# Qualitative Research Design:

## Proposed Title:

*'Hedonistic Spaces'*? A *Re-Investigation* Into the Interplay Between Intoxication, Sexual Politics and Technology at Southwest UK Drum & Bass Raves.

## [1.0] Introduction:

*"EDM has a hedonistic element [1], a sensibility towards the party and vibes." (Fraser, 2012: 504)*

*"[A]lmost always interviewees over 20 years old, talk about rave in terms of an evolution; a sexual-political 'progress'." (Pini, 2001: 116)*

'Rave culture' is an all-encompassing term: including 'raves' as spaces of night-time music events, 'ravers' as attendees, and 'rave music' as a descriptor for sub-genres of Electronic Dance Music *[Henceforth: EDM]* (Fraser, 2012; Reynolds, 2012). Originating in the 1980s, rave culture has become a global phenomenon (Murphy & Loben, 2021), with independently spatialised movements predominantly occurring in the UK, USA, Brazil, and New Zealand. Described as a post-COVID "rave renaissance" (Tate, 2021), raves and rave music in the UK has grown exponentially in the past five years. Much of the, albeit limited, research [2] into 'rave culture' occurred during the 1990s/2000s, with socio-cultural spaces of the rave theorised as positive, safe and *[racially and sexually]* inclusive (Bradby, 1993; Pini, 2001; Buckland, 2002). As a community member and researcher of the contemporary UK Drum & Bass *[Henceforth: DnB]* rave sub-culture, my personal experiences and research conclusions juxtapose the established literature, with this research designed to refresh and recontextualise sub-cultural knowledges.

Such auto-ethnographic and abductive feelings inspired this research project in *prima instantia* (Holmes, 2020; Reichertz, 2013), additionally developing embodied avenues of investigation omitted from my prior research given its focus on digital spaces (Nagle, 2023) [3]. Following Hart's (2018) influential structure for research proposals, I begin with a literature review to contextualise and specify the research topics; additionally exploring supplementary avenues of communitas, non-representational/more-than-human theories and edgework to situate later analysis. Subsequently, the methodology section explicitly states the interpretivist meta-theoretical/theoretical disposition, before breaking down the research question/sub-questions. Proposed focus group and participant observation methods are explored, alongside sustained discussion of validity and ethics. Holistically, I seek to answer the research question: *'to what extent does the interplay between intoxication, communitas and technical augmentation create overtly 'hedonistic' and safe spaces in Southwest UK DnB raves?'*; specifically questioning the lexicology and theory purported by Fraser (2012), Pini (2001) and Buckland (2002).

## [2.0] Literature Review:

### [2.1] Raves & Rave Music:

Raving developed from the 1970/80s 'New Traveller' movements (Hetherington, 2000; Abrahams & Wishart, 2016), championing counter-cultural lifestyles centred around illegal musical events and collective transcendence. Consequently, raves occurred illegally (Stratton, 2022; Reynolds, 2012), often taking place in abandoned buildings and fields, highlighting a key spatial construct in established research. However, policy changes and resistance in the 1990s [4] slowly became formalised and economised raves (Smith & Maughan, 1998). Whilst illegal rave research *does* still exist (Taylor, 2016; Keeler, 2019; Avis-Ward, 2022), this research focuses solely on legal spaces given issues of ethical clearance, participant access and researcher safety. Contemporary raves take place in venues designed to mirror the unpolished, "warehouse-y" *[sic]* feel of original spaces (John B: Drum&BassArena, 2020). Technologies such as smoke machines and lighting/strobe systems are used (Fraser, 2012), framed in research as positively creating hedonistic spaces and intensifying embodied experiences (ibid.; Pini, 2001). This research questions this paradigm, introducing dialectics of more-than-human/non-representational affects and ecologies to better understand how spatial design contributes to collective experiences of transcendence and intoxication which may not prioritise attendee safety.

Alongside technological augmentation, music is at the nexus of rave experience. Representing a "bewildering variety of musical genres and sub-genres" (Smith & Maughan, 1998: 219), any research into rave music can become mired in musical technicalities and intra-cultural politics. Numerous sub-communities develop from subjective/topographical alliances with sub-genres; as *House, Techno, DnB,* and *Hardstyle* all afford their own independent, yet axiomatically related, coteries. Whilst this messiness is recognised, I have chosen to focus this research on DnB, a rave sub-genre which can mobilise my position as an inside researcher (Taylor, 2011; Catungal & Dowling, 2021). This affords preferential access to participants and intra-community information (ibid.), also targeting the fastest growing EDM sub-genre within the UK (Jenkins, 2021; Petridis, 2022). Moreover, DnB music sonically represents a form of EDM "faster than any other dance music" (Roni Size: Drum&BassArena, 2020). With songs averaging 174 beats per minute with hectic breakbeats and distorted basslines, the DnB experience is necessarily embodied and aggressive (Fraser, 2012). Synoptically, the inquiry into non-representational experiences in raves allows for enhanced exploration of cathartic abandonment and the potential dangers around overstimulation and deindividualization (Hesmondhalgh, 1997); exacerbated by underlying cultures of drug usage and community marginalisation.

## [2.2] Rave Culture, Community Philosophy & Safety:

Established academic understandings of 'rave' cultures focus on an embedded nexus of "peace, love, unity and respect" (Anderson, 2015) and tendencies for gendered inclusivity (Pini, 2001; Buckland, 2002). Birthed from postmodern experiences of urban geographies (Goldie & Gorman, 2003; Thompson, 2017), DnB is founded on an ideology of anti-establishmentarianism, community, and inclusion; especially attractive to younger populations protesting external "restrictions placed upon them" (Smith & Maughan, 1999: 212) [5]. Synoptically, this links with theories of edgework (Lyng, 1990; 2004), which regards youth intoxication as a form of localised control and excitement. The interplay between "raucous drug consumption" (Nagle, 2023: 35), notably MDMA/ecstasy (Fraser, 2012), and underlying cultures of inclusivity helped create hedonistic spaces of the rave where "hugging rather than fighting occurred" (Murphy & Loben, 2021: 30) [6]. This paradigm is also supported by Pini (2001: 44), where cultures of inclusivity and drug consumption can temporarily alter the "sexual politics" in raves; meaning that women often feel safer given the focus on independent, yet relational, self-fulfilment.

Despite these significant conclusions, the topographical expansion of DnB beyond urbanised environments and increasingly diverse postmodern lifestyles has resurfaced issues of sexism and physical assault in raves (Kovac & Trussell, 2015). Moreover, social science research has failed to recognise the negative effects of extreme intoxication cultured and augmented cathartic abandon, elucidated by concerningly regular reports of overdoses and/or deaths (BBC, 2022; Bazaraa, 2023; Hockaday, 2020). Re-focusing and re-contextualising research is necessary to ensure the safety of community members, with updated conclusions aiding community members, nightclub owners and policy makers in creating safer, more inclusive environments.

## [2.3] Communitas & Liminality:

Supplementing embedded understandings of community, theories of communitas refer to the spontaneous creation of inclusive communities based on shared identities during liminal spaces of festival or ritual (Turner, 2017; Turner, 2012). Such liminal spaces are seen in raves (Fraser, 2012), with DnB music inspiring a collective identity, the DJ acting as the "general authority of the ritual", and the rave socio-spatially transcending traditional social norms (Turner, 2017: 171). The positive nature of communitas has been referenced previously, aiding the construction of discourses of collective hedonism and, consequently, inclusive, and safe spaces (Browne, 2007; Hesmondhalgh, 1997; Pini, 2001). However, the focus on egalitarian experiences within communitas can overgeneralise and misrepresent the postmodern experience of contemporary raves. Intra-DnB politics and innate hierarchies disrupt senses of equality in communitas (Fraser, 2012), with recent community expansion leading to fragmentation (Nagle, 2023). Moreover, the increased usage of drugs in raves and technological ecologies can unsettle notions of more-than-human collective transcendence; with larger focus placed on self-fulfilment rather than the collective (Fraser, 2012). Thus, whilst theories of communitas provide a useful frame for analysis, changing socio-technological spaces and community identities requires a re-investigation into whether raves can *still* be spontaneously de-politicised.

# [3.0] Methodology:

## [3.1] [Meta-]Theoretical Commitments:

Research into raves and associated experiences attempts to descriptively understand the "social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved" (Welman & Kruger, 1999: 189). Consequently, a qualitative interpretivist research design is adopted to capture both subjective and objective social realities (Della Porta & Keating, 2008). Ontologically, interpretivist design allows for individual, subjective experiences to be captured alongside recognition of objective factors *[class, community, culture]* which can influence behaviours. Correspondingly, an interpretivist epistemology similarly produces subjective/contextual knowledges (ibid.). However, as the study focuses on 'empathetic', non-representational/more-than-human phenomena, quasi-humanistic epistemologies are recognised to best explore the affects and emotions produced by hedonistic spaces of the rave and/or intoxication. Holistically, the interpretivist theoretical nexus reflects the approach in established literature *[Buckland, 2002; Pini, 2001]*, with supplementary quasi-humanistic epistemologies highlighting the importance of empathetic knowledges in performative research (Spry, 2006).

From this meta-theoretical base, an empirical, case study-centric approach is adopted using purposive sampling alongside focus groups and participant observation methods *[3.3]*. Antithetical to nomothetic approaches, idiographic approaches utilise qualitative and intensive research practices to highlight individualised experiences and differences (Sayer, 1989; Baxter, 2016). Despite not affording the positivist-driven ideal of generalisation in the same representatively immediate sense as nomothetic research, cases are "viewed as neither entirely unique nor entirely representative of a phenomenon" (Baxter, 2016: 113); opening discussions of generalisability and transferability through processes of moderatum/cultural consistency (Williams, 2000) *[3.4]*. This approach allows for detailed exploration of the individualised and subjective experiences of safety at DnB raves, producing conclusions that can be illustratively transposed onto other sub-cultures (Mason, 1996).

## [3.2] Research Questions:

The central research question encapsulates all avenues of inquiry into one statement: *'to what extent does the interplay between intoxication, communitas and technical augmentation create overtly 'hedonistic' and safe spaces in Southwest UK DnB raves?'*. This holistic research question states the *argument* for the project by abductively questioning the established literature and highlighting the topics and spaces of investigation (Kurtz, 2021). However, the general *structure* of the research project is better evidenced through the sub-questions:

1. *To what extent does the postmodern ideology of rave culture still create hedonistic and safe spaces in DnB nightclubs in the Southwest UK?*
2. *How does the interplay between intoxication and underlying cultures of drug consumption affect the safety of attendees in DnB raves in the Southwest UK?*
3. *How does the socio-technical design of DnB raves in nightclubs in the Southwest UK affect the safety of attendees and to what extent are 'hedonistic' ecologies created?*

These questions are ordered to reflect the intended sections of analysis, beginning with a questioning of the established literature before exploring my deductive avenues of

investigation (Reichertz, 2013). These questions were designed following Kurtz's (2021) guidance, ensuring that all questions are specifically answerable, temporally achievable for a postgraduate thesis, expressed as "something people should care about" (81), and contribute to wider scholarly knowledge production. Additionally, the inclusion of a designated spatial area highlights the translation of largely urban geographies to new spatial areas.

Whilst these questions are thoroughly designed, the messy nature of qualitative research design means that these questions are subject to change. Being both reflexive and malleable in the research design process is necessary to create a "communicative and trustworthy 'story'" (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019: 259). In particular, the classification of safety has been left purposefully vague. Reflexively, as a "white, cisgender, male researcher" (Levy, 2013: 197), it is not ethical nor correct to pre-determine a definition for safety in the context of sexist experiences in raves. Instead, the definition will be extrapolated from the participants explanations in the focus groups.

## [3.3] Sampling & Methods:

Congruent with the idiographic/interpretivist methodology, purposive sampling techniques are used to target a "rare" population (Williams, 2000: 216); where synthesising a fully representative and generalisable sample is both unlikely and irrelevant to the goal of the research (Emmel, 2014; Williams, 2000) [8]. Consequently, an *illustrative* or *evocative sample* is used to "provide a flavour" (Mason, 1996: 126) of a specific rave sub-culture which can be transposed into various contexts through moderatum and cultural consistency (Williams, 2000). In practice, both *listing* and *snowball sampling* will be utilised. Leveraging my position as an inside researcher, I have numerous friends and contacts who would be viable participants for the study. These connections will form the initial list, with additional snowball sampling techniques used at the end of focus groups to access new participants (Krueger, 1988). Ideally, ≈20 participants will be involved, giving me four focus groups with five people with various intersectionalities in each [9].

Once a participant list has been established, focus groups will be used to collect data before participant observation techniques later in the research process. This methodology borrows from Buckland's (2002) work, providing a framework for data collection and information over ethical concerns. Reflective of the focus on community/communitas, an in-depth focus group method will be used to maximise participant-participant discussion and data collection; although achieving such synergistic discussion is often difficult (Kneale, 2001). To stimulate this, quasi-performative methods will be used, galvanising participant engagement through "bodily practices" (Longhurst, 2016: 145; 2008). Consistent with my non-representational/more-than-human disposition and theoretical methodology, using DJ decks and/or playing DnB songs allows for participants to discuss their experiences in relation to the music played in rave environments. I believe this will help elucidate non-representational language and data given the "tribal [and] hypnotic" (Flight: Drum&BassArena, 2020) nature of the genre, additionally bringing DnB-specific vernacular into academic research and building participant-researcher rapport through shared exercise. Focus groups will still have a deductive interview guide to initially discuss themes of intoxication, sexualised experiences, and non-representational affects. For transcription purposes, they will be audio/visual recorded to note body languages in addition to speech [10].

Supplementing the focus groups, additional participant observation will be undertaken in five nightclubs in the Southwest. The data collection method focuses on the design of nightclubs and behaviours of ravers to provide spatialised evidence for topics discussed in the focus groups. Through my work in the community, I have preferential access to nightclub events, with five individual visits initially proposed.  Reflecting on this notion, my position as an *emic researcher* (England, 1994) must be recognised in situating my knowledges (Haraway, 1988) and deductive field note topics; currently focusing on usage of space, use of technology and raver-raver/raver-technology interactions.

## [3.4] Analysis & Coding:

Immediately after each focus group, I intend to transcribe the discussions to ensure clarity and consistency (Longhurst, 2016) [11]. Additional body language and researcher transcription notes will be transcribed for later non-representational analysis (Wood & Smith, 2004). Once completed, an initial stage of open coding will occur to better elucidate the topics of research for the participant observation criteria (Cope & Kurtz, 2016), reflective of a sequential research design. The modularity of this design allows for continued repetition, with constant refinement of the research questions, methods, and analytical topics (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Once data collection is completed, stages of coding and analysis will focus on the avenues of investigation in the research questions; using an inductive/deductive form of open coding to assimilate the intended topics of research with participant contributions (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Currently, these topics revolve around embodied actions *[sexualised/gendered safety]*, drug cultures and intoxication *[physical safety]* and non-representational/more-than-human ecologies of affect and landscape *[meta-physical/trans-technological safety]*. Subsequently, both data sets will be compared using axial coding (Williams & Moser, 2019) to identify synoptic links and holistic conclusions.

## [3.5] Ethical Concerns:

All research projects are fraught with ethical concerns, especially those looking to elucidate marginalised populations in intoxicated environments (Buckland, 2002). Concerning the focus groups, both the participants and topics of discussion raise some issues. Interviewing friends can aid in breaking down researcher/participant tentativeness and ensuring 'empirical literacy' (Roseneil, 1993), yet can potentially produce "confusion [and] conflict" (Taylor, 2011: 7) given differences in social environment/status. Considering the intensive nature of my research design, I hope that a mutually comfortable environment for conversation is created which would minimise such negative effects [12]. Moreover, some of the topics discussed may be potentially upsetting to some participants. Thus, quick diversion questions are listed in the guide to allow for a quick change of topic; supplemented by suggestions of returning to/focusing on the performative activity.

Regarding the participant observation, Buckland's (2002) ethics and the UN guidance (Fry & Hall, 2004) provide a useful praxis base. No defining characteristics are being recorded so participant anonymity *[in a public place]* is preserved and there is no need to receive informed consent. However, more practical concerns of interviewer safety in intoxicated environments are still relevant, with associated risk assessments to be completed pre-data collection.

## [4.0] Conclusions:

Overall, this research proposal has highlighted the necessary importance of updating sub-cultural rave research to ensure attendee safety in increasingly popular and technological rave environments. The interpretivist empirical research design is contextually aware of prior paradigms, looking to redefine knowledges in changing environments whilst still contributing a new ecological/more-than-human perspective; aligning sub-cultural rave research with contemporary theories. A sequential research design of focus groups and participant observation elucidates the socio-technical interactions of ravers, mobilising the rich description of experiences with primary data from live events. Holistically, the study looks to re-define and create new knowledges with high internal validity, with my expertise in the scene, honest methodology and rigorous analysis positively influencing the trustworthiness/believability of my results.

## *Endnotes:*

1. Terminology originally adapted from Browne (2007: 83), referring to hedonism as associated with "'party' and 'fun'".

2. As of 24/11/2023, 'Google Scholar' returns *116,000* results for 'rave culture' and 'Web of Science' only returns *157*.

3. Discussion of my prior research can act as a quasi-pilot study, evidencing the legitimacy of the deductive claims.

4. See: *Criminal Justice & Public Order Act, 1994*.

5. For example: capitalism, state authority, parent culture, urban alienation, racism, sexism, and marginalisation.

6. The genre heavily borrows from Jamaican soundsystem culture by using similar speaker set-ups and ragga-inspired vocals (Thomson, 2017). As populations from the "Afro-Caribbean diaspora" (Reynolds, 2012: 651) are embedded in the genre's genetics, DnB communities were often racially inclusive as well (Murphy & Loben, 2021; Quinn, 2002).

7. Evidenced by Bennett (2018: 143), referencing Smith & Maughan's (1998) paper into UK Dance Music cultural economies: *"Moving forward in time though, Smith and Maughan's words ring true for a wide range of musical genres, such as rock, punk, reggae, folk, jazz, as well as any number of fusion genres (including in the electronic realm),*

*that have evolved large, trans-local scenes of production and distribution aided by an increasingly sophisticated array of social media tools."*.

8. Statement written in context of wider positivist-driven academic preferences to generalisability; not necessarily immediately relevant to social sciences.

9. If listing and/or or snowball sampling is insufficient, online social media databases such as '*Devon Underground Music Hub*' or '*174.*' can be utilised to easily obtain lists of potential participants. Moreover, my prior research had difficulties in recruiting female participants, recognising the potential interplay between my positionality as a male researcher. These sources could be used to access a more gender-varied participant pool.

10. Although issues of conflicting audio streams with music being played are recognised, my affinity with DJ equipment and post-production software will aid in creating clear audio files. All data will be kept safe in my University OneDrive, in accordance with GDPR.

11. Transcriptions will also be shared with the participants of the focus groups, offering them the option to redact certain statements *[or opt-out entirely]*.

12. I will still need to ensure participant anonymity regardless of any personal affiliation.

## Timeline for Research:

*Timeline based on MRes thesis of 18,000 words, completed between 10/5/2024 to 6/9/2024 [119 days or 17 weeks total].*

### Preparation:                                                                                         *Weeks 0 - 1*
Gaining relevant ethics approval, additional conversations with dissertation advisor, clarifying methodology and objectives. Potential test-runs for participant observation methods without noting any data *[especially pre-ethics approval]*.

### Literature Review & Positioning Research:                                                            *Weeks 1 - 3*
Collating and completing readings around the topic, including interdisciplinary sources and wider policy debates. Further reading around methods, ensuring intensive nature is thoroughly described. Drafting sections of literature review.

### Data Collection:                                                                                     *Weeks 3 - 8*
Conducting focus groups, primary analysis sections, creation of inductive codebook for fieldwork, completing participant observations. Ensure time to reflect on data and re-write/research topics in literature review.

### Data Processing:                                                                                     *Weeks 3 - 8*
Transcribing audio-visual data from focus groups, organising fieldnotes from participant observation. Once pre-determined coding methods completed, look to supplement with others to reveal other dialectics. Do not over-code, allow time to reflect on data. Transcribing takes longer than you think!

### Data Analysis:                                                                                       *Weeks 8 - 10*
Finalising and applying data analysis strategy, application to data, preparation of analytical conclusions and outlining analytical sections.

### Argumentation/Structure:                                                                             *Weeks 10 - 11*
Finalise structure of dissertation, collate pre-written sections and order, identify, and solidify holistic argument to run through dissertation.

### Non-Data Sections Drafting:                                                                          *Weeks 11 - 12*
Finalise literature review, methodology section, ensure synoptic links to data analysis conclusions. Other matter including finding/creating pictures and tables to back up research findings.

### Data Sections Drafting:                                                                              *Weeks 13 - 15*
Break up analytical sections into short essays, write each one and draw final conclusions to sum up.

### Finalising:                                                                                          *Weeks 15 - 17*
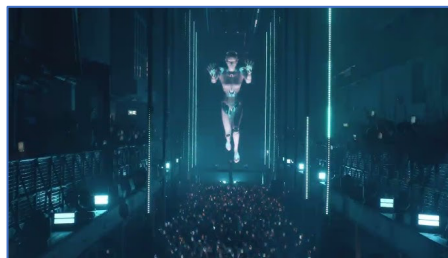Write conclusion, editing, formatting, references, and thorough checks. Allow some time before deadline to re-read in different contexts and environments.

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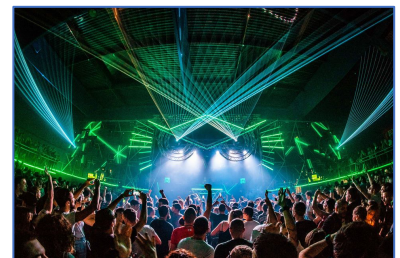## Examples of New Technologies Used in Raves:



*Example of high-powered speaker systems. Dillinja's Valve soundsystem pictured.*

*Source: DnB Dojo (2014)*



*Example of audio/visual holograms and warehouse design of raves. Printworks London pictured.*

*Source: DJ Mag (2020)*



*Example of strobes and lazers used in nightclubs. Fabric Nightclub pictured.*

*Source: DesignMyNight (n.d.)*

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