations of drug-taking (and more broadly, of ‘clubbing’) whilst maintaining their own ‘extraordinary’ ones.

⁷² Mahmud (2012: 431) concedes that discretion served to ‘shield’ freemasons from ‘political attacks’ from state and media that were ‘authorised by neoliberal discourses of transparency’. She however emphasises that for her informants, discretion was ‘generative’ (ibid 2014: 44) rather than simply mitigative. The same argument may be applied to Fairfielders, and it is because of this that they practice discretion and discipline in private settings where there is no risk of ‘getting caught’ and criminally prosecuted for taking drugs.

As she concentrates on her informants' understanding and practice of *discrezione*, Mahmud (2012: 429) emphasises that discretion must be interpreted 'both as a practice of concealment and as a practice of disclosure', through which information, meanings, and a 'subject's positionality' are performatively conveyed and established 'within a specific community of practice'. Discretion, Mahmud argues, is central to how her informants position themselves and recognise each other as freemasons in a world that they binarily divide into the categories of Masonic 'initiated' and the non-Masonic 'profane' (ibid.: 2014: 26, 2012: 429). Discretion, Mahmud (2012: 434) suggests, works towards three ends as a 'meaning-making set of practices' for Freemasons.

First, as a 'knowledge practice' it implies the ability of freemasons to recognise symbolic meaning in things such as the architectural characteristics and topography of a place that 'profane' individuals do not recognise. Mahmud details, for example, her visit to an outdoor site in the Portuguese town of Sintra with a group of female⁷³ informants. Whilst being a UNESCO World Heritage site that is popular with profane tourists, the site also serves as an important 'initiation' path for freemasons. In Sintra, the meaning of architectural cues such as a pelican carved into a fountain or a carefully hidden well (ibid. 2012: 432 – 433) can only be noticed and decoded by the initiated. Mahmud's informants are also able to identify similar masonic architectural cues in bustling *piazze* and other public spaces in Italy. The recognition of these features effectively turns these sites into 'spaces of discretion' with a 'liminal' valence between the profane and the initiated, where freemasons can recognise meaning that is 'hidden in plain sight' (Mahmud 2014: 43 – 44).

Second, discretion also engenders intimacy and mutual recognition between freemasons as 'a set of embodied practices that produce particular forms of intimate relationality' (Mahmud 2012: 434). Mahmud writes of how, in Sintra, her group joined hands in a 'chain of union' as

⁷³ Mahmud's primarily concentrates on freemason 'sisters' rather than 'brothers', as through her work she explores the implications of gender within the predominantly masculine freemason domain.

they reached the bottom of a well and were surprised by two French freemason males who entered the site at the same time. Immediately recognising the circle and its meaning, the two men asked for permission to join hands with Mahmud and her informants, and this in turn revealed their own identity and position as freemasons (ibid.: 433). Elsewhere Mahmud also recounts how subtler embodied signs of masonic positionality and shared knowledge were communicated through winks, handshakes, and innuendos (ibid. 2014: 44). In these instances, therefore, practices of discretion underpin intimacy between those who know each other as freemasons, but their mutual recognition may also engender ‘temporary communities’ (ibid. 2012: 434) between freemasons who would not otherwise identify each other as such.

Mahmud (2012) identifies a third function of discretion in producing ‘subject positions situated within particular historical genealogies’ (ibid.: 434). In other words, similarly to other religious groups, in recognising masonic architectural and topographic features such as those in Sintra freemasons find meaning that transcends immanent temporality. For them, this serves in the ‘grandiose (re)construction of a selectively imagined past’ (ibid. 2012: 434), as it legitimises their existence in terms of a much broader, historic, and esoteric whole.

Similarities between discretion as an embodied practice of Mahmud’s freemasons and Fairfielders become clear here. Both groups practice discretion to signal a common positionality and membership to each other through codified performances and cues. To some degree, Fairfielders as well organise their world and those within it into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ similarly to how freemasons organise theirs into ‘profane’ and ‘initiated’⁷⁴. Both these dichotomies correspond to a separation between those who can decode information and meaning that is communicated through the practice of discretion and those who do not.

⁷⁴ This parallel comes across strongly, for instance, when Russ uses the term ‘toxic’ to describe the ‘bad’ event in Gozo (see Chapter 6).

Like Mahmud's informants, Fairfielders also recognise symbolic meaning that is specifically connected to drug-taking and that others may not recognise in everyday things. One of the most direct examples of this is the identification of 'hidden meanings' behind the lyrics of certain songs. This may be testified, for instance, by the following explanation that Gennaro gave me of the lyrics to the Italo-Disco hit *Spacer Woman*, released in 1983 by the artist *Charlie*⁷⁵:

"When he is saying *Spacer Woman*, he is directly referring to the drug in a subtle way ... and when he says, 'we can start it over', he is referring to fighting with her [*jiggieled magħha*] and then making up again".

Symbolic meaning is also found in ordinary things that become directly connected to drug-taking. Banknotes and bankcards, for instance, are tools used by Fairfielders in the consumption of cocaine: the former rolled up to snort the powder that is finely crushed and arranged or 'cut' into straight lines with the latter. This symbolic meaning of bankcards was brought out fully on one occasion when a group of Fairfielders met the day after a party that had been held at a club. At the party the night before, Sheila had lost one of her bankcards, and she openly asked the group about whether anyone had found it in any of the club's bathrooms. In reply to this, Justin immediately quipped: "I didn't know they had ATMs in the bathrooms". Everyone including Sheila herself was amused, smiling and laughing heartily.

At no point of this interaction was Sheila's use of the bankcard for cocaine consumption directly articulated, yet everyone present could intuit that she could have only lost it under those circumstances. This was precisely what made Justin's joke very humorous but also more deeply effective, in two ways. First, Justin's quip constitutes the '*secret joke*' that acts similarly to gossip in cementing intimacy and membership of a tight-knit group (Heilman 1979: 198). This especially because it would not have been understood by outsiders: one can only 'get' the joke if he or she can make the connection between Fairfielders, bankcards, bathrooms, and

⁷⁵ Here Gennaro is specifically referring to this part of the lyrics: '*We can start it over, come on be my lover, you will be my danger, let me be your stranger*'.

cocaine. Second and more subtly, the joke served to ‘playfully’ remind Sheila - but also the rest of those present - of the importance of discretion. More concretely, it reminded them that a bankcard left in a bathroom is bound to reveal their drug-taking (because here the bankcard becomes ‘drug paraphernalia’). It also conveyed the message that if a bankcard is lost in such a way then openly claiming it as Sheila did is equally indiscrete, as it reveals the claimant as a cocaine user. That has to do with the ‘concealing’ value of discretion. At the same time, however, Justin’s joke highlights the value of revealing and recognising (also discretely, and in this case rather wittily) the group’s drug use as a problematic practice. Here again, therefore, some of the problems and risks connected to drug-taking are being ‘flirted’ with, as they are communicated and recognised discreetly through the joke.

An application of discretion as process of recognition of cues in architecture, topography, and temporality to Fairfielders is admittedly more limited. There are two reasons for this, which are themselves revealing. First, because Malta offers very little in terms of ‘landmarks’ and ‘history’ that are associated with alternative dance music culture that is followed and sustained by Fairfielders. Fairfielders may seek these by occasionally travelling to specific locations and festivals in mainland Europe, such as the Berghain club in Berlin (Germany), the Glastonbury festival in Somerset (United Kingdom), and the Dekmantel festival in Amsterdam (Netherlands). In this respect, similarly to Argentine tango dancers followed in Malta by Baldacchino (2017), a Fairfielder ‘communal imaginary’ (ibid.: 136) and connection to global alternative dance music culture is partially sustained through narratives about these ‘big’ foreign events: which DJs played which records, how ‘good’ the crowd was, and so on⁷⁶. Second, therefore, Fairfielders are themselves producing their ‘history’ through their own events, performances, and discourse. This means that one cannot conceptualise Fairfielder culture simply as an ‘off-shoot’ of global alternative dance music culture, in the same way as

⁷⁶ These narratives did not include direct accounts of drug-taking experiences at these festivals. Fairfielders only spoke to me directly about drug-taking in these settings when I asked them directly about the matter. This further illustrates the centrality of discretion to Fairfielder narratives about drugs.

Italian freemasons follow the same predetermined codes and values as freemasons elsewhere. In this sense the Fairfielder group did not ‘just happen’ and result from an inevitable spread of a modern global phenomenon to a Europeanised Malta, but instead requires active and ongoing cultivation – through the organisation of parties, events, and gatherings, but also through what Pennay and Moore (2010) define as micro-political relations that are performatively and discursively sustained by the group.

8.5 The Secret Life of Drugs

Thus far in this chapter, I have attempted to connect discipline with discretion. I have essentially argued that discipline ‘sets the stage’ for discretion to be practiced by Fairfielders, as it allows for signs of drug-taking to be mutually recognised and communicated discreetly between them. Discipline begets discretion, because in its absence there would be very little left to be subtly communicated and intuited. Additionally, Fairfielder domestication/ domination of club drug consumption through discipline and the ‘labours’ this entails are themselves central components of that which is communicated and intuited through the practice of discretion; and in this respect, discipline not only engenders but also constitutes the ‘content’ of discretion. From this perspective, discretion is valued by Fairfielders for its ‘aesthetic and epistemological labour’ (Mahmud 2012: 435), because in this capacity it correlates with desirable drug-taking in the first instance, and sustained membership within the group in the second.

This analysis thus leads us to a more complete understanding of discretion in Fairfielder drug-taking through an ‘interactionist’ approach, as we have seen how its practice serves to simultaneously consolidate Fairfielder group sociality and complicity on the one hand and distinguish group members from others on the other. In this respect, drug-taking shifts from being ‘concealed’ and ‘private’ knowledge of the individual to being ‘property’ that is shared between members of the group, and it is here that the secret of drug-taking becomes transformative as it ‘determines the reciprocal relations of those who possess the secret in

common' (Simmel 1906: 470, see also Johnson 2002: 26, Maffesoli 1996: 92). In the case of Fairfielders, discretion is central to these reciprocal relations as it serves to selectively disclose drug-taking whilst preserving its valency as a shared secret.

There is another related function of discretion that must be considered, which has to do with how Fairfielder drug-taking as a shared secret is fetishised. Here, I synthesise and apply two key concepts developed by Taussig (1999) in his work on the 'public' secret. The first is the concept of *defacement*. Taussig (ibid.: 1 – 5) defines defacement as the process through which the full symbolic power and meaning of everyday 'social things' is essentially unmasked or 'released' through their desecration. He notes various examples of how this may occur: the public revulsion and outcry that is caused by a life-size statue of a naked Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, stealing from the corpses of soldiers, the destruction of banknotes and coins, or the burning of national flags (ibid.: 11 – 22). All these things are 'routinised'⁷⁷ to the extent that their 'inherent magic' and full significance is only noticed and revealed – more powerful than at any other point - when they are defaced (ibid.: 5). In this way and crucially for Taussig, the implication of defacement is not that it violates the sacred, but instead that it brings the sacred to the surface:

“... these acts of desecration seem to *create* sacredness, albeit of a special variety ... [and] ... *this is achieved through a “drama of revelation” which, like unmasking, amounts to a transgressive uncovering of a “secretly familiar”*” (ibid.: 51, original emphasis).

The second concept is what Taussig (1999: 53) defines '*the law of the base*'. This implies an inherent property or 'yearning' of that which is sacred to become defaced, and hence reveal its power. Thus, Taussig suggests, 'taboo' as the 'prohibition' of defacement secretly 'contains ... an appeal, even a demand, within itself to transgress that which it prohibits', because it is

⁷⁷ In the case of monuments, Taussig (1999: 52) later notes, not only 'hidden' but also 'invisible'.

through defacement - and therefore the sudden and dramatic revelation of this 'secret' - that the object achieves its 'fetish status' (ibid.: 53).

How may these concepts be connected to drug-taking and Fairfielders? Club drugs – and particularly Ecstasy – may deface those who consume them, in the metaphorical sense meant by Taussig, but also in a literal one. One may even argue that nowhere is defacement more visible than in the uncontrolled contortions, lip-biting, eye-rolling, and other (side)effects that Ecstasy causes to the faces of those who consume the drug in an unmoderated manner and without restraint. It is therefore an inherent property - or 'law of base' to use Taussig's term - of this drug to reveal itself, its use, and its power to possess those who consume it. In the absence of these effects the drug could very well constitute the 'perfect' secret or taboo, because it disappears as soon as one ingests it. However, it is precisely at the point when the Ecstasy tablet disintegrates through its consumption as it becomes part of the 'body' of those who take it that it becomes activated and 'pushes' itself to the surface, and *ipso facto* becomes fetishised as a party drug.

Such defacement, as we have previously seen, becomes evident in the case of *hamalli* and 'fools', of whom drug-taking behaviour causes abhorrence and represents the 'benchmark' of distinction for Fairfielders. At the same time, however, this same behaviour serves as an uncanny reminder of the inherent problems and power of club drugs for Fairfielders, which they seek to overcome through their own consumption. The crucial difference here is that, incapable or unwilling to contain its powers, *hamalli* are completely transformed when they consume the drug: physically (because of the visible and 'defacing' effects) and socially (because overwhelmed by drug-induced pleasure, they become intoxicated to the point that they cannot effectively participate in practices of discretion, they lose their sense of critical judgment, and so forth). Fairfielders witness these effects on others, and are reminded that, if left unchecked and unmoderated, their own drug use will transform them in same way, and in turn they would themselves become *hamalli*. In other words, with comportment, body and face

serving as its vessels, defacement not only testifies undesirable drug-taking of the disparaged other, but also the transformative power of these drugs themselves that is ‘coiled up’ in every Ecstasy tablet and gram of cocaine.

It is this power - in its equal measure of ‘pleasure’ and ‘problem’ – that is signalled but also domesticated through the practice of discretion. Because if one manages to take Ecstasy without being ‘defaced’ by it in the way *hamalli* and fools are, then one proves that he or she is more ‘powerful’ than the drug itself. Through discretion - and discipline before it – therefore, the fetish is harnessed, and its power is transferred: to Fairfielders, to their events, and towards a ‘common fund’ – in the Simmelian and Goffmanian views of the secret as ‘possession’ - of the shared secret.

At this point, discretion transforms Fairfielder drug-taking into the secret as a ‘constant ... social form’ (Johnson 2002: 26) as its ‘content’ becomes secondary. In other words, when drug-taking becomes a Fairfielder (public) secret, or a fact that is ‘known but cannot be spoken’ (Taussig 1999: 50), its significance is not drawn from externalising its content (through for example, the statement ‘I took Ecstasy’) but rather from its presence, cultivation, and protection. As Taussig states:

“The fact is that when the fetish status of the secret is achieved, it is the skin of the secret that vibrates with sacred light, intimation of the public secret within.” (ibid. 1999: 58, original emphasis)

Apart from fostering these ‘skins’ (or ‘doors’, as I have referred to them) of the secret discursively and performatively through discretion, Fairfielders also organise their own ‘Secret Parties’, which they regard as ‘special’⁷⁸. The ‘special’ or ‘extraordinary’ property of these

⁷⁸ This is an emic descriptive term that Fairfielders use in referring to these types of events.

events is engendered by their promulgation as a secret that surrounds, protects, but at the same time underlines the value of drug-taking as their ‘kernel’. It is this active fostering of ‘layers’ of secrecy – a process that may be defined as ‘secretism’ (Johnson 2002)⁷⁹ – that renders Fairfielder drug-taking ‘special’ and distinct from hoi polloi drug-taking that is undisciplined, indiscreet, and out in the open. In supporting this point and connecting it to my previous discussion on discretion, I present a descriptive account of a secret Fairfielder party below. I lift most of the vignette directly from my fieldnotes as I go into some ethnographic detail of the event. This not only to satisfy the anthropological enterprise of ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973), but also because I attempt to emphasise the ‘setting up’ and ‘sense of anticipation’ leading up to and into this event.

8.6 Wide Shut

Wide Shut parties are a series of secret parties Russ and Tim take great care and pride in organising. Apart from private house parties, these parties are the most exclusive and secretly organised Fairfielder events: not more than three times a year (usually monthly from July to September), and across different outdoor venues that are not clubs or otherwise ‘licensed’ places within which a party could be legally organised. Over the period of my fieldwork, these venues included pool areas of remote private villas, unused rock quarries, and fields. Choosing a good venue for these parties is, as Russ told me, key to making the party ‘good’ and ‘special’. *Wide Shut* venues not only need to offer a unique setting that is different from the usual clubs that host public Fairfielder parties, but also the isolation and insularity that is necessary for the party to go on without interference from the police. The ‘thrill’ of *Wide Shut* parties begins here - even prior to considering drug-taking, Fairfielders are aware that participation in these

⁷⁹ In his ethnography of Candomblé practitioners in Brazil, Johnson (2002: 3) draws upon Simmel (1906) and his notion of *Geheimnistuererei* to define secretism as the ‘active milling, polishing, and promotion of the reputation of secrets’. Whilst, similarly to Mahmud (2012, 2014), Johnson focuses on a religious secret society, the application of this concept is instructive as it emphasises that the secret becomes significant when it is circulated as a social form, irrespectively of its content.

events means being complicit in producing an event that does not follow the ‘legal’ or ‘legitimate’ format other public parties that are organised elsewhere follow.

Work and preparations for *Wide Shut* events begin through Facebook. Russ and Tim administer a private or ‘closed’ *Wide Shut* forum or ‘Facebook Group’ of which content can only be viewed and interacted with by other Facebook users whom Russ and Tim themselves have ‘invited’ or ‘added’ to the group. This serves as a sort of virtual private chat room of which users can discuss *Wide Shut* related matters: upcoming and past *Wide Shut* events, new music that corresponds to *Wide Shut* style and taste, and so on. An invitation to the *Wide Shut* Facebook group signifies an invitation to *Wide Shut* parties, and members only consist of Fairfielders and some other *klikek* of which constituents are known and directly ‘vetted’ by Russ and Tim.

There are two key rules of the group that Russ and Tim straightforwardly emphasise. The first is that members should not attempt to invite others to the group - and therefore to *Wide Shut* events - without first asking for approval directly from Russ and Tim. This ensures that access to the events, and more pointedly to information about the events, is strictly regulated and moderated. The second rule is that any photos and videos taken with mobile phones at *Wide Shut* events are only to be uploaded and shared on the closed Facebook group, and not otherwise ‘publicly’. Unlike in the case of other public events, there are no ‘official’ event photographers at these events.

This ‘no photos’ rule tallies with an important function of the closed Facebook group as a platform through which memorable instances of *Wide Shut* events that are captured on video can be revisited and referred back to after the event. Media and content about a *Wide Shut* event is not, therefore, used to ‘promote’ and ‘commercialise’ future events to a wider audience, but rather serves to consolidate a mutual feeling of exclusivity of these events to those who participate in them. An even more important function of the Facebook group is for Russ and Tim to provide information about time and place for *Wide Shut* events to group members, but

here there is an even further ‘shell’ of secrecy that is activated: the exact location of the event remains undisclosed by Russ and Tim always.

On the day of the event, group members are only instructed to show up at a designated ‘pickup point’ that is usually close to the event location, at a specific time. From this pickup point, minivans⁸⁰ take the event attendees to the event location. Whilst inner circle Fairfielders are usually privy to the exact location of *Wide Shut* events, bypassing the minivan service by driving to the location is discouraged, and indeed never done. One reason for this has to do with logistics, since the locations for these events hardly provide adequate parking spaces for event attendees. A second more important reason is to make sure that no undue attention is drawn to the typically isolated locations by traffic. All of this further contributes to secrecy that surrounds *Wide Shut* which, as I could discern when I attended these events, became palpable as an almost ‘electric’ feeling of anticipation as Fairfielders chatted and shared bottles containing the last sips of pre-party drinks⁸¹ on those brief minivan trips.

One *Wide Shut* event took place in a small uncultivated field situated just beneath a high cliff face close to the eastern shore of the island. The field was privately owned by someone whom Russ and Tim knew, and who evidently trusted them enough to agree to it being turned into the setting for a Fairfielder party for one night in August. On this occasion Russ and Tim had instructed members of the *Wide Shut* Facebook group to gather at a pickup point near an isolated wooded area - that as I found out later was a ten-minute drive away from the event location –

⁸⁰ A ‘shuttle service’, usually consisting of two or three minivans, was hired by Russ and Tim for these purposes. The service would run in two phases of trips every half an hour: first during the first two hours of the event - usually between 10 p.m. and 12 a.m. - with vans travelling from the pickup point to the event location every half an hour, and second during the last two to three hours of the event – usually between 4 a.m. and 7 a.m. – with vans travelling from the event location back to the pickup point every half an hour.

⁸¹ Another *Wide Shut* event rule was that attendees could not bring their own drinks to the party. A small make shift bar was instead set up and run at the event location, and whilst attendees were charged a small ‘ticket fee’ (usually €5 or €10) for entrance, bar sales were the main source of money that Russ and Tim used to cover all party expenses (minivan service, sound system, bar staff, property rent in the case of pool parties, etc.). Some profits for the two organisers could also result from these bar sales, but since these parties only catered for a maximum of one hundred to one hundred and fifty attendees, any profits made were relatively modest.

every half-hour between 10 p.m. and 12 a.m. At around 8 p.m. that evening I made my way to Gennaro's and Maggie's apartment, where other Fairfielders were gathering for a few pre-party drinks. As usual, during this time Fairfielders discussed matters that had to do with their everyday and working or student lives, gossiped about the scene, and voiced their anticipation about how 'good' and 'special' the night ahead should be. Drugs were neither taken nor ever directly mentioned at this stage of the night, but the intention to take drugs later at the party might have occasionally been alluded to when, for example, a Fairfielder arrived at the apartment and jokingly remarked to the others about planning to 'go all out' or to 'have a good night'. In any eventuality, the pre-party provided a laid-back, communal setting where bonds between members of the core *klikka* were reaffirmed through chatting about the mundane and reciprocal interest in the goings on of their everyday lives: a type of interaction that within the actual party setting was both inappropriate and impractical. This, too, led to the consolidation of friendship ties between core group Fairfielders that were permanent and not simply temporarily and conveniently activated for the purposes of 'partying' or collective drug-taking.

At around 10.30 p.m., those present cleaned up the apartment from empty cups, filled small soft-drink and water bottles with any remaining drinks, and car-pooled their way to the *Wide Shut* pickup spot. Amelie offered me a place in her car, which I gladly accepted. It took us around twenty minutes to drive to the pickup spot. Although not as isolated as the party location, the spot itself was situated away from any major roads and homes and was remote. On our arrival I could see that it was only scarcely lit by a couple of lampposts that, I assumed, were there to cater for attendees of more 'legitimate' events that might have taken place on evenings in the nearby woodland area. Apart from headlights from two or three other cars that were being parked, in the near total darkness I could barely identify the silhouettes of those who were at the apartment and had arrived there before Amelie and myself. They had joined a group of other *Wide Shut* party attendees – most of them younger rank-and-file members of the Fairfielder group - who were also waiting for the next minivan to pick them up. As I walked up to the group I was greeted by some of these others who knew me and were familiar with my

work, and within just a few minutes our small-talk was interrupted by the arrival of the next two minivans. Between passing their remaining drinks to each other and chatting, all those present proceeded to find a seat in one of the vans, slowly and in an orderly fashion.

For the next ten or fifteen minutes the minivan took us through some narrow roads that were flanked by fields and garrigue, and not much else. I could not tell whether we were getting any closer to our destination, and the lack of any visible landmarks coupled with the near pitch-darkness made me think about how I would have never been able to find my own way to the event location that night, and nor indeed would I be able to recall the turns the minivan driver was taking to get there. I could only tell that we had arrived at the drop-off point when the driver made a turn into a small open field where I could see another parked minivan from which some other Fairfielders were coming out of. As I hopped off the van I could still not see any concrete indications that suggested a party was going on anywhere close, but I could just about perceive vibrations of a bass drum sound coming from somewhere not far away across the hot and otherwise still summer night air. Together with the other Fairfielders I soon grasped that the area where the vans had dropped us off was situated at the top of a cliff, and that the source of the sound was to be found somewhere beneath it.

There were no signs or anyone to direct us or tell us where to go next, but a steep slope leading down to where the vibrations were coming from seemed to be the only reasonable path to reach the party. With the departure of the minivans and the lighting they provided, most of us had brought out our smartphones to double as flashlights, and we were now using these to navigate our way down the uneven, rocky terrain of the slope; “this is going to be special”, a Fairfielder who was walking close by remarked. As I walked on, I realised for the first time that it was a cloudless night of a full moon, as I also became aware of the smell of thyme shrubs and the sea from the nearby coast. The process and setting conveyed a sensory experience that to me was distinctly ‘Maltese’, and that in a sort of melancholic way triggered memories of when as a child my parents would bring me together with my sisters for Sunday afternoon walks around

that same area of the island. At the same time, it all felt distant and detached from that familiar time of my childhood and the Malta I knew, as if each step of the way of reaching *Wide Shut* was taking me deeper through layers of secrecy, towards something that felt almost prohibitively esoteric: first laterally and further away from all the inhabited zones of the island, and now downwards towards the very kernel of the secret that, like my interlocutors, I was hoping would not disappoint and betray its anticipation and the effort it was taking us to reach it.

Once we were more than half way down the slope I could finally see the source of the music, that by this point had grown loud enough to be perceptible as more than low frequency vibrations. From where I was standing I could count about six make shift light posts that had been set up around the field, two on one end over a table where record players, a sound mixer, and amplifier with speakers were set up, another two at the nearest end over another table that was serving as a bar, and the rest in between over an open space of the field that was serving as a dancefloor. Many of the attendees had reached the location before us and were clustered in smaller groups across the field.

The volume of the music was being kept low enough for conversations to take place comfortably in the spots of the field that were farther from the amplifier. This was also important in making sure that the sound was not audible from any of the distant roads. As I reached the bar and I was met and greeted by Russ, he explained that a further measure to ensure that the party was not shut down by the police was in place: they had hired a couple of security people who were serving as ‘lookouts’ on two of the roads up the cliff. Russ and Tim were aware that despite the remoteness of the location, police cars from the nearest station were likely to be routinely monitoring the area through these roads on the night. The security people had familiarised themselves with the roads that the police would take, and their role was to call Russ or Tim when they saw a police car approaching so that then the music would be switched off until it was driven past.

This happened twice on the night. On one of these instances after the music was switched off I could clearly see a torch being flickered from the edge of the cliff towards us, which I gathered signalled that the police were at a safe distance and that the music could therefore be turned back on. When this happened, I took out my phone and typed up a brief note: “C. Geertz, Cock Fight”. I realised the full extent to which, similarly to Geertz (1973) witnessing an illegal cock fight in Bali, I was at the centre of an activity that was taking place both figuratively and literally at the margins of established state and authority in Malta. Except that, as rustic as it might have felt to me, I was dealing with serious ring-leaders; ‘elite cockfighters’, I thought, who had only hedged their bets after having meticulously planned out the activity and having taken all the necessary pre-emptive measures – from carefully choosing this location, to engaging paid sentinels – to keep it running smoothly throughout the night.

There was therefore no point at which I, and from what I could discern any of those present, felt that there was any true risk for the event to be discovered and stopped. Those two instances when the music was temporarily switched off only served to enhance that condition of ‘flirting’ with the possibility of discovery. This in turn heightened the tension between anxiety and thrill, restraint and release, that was at the core of *Wide Shut*. Each time the music was turned off those present went quiet. Their conversations became hushed as they looked towards the top of the cliffs in apprehension, hoping for the ‘all clear’ torchlight signal to come soon. Each time the music was turned back on, then, coincided with a peak in euphoria that was palpable, yet neither vocalised nor otherwise externalised.

The event went on smoothly through the night, and Fairfielders behaved and interacted in the same manner that they did elsewhere. A Maltese rubble wall (*ħajt tas-sejjeħ*) that marked the back edge of the field a few metres behind the makeshift DJ stand served as a spot where small groups of Fairfielders congregated, smoked, and chatted. Drug-taking was, as usual, only signalled discreetly through winks, hugs, and other subtle cues, as well as the exchange of water.

One defining moment came at around 6 a.m., as the sun was rising. The last minivans back were waiting at the top of the cliff, with most attendees having already left for the drop-off point earlier. The small crowd of around twenty people that remained were aware that the event was ending. They looked visibly tired, their eyes baggy and shoes and clothes dusty, but were also smiling and seemed satisfied with the fact that the party had fulfilled expectations. At this point Russ and Tim, who were joined by two other DJs at the DJ stand, played the French producer *St. Germain*'s 12-inch single version of '*Deep in It*', a jazzy number characterised by deep bass line layered below sweeping chords played on the recognisable Fender Rhodes piano. The track perfectly complemented the early morning sunlight and dew, the warm air that was slowly replacing the slightly chilling air of the night, the crowd of the select few that remained, and the mutual unspoken feeling that this was the conclusion of a special event. From the exchange of smiles between those still there, wearily and silently undulating to the chords of *St. Germain*, I could tell that there was a mutual understanding that everyone had been 'deep in' the secrecy of the event, and it was time to call it a night.

This last part of the event was filmed on a smartphone by a Fairfielder and was later uploaded to the *Wide Shut* Facebook group, captioned with '*what a special night, smiles all around*'. In the absence of any other photos and videos it was the only memoir and piece of evidence that the event had happened at all, and it was fondly referred to by Fairfielders when they recalled the event over the following months. Whilst other 'good' secret events were held and organised, 'the one of the field' – as Fairfielders referred to it - was often remembered as particularly 'special'.

8.7 Conclusions

On the night of *Wide Shut*, my informants temporarily appropriated and converted that field: into a space for 'partying' through setting it up with lights, a sound system, a bar, and so on, but also into a 'space of discretion' as defined by Mahmud (2014). As in the case of the freemasons followed by Mahmud, discretion here was practiced for its 'generative' rather than

‘mitigative’ properties. Indeed, in the context of *Wide Shut*, there was no need to be discreet to mitigate the risk of being ‘found out’ taking drugs. This possibility was greatly reduced – if not eliminated – by the fact that the event was insulated and held in secret, protected from police intervention by the lookout system that Russ and Tim had in place. Drug-taking was still discreet here and in other contexts mentioned in this chapter, however, because for Fairfielders discretion is generative and functional in three ways.

First, it underpins the distinction between those considered to be ‘authentic’ or ‘hip’ and others, including ‘fools’ and *hamalli*. If one is excessively overt, and therefore indiscreet, about taking drugs then one is either ‘trying too hard’ to integrate within the group and the scene (as in the case of Luna’s acquaintance above) or is exhibiting the type of abandonment that is characteristic of *hamalli*. Furthermore, indiscretion in drug-taking also suggests that one is generally indiscreet under other circumstances, and this concurs with my previous observation that Fairfielders draw broader inferences about one’s character from how he or she consumes drugs.

Second, discretion consolidates ties between Fairfielders and their self-representations of being those who are ‘in the know’, as it allows them to recognise each other’s drug-taking through decoding signals and cues that outsiders might not be able to decode. Here, discretion serves to communicate and recognise the shared secret, that as Simmel posits ‘adorns’ its possessor (Simmel and Wolff 1950: 338 – 344, see also Urban 2001; Goffman 1990: 142). *Wide Shut* served to re-affirm this adornment because if one is invited to *Wide Shut* then he is a member of the privileged few who are in the know about the secret. At the same time, however, a *Wide Shut* attendee must also prove that he is a worthy ‘custodian’ and ‘cultivator’ of that secret: first by following the pre-set rules of secrecy of the event, and second by being able to engage in discreet drug-taking at the event itself.

Here, Mahmud's ethnography and my own become epistemologically dissimilar in a significant way. Mahmud (2012: 428) notes that her informants were 'unequivocal and relentless' in insisting that they were not a secret society. To them, the fact that signs of the initiated can be found in 'plain sight' of the profane testifies this. Indeed, in her later analysis Mahmud proposes that freemasons should be conceptualised as a 'society of discretion' rather than a 'secret society', because in her experience they not only operated within but also 'embraced' the profane world (ibid. 2014: 43). Fairfielders, on the other hand, directly refer to some of their most exclusive events as 'secret events'⁸². As I have suggested, this does not imply that the practice of discretion is suspended in a Fairfielder gathering that is private or secret. Rather, discretion is a central performative manifestation of this secrecy that extends to public events as well. However, emic Fairfielder narratives of secrecy serve to further encompass drug-taking activities and the platforms where these occur and render them - to cite another term frequently used by my informants in describing these events - 'more special' than other events that are not secret.

Finally, through discretion, Fairfielders produce and polish layers of 'skin' that give the secret of drug-taking its extraordinary properties. To be sure, this is only made possible by the *a priori* property of drugs as problematic and tabooed commodities, and the same type of 'fetish status' could not be attributed to alcohol⁸³ by Fairfielders, for example. In some sense, therefore, here Fairfielders are themselves contesting the meaning of club drug-taking as a 'normalised' activity that is part of mainstream youthful night-time leisure, and re-appropriating it as a secret of their own. This is also why *hamalli* and 'fools' are disparaged: they are not discreet in their drug-taking, and their erratic motions, contorted facial expressions, and overall comportment when they take drugs reveal that the drug is taking over - or 'defacing'

⁸² This may also be attributed to the fact that for Fairfielders the divide between 'good' and 'bad' is rather more rigid than the divide between 'profane' and 'initiated' for Italian freemasons. Furthermore, whilst freemasons find signs of the initiated in the profane, Fairfielders do not attribute value to anything that is connected to that which they deem 'bad' or 'toxic'.

⁸³ Rather contrarily, excessive alcohol consumption was even more discouraged than club drug-taking by Fairfielders.

- them. Through discretion, Fairfielders acknowledge this power of drugs and their potential to 'deface', but also prove that they can not only domesticate, but also dominate over this power.

Chapter 9: The Social Life of Drugs

9.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, I have focused my analysis on how Fairfielders interact, position, and distinguish themselves through modalities of consumption of club drugs. In this final ethnographic chapter, I concentrate on patterns of exchange of drugs as illicit commodities, but also of other 'licit' materials (namely water and chewing gum) as gifts through which Fairfielder drug-taking is discreetly indexed.

Here I essentially advance three points. First, that like consumption, exchange of both illicit and licit things is central to how Fairfielders distinguish themselves from others whilst constructing identity and sociality. In this sense the Fairfielder ethos equally guides 'transacting', 'gifting', and consuming drugs and other related goods. Here I more closely explore my observation that the Fairfielder must not only know when and how to take drugs discreetly, but also when and how to acquire them and signal their use through exchange.

Second, that the biographies of Fairfielders in their capacity as club drug-takers are interwoven with the 'cultural biographies' (Kopytoff 1986) of drugs. In the previous chapter I have referred to Taussig (1999) in suggesting that club drugs have a 'secret life': agency and power that under determined conditions (of 'excessive' or 'unbridled' consumption) is revealed through defacement. I have used this notion to support my proposition that the attribution of positive or negative value that is attached to these drugs is directly correlated with how they are consumed. In practice, an Ecstasy tablet or a 'gram' of cocaine within it has, *a priori*, both 'negative' and 'positive' value: it is equally 'loaded' with the potential to induce pleasure, euphoria, and empathy on one hand and to deface its user on the other. I have suggested that the active overcoming of those 'negative' values in their effective conversion to generative positive ones through discipline and discretion is what sets Fairfielders apart from other drug users. This process of attribution of value, however, begins with the Fairfielder understanding

and recognition of drugs as peculiar types of things that in and of themselves require a different treatment – from when they are acquired, to when they are consumed, to when the longer-lasting effects of consuming them are no longer felt - than other ‘ordinary’ things.

Third, within the context of a Fairfielder event the exchange of water and chewing gum carries implications that are altogether different from the exchange of these same materials in other contexts. This, I shall argue, implies that club drugs and other goods that are connected to their use must be understood as ‘things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context’ (Appadurai 1986: 5) and which, in relationally and situationally shifting within and between commodity and gift exchange spheres, underpin Fairfielder group structure, hierarchy, and distinction from other groups. In this respect, the overarching argument of this thesis that Fairfielder drug-taking is a laborious process that requires the active application of scene-specific knowledge here fits well with Appadurai’s notion that ‘the politics of value is in many contexts a politics of knowledge’ (ibid. 1986: 6).

9.2 The Commodity Potential of Drugs

A crucial point for Appadurai (1986) is that ‘commodity-hood’ is one stage of a thing’s ‘life history’ or ‘career’; a stage that can be identified as ‘*the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature*’ (ibid.: 13, original emphasis). From this perspective, as Appadurai (2006: 15) more recently notes, the status and value of a thing is firstly not permanent, as it may often over time shift from commodity, to gift, to sacred object, to worthless junk, and vice versa, and secondly is always tied to historical, social, and political conditions under which the thing is found and through which it gains valence. Following the thing as it shifts and transforms from one phase of its career to another through ‘methodological fetishism’ (Appadurai 1986: 5) allows us to focus on the different properties and implications of each phase whilst focusing on the thing’s life as a ‘*total trajectory*’ (Appadurai 1986: 13, original emphasis) that accommodates diversions rather than

- as an alternative Marxist approach would tend to favour - a unilinear pathway that begins at production and inevitably ends at commoditisation.

My intention here is not to suggest that club drugs should not be treated as commodities, but only that, following Appadurai, it is instructive to approach them in terms of their 'commodity potential' as this changes with their use and function, rather than as 'absolute' commodities. Appadurai (1986: 13) provides further elaboration on this point, as he identifies three dimensions or factors that together determine the thing's 'commodity situation': the 'commodity candidacy', the 'commodity context', and the 'commodity phase'. I briefly summarise the first two of these below, before proceeding to a more detailed discussion of the the commodity phase. In drawing upon both Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986) I concentrate on this concept particularly because through its application to my ethnographic data the valence of club drugs as 'peculiar' things for Fairfielders emerges most clearly. Nevertheless, the commodity phase must be considered together with the commodity candidacy and commodity context to fully understand how and why drugs acquire this valence.

The 'commodity candidacy' implies the location of a thing within the 'conceptual' framework of exchange, which includes conditions of exchange and the values of the objects of exchange that are agreed upon by the parties involved (Appadurai 1986: 13 – 14). To some degree these conditions and values are defined and pre-set by the cultural context within which the thing is found, through a 'taxonomic structure' (ibid.: 14) that categorises and collects certain things according to their exchangeability in relation to others⁸⁴. Notwithstanding certain specific circumstances⁸⁵, the thing may only achieve commodity-hood once a common agreement about

⁸⁴ Both Appadurai (1986: 14) and Kopytoff (1986: 71) exemplify how this may occur in referring to the pre-colonial multi-centric economy of the Tiv of central Nigeria, as documented by Bohannan (1959), and where three distinct 'spheres' of exchange served to categorise subsistence goods, livestock, ritual goods, women and so forth and set the boundaries and rules for exchange of these things.

⁸⁵ Appadurai notes two types of situations where this may occur. The first involves transactions that occur 'across cultural boundaries', and where the exchange tends to be purely based on an agreement about price, but very little else. The second is a situation where exchange takes place under extreme

this exchangeability - what it may be exchanged for and under which conditions - has been established.

Whilst club drugs undoubtedly fulfil their commodity candidacy in the sense that they are bought and sold as such at specific stages of their social lives, they present two particularities here. First, whilst their producers and distributors intend them to be exchangeable as ‘commodities by *destination*’ (Appadurai 1986: 16, original emphasis), the prohibition of their circulation by the state and other regulatory bodies in effect means that they are ‘commodities by *diversion*’ (Appadurai 1986: 16, original emphasis) implying that they can only become commodities once the regulations prohibiting their commoditisation are surmounted through their illegal production and circulation. In other words, there is a tension between the illicit production, distribution, and even ‘marketing’ of these drugs as ‘mobile commodities’ that are homogenous and available to anyone who has the means to acquire them on the one hand, and the efforts of the state that are aimed at keeping them ‘enclaved’ (Appadurai 1986: 22) and de-commoditised.

Second, as a direct result of this tension and as I have previously discussed, there may be important and potentially dangerous fluctuations in the composition of these drugs that result from their adulteration and contamination, which effectively means that even when ‘paraded’ as commodities, they remain - to a degree - ‘singular’ items. This is reflected in conditions of their exchange: a Fairfielder is never sure about whether he or she is buying a ‘pure’ product from the dealer, and in turn may decide, for instance, that one brand of Ecstasy from a dealer on a specific night does not fulfil the commodity candidacy, opting out of the transaction altogether. As a further consideration to my discussion in Chapter 5, this is an important and specific dimension of Fairfielder drug-taking that makes them distinct from both ‘addicts’ of other types of drugs who might accept even the most impure and diluted form of drug to repress

conditions, such as those of famine or war, where a shared perception of value and price ‘come almost completely unyoked’ and things of which values are ‘incommensurable’ are exchanged (ibid. 1986: 14).

withdrawal, and from others who engage in consumption of club drugs as if they were indeed 'homogenised' and 'ordinary' commodities.

The commodity context implies '*social* arenas, within or between *cultural* units' (Appadurai 1986: 15, original emphasis) that provide the necessary spatial and environmental conditions for a thing to achieve the commodity state. In this sense the commodity context may constitute different 'settings' that at specific times are occupied by buyers and sellers who come to agreements about the commodity value of objects and the terms of their trade. Here Appadurai refers to examples of marriage contexts within which women are exclusively exchanged, but later also cites Geertz (1979) as he elaborates on the example of 'bazaar settings' as a commodity context that is characterised by the search for knowledge and information about the reliability and quality of both sellers and things.

As it may be applied to the used car market in contemporary society (Geertz 1979: 224 cited in Appadurai 1986: 43), what Appadurai categorises as a 'bazaar-style information economy' may be applied to the Fairfielder context for two important reasons that I shall gloss here and bring out fully in the next section of this chapter. First, because obtaining *information* about the quality of drugs available within the context of a 'party' - and more broadly, of the 'club drug-taking scene' - is a central factor in the determination of value of drugs to Fairfielders. In this sense the Fairfielder events and scene constitute the commodity context because they evidently serve as the key settings where these drugs are bought and sold. This does not mean, however, that once they reach this context drugs are indiscriminately bought by Fairfielders. Rather, Fairfielders engage in calculated attempts to 'source' information about the type and quality of these drugs from each other, as they decide whether to buy them or otherwise. Second, because the establishment of 'clientelisation' - that is, a relationship by way of which a buyer always returns to the same seller to purchase specific goods that the seller offers (Geertz 1978: 30) - occurs between the Fairfielder and the drug dealer. As I shall illustrate shortly, this does not mean that Fairfielders trust the dealer, but rather contrarily the relationship between the two is

characterised by a degree of implicit *distrust* towards the dealer⁸⁶ and more strongly his products. This as well significantly impacts the commodity-hood of drugs in the Fairfielders context, because whilst they become available as ordinary commodities, the shared knowledge that they are not engenders care and moderation in how they are taken and exchanged.

9.3 Drug Trajectories

The commodity phase refers to the potential of a thing to ‘move in *and* out of the commodity state’ (Appadurai 1986: 13, original emphasis) over time. In his own contribution to ‘The Social Life of Things’, Igor Kopytoff (1986: 72 - 73) provides an in-depth analysis of this movement. He posits that commoditisation as a ‘technology’ of capitalism drives the expansive homogenisation of commodity exchange, first as it standardises exchange value of each thing vis-à-vis all other things, and second as it expands as a ‘system’ by incorporating an ever-increasing number of things within it (ibid.: 73).

Countering commoditisation, Kopytoff (1986: 73) continues, is ‘singularisation’, which implies that under certain conditions and at certain stages of their ‘biographies’ things may be placed within a niche that precludes them from being treated and transacted as other commodities. Singularisation not only occurs in cases when things are culturally recognised as invaluable because they become collectively acknowledged as ‘sacred’ (as for example with certain ritual objects and monuments), but also in cases when the thing is considered ‘priceless’ because it is by every measure considered non-tradeable. Thus, for instance, in the case of the Aghem of western Cameroon studied by Kopytoff (1986: 74 – 75) manioc was singularised because its trade value was categorised ‘below that of marketable subsistence items’, and Kopytoff’s own field inquiry about its exchange value was met with derision from his informants. Kopytoff

⁸⁶ As I shall further explain below, distrust towards any dealer rather than individual dealers themselves, although one dealer may be considered more ‘reputable’ than another. Considering the ‘smallness’ of the scene and the limited number of dealers who supply drugs to Fairfielders, however, Fairfielders are not left with much choice with respect to suppliers. Rather, as I have shown in Chapter 4, they can only choose whether to buy the drugs or not. In all eventualities, some degree of clientelisation (that does not guarantee product quality) is inevitable.

emphasises that this was not because for the Aghem manioc is 'priceless' because it is imbued with some symbolic power, but rather contrarily it is priceless because it is 'worthless' and as such may only either be consumed or given away (ibid.: 75).

The singularised thing, then, can be found at any point between opposite poles of a scale of value that is - at least temporarily - altogether detached from its commodity value. In other words, if, by definition, the value of the commodity as an 'economic object' is only established through a commensurable 'exchange of sacrifices' (Appadurai 1986: 3 – 4)⁸⁷, the object that is in the singularised phase of its career is not a commodity because no other thing may be sacrificed for it, and therefore its exchange value cannot be established in these terms. Further in this way, singularisation in Kopytoff's model implies a process through which 'the tendency of all economies to expand the jurisdiction of commoditisation' (Appadurai 1986: 17) is resisted and contested.

Notwithstanding Appadurai's doubts as regards to a total structural opposition between commoditisation and singularisation⁸⁸, Kopytoff's model is instructive as firstly it recognises that whether an object is commoditised or singularised depends on the social, temporal, and spatial context within which it is found (Appadurai 1986: 17), and secondly that objects may – irrespectively from their production, through different processes of attribution of value and at different points of their careers - be differentially commoditised or singularised by societies or groups. This latter point also implies that, particularly in 'complex' societies, singularisation that is sustained by one or more groups but not others may result in tensions between 'disparate

⁸⁷ Appadurai draws upon Simmel (2004) and his notion that the economic value of an object is essentially determined reciprocally in direct relation to the value of another object for which it is exchangeable. In this view the value of each object is constituted against the 'cost of a sacrifice' (Simmel 2004: 77) of another, and thus it is the 'commensuration of sacrifices' (Appadurai 1986: 14) that occurs through exchange that establishes value.

⁸⁸ Appadurai (1986: 17) notes how singular items may themselves be commoditised, thus betraying the 'ideal-typical contrast' between the singularised and commoditised. Additionally, Kopytoff (1986: 88) also concedes that his model is of the 'ideal type', and that things can be found 'in between' the commoditised and singularised state.

and morally charged systems' (Kopytoff 1986: 82), and therefore in this sense the value of the thing as a singularised item or as a commodity may also come to symbolise the values of a group or groups in opposition to others.

Crucially for the application of this model to my analysis of drug-taking, Kopytoff (1986: 75) identifies 'terminal commodities', as things that may only be obtained but not circulated further as commodities. In this way, the terminal commodity becomes singularised once it is acquired as it is 'precluded' from being re-exchanged as such 'by fiat' (ibid. 1986: 75). Among examples given by Kopytoff of terminal commodities are prescription medications: their commoditisation is 'terminal' because once they are prescribed by a medical professional to the patient (and in this sense every prescription is *de facto* 'singular') and the patient acquires them, they can only be used by that patient, who is legally prohibited from re-selling them to anyone else. Saxer (2013: 175) has noted how this process of 'radical singularisation' may be followed and take place as one type of trajectory in the biographies of prescription medicines in Tibet. On the other hand, a clear example of how the prohibition to circulate prescribed drugs is broken is the case of methadone that is prescribed and distributed to heroin addicts in rehabilitation who, instead of using it, sell it to other addicts on the streets (see Bourgois 2000).

Cases of when they are illegally re-commoditised aside, prescription drugs may be followed through a biographical course from 'commodity-hood' to singularisation. As noted by Van der Geest et al. (1996: 156), this process may be traced through a series of stages that are each 'characterised by a specific context and particular actors': from when the drugs are industrially manufactured, to when they are distributed to hospitals, pharmacies, and so forth, to when they are exchanged by the patient for a prescription, to when they are taken. The social life of pharmaceuticals does not, however, end here. Rather, the 'purpose' and 'meaning' of the life of the pharmaceutical is only fulfilled through its *effects*: alleviating symptoms, making the patient better, and so forth. These desired effects can only be achieved through *correct* use, application, and consumption of the substance as it has been prescribed, because otherwise

‘wrong use may render ... [the pharmaceutical’s] ... entire life meaningless’ (Van der Geest et al. 1996: 156).

This discussion raises several important questions that are relevant to the Fairfield case. Do Fairfield club drugs remain in the commodity state throughout their social lives? Do these drugs ever become singularised, and if so, what are the conditions and implications of their singularisation? Can the social lives of club drugs be traced through biographies that are in any way analogous to those of prescription drugs? What impacts does the inherent ‘imperfection’ of these drugs have on their biographies?

Let us take up Appadurai’s suggestion for methodological fetishism and attempt to address these questions by following the drugs themselves, as they reach Fairfielders in Malta. Here I am not so much concentrating on the production and distribution stages as I am in the later stages of the social lives of these drugs. That is, those stages that include and follow their presence at Fairfielder drug-taking events and their acquisition as commodities. I also concentrate on these later stages because, as we shall see, it is only from here onwards that the biographies of club drugs and Fairfielders become immanently and materially intertwined.

9.4 Following Drugs at a Fairfielder Event

Club drugs are ‘introduced’ to Fairfielders by the dealer⁸⁹, who whilst not ‘soliciting’ or ‘pushing’ drugs, constitutes their source. The dealer exemplifies ‘the stranger’ (Simmel and Wolff 1950: 402 – 408) who acts as ‘the mendicant’ (Heilman 1976: 108) for the group. He is simultaneously near to and remote from the group, and whilst he may participate in and enjoy events like other Fairfielders, he is acutely categorised as the necessary trader who ‘brings products that originate outside the group’ (Simmel and Wolff 1950: 403). In this capacity he

⁸⁹ Here I refer to ‘the dealer’ as a Simmelian ‘social type’ rather than as any specific individual. In other words, my description may apply to any individual who is principally known by Fairfielders as one who sells drugs.

may under different circumstances be referred to as both an acquaintance and a *ħaxxej*⁹⁰ whose contributions to the scene only further his own business interests. This is not to say that he is unwelcome or that his role is not considered essential, but only that - like his drugs - his actions and would-be contributions will always be taken with a degree of caution and cynicism by the group. He usually attends events accompanied by his own *klikka* consisting of people who may be entirely extraneous to the group, and which may also include individuals whom Fairfielders judge and consider as *ħamalli* or *meqrudin*⁹¹. Whilst sustaining good personal relations with senior members of the group, he is kept at arm's length by most Fairfielders. He is never, for instance, invited to afternoon tea and gossip sessions with other Fairfielders (see Chapter 7). More than with anything else, his presence at an event is associated with the availability of Ecstasy and cocaine. During an event, one Fairfielder may ask another about whether he or she 'has seen' the dealer, referring to him by name, and this conveys an immediate mutual understanding that the asker is looking to buy drugs. In this respect the direct association between the dealer and his goods, whilst always unadvertised, is well-known and understood by Fairfielders.

Immediately out of the dealer's pockets at a Fairfielder event, Ecstasy tablets and cocaine that is usually 'packaged' in small bags as 'a gram' or *gramma* may take two distinct pathways of circulation. The first as gifts that the dealer hands to the event organisers, the second as commodities that he sells⁹² to attendees. The drug-as-gift usually consists of either a single *gramma* or an Ecstasy tablet, and the dealer gives it to the organisers as soon as he gets to the event venue. This is usually the only point of 'contact' between the dealer and event organisers throughout the event. This gifting is by no means selfless but is rather a token offered in exchange for the organisation of the event that serves as an essential 'platform' for the dealer

⁹⁰ This translates to 'fucker', and in Maltese vernacular denotes 'men who betray trust' (Mitchell 2002: 81). It was sometimes used - rather matter-of-factly - by Fairfielder men when referring to dealers.

⁹¹ Meaning 'doomed' or 'destroyed', and another descriptive term used by Fairfielders to refer to people who engage in excessive and undesirable drug-taking.

⁹² Throughout my fieldwork, Ecstasy was sold at a fixed price of €10 per tablet, whilst the price of a *gramma* fluctuated slightly between €40 and €60, depending on the dealer.

to sell his goods. This was unequivocally explained to me by Gennaro, when I asked him about why the dealer would feel obliged to give drugs to organisers like himself:

“He does it because he knows that without us organising events he would not sell ... we need him to be there because otherwise there would not be drugs available, but he needs us as well and he knows it ... after all, he comes and makes his money because we organise the event ... he would not be able to do anything without us, right? (*mingħajrna ma jagħmel xejn, hux?*)”.

The gifted Ecstasy tablet or *gramma* thus serves as a token of acknowledgment of a relationship - that is more or less mutually beneficial - between event organisers and the drug dealer. It also establishes the presence of the latter with the former, effectively symbolising a connection between the dealer's operations within the illicit and 'parallel' economy of drug-selling to those of the organisers within the legitimate and commercial economy of the public event⁹³.

It is important to note that, whilst evidently familiar with the dealer and his operations in this sense, Fairfielders organisers like Gennaro do not take any monetary 'cuts' from the sale of drugs during an event. Nor do they ever get to know how much money the dealer makes. There may, at most, be rare occasions when towards the end of well-attended public Fairfielders events the dealer approaches organisers to tell them that he has run out of drugs. On two such occasions during my fieldwork, the fact that the dealer had 'sold everything' (*biegħ kollox*) was briefly talked about by Fairfielders men who were also privy to this information in the days following the event. Whilst not necessarily taken as reflective of good quality or 'vibe' of the event, this indicated that the crowd at that event was remarkably 'big' or numerous. These were the only times when Fairfielders directly referred to quantities of drugs sold at events. Even in these cases, however, they had no information about monetary profits made by the dealer, as these remained undisclosed and unknown to all members of the group.

⁹³ This insofar as public Fairfielders events that are organised in nightclubs and other licensed venues must always involve fully legitimate economic operations, including entrance or ticket fees that are and bar sales that are taxed. Whilst in the case of 'secret' Fairfielders events that are organised in unlicensed venues such as *Wide Shut* the differences between 'legitimate/commercial' and 'illegitimate/ clandestine' economic spheres become less clear (see Petiau 2015), the dealer is the only source of drugs at these events as well. Also, in this sense, for Fairfielders transactions involving drugs are altogether detached and separate from all other transactions in all other cases, including for instance those involving the unauthorised sale of drinks at an 'illegal' event.

The drug that is received as gift by event organisers is never re-sold to others. In the case of the Ecstasy tablet, the organiser usually takes it at the private after-party. The same is done with the *gramma*, although there may be cases when the organiser takes small ‘bumps’ from the bag in the VIP or backstage areas of the party itself - and here he may also offer bumps to other Fairfielder organisers, DJs, and senior men of the group who are present in the area. In these cases, bumps of cocaine are taken and given during brief discussions – usually about the event and more generally the scene – between the organiser and other men that take place in these exclusive backstage areas⁹⁴. Gifting and sharing small amounts of the drug in these instances serve to lubricate conversation, reinforce alliances between established ‘producers’ of the scene, and underscore their seniority. Any minor conflicts and tensions that arise between Fairfielder men may also be resolved in this context. In all eventualities the drug-as-gift is either consumed entirely by the person who receives it or, less frequently and only in the case of cocaine, partially shared with others. It is also usually consumed within a few hours from when it is received, and thus not ‘accumulated’ or saved to be consumed or circulated during a future event.

Ecstasy and cocaine that are bought for consumption during a party or after-party are usually acquired at the event itself. This acquisition involves a discreet transaction between an individual Fairfielder and the dealer, with the buyer approaching the dealer with the exact amount of cash required to buy an Ecstasy tablet or *gramma*, and the dealer immediately producing one or the other depending on what the Fairfielder asks him for. During these swift transactions there are neither questions asked to the dealer about the quality or type of drugs that he has for sale on the night, nor any other type of evaluative discussion about the source of the drugs, whether the dealer himself has tried the drugs, and so forth. Information about whether the acquired drugs are ‘good’ or ‘bad’ is only privately shared between Fairfielders themselves once the drugs are acquired, taken to a private location such as a bathroom and

⁹⁴ The gendered dimensions and dynamics of these discussions in the backstage area of a party are not unlike those of discussions or ‘gossip sessions’ about the political economy of the scene (see Chapter 7).

looked at⁹⁵, and in the case of cocaine even tried. Like the drug-as-gift, the drug that is in this setting obtained as a commodity is never re-sold, and it is consumed within a few hours from when it is acquired.

Refraining from selling drugs is crucial for Fairfielders, as they connect the impersonal type of transaction that selling involves to the ‘devious’ figure of the dealer rather than to peers⁹⁶. The importance of this disassociation became especially clear to me in one exceptional case where - because of a series of circumstances including the fact that he ‘knew the dealer’ - one informant bought Ecstasy pills for himself and a group of other Fairfielder men prior to them spending a weekend together in a farmhouse. My informant recounted how he was very unhappy to do this, because as he put it with reference to the entire group, ‘we don’t sell [drugs]’ (*aħna ma nbieghux*). He also told me about how once at the farmhouse all those present collectively devised a system through which commodity exchange itself was avoided, whilst making sure that he got the money he had spent on the drugs back:

“What we did was put the pills on a table, and placed a cup next to them ... anyone who took a pill had to put Ten Euros in the cup ... we all knew that we’re not going to stay selling drugs to each other and we solved it that way ... so all I did was get my money back like that ... it worked and it didn’t feel like I was selling to them, but I still wouldn’t want it to happen again”.

This case further illustrates how for Fairfielders drugs are only ‘commodities’ insofar as they may be obtained in exchange for money from the dealer. Their ‘saleability’ (Kopytoff 1986: 69), however, expires as soon as they are bought - and in this sense, like prescription drugs for Kopytoff, they are terminal commodities. Thus, whilst small amounts of cocaine may be circulated as gifts between the senior men of the group under certain conditions, the re-

⁹⁵ This becomes especially important when assessing the type of Ecstasy tablets that the dealer has on the night. If one Fairfielder buys a type or ‘brand’ of pill that is known by the group to have undesirable effects, then he or she will tell other Fairfielders about this, effectively informing their decision about whether to buy Ecstasy from that dealer during that event (see Chapter 5).

⁹⁶ This distinction between ‘dealer’ and ‘peer’ is not necessarily one that other groups of recreational drug-takers identify and sustain in the same way as Fairfielders. Citing Dorn and South (1990), Measham et al. (2001: 152) for example state that it is rather common for such groups in the United Kingdom to constitute ‘mutual societies’ of ‘user-dealers’, where users buy drugs from members of their own ‘friendship network’ rather than from ‘dealers’ who are external to the network.

commoditisation of these substances is in all cases strictly prohibited by the Fairfielder ethos. Without a doubt, 'external' factors are involved here: the prohibitive and legal sanctions that come into play if one is caught selling drugs are much more serious than those activated when one is caught using them, for instance, and this undoubtedly impacts Fairfielders' approach to drug-selling in ways that cannot be overlooked. There are, however, three key 'internal' factors that cause the radical singularisation of drugs once they are bought by Fairfielders.

First, as we have seen, although the prices of Ecstasy and cocaine remain stable their composition and quality fluctuate. Irrespectively from the establishment of clientelisation between dealer and Fairfielder, the Fairfielder can never fully trust the dealer's product because it may have reached the dealer when it has been already contaminated or adulterated. Fairfielders are keenly aware of this and to them it is an inherent dimension of drug consumption that they consider in choosing whether to take or not to take drugs. As a direct result, they also do not sell these drugs that are 'defective' and potentially 'dangerous' products to others themselves: it is one thing to share small 'bumps' of cocaine with other senior Fairfielder men, but quite another to sell a *gramma* that is 'impure' to others. Furthermore, re-selling these drugs to others would not tally with the Fairfielder treatment of these substances as 'extraordinary' items that must be consumed with care and responsibility, and would instead reduce them to ordinary commodities to be distributed and consumed indiscriminately.

Second, whilst being an eminently social activity, Fairfielder drug consumption is at the same time a profoundly individual experience. This because each Fairfielder must be able to navigate the problematic use of these drugs 'internally', whilst 'externalising' his or her success in doing so through exercising discretion and composure. In this sense, the singularity of the drugs is reflected in the singularity of the drug-taking experience. The experience may depend on context and state of mind of the drug-taker, but more pointedly on class background and style. The process here is the reverse of the one involved in the case of prescription drugs: whilst the medical professional prescribes drugs following assessment and diagnosis of a 'below-surface'

condition, it is the consumption of club drugs that brings the ‘condition’ of the individual to the surface.

Moreover, in the case of club drugs, matters are complicated further because of the *unpredictable* singularity of the drugs themselves. It is also because of this that a Fairfielder will affirm that ‘club drugs are not for everyone’: if one lacks the will and ability to understand and ‘respect’ drugs as potent items that are unlike ‘ordinary’ commodities, then one is likely to engage in excessive drug consumption that leads to undesirable behaviour. Both prescription drugs and club drugs similarly necessitate a careful and ‘correct’ modality of consumption to result in the desired effects and ‘fulfil the purpose’ of their social lives. With club drugs, however, that ‘purpose’ depends on socially prescribed values of what is desirable and what is not. In other words, the way in which club drugs ‘illuminate their human and social context’ (Appadurai 1986: 5) is different for Fairfielders than for other groups of club drug-takers in Malta and elsewhere, and the treatment of club drugs as extraordinary and potent items rather than ordinary commodities is key to this distinction.

Third, Fairfielders attribute agency to club drugs. I have previously shown how they will talk about negotiating a state between ‘resisting’ and ‘letting go’ to Ecstasy, not unlike how one might talk about dealing with ‘flirting’ or even ‘erotic seduction’⁹⁷. In this sense club drugs for Fairfielders have an agentic property that is twofold. On the one hand, if consumed ‘correctly’ (that is, moderately and discreetly) and their effects are controlled and balanced out with the

⁹⁷ A similar, albeit more extreme, type of ‘intimate relatedness’ with illicit drugs is identified by Aaron Goodfellow (2008), as he presents an ethno-biographical account of Matthew - an HIV-positive, methamphetamine addict in his twenties living within a rehabilitation facility in Baltimore, Maryland (United States). Goodfellow (2008: 280) shows how his informant uses narratives of ‘both intense sexual pleasure and death’ as he describes his experience of methamphetamine use. This conflictual ‘relationship’ with the drug mirrors Matthew’s relationships with his kin and loved ones, as well as the rehabilitative-institutional ‘system’ that he is part of. Ecstasy and cocaine are not associated with ‘life’ and ‘death’ in the same pronounced way in Fairfielder narratives, because Fairfielder consumption of these drugs neither results in potentially lethal ‘overdosing’ nor to the sort of dependence, dysfunction, and co-morbidity that lead to institutionalisation in Matthew’s case. Like Matthew, however, in their narratives Fairfielders simultaneously refer to negative and positive ‘pulls’ in a way that reveals an acknowledgment of agency, influence, and transformative power of these drugs on the user’s state of being.

'pleasure' that they induce, these drugs bring out the user's ability to 'dominate' their consumption and in turn consolidate his or her membership within the Fairfielder group. On the other, if they are taken indiscriminately and excessively and their effects overwhelm the user, then he or she will be disparaged and considered an outsider. This does not imply that all users of these drugs seek to control their effects in the same way that Fairfielders do. Rather the opposite, Fairfielder identity is distinct from the identity of other club drug-takers because it is grounded in knowledge and awareness of this potentiality of club drugs to both enhance the user's 'possession' and 'triumph' over their problematic consumption and 'dispossess' the user by exposing him or her as a 'glutton' (or to use Sergio's Maltese term for 'pigs' in Chapter 4, *'ħnieżer'*) who consumes immoderately and indiscriminately. In practice, therefore, a club drug-taker who is not part of the Fairfielder group may very well actively seek to use club drugs with abandon, and not care about moderating consumption. However, quite apart from the fact that this is a more 'dangerous' modality of consumption of these drugs, to the Fairfielder this signifies an 'otherness' that is irreconcilable with the Fairfielder ethos and their attribution of 'extraordinary' valence to the drugs themselves.

9.5 Following 'Licit' Goods at a Fairfielder Event

Let us now turn our attention to two items – water and chewing gum - that may by all accounts be categorised as 'licit' commodities, but of which circulation at Fairfielder events accompanies and indexes club drug-taking. I present a description of how these three items that I call 'club drug peripherals' are exchanged on a Fairfielder 'dance floor' below, in illustrating three points. First, that within the context of a Fairfielder event, the biographies of club drugs intersect with the biographies of club drug peripherals in very specific ways. We have seen how the circulation of an Ecstasy tablet or a *gramma* is terminated once it is bought by the individual Fairfielder from the dealer, but the consumption of these drugs itself triggers cycles of free exchange of club drug peripherals that do not occur in other settings.

Second, that the exchange of drug peripherals between Fairfielders broadly follows the system of three obligations that underpin the gift economy as identified by Mauss (1966) - that is, the obligations to give, to receive, and to reciprocate. At the same time, however, following the trajectory of circulation of club drug peripherals reveals a hierarchical structure between Fairfielders and others who are present at public Fairfielder events. In practice, chewing gum and water may be given to - but not received from - rank-and-file members of the group, or even others who are present but are not part of the group. The implications of this selective gifting are brought out in my description below.

Third, knowing when and how to exchange club drug peripherals is an inherent dimension of that which is considered the 'correct' consumption of club drugs by Fairfielders, for two reasons. First, because chewing gum and water especially serve to mitigate some of the undesirable, visible, and potentially dangerous effects of Ecstasy. The 'responsible' Ecstasy user who does not allow the effects of the drug to 'completely take over' is therefore expected to have these items at hand when he or she is using the drug. Second, because the presence and exchange of these items for Fairfielders serves to discreetly signify that drugs are being taken, and more pointedly that their effects are being actively mitigated. Exchanging water and chewing gum therefore allows for one Fairfielder to know that another has taken Ecstasy without the need for the explicit articulation of this fact⁹⁸.

9.5.1 The Circulation of Chewing Gum

One of the most widely experienced and reported undesirable side effects of Ecstasy use is involuntary clenching of the jaw muscles, known colloquially as 'gurning'⁹⁹ and medically as trismus (Davidson and Parrott 1997: 224), that may lead to involuntary biting of the lip and cheek. Some gurning is always expected to occur when even small amounts of Ecstasy are

⁹⁸ The significance of these 'practices of discretion' shall be discussed in Chapter 8.

⁹⁹ Fairfielders use the Maltese term '*jghawweg*' or '*tghawweg*' - that translates to he or she is 'distorting' his mouth or face - to refer to someone who is exhibiting this effect of Ecstasy. Fairfielders consider gurning to be highly undesirable and indicative of excessive Ecstasy consumption.

taken, but the effect becomes more pronounced when the tablets consumed are ‘strong’ or if the user consumes large quantities of Ecstasy. At big rave parties, ‘pacifiers’ are sometimes carried and used by clubbers and ravers to alleviate this effect, although there is some debate about whether these items have been used for this purpose or rather as fashion accessories meant to symbolize a carefree attitude reminiscent of childhood (see Dore 2002: 1583). In any eventuality, carrying a pacifier at a party is certainly a type of behaviour that Fairfielders would consider as excessive and inelegant as gurning itself, not least because this too would be taken as a conspicuous and overt marker of drug-taking.

Instead, to alleviate gurning and avoid inner cheek biting that it leads to, Fairfielders use chewing gum. Chewing gum is not sold at clubs or other event venues, but ahead of going to an event at which they plan to take Ecstasy, Fairfielders will ‘stock up’, usually on a single ‘pack of gum’ or ‘*pakkett chewing gum*’ (see Figure 6) and hold it in their bags or pockets at the event.

Figure 7 – The type of Gum that is used by Fairfielders



After taking Ecstasy, Fairfielders may take one or two ‘pieces’ of gum and chew on them as the gurning effect of the drug begins to set in, and the gum being chewed is thrown away and replaced with new pieces are taken from the pack every so often. It is not uncommon for a Fairfielder to chew gum all through an event, and this itself signifies that Ecstasy has been taken to other Fairfielders.

Apart from its practical functionality towards alleviating and even ‘concealing’ gurning, chewing gum is also central to the establishment of complicity between Fairfielders through its exchange. A Fairfielder will spontaneously offer his or her pack of chewing gum to other Fairfielders who are close by on a dance floor, who will usually take a piece or two from the offered pack, even if they have their own packs available in their pockets and bags. When someone runs out of chewing gum in this way, the item will always be provided by other Fairfielders, either through the same modality of sharing or when the Fairfielder who runs out of chewing gum outrightly asks another to spare a stick from his or her pack.

Through this gifting, Fairfielders are essentially communicating two things to one another. First, that they have consumed Ecstasy and that they are therefore in the process of navigating those effects of the drug that make them mutually vulnerable. Second, that they are aware of the ‘labours’ of this navigation. This is at times also subtly evidenced when a Fairfielder passes the pack of chewing gum to another as he or she winks or pats the other on the back. Here, therefore, Fairfielders are discreetly communicating a mutuality of condition, essentially telling each other that whilst each of them must go through the process of controlling the drugs and their effects individually, they are all, to put it idiomatically, ‘in the same boat’.

In this context, a Fairfielder will only spontaneously offer and ask for chewing gum to and from other Fairfielders. A Fairfielder, however, will also give chewing gum to either rank-and-file members of the Fairfielder group or outsiders who are present at the event. In these cases, gifting is not spontaneous, but will follow an explicit request. What may happen in these cases

is that an outsider who is on the dance floor and who also took Ecstasy sees a Fairfielder passing the pack of chewing to other Fairfielders, and here he or she will ask for a piece. The Fairfielder will oblige, but usually here the gifting is less ‘intimate’ than between Fairfielders: the pack of chewing gum is simply passed on to the outsider who will take a piece of gum and return it, often without verbal or any further interaction. In this case the outsider does not belong to and is not integrated within the ‘support’ network of exchange constituted by Fairfielders but will still be given chewing gum and thus temporarily interacted with through unreciprocated gifting.

The implications here are twofold, and to a degree opposite. First, the Fairfielder is fulfilling a ‘duty of care’ towards others who do not possess chewing gum as a ‘tool’ of mitigation of the negative effects of Ecstasy. Second, the gifting itself brings out the inadequacy of others who *do not know how to consume* Ecstasy responsibly, because they have neither thought of bringing their own packs of gum to the event, nor successfully positioned themselves within a system or group that can ‘spontaneously’ provide chewing gum at the event. Thus, whilst the chewing gum gift may at first come across as selfless, it is in fact a way through which distinction and social hierarchy on a Fairfielder event dance floor are reinforced. In practice, here Fairfielders emerge as the ‘producers’, the ‘providers’, and those who know how to responsibly and ‘properly’ consume drugs, whilst outsiders are the ones who end up being ‘dependent’ on Fairfielders to – at least partially - navigate the labours of their own club drug-taking. This dynamic becomes even more emphasised in the case of the gifting of water, as I illustrate below.

9.5.2 The Circulation of Water

The possibility of dehydration brought about by hyperthermia is a widely recognized and acknowledged health risk of consuming Ecstasy, especially in high amounts. As a result, the practice of coupling Ecstasy use with drinking water throughout the course of a night out is not only highly advocated by official and institutional harm-reduction agencies and is also a risk-management strategy which is integrated within the habits of Ecstasy users (see Kelly 2007,

Chinet et al. 2007)¹⁰⁰. Fairfielders employ this strategy as they carry and use bottled water (see Figure 7) with them at events. Unlike chewing gum, half-litre water bottles - usually averaging at €2 in price - can be bought directly from bars at Fairfielder events where tap water may be available but considered undrinkable¹⁰¹.

Figure 8 – The type of water bottle that is carried and used by Fairfielders



¹⁰⁰ Hyponatremia, a condition in which sodium levels in the blood become dangerously low, has in some cases been associated with the consumption of too much water with Ecstasy (see Campbell and Rosner 2008). This was not, however, a risk that Fairfielders associated with their Ecstasy consumption because in any eventuality the quantities of both Ecstasy and water that they consumed were not high enough to lead to this condition.

¹⁰¹ In Malta, tap water is safe to drink but has a strong chlorine taste, and most people buy and consume bottled water instead of tap water under any circumstances. The price of water that is bought from clubs and other event venues is up to double the price of water that is bought elsewhere. Notwithstanding this high price, Fairfielders consider water to be an essential commodity at drug-taking events, where it is bought and used by them more frequently than alcoholic drinks.

The availability of bottled water at events does not eliminate frequent exchanges of sips of water between Fairfielders, and the dynamics of this exchange are not unlike those of the exchange of chewing gum. A bottle of water may be spontaneously passed around two or three people who are close to each other on a dance floor, and it is also common for Fairfielders to ask for quick ‘sips’ (which they refer to in Maltese as *‘belgħa ilma’*, or simply *‘belgħa’*) from each other’s water bottles when their own run out, until their next trip to the bar where they buy new ones for themselves.

As in the case of chewing gum, the exchange of sips of water underscores the unarticulated mutuality of condition that results from taking Ecstasy. Between Fairfielders this exchange occurs spontaneously, and it too may be accompanied by a type of brief ‘contact’ or interaction between giver and receiver such as a pat on the back or a wink. Here again, whilst Fairfielders only spontaneously offer water to each other, there may be rank-and-file members of the group or outsiders who ask for ‘sips’ of water from them. In these cases, Fairfielders will – with otherwise minimal contact or interaction - give sips from their water bottles to these others, notwithstanding some personal reservations they might have with doing so.

This became clear to me when, late one night at a public Fairfielder event, I observed a young man who is not part of the group approach Fairfielder Amelie, as she was standing on the dance floor with a small group of other Fairfielders. This man looked particularly dishevelled, and as he pointed to Amelie’s water bottle to indicate to her that he wanted a sip I noticed that he presented the tell-tale signs of Ecstasy use: sweating, gurning, excessive ‘pouting’, and swaying of the head. I could see Amelie hesitate, but after a pause of a few seconds, without saying anything and as she broke eye contact with the man, she gave her bottle to him. The man took one or two gulps of water and as he seemed to thank Amelie returned her bottle. Still looking away from the man, Amelie silently took her bottle back. When I approached Amelie and asked her about whether my impression that she was reluctant to give the man water was a correct one, she replied in a frustrated tone of voice:

“I’m squeamish and I don’t like people I don’t know asking me for my water... this guy, he is just going around wasted asking for water ... I don’t like it, but I feel that I have to give it to him because he’ll be wasted...”

Amelie’s actions and statement further testifies the strong obligation to give these drug peripherals to outsiders who come across as ill-equipped to ‘responsibly’ consume Ecstasy. Whilst giving the man a sip of her water, Amelie outrightly reveals that she ‘does not like’ to share it with this individual who is ‘wasted’. This further emphasises a structural opposition that comes through in the gift of water in this case: on the one hand it satisfies a type of ‘moral’ obligation towards others who are more evidently at risk from the dehydrating effect of Ecstasy, but on the other it conveys the message that these others are, unlike Fairfielders, either unwilling or unable to domesticate and dominate consumption of the drug and its undesirable effects.

9.6 Conclusions

In the conclusions to his essay on the cultural biography of things, Kopytoff (1986: 88) notes that whilst in his analysis things are ideally categorised as either commodities or singularised, one must also consider the ‘cases in between’. Indeed, he argues that it is these cases that yield ‘the highest theoretical returns’, because considering the way in which a thing is shifted, ‘converted’, and ‘reshuffled’ between the two states over time reveals interests, motivations, and even ‘connivance’ of those actors and groups that are in contact with the thing at a specific stage of its biography (ibid.: 1986: 88).

Through the application Appadurai’s and Kopytoff’s frameworks to the social life of drugs, in this chapter I have shown how club drugs may exemplify one such case of a ‘hybrid’ that, throughout its life in contact with Fairfielders, is neither ‘absolutely’ commoditised nor singularised. Rather, I have argued that – because of their inherent problematic and extraordinary properties – club drugs are treated differently than other commodities by Fairfielders. Their ‘sale’ and ‘acquisition’ as commodities is only associated with the ‘dealer’ who notwithstanding the establishment of clientelisation remains untrustworthy and external to

the group. In this respect Fairfielders have no choice - other than that of abstinence or desistance – than to obtain drugs as ‘faulty commodities’ from the dealer in this way, and here club drugs are almost ‘forced’ into a brief temporary commodity state that necessarily precedes their fulfilment as singularised objects, imbued with power and agency. We have seen how Fairfielders will devise strategies to avoid the re-commoditisation of club drugs, as well as how this singularisation engenders care and responsibility in how they are taken, that in turn underscores the distinction between Fairfielders and others who consume drugs indiscriminately.

I have also suggested that club drugs may be framed as having eminently ‘social’ lives because their consumption leads to the circulation of other items (chewing gum and water) that they are related to, which I have termed club drug peripherals. The way in which these items are taken and selectively exchanged as gifts at Fairfield events itself underscores the extraordinary property of drugs (in this case, Ecstasy) as problematic consumables of which undesirable and dangerous effects (‘gurning’ and dehydration) must be responsibly mitigated through active strategies (carrying and using packs of chewing gum and bottles of water) by the individual Fairfielder. Fairfielders, however, also circulate these items amongst themselves to discreetly signal that each of them is willing and able enough to successfully tackle those effects. In this sense it is not simply the gift that is reciprocated, but also the understanding of a mutual condition of being *and* the mutual understanding that they are able to dominate over consumption of these substances because they are ‘self-monitoring’ their own responsible use. In contrast, when Fairfielders give chewing gum and water to outsiders through unreciprocated gifting, the ‘return’ is a heightened awareness and confirmation of the fact that they are not like those whom they compare to ‘pigs’, who consume indiscriminately and without pre-emption.

Chapter 10: Conclusions

“Therefore, take me and bind me to the crosspiece half way up the mast; bind me as I stand up-right, with a bond so fast that I cannot possibly break away, and lash the rope’s ends to the mast itself. If I beg and pray you to set me free, then bind me more tightly still.” (Homer and Butler 1999: 205).

10.1 Poisons and Antidotes

As we come to the concluding thoughts of this thesis, I am yet to fully explain my decision to collect its main chapters into sections titled ‘Antidotes’ and ‘Poisons’. As the reader may have recognised, this choice was not only a stylistic or cosmetic one, but rather one that reflects the main argument that underpins this thesis: that Fairfielders consume and contend with ‘poisons’, whilst continuously mitigating their negative effects through ‘antidotes’ that they collectively produce, devise, and self-administer.

Poison, in the literal sense, comes in the form of the drugs themselves, as potent and dangerously unpredictable items. In a figurative sense, it also transpires from the contagious ‘toxicity’, ‘profanity’, and ‘rot’ of *hazin*, that in turn manifest as the visible and unchecked effects of club drugs on *hamalli* and ‘fools’ (Chapter 6), *paroli vojti* or ‘bad’ gossip (Chapter 7), indiscretion and defacement (Chapter 8), and even in the ‘gift’¹⁰² of the Ecstasy tablet or *gramma* that the dealer gives – insidiously to maximise his own self-interest - to Fairfield event organisers (Chapter 9).

For Fairfielders, these are consequences of an ‘irreverent’ treatment of club drugs. They serve as visible reminders of the negative and undesirable effects of these substances (that is, their potential to ‘deface’ their user, Chapter 8) when their power is either not known or known but not respected, and when because of this, they are treated like other ‘ordinary’ commodities and

¹⁰² As noted by Mauss (1966: 127) and Bailey (1971: 24), the word ‘Gift’ also means ‘poison’ in German, and is etymologically derived from the Latin *dosis*, or ‘dose of poison’.

consumed indiscriminately. They also remind Fairfielders that they themselves are not ‘naturally immune’ to these poisons – particularly because they are consuming the same substances as others who end up ‘in a bad state’. Fairfielders thus devise and alter their own modalities of consumption, effectively generating and implementing practical strategies of prevention and mitigation that act as ‘antidotes’.

I group these strategies into four categories or types. The first category is of strategies of *social control* that discourage the excessive use of drugs. In practice, the group sanctions and ostracises those who take drugs excessively, and who are either unwilling or incapable of participating in practices of discretion during drug-taking events. These sanctions (ex. not inviting a rank-and-file member of the group to the next private party) may follow sessions of ‘good’ or ‘constructive’ gossip (*diskussjonijiet* in Chapter 7), through which a drug-taking event and the behaviours of those present are retrospectively evaluated by senior Fairfielders. Strategies of social control are a social fact of the group and have three functions. First, they ensure that the group retains a distinct and more ‘respectable’ image and identity from *drugati* and *hamalli*. Second, they decrease the possibility that future events might be interrupted by any member of the group falling ill because of consuming drugs excessively (ex. from dehydration caused by Ecstasy). Third, they work towards the maintenance of secrecy, both in terms of the group not being ‘exposed’ as drug-takers to external parties and the internal cohesive role of practices of discretion.

The second category is of *autonomy*. Fairfielders actively choose whether to consume drugs or otherwise, as well as recognise the ‘appropriate’ contexts within which to consume different types of drugs. They may organise and attend events where drug use is considered inappropriate (ex. *Southsound* in Chapter 4), or where cocaine is used instead of Ecstasy (Chapter 5). Additionally, in the case of quality and effects of different ‘brands’ of Ecstasy, there is a pool of collective knowledge that is developed and resorted to by Fairfielders as they decide whether to consume the Ecstasy ‘brand’ that is available to them during an event. If

Fairfielders know that the pills available are too strong and their effects are unmanageable (irrespective of the preventative and mitigative steps one takes), then they do not consume Ecstasy at all. Notwithstanding the limiting and ‘dispossessing’ property of a restricted market through which only one brand of Ecstasy is available on any given night, the choice to abstain remains a prerogative of Fairfielders as consumers, even if the restrictive/restricted choice of products and brands effectively implies that in economic terms they are *qua*-consumers.

The practical implications of strategies of autonomy are twofold. First, they ensure that Fairfielders consume drugs at the appropriate times and places where they are ‘supported’ by the rest of the group (ex. through exchange of water and chewing gum in Chapter 9). This also means that the drug-taking experience is always ‘collective’ rather than individual, and that no member of the group is, for instance, going to take Ecstasy during a Christmas meal or an afternoon gathering over coffee, as an ‘addict’ might. Second, they promote and facilitate the sharing of knowledge about ‘bad’ or particularly strong types of Ecstasy tablets, effectively decreasing the possibility that Fairfielders might consume drugs of which effects are unmanageable and particularly dangerous. Strategies of autonomy thus contribute to both cohesion and discretion, as well as Fairfielders’ self-representations as discriminative and ‘virtuous’ drug consumers.

The third category is of strategies of *practice*. These strategies include moderating the *quantities* of drugs that are consumed (ex. taking ‘half’ an Ecstasy pill, Chapter 4) and regulating the frequency at which drugs are taken by allowing for time to elapse between drug-taking events (ex. by taking ‘breaks’, Chapter 4). Whilst moderation may be informed by discourses of harm reduction propagated by specialised media (ex. the ‘Mixmag’ advert, Chapter 4), they are incorporated, sustained and promoted by the ethos of the group. These strategies serve to reduce the harms associated with club drugs (ex. by ‘self-testing’ Ecstasy through ingesting part of the tablet). They also, however, work towards maximising the experience of pleasure through the distribution of consumption of drug-taking over time. One

may for instance take half a pill during a party, and if the quality of that pill is good, take the other half later during the after-party, prolongating and ‘economising’ the desired effects of that pill. In this sense ‘taking breaks’ between drug-taking events also prevents the experience from becoming repetitive and mundane, and even reduces the possibility of physical ‘tolerance’ to the drugs to be developed by the user.

The final category is of strategies of *modulation of experience*. These involve an internal cognitive process that follows the consumption of drugs, through which physical/visible effects (ex. grinding of the teeth, facial contortions), behavioural effects (ex. excessive chattiness and displays of empathy), and biopsychological effects (ex. pleasure, overconfidence) of these substances are ‘kept in check’ and ‘balanced out’ with composure. Through modulation of experience, Fairfielders ‘hold back’ (Chapter 4) and are not overwhelmed by these effects, retaining rationality, critical judgment, long-term memory (as opposed to memory ‘blackouts’ that may be caused by excessive drug consumption), and the ability to contribute to practices of discretion and exchange within the context of a drug-taking event. The modulation of experience is, of course, only possible following the implementation of the other strategies, as it necessitates the regulation of quantities and qualities of the drugs that are consumed.

In sum, these four types of strategies ensure that an ethos of disciplined drug-taking is sustained and adhered to. I must reiterate the point that this ethos does not encourage total abstention, but rather depends on two conditions: first, that drugs are consumed, and second, that the problems of drug consumption are mutually recognised and acknowledged. These conditions are precisely what requires this ethos, which in turn gives the group its distinctive and cohesive properties, to be sustained and perpetuated. It is also through the requirement of implementing these strategies that club drug-taking is given meaning by Fairfielders, as it is ‘elevated’ from an individual hedonistic search for ‘pleasure’, to almost an ‘art’ that requires them to rise to the challenging task of disciplining their bodies, behaviour, and sensuous experience whilst deriving *just enough* pleasure from the drugs and mitigate their undesirable effects.

10.2 The Distinctive, the Discreet and the Vulnerable

Without a doubt, the will and capacity to engage in strategies of prevention and mitigation corresponds to symbolic capital that is valued by the group. Fairfielders must show and prove that they are able to engage these strategies every time they consume drugs¹⁰³, and if they do this effectively and consistently, their position is strengthened, prestige increases, and they gain continued access to the group's most secret and domestic events. As I have suggested in Chapter 2, the notion of 'subcultural capital' - implying types of symbolic capital that are 'scene-specific' to clubbing and youth scenes advanced by Thornton (1995) - is analytically useful in understanding how the Fairfielder group internally maintains its structure.

Through this thesis, however, it becomes evident that the distinction between this group and other groups of Maltese club drug users are not only based on 'mainstream/inauthentic' versus 'authentic/hip' dichotomies of tastes in music, dress sense, use of slang, and so forth. Moreover, this is not a 'temporary' distinction that is confined to specific times and places, and that only applies within the domains of Maltese youths or club culture. Rather in the case of Fairfielders, the overarching distinction is between them and *hamalli* – an emic term that describes the Maltese *hoi polloi* who belong to a lower social class, and of which implications are certainly not confined to the club or youth scene.

Undoubtedly, Fairfielders disparage *hamalli* in terms of their drug use: because they are 'pigs' as they consume excessive amounts of drugs over short periods of time (Chapter 4), do not seek to control the undesirable effects of club drugs (Chapter 6), and are 'loud' and vulgar when they are at parties (Chapter 7). These judgments, however, underpin historical class tensions between *puliti* (English-speaking, educated, upper-middle class) and *hamalli* (Maltese-speaking, uneducated, lower class) - a divide that defines social, cultural, and political realities

¹⁰³ This is also an important difference between the Fairfielder group and 'secret societies' where a history, code of ethics, and capital is inherited rather than produced (ex. freemasons), because Fairfielders must prove themselves 'worthy' of continued membership within the group through the successful application of these strategies, every time they take drugs.

in Malta. Through their drug-taking behaviour, therefore, *hamalli* reveal their more deeply ingrained shortcomings as indiscriminate consumers: their only intention is to take as much as they can of whatever is available.

Strategies of prevention and mitigation also contribute to the maintenance of discretion and secrecy, which as we have seen engender sociality and cohesion and are necessary components in the production of Fairfielder events like *Wide Shut* (Chapter 8). For Fairfielders, secrecy and discretion also underpin distinction between themselves and *hamalli*¹⁰⁴: *hamalli* are both incapable of discreetly signalling their drug use and of producing, cultivating, and keeping the secret.

From this perspective, we must look beyond the utility of discretion and secrecy as devices that simply conceal drug use from disapproving others. This does not imply that for Fairfielders they do not serve the function of concealing drug-taking. Contrarily, they are aware that – especially because of Malta’s small-scale context – they need to be particularly vigilant in when and with whom to take drugs (Chapter 6). One also cannot overlook an epistemological property of Fairfielder drug-taking that situates it within a category of ideologies, behaviours, and practices that as Simmel (1906: 471) posits are ‘contents which are at an immature stage of development, and thus in a condition liable to injury from opposing interests’¹⁰⁵. In this respect the Fairfielder group shares a fundamental similarity with the ‘secret society’ as a ‘social form’ that conceals that which the established ideology condemns and sanctions; and because club drug-taking is prohibited, its practice must essentially be hidden, as its revelation

¹⁰⁴ Here it is interesting to note that the words ‘discretion’ and ‘distinction’ share the same etymological root, as Mahmud (2012: 430) observes.

¹⁰⁵ Here, Simmel (1906: 471) refers to issues pertaining to ‘youthful knowledge, religion, morality, party’, whilst maintaining that secret societies act as the ‘appropriate social form’ within which these ‘new life-contents’ may be cultivated away from resistance from the ‘opposition’ of established and dominant ideologies. Habermas (1989: 34 - 35) also similarly suggests that secret societies in eighteenth century Europe served a central role in the cultivation of reason and enlightenment, and more broadly were the original manifestations of the ‘coming together’ of members of civil society outside the ‘absolutism’ of the state.

would undoubtedly otherwise result in its ‘interruption’ (Simmel 1906: 471). Whether club drug-taking is a practice that will gradually be more widely and ‘officially’ accommodated by a neoliberal ideology – similarly to how marijuana, for example, has been recently legitimated as a ‘medicinal substance’ in Malta (see Pace 2018) and a legitimate recreational drug elsewhere - remains to be seen. As I have argued, however, Fairfielders neither ‘campaign’ for drug-taking to be legitimised (not least because this itself might infer that they are drug users), nor expect this legitimising to take place. Rather, they constructively use the secrecy that is an integral component of illicit drug-taking as a foundation for practices of discretion, complicity, and sociality that enhance the distinctiveness of the group.

A claim that Fairfielders are not anxious about both the fact that drug consumption is dangerous and that it is an illegal and stigmatised practice would be short sighted and would suggest a naiveite that does not belong to Fairfielders. The awareness of these facts rather results in two forms of vulnerability that are felt and contended with by the group. The first is an ‘*endosomatic*’ type of vulnerability that stems from the fact that drugs are potent and impure items of which consumption may, even if controlled and moderated, have detrimental short and long-term effects on health. The second is an ‘*exo-social*’ type of vulnerability that results from the fact that drug use is illegal, stigmatised, and tabooed, and therefore that being caught taking drugs may inevitably lead to serious repercussions on one’s reputation.

A recognition of this vulnerability also contributes to the establishment of a ‘mutual condition of being’ that Sahlins (2013) identifies as an essential component of kinship, and here there are similarities between the type of ‘affinity’ and ‘relatedness’ that Kirtsoglou (2004) notes amongst lesbians of her *parea* in Greece and the sociality that characterises relations between inner circle Fairfielders. In this sense it is suggestive that Fairfielders frequently used the term ‘brother’ to refer to each other. This reference to kinship was in no uncertain terms brought out by Russ during a discussion at Gennaro’s and Maggie’s apartment, when he told me:

“Those over here [referring to Fairfielders at the apartment] are like brothers and sisters ... the others [those who attend public Fairfielder parties but are not part of the inner circle] are like cousins”.¹⁰⁶

Fairfielders, then, become intimate and complicit through the vulnerabilities that stem from their drug use. They are acutely aware of the risks and dangers that this drug use entails, but it is this mutual and unarticulated awareness that conjoins them, even more centrally than the empathogenic and pleasure-inducing properties of club drugs. Acknowledging and ‘flirting’ with both dangers and potentially defacing pleasures of drugs, whilst never completely succumbing to their seductive pull, is the task that Fairfielders take up individually and support each other through.

10.3 Practical Utility of My Research

Statistical and epidemiological models provide us with useful information about the prevalence of certain types of drug use at a given time. They indicate and attempt to predict how drug use is more likely to occur and ‘spread’ – much like an epidemic - under determined social, economic, and psychosomatic conditions: of a lack of awareness about the dangers of drug use, of poverty, of genetic predispositions to becoming addicted, and so forth.

This type of quantitative research is useful insofar as it helps us to identify ‘high-risk drug use and trends’ and tell us, for instance, that data collected from treatment centres in Malta suggests that the numbers of those seeking ‘first treatment’ for cocaine use is becoming increasingly common (EMCDDA 2018: 6). It may also provide us with the latest information about the composition, purity, and ‘quality’ of samples taken from seized drugs in Malta and elsewhere

¹⁰⁶ Here it is also interesting to note that relations between inner circle Fairfielders were non-erotic. In other words, they did not ‘make out’ or engage in any sort of overtly sexual behaviour with each other at any time. Even in the cases of the stable and long-term couples Russ and Mia and Maggie and Gennaro, there were no ‘public displays of affection’, especially during times when drugs were being consumed.

(EMCDDA 2018: 18 – 19), as well as about prevention and harm reduction¹⁰⁷ programmes that are currently in place to address the problems of drug abuse.

In a sense, these models give a broad picture that, in form, is not much different from the one that I have presented in this thesis. They provide us with data about ‘poisons’ and their dangers: drugs and their composition, where they are found and used most frequently, their problems and impacts, and so forth. They also recommend, inform, and monitor the effectiveness of state-implemented ‘antidotes’ to counteract these poisons: of education, prevention, harm reduction, and policy.

A shortcoming of these models, however, is that they provide us with ‘universal’ frameworks that fail to consider that the valences attributed to drugs and drug consumption may vary considerably between groups of users. In other words, they do not consider that users respond differently to the ‘potentialities’ of club drugs - as impure and ‘faulty’ commodities, as experience, mind, and body-altering substances that may ‘deface’ the user, as substances of which use may have detrimental effects on health and well-being, and so forth. As a result, they do not allow for the possibility that different and effective antidotes - especially ones that reduce the harms of club drug-taking – may be innovatively devised and administered by drug users themselves.

Through this thesis I have attempted to present an alternative perspective, as I have suggested that strategies to mitigate the problems that are attached to club drug consumption are highly valued by my informants. I have also argued that these strategies are actively sought out and implemented by Fairfielders, because it is through them that these youths construct a distinctive

¹⁰⁷ Illicit drug use prevention strategies in Malta largely involve the implementation of educational campaigns in school settings, and less frequently in community and family settings (EMCDDA 2018: 11). Harm reduction programmes are primarily designed to reduce the prevalence of diseases associated with injecting drugs, and thus largely consist of the provision of clean needles at seven localities in Malta, blood screening, and counselling for users (EMCDDA 2018: 12).

sense of identity within a Maltese context. From this perspective, I have neither ‘victimised’ nor ‘pathologized’ my informants, arguing instead that they are capable of exercising agency, choice and autonomy. My intention in this respect was neither to show that the use of these drugs can be managed by any user or groups of users, nor that they are ‘safe’ drugs that do not have detrimental effects on the user. These are questions that epidemiological and other methodologies are better suited to answer. Rather, I set out to find out what drugs do *for* the youths that I worked with, and I posited that the consumption of these substances creates the conditions for disciplined modalities of consumption to become valued as markers of distinction. I trust that my analysis should offer medical, legal and other professionals who are active in the ‘drug field’ the opportunity to engage with the problem from an alternative perspective. This thesis should also provoke some thought about reasons other than human drives for pleasure and intoxication for which - notwithstanding a decades-long war on drugs - these substances retain their popularity.

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Appendix 1 – Research Ethics Committee Application Form

1. Please give a brief summary of the purpose of the research, in non-technical language.

The proposed research ethnographically situates recreational use of substances that occur as ‘club drugs’ (most frequently MDMA and Cocaine) among a group of Maltese youths. It seeks to explore how, when, and why these drugs are used by following practice, custom, and discourse of a number of users in Malta. The proposed research is concerned with situations and environments within which these club drugs are recreationally used (night clubs, parties, music festivals), but also with the functions of club drug use in terms of the impacts it carries on the establishment of sociality and community among users, that extends beyond these environments.

In other words, it delves into the question of whether the recreational use of club drugs is driven solely by spur-of-the moment individual decisions made under specific circumstances within environments of night-time leisure, or whether it is rather also underpinned by more complex cultural, social, and economic processes that may not only ‘govern’ use, but also self-regulation. The research departs from the axiom that in any eventuality club drug use in Malta is in itself a multifaceted and widespread social phenomenon that has thus far been insufficiently studied, and that can in turn be validly considered and addressed through ethnographic theory and practice. The proposed research, therefore, generally seeks to expose and analyse links between the global phenomenon of club drug use and an associated electronic dance music culture, the specificities of Maltese culture, and eminently anthropological terrains such as those of community, emotions, memory, and ritual.

2. Give details of procedures that relate to subjects' participation:

(a) How are subjects recruited? What inducement is offered?

For the purposes of the proposed research and in view of a chosen ethnographic method that is rooted in participant observation, subjects will not be recruited, but rather will be gradually engaged in rapport over time after being overtly informed about the identity of the researcher, the aims of the research, and the measures taken in order for their identities to be protected at all times through the use of pseudonyms and other appropriate measures, especially with respect to the text that will be presented as thesis at the end of the inquiry period. They will also be told that submitting personal data such as contact details to the researcher will not be necessary at any stage, and they will only be asked to share information they are willing to share through open conversations with the researcher. They will hence be considered informants. Potential informants shall be physically approached during a phase of preliminary mapping of the research field, and also through gatekeepers who are aware of the project and are willing to participate and assist. Since the project, and the anthropological enterprise, hinges on following and relating to informants over time across various environments and situations, building trust and rapport with them and making sure that they are aware of the research process and what it entails will not only be important in terms of its ethical considerations, but also essential in terms of the project's ethnographic objectives.

(b) Salient Characteristics of Subjects

All of the informants will be adults aged between twenty-two (22) and thirty-five (35). The group of informants is expected to consist of between twenty (20) to thirty (30) individuals, male and female, who would more or less know one another because of associations formed in part through common tastes, shared territory, and social networking. In view of the proposed research purposes, the main salient characteristic shared by all informants will be their recreational use of club drugs in Maltese night clubs, at parties, and at music festivals, and this

may occur at varying degrees between individuals across the group. It follows, therefore, that they shall also all be consumers of a particular style and type of electronic dance music, and will thus be expected to share markers of style and identity in this respect.

(c) Describe how permissions has been obtained from co-operating institutions.

No external institutions will be asked for cooperation with respect to the proposed research.

(d) What do subjects do, or what is done to them, or what information is gathered?

There will be no structured interviews carried out with informants in collecting the ethnographic information for the proposed research. Rather, informants will be observed and engaged in conversation within the setting of night clubs, parties, and music festivals, and in other contexts within which the researcher is invited to participate by the informants themselves. Whilst the proposed research primarily concerns recreational club drug use, one can anticipate that this kind of drug taking would only occur on specific nights during weekends, especially during the Spring and Summer months when dance music parties and festivals in Malta are held most frequently. Engaging in participant observation at these times is undoubtedly crucial for gathering data and providing context for the proposed project. It is reasonable to assume, however, that a significant volume of conversation and interaction with informants would occur away from these settings, at points when drug use is not taking place. Not including the preliminary field mapping phase, the projected fieldwork phase of the project spans over one year, from May 2016 to May 2017. During this period, the researcher will be presently observing and interacting with the informants whilst noting their custom and approaches towards drug consumption within public spaces of night-time leisure. The researcher will also take other opportunities to speak to informants about their perceptions towards recreational club drug taking, in terms of functionality and what it does for them, and the impacts they think it carries on their mundane lives. In this respect, it is important to note

that first, fieldwork for the proposed project shall be based on the researcher's own analysis as a participant observer, and second, inferences shall be drawn from open and free conversations led by informants themselves.

(e) Which of the following data categories are collected? Please tick where appropriate.

Race and ethnic origin	NA
Political opinions	NA
Religious and philosophical beliefs	NA
Trade union memberships	NA
Health	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Sex life	NA
Genetic information	NA

3. How do you explain the research to subjects and obtain their informed consent?

As specified in section 2(a) above, the researcher shall be fully overt about his identity, role, and aims to all potential informants. The researcher will introduce himself as a doctoral student in Anthropology, who is writing a thesis about recreational club drug use and the contemporary Maltese electronic dance music scene. Where necessary, the researcher will explain what an anthropologist is and does, and the questions he is seeking to answer. At all times, informants will be reminded that their identities will not be revealed at any point of the process, and that they are free to ask the researcher to not include any parts of the conversations they have with him in his text. Where appropriate, individual informants will also be given the opportunity to check and review parts of the text that are about conversations had with them. This entirely overt approach is also essential for the proposed project and considered together with the chosen ethnographic research methodology, since analysis of the ways in which informants relate to the ethnographer on the field may in itself lead to valuable and relevant inferences.

4. Do subjects risk any harm physical/psychological/legal/social by participating in this research?

Informants do not risk any harm by participating in the research. The researcher is aware that, also because of the relative sensitivity of the main topic of research, it is important that identities of informants are appropriately concealed at all times, and this has been considered together with the choice of ethnographic method and writing. In the final thesis, pseudonyms for person and place shall be used at all times, and it is anticipated that for the purposes of the proposed research personal and contact details pertaining to informants which the researcher learns will not need to be disclosed at any time. The researcher will also apply discretion in changing and omitting text that is not necessary for analysis towards the aims of the project, and that may in any way lead to the identification of any one of his informants.

5. Are subjects deliberately deceived in any way?

Informants will not be deliberately deceived in any way, at any point of inquiry.

6. How will participation in this research benefit subjects?

Whilst informants will not directly benefit from the proposed research, they will be kept updated and briefed about the project. The researcher will remain available and respond to informants who wish to ask about the progress of the project, at all times.

Appendix 2 – General Interview Schema

Name of Researcher: John Micallef

Name of Institution: University of Malta

Name of Ph.D. Research Project: Identity, Discourse, and Self-Regulation: A Study of “Club Drug” Use Among Maltese Youths

1. Do you use drugs, such as MDMA and Cocaine? If yes, how often, and where?
2. How do you feel about your drug use? Does it make you feel good or bad, or guilty in any way?
3. Do you think that these drugs are an essential part of your leisure time, and would you go out without consuming them?
4. What role do these drugs play in creating and maintaining your friendships? Do you feel that you can make new friends through these drugs, in any way?
5. Do you see yourself stopping your drug use? Do you think that it is ‘just a phase’?
6. Do you think that these drugs are an essential part of the dance music party, club, and festival scene? Would you do these drugs anywhere else other than at a party?
7. Do you think that they are in any way linked to a wider Maltese culture?
8. How often do you consume these drugs? Do you alternate and take weekends off ‘partying’?
9. Do you ‘discipline’ yourself in any way and manage the amount of drugs you take at parties?
10. Do you ever feel negative consequences of your drug taking, physical and/or psychological?
11. How do you speak to others about your drug use?
12. Do you consider your drug use to be, in any way, a ‘secret’ or ‘hidden’ side of your identity?
13. Do you think that your drug use defines who you are?

14. Do you see any danger and risk in taking these drugs? How do you deal with that?
15. Do you decide to take these drugs at the club or parties themselves, according to how you are feeling at the time? Or do you plan to take the drugs beforehand?

Appendix 3 – Information Sheet for Informants

Name of Researcher: John Micallef

Name of Institution: University of Malta

Name of Ph.D. Research Project: Identity, Discourse, and Self-Regulation: A Study of “Club Drug” Use Among Maltese Youths

Introduction

I am John Micallef, and I am currently working on a Ph.D. with the Department of Anthropological Sciences at the University of Malta. My research is on what is sometimes called “substance abuse”: club drugs, like MDMA and (sometimes) Cocaine, and specifically on how these are used recreationally in Malta, at parties, nightclubs, and music festivals. The purpose of this sheet is to inform you, following your verbal consent to participate in the project, about the purposes of my research and your role as an informant. Please let me know if anything is not clear, and I will explain further.

Purpose of the Research

I would like you to help me learn about this phenomenon through your impressions, views, and (possible) experiences. This could include previous and present use of these substances, how and when you consume(d) them, and whether you think this consumption has any impacts on you that go beyond your leisure activities, such as for example your health and well-being, and your relationships with others (including for example family members or significant others) . If you have direct experience of these substances, I would also like to learn about the risks you consider when consuming them, whether this affects/affected your consumption, and also how they contribute(d) to your feeling of being part of a group of peers, and a specific type of culture.

Voluntary Participation, Right To Withdraw, and Access to Text

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. I am aware that, given the sensitivity and nature of the research topic, I may be asking you to share some personal and confidential information with me, and that you may feel uncomfortable talking about the subject of interest. You can choose to participate or not to participate, and you can also choose to not answer any related questions, or ask me to omit certain information that you provide me with from the research study and from the dissertation text that I will produce following our conversations. You may also choose to withdraw your participation as an informant, at any point in time during the research. You will also have the opportunity to review extracts from the dissertation that I may draw from our conversations, and the right to instruct me to omit all or parts of that text, before I submit it to the University of Malta for examination.

Procedures

During your participation in the present research, we will be talking about club drug use, and I will be asking you questions about the topic. I will not be taking notes of your answers at the time of our conversations, but I will be summarising your answers in writing, in my personal field notes that will not be accessed and read by anyone else, at a later time. I will not be using your real name or other identifiable particulars in noting and writing, in my notebooks or final dissertation text. My notebooks will also be kept locked in a safe place under lock and key, and they will not be scanned or converted into computer files or soft data. It is crucial for you to be aware of the fact that the information that you will be giving me will remain confidential, and no one else but myself will have access to it. In the final dissertation, I may be using your impressions, insights and experiences (if any) to illustrate my thesis, but I shall not be revealing your identity or any other personal data. If you have questions about the research at any time, you can approach me and I will always be available to answer them. I shall, at all times, be the only one who knows your identity, and I bind myself to protect your identity and your confidentiality under all circumstances. I shall follow the professional code of practices

established by the *American Anthropological Association* under whose aegis similar research to mine has been conducted in the USA and elsewhere.

Duration

The research will take place over twelve (12) months, between May 2016 and June 2017. I may also be looking to approach you with some follow-up questions, if you remain available and willing, after the twelve months have elapsed.

Who to Contact

If you have any questions, you can ask them at any time. You may contact me via email address john.micallef.01@um.edu.mt or mobile telephone number 79710863, at any point should you require further clarifications about the research. You may also contact my faculty supervisor, Professor Paul Sant-Cassia, via email address Paul.sant-cassia@um.edu.mt.

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