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Trends and patterns in licit and illicit drug use in Amsterdam nightlife, 2010

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ABSTRACT
Antenna is a mixed-method study that annually monitors trends in nightlife and substance use among Amsterdam adolescents and young adults. It combines and integrates qualitative data from a panel study (semi-annual interviews with a panel of avid nightlifers and professionals from various nightlife scenes) with quantitative data from annual surveys among various populations of young people as well as from substance use prevention indicators. In 2010, Antenna included a survey among 590 pubgoers. Current use (i.e. use of a substance in the past month) was highest for alcohol (99%), followed by tobacco (54%) and then cannabis (23%), ecstasy (13%), cocaine (12%), amphetamine (2%) and GHB (2%). Regarding new drugs, 2% reported lifetime use of mephedrone, and less than 1% was a current user.

Introduction

Amsterdam nightlifers had a wide array of music styles to choose from in 2010. The club and events agenda was packed. There was something for every taste all the year round, but none of the activities in clubland really stood out. Club owners were being cautious about new investments and new programming. The gay scene was showing some signs of recovery after years of malaise.

For many nightlifers, music and dancing are still major motives in their choice of activities, but virtual media are encroaching on nightlife scenes more and more. Non-stop communication via iPhones, blackberries and androids seems to be undermining the function of the nightclub as a traditional meeting place. Critics say the constant flirtation with pulsating plasma screens on the dance floor is leading to collective autism. Yet the burgeoning influence of social media also triggers countless impromptu partying initiatives. Swift communication enables event planners to mobilise their clientele in no time. There is a continuing quest to find venues outside the well-ordered (some say overregulated) Amsterdam events scene. Semi-illegal park raves now spring up with increasing frequency.

The Antenna monitoring scheme

Since 1993, Amsterdam Antenna has been documenting and analysing trends in nightlife and substance use among Amsterdam young adults and adolescents (Korf & Nabben, 2000; Korf et al., 1998). The **panel study** traces the latest developments every year by holding individual, semi-annual interviews with a panel of avid nightlifers and professionals from various nightlife scenes. The main focus is on trendsetters who try out new types of music, events, nightspots and drugs, or who experiment with new variations on older themes. They also lead the way as particular drugs or styles go out of fashion. The panel study also focuses on neighbourhood and problem youth. It reports trends, signs and rumours from all these groups, but it provides no exact figures.

The annual **survey**, by comparison, delivers quantitative data about substance use in specific groups in the city: school-aged adolescents, young clients of youth services, cannabis coffeeshop customers, pubgoers and clubbers. The 2010 survey focuses for the third time on Amsterdam pubgoers. As in 2000 (Korf et al., 2001) and 2005 (Nabben et al., 2006), we surveyed a wide range of customers in Amsterdam pubs and cafés. Our sample reliably represented the young adults and adolescents who were frequenting mainstream, trendy, gay and student pubs in 2010. Some trendsetters were amongst them, but most respondents could be considered trend followers and mainstreamers. A total of 590 pubgoers completed the questionnaire. Their average age was 27, and they were almost evenly split between males and females. Three quarters were of Dutch ethnicity. More than half lived alone, and the average pubgoer had a high level of education.

Other statistics reported here derive from sources we call **substance use prevention indicators**. These provide quantitative data on the alcohol and drugs markets from several sources: requests for information or advice received via a telephone help line and a website; drug education contacts at dance events; and results from the testing of voluntarily submitted drugs. Altogether, the information reported in the various components of Antenna yields a diversified picture of developments and trends in Amsterdam's world of recreational substances.[1]

Alcohol

Little has changed in terms of the alcoholic beverages on offer in Amsterdam nightspots. Although a wide range of drinks has long been available, expensive drinks are currently out of vogue. Panel members attribute this to a 'feeling of economic crisis' and to the high prices charged in nightlife venues. Nightlifers in the dance music scene drink substantially more than urban devotees. Alcohol promotion by the drinks industry currently adopts a lower profile than in the late 1990s. Significantly, our trendsetter informants did not seem keen to report many new drinking fads in 2010.

Virtually all the pubgoers we surveyed consumed alcohol, but daily drinkers were far in the minority. Per drinking day, respondents averaged five units of alcohol, unchanged in relation to the 2000 and 2005 surveys. Although the norm they reportedly set for excessive drinking was now lower than previously, this did not yet have any demonstrable impact on the actual drinking behaviour. One in ten pubgoers qualified as problem drinkers; they reported drinking larger amounts of alcohol and at greater frequencies than others, and notably also more symptoms of alcohol dependence and harmful drinking behaviour. Male pubgoers drank more on average than female pubgoers and were more likely to be problem drinkers. Age, ethnicity and type of venue made little or no difference. Most pubgoers reported cycling home after a night out, and most of the rest either walked or took public transport. Although few pubgoers drove cars after drinking, all the more of them rode bicycles.

Amongst neighbourhood and problem youth, the ethnic Dutch and Surinamese young people reportedly drank alcohol more frequently and in greater quantities than Moroccan youth.

Tobacco

The annoyance triggered by the 2008 smoking ban has meanwhile somewhat abated. Surreptitious smoking is now less widespread in all types of nightspots. Most clubs consistently and strictly enforce the ban. Some leniency may be observed at certain types of events if a large minority of attendees are breaking the rules. Rules are also more likely to be violated later at night.

Slightly more than half of the pubgoers we surveyed were current (last-month) tobacco smokers, and one quarter smoked daily. Non-daily smokers consumed an average of five cigarettes on days that they smoked; daily smokers averaged twelve a day. Although many smokers reported ignoring the pub smoking ban on occasion, some also said they have cut down on smoking since the ban took effect. A difference worth noting since our previous pub surveys is that the percentage of daily smokers has practically been cut in half, whereas the percentage of current smokers remains about the same. In other words, there are just as many smokers, but they smoke fewer cigarettes.

Cannabis

Partly as a consequence of the smoking ban, cannabis smoking in clubs is likewise less frequent. With the exception of specific cannabis cultures in the urban music and a few other scenes, panel members reported spotting fewer cannabis smokers. There are some people that smoke cannabis in every network represented in the panel, but the trend has been diminishing for years, even in circles where heavy use of other drugs may take place. 'Real' cannabis smokers increasingly stand out in the crowd, panel members report.

Most pubgoers had tried cannabis at some time, but most 'grew out' of cannabis smoking as they got older. Almost one quarter of the pubgoers had smoked it in the past month, but only one per cent smoked it every day. Few changes were evident in cannabis use patterns, except for the reduced cannabis smoking in nightlife. Smokers who preferred hashish to marijuana were apparently on the increase.

A large majority of neighbourhood youth in the panel networks had experience with cannabis, and a considerable number smoked it daily. Professionals working with young people report that, beyond the relaxing effects of the drug, a minority develop more problematic cannabis use in trying to escape from or neutralise personal problems.

Cocaine, ecstasy and mephedrone

In comparison to ecstasy, panel members report that the use of cocaine is more impromptu and less tied to particular settings or times of the day. Night scenes with alternative or student lifestyles and the corresponding musical preferences have gained in popularity in recent years. Cocaine, in particular, is less common there. Although it does remain popular in other scenes and in private settings, a growing number of people are expressing an aversion to the one-time cool, successful image emanated by cocaine.

In the panel networks, there was a reported light increase in ecstasy use in 2010 after the unstable period the previous year. The availability of 'good-quality' ecstasy tablets increased all across town, as did consumer confidence. Many users insist that no ersatz drug can even approach that special buzz they get from ecstasy. Mephedrone[2], a stimulant that gained popularity in a few circles during the recent ecstasy market slump, is said to be no match for ecstasy. Despite some positive reports about mephedrone, the negative experiences, such as heart palpitations, nervousness, headache and stiff jaws, seem to predominate. Indeed, few pubgoers we questioned had ever taken mephedrone.

Amongst the pubgoers who took party drugs, ecstasy and cocaine were the most widely used. Apart from them, the majority of pubgoers had never tried ecstasy, cocaine or other hard drugs. About one in eight reported having taken ecstasy in the past month, and a similar percentage had taken cocaine (partly the same respondents). No daily users were encountered, and most users took the drugs on special occasions only. In terms of ecstasy and cocaine use among pubgoers, the distinction between trendy and mainstream users seems to have blurred over the years. The trendsetters in our panel study also had that impression.

In circles of neighbourhood youth, some sparse experimentation with ecstasy or cocaine occurs, mostly by ethnic Dutch youth. In the more ethnically mixed, often homeless groups of problem youth we observe, there is more experience with cocaine and ecstasy.

After alcohol and cannabis, cocaine is the third most common drug in inquiries received by the Jellinek Prevention telephone and Internet service. There is a downward trend in telephone queries about cocaine. Few telephone questions are now received about ecstasy, but more come in via the website.

At dance events, workers at the stands operated by Unity (a project for drug and alcohol education) report that ecstasy is still the most popular party drug and the subject of the most questions. Obviously this involves a specific subgroup of nightlifers, who take ecstasy even more frequently than cannabis. After a ten-year span of reasonably good and stable quality of ecstasy, followed by a dip in 2009 when MDMA was often not the primary active ingredient in tablets, the percentage of 'real' ecstasy samples submitted to the Jellinek testing service in 2010 had almost reverted to its previous level. The average dosage was even slightly higher than in previous years at 96 milligrams. This bore out the impressions of panel members. Just as after the ecstasy crisis of 1997, the market promptly recovered from the 2009 crisis.

Remarkably, very few ecstasy specimens containing mephedrone were detected in Amsterdam – contrasting with the Dutch nationwide data from the Drugs Information and Monitoring System (DIMS) (Brunt et al., 2010). Rather more samples containing mCPP were encountered, but still substantially fewer than in 2009. Since the turn of the century, the number of cocaine specimens submitted to the test service has steadily increased. Although the average purity of cocaine has not diminished, more and more contaminants are being detected, in particular levamisol and phenacetin. Only one quarter of the samples submitted in 2010 consisted exclusively of cocaine.

Amphetamine and GHB

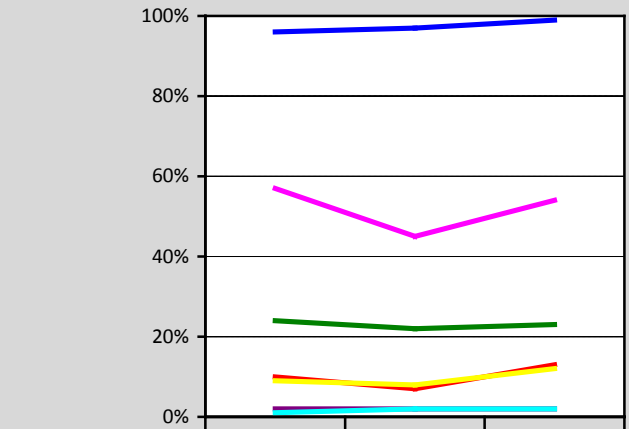
The Amsterdam markets for amphetamine and GHB are small compared to those for cocaine and ecstasy. Although there are some nightlife scenes where either amphetamine or GHB is the second most popular drug, the use of these drugs by pubgoers is far less common.

Yet amphetamine is apparently undergoing a 'rehabilitation' at present, especially amongst young, educated partygoers. It has surfaced in some scenes as a drug that is mainly shared and/or resold for a tiny sum. Panel members report that this 'speed renaissance' is in line with the expanding alternative partying culture that welcomes pep pills as protest drugs. Growing numbers of amphetamine specimens are also being submitted to the drugs testing service in the past two years. Methamphetamine, for its part, remains a marginal drug and is difficult to obtain in Amsterdam.

GHB (like another anaesthetic, laughing gas) is popular especially with young newcomers to nightlife. It is taken mainly in private settings such as afterparties, at impromptu dance events and in nightclubs. Often it is distributed via networks of friends. Many users turn a blind eye to the risks of GHB, in or-

der to experience its pleasurable high (including relaxing, erotic, entactogenic and downer effects) and due to the unlikelihood of hangovers. But disputes also rage, as many users are prone to pass out or show sensation-seeking behaviour. Some of the pubgoers we questioned indeed reported having passed out on GHB, but we did not encounter frequent users in the sample.

Figure 1 Trends in current (last-month) substance use by Amsterdam pubgoers, 2000-2010



	2000	2005	2010
alcohol	96%	97%	99%
tobacco	57%	45%	54%
cannabis	24%	22%	23%
ecstasy	10%	7%	13%
cocaine	9%	8%	12%
amphetamine	2%	2%	2%
ghb	1%	2%	2%

Other drugs

We observed only very low percentages of pubgoers that currently took illicit drugs other than the ones discussed so far. Panel informants similarly reported that many such drugs are found only in very limited circles.

In 2010, the use of laughing gas rose back to levels near those in its first peak in 1997. But in contrast to the industrial gas canisters then provided in nightspots (enough to fill hundreds of balloons), in 2010 small groups of laughing gas users were toting their own whipped cream canisters and bags full of chargers. The use of ketamine was rather less prevalent and was limited mostly to the alternative nightlife segment; availability was erratic. Psychedelics such as LSD, magic mushrooms, truffles, DMT and ayahuasca played only marginal roles in classical nightlife. Viagra and poppers were popular mainly in promiscuous gay and straight networks. Polydrug use was seen in all networks, but was more frequent and varied in the dance music scene. Although certain specific combinations were more popular, drugs were often combined impulsively as well.

Conclusions

Not surprisingly, King Alcohol reigns in Amsterdam pub life. Virtually all pubgoers drink it. Although they currently tend to rate people as excessive drinkers more readily than a decade ago, this is not yet mirrored in a decline in the amounts consumed. Smoking behaviour does show clear changes, expressed in a sharp decline in the percentage of daily tobacco smokers. Cannabis is now also smoked less in nightlife. Interestingly in comparison with the previous pub surveys in 2000 and 2005, the use of specific substances is now less closely tied to particular settings and scenes. Whereas mainstream, trendy, gay or student nightlife scenes once reflected worlds of difference, these scenes appear to have converged somewhat and are less differentiating today. This development among trend followers has been characterised by trendsetters in our panel as 'mainstream hip'.

Following the swift recovery of the ecstasy market, user confidence appears to have been restored. In comparison with 2009, the status of ecstasy in relation to other drugs and to new drugs like mephedrone has rebounded. Trendsetters in the panel say the use of both GHB and amphetamine has risen slightly, but not the use of cocaine. This could be evidence of a stronger 'subcultural élan' in some groups of young nightlifers who seek their pleasures partly outside the established club scene. Although there are also many regions of Amsterdam nightlife where little or no drug use occurs, the alternatively inclined partying segment is apparently growing. The new élan now seen in young trendsetters, which we characterised in our 2009 Antenna as a 'new partying madness', thus seems to be taking on more tangible forms.

Table 1 Substance use by Amsterdam pubgoers, 2010

	lifetime	last month
alcohol	100%	99%
tobacco	82%	54%
cannabis	80%	23%
ecstasy	46%	13%
cocaine	34%	12%
amphetamine	18%	2%
GHB	11%	2%
laughing gas	26%	2%
ketamine	8%	< 1%
magic mushrooms	25%	< 1%
LSD	7%	< 1%
crack cocaine	1%	0%
heroine	3%	< 1%
poppers	25%	3%
Viagra	4%	1%
MDMA powder	28%	5%
2-CB	5%	< 1%
methamphetamine	3%	0%
mephedrone	2%	< 1%
Ritalin	9%	1%

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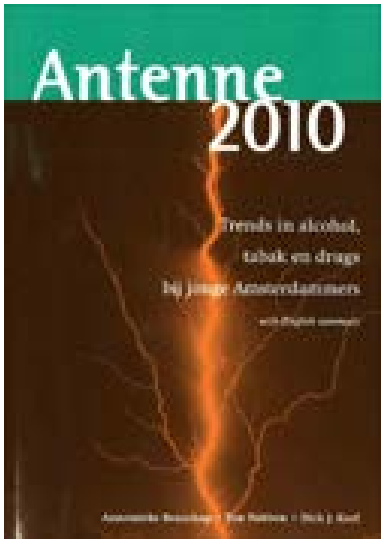
Notes

1. A detailed report of the 2010 study has been published in Dutch by Benschop et al., 2011.

2. Mephedrone is new drug at the European market (Sedefov & Gallegos, 2011). In 2010, it got much media attention, in particular in the UK.



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