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Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll: A qualitative exploration of risky behaviours in a Manchester gay male population

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ABSTRACT

Gay men tend to be stereotyped for their behaviour, with popular assumptions being that they routinely drink intoxicants and engage in unsafe sexual practices; this is referred to as 'risky behaviour' in this current study.

This study aims to explore the prevalence of these risky behaviours in gay men who frequent the gay scene. Furthermore, it aims to both challenge and explain these stereotypes using a qualitative method.

6 semi-structured interviews were conducted and analysed using narrative analysis. From this, a negative tone of self-denigration was identified along with two themes: Coming out: The two sides of the gay scene and A crises of confidence.

These findings help explain the aforementioned stereotypes by giving gay men a voice about the topic.

KEY WORDS:	GAY MEN	RISKY BEHAVIOURS	GAY SCENE	CONFIDENCE	COMING OUT

Personal rationale

I have been 'out' as a lesbian for many years and know personally of the prejudices and stereotyping of the LGBT community. As a member of that community I regularly associate with gay men and am interested in their culture. The gay community differs from the lesbian scene; there are more venues such as 'bath houses' or 'saunas', seemingly devoted to homosexual men meeting for sexual activity(Woods et al., 2001: 1). A relatively recent development is the phone app Grindr, which facilitates men meeting men for casual sex. This type of application is not common to the lesbian community. It almost seems as though these risky behaviours are becoming a way to define the gay male scene, with many people assuming that gay men enter the scene solely to engage in drug and alcohol abuse, and casual sex. My aim here was to explore all the behaviour of gay men, both the risky and otherwise, and discuss with them why they make the choices they do. My hope was to simultaneously challenge and explain the stereotypes attached to men who have sex with men.

Introduction

What are Risky Behaviours?
Risky behaviours are those which are practised despite prior knowledge of possible negative consequences (Byrnes, Miller & Schafer, 1999). Though definitions differ, one view suggests the outcome of the behaviour must contain some level of undesirability or danger (Furby & Beyth-Marom, 1992). That said; the negative consequences do not seem to act as a deterrent. Risky behaviours such as drug taking are nearly as prevalent now as they were in 1996, despite an increased amount of anti-drug campaigning, suggesting that knowledge of the negative consequences of risk does not necessarily deter it (Home Office UK, 2013).
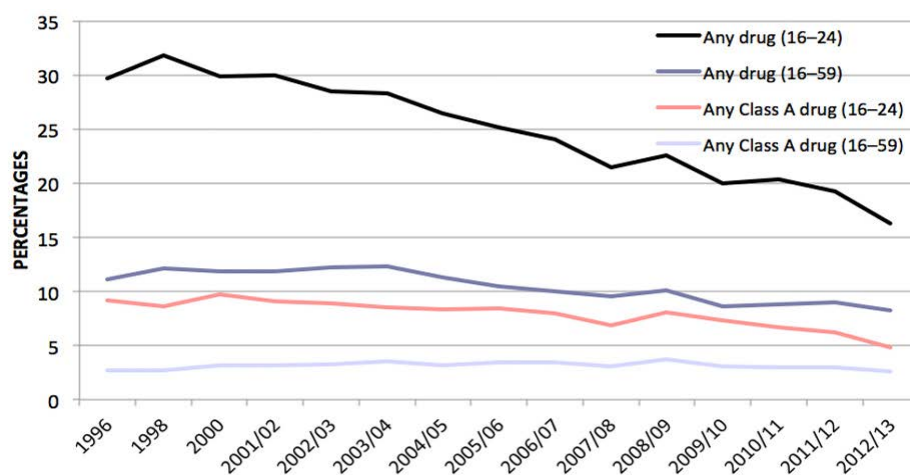

Figure 1.

Use of illegal drugs from 1996-2013 in England and Wales.

It is important here to seek an insight into why people engage in these risky behaviours.
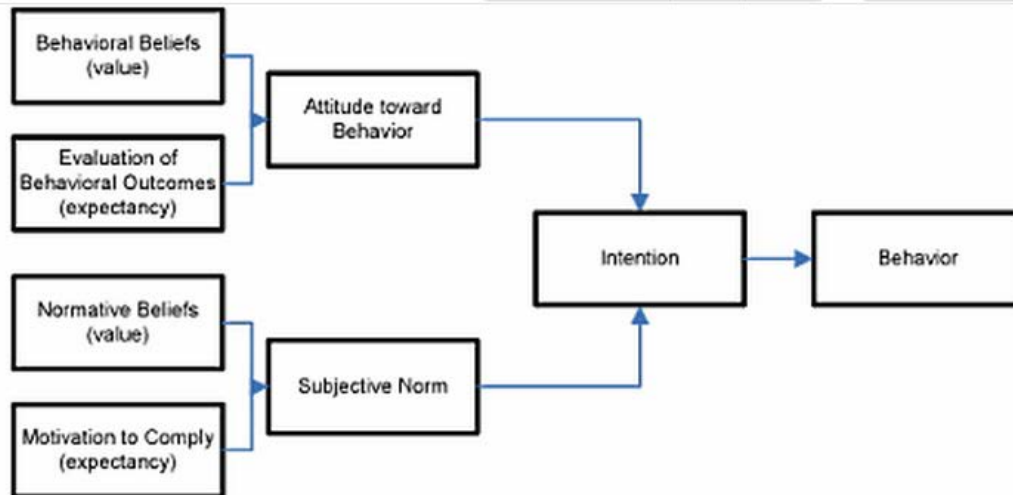

Theory of Reasoned Action and Risk.

Figure 2. Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) Theory of Reasoned Action model.

One theory which may explain this is Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) Theory of Reasoned Action which is detailed in figure 2. This model assumes that various stages lead up to the intention to perform a behaviour. Arguably the most important aspects of this model in relation to this study are the normative beliefs and motivation to comply. These factors suggest that if a certain behaviour is practiced by the group and an individual feels pressured to comply, they will form the intention to perform this behaviour and are therefore more likely to execute it. It is important to note that attitudes play an important part in this model, and it is suggested that we use past experiences to form these attitudes (Petty et al., 1997; Eagly & Chaiken, 2007). This postulates that if an individual has engaged in certain behaviours previously with positive results, they are more likely to do it again, ignoring the potential consequences. Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) assume that an individual holds any number of beliefs, but a few may be more important than others. These salient beliefs are assumed to govern an individual's attitude (Conner & Armitage, 1998; Veciana et al., 2005) and therefore their behaviour. However, it is important to look at a group setting to explore if social factors influence participation in certain behaviours.

The Gay Community as a Social Setting
The gay community tends to be preoccupied with attractiveness and socio-cultural ideals of body types, (Legenbauer et al., 2009) and Clarke and Turner (2007: 274) suggest gay men may feel 'constrained by lesbian/gay appearance norms'. This postulates that individuals can feel pressured to conform to every aspect of a

minority[1] group, even something as minor as physical appearance. Fiske (2004) reinforces this idea by suggesting that people are more likely to conform to their own group and ignore 'outsiders' ; this implies that individuals may ignore the wider social norm in favour of the groups. It is important to consider how being part of the gay community influences an individual's identity and perhaps their behaviour, whilst also taking in to account the struggles of 'fitting in' to the minority group.

<u>Fitting in to the Minority</u>

It is proposed being part of a group like the gay community 'provide[s] a social context…in which the homosexual can find acceptance' (Leznoff & Westley 1956: 257), however recently acceptance has become increasingly hard to find, partly due to peer pressure. Valentine and Skelton (2003) suggest that gay males find themselves under pressure to adopt a 'gay look' even if they are unsure of their sexuality and can feel forced to form an identity before they feel comfortable to do so.

Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory suggests group membership can shape identity. They postulate that an individual identifies with a group which leads to them being more likely to conform and cooperate with group behaviours, this is called social identification. Ashforth and Mael (1989) describe this process as leading to self-identification. This supports the aforementioned idea that people can and do form identities based upon the company they keep. This idea can prove to be a negative identification process if the group's normative behaviour is risky. This is relevant when looking at the stereotypes attached to gay men suggesting they are promiscuous (Crossley, 2004). If it is a popular opinion that promiscuity is common amongst men who have sex with men, new members of the community may feel pressured to engage in such behaviour. Furthermore, as an individual becomes immersed in an entirely new culture, they may resort to new, sometimes risky, methods in order to boost self-esteem and to combat the anxiety which can occur when trying to fit in. It is suggested by Hunt and Evans (2008) that the use of ecstasy has the effect of boosting self-esteem and can make an individual feel more confident. Additionally, it can make someone care less about what others may think of them. This is important to note as the aforementioned studies suggest fitting in to the gay scene can be difficult, which may prompt homosexual males to engage in risky behaviours such as drug taking.

<u>Gay Men and Risky Behaviours</u>

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[1] Minority- '[An] identifiable subgroup within a society' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2013)

Through looking at how some gay males form identities it is easier to understand they may engage in risky behaviours. Rhodes (1997: 210) suggests that risky behaviours are a product of the 'individuals, the actions of other individuals, their communities and social environments'. This suggests that the social environment heavily influences the prevalence of risky behaviours. It is important here to discuss how different types of conformity may explain why men who have sex with men sometimes engage in these behaviours.

Conformity is defined as 'yielding to group pressure' (Man, 1969) and 'involves an exaggerated tendency to follow the majority' (Efferson et al., 2008: 56). According to Kelman (1958) it can be broken down in to three types: Compliance, internalisation and identification. All three types may offer insight in to why gay men engage in risky behaviours. Compliance refers to conforming to the group behaviours despite not necessarily agreeing with them. The identification process is similar to compliance, however it is more likely to occur if the person is conforming to someone they admire (for example an individual with a higher status within the group). The final type of conformity is identification, which is where an individual's beliefs start to synchronise with that of the groups. Kelman (2006:4) suggests this happens when someone accepts group influence in order to 'maintain a satisfying self-defining relationship'. Kelman (2006) further postulates that this type of conformity can occur when an individual is modelled by another and seeks to be like them. In relation to men who have sex with men, this model suggests that people may conform to group norms like risky behaviours, even when they disagree with it.

This notion is supported by studies that suggest that gay males engage in high rates of drug use (Greenwood et al. 2001; Halkitis & Parsons, 2002) and unprotected sex (Stall et al., 2001) during circuit parties[2]. Mansergh et al. (2001) found that the use of stimulants such as ecstasy increased during these parties compared with use over the past 6 months. This proposes that the environment and company of the gay men can heavily influence whether they engage in risky behaviours, and also that homosexual men participate in substance abuse more when on this scene. However, Elizur and Ziv (2001) suggest mixed feelings about sexuality and the "coming out" process can in turn cause gay men to engage in these behaviours. This contradiction in findings highlights the importance of more research in to the area.

Coming Out

The process of coming out as gay to friends and family has been well documented, with the implications of disclosing sexuality ranging from a change in family dynamics to complete rejection from the family (D'Augelli et al., 2005). Research suggests that coming out is not just revealing ones sexuality, but it is a significant process which enhances the formation of self-identity (Mehra & Braquet, 2006). This suggests that though it can be difficult to come out, it can be a necessary stage in order to ascertain a sense of self-identity. It is also suggested that there is an element of identity negotiation when faced with the prospect of coming out (Evans,

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[2] Circuit parties- '*multiday gatherings of gay and bisexual men*' (Mansergh et al., 2001:959)

2002). This means that forming an identity is not an easy process and socio-historical factors and the influence of others makes the formation of identity an on-going, and incessantly changing process. In relation to coming out, this suggests that during this time, an individual is susceptible to influence which in turn can affect the choices a gay man may take in relation to their sexuality. It is here where men who have sex with men may be more likely to participate in risky behaviours.

After reviewing the existing literature on gay men and risky behaviours it has become apparent that little data explores this topic qualitatively. Though the existing literature is useful for pointing out and explaining risky behaviours, it tends to overlook the reasons why they occur. It is for this reason that a qualitative method has been chosen. This method permits deep exploration of these 'whys'. This means, not only do the interviewees get a voice about the topic, but the study does not wholly rely on existing literature to make its inferences.

Objectives

The main aims of this research are:

1. To interview six gay men who frequent the gay scene[3] and explore if and why they engage in known risky behaviours: unsafe sexual practices and the use of intoxicants.
2. In relation to sexual practises, to explore the prevalence of unsafe sex in the gay population.
3. Looking at the use of intoxicants, to ascertain whether gay men *choose* to indulge these risky behaviours, and whether the gay scene influences their choices.
4. Again, in relation to the use of intoxicants, to explore why homosexual men on the gay scene may indulge in substance abuse.
5. To consider if the use of intoxicants heightens the chances of engaging in risky sexual activity.
6. To explain and challenge the stereotypes relating to the risky behaviours exhibited by gay men on the scene.

Method

The qualitative researcher's perspective is perhaps a paradoxical one: it is to be acutely tuned-in to the experiences and meaning systems of others—to indwell—and at the same time to be aware of how one's own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand. (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 123)

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[3] Gay Scene- 'commercialized gay spaces, such as nightclubs and dance parties.' (Ridge, Plummer & Peasley, 2006: 501)

Rationale

The rationale behind this study originated with the researcher's personal experience with men who have sex with men, and an interest in gay practices. As a gay woman with many gay male friends, I have a personal interest in their behaviour. This study aimed to give gay men a voice about their behaviours using a qualitative method and question stereotypes attached to the gay community.

Methodological Aim

The methodological aim of this study was to try to explain why gay men engage in risky behaviours. Many quantitative articles have identified risky behaviours in gay men but not given participants the opportunity to explain why they participate in them. These findings can sometimes stigmatise gay men by simply suggesting for example 'gay men participate in unprotected sex'. A qualitative method reifies the voice, rather than the behaviour.

Design

As mentioned in the methodological aims, a qualitative design was used in this study. Fenton et al. (2001:85) suggest that a qualitative method can produce 'significant contributions to our understanding…of the social context of sexual behaviour'.

This study collected data on risky behaviours using semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen as the interview questions are outlined using a topic guide (appendix 4), but extra questions could be added if necessary (Wengraf 2001). The relaxed nature of semi structured interviews allows for new, interesting topics to arise and be addressed (Horton, Macve & Struyven 2004). In addition to this, the interviewee can lead the conversation more freely without being probed by the researcher (Silverman, 2011). This was important in the present study as the nature of the topic was sensitive. Measures were taken to make the interviewees feel as comfortable as possible; no-one was coerced into answering anything they did not wish to. Location was also carefully considered.

Interviewees

A purposive sample was chosen as this study focused on gay men only, however it was also an opportunity sample. The interviews were conducted with six gay men who frequent the gay scene. The interviewees were acquaintances of the researcher, which helped reduce any reservations they may have had about discussing sensitive topics. They were between the ages of 21 and 25 and all participants were currently living in the Greater Manchester area. The interviewees met the following criteria:

- \- >18 to give full informed consent for the study
- \- Over the legal age to have sex which for gay males is 16
- \- Old enough to be legally entering gay clubs and consuming alcohol
- \- Living in Greater Manchester in order to attend interviews

It became apparent whilst researching the area that risky behaviours are more prevalent in 'scene' men rather than 'non-scene'. As the study focused on risky behaviours primarily, it was decided to only interview men who have at some point in their lives been part of the 'scene'.

Table 1. Interviewee information.

Name	Age	Background information
Dave	21	Originally from Leeds. Moved to Manchester for university and is currently a 3rd year fashion student. Came out around the age of 13. Currently single.
William	22	Originally from North Yorkshire. Moved to Manchester for university but finished his course in 2013. Came out around the age of 15. Currently single.
Sam	23	Originally from Leeds. Moved to Manchester for work. Came out just before his 18th birthday. Currently in a long-term relationship.
Ben	21	Originally from Birmingham. Moved to Manchester for University and is currently a 3rd year fashion student. Came out around the age of 15. Currently single.
Jack	25	Originally from London. Moved to Manchester for work. Came out during drama school. Currently single.
Matt	24	Originally from Milton Keynes. Moved to Manchester for university and is currently a 2nd year landscape architecture student. Currently single.

Procedure

An information sheet (appendix 1) was presented via e-mail. Once the volunteers decided to participate in the study, contact details were exchanged in order to arrange the interviews. A consent form was presented (appendix 3) before the interview, detailing interview topics and their rights, and a closing information sheet post interview (appendix 2). This is in accordance with the BPS ethical guidelines. A comfortable, private place that was easily accessible to both researcher and volunteer was identified (for example Manchester Metropolitan University). This was important, as venue is known to influence response (Silverman 2011). The interviews were no longer than an hour in length so as not to inconvenience the interviewee. Post interview, the recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the recordings were then deleted to ensure anonymity.

Insider-Outsider Influence

Interviewing requires a level of trust between the researcher and the interviewee to give rise to honest responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). With this study, this trust was created beforehand, as the interviewees were known to the researcher. However, there has been much debate about whether a gender difference between researcher and interviewee could affect the quality of the data collected. Despite pre-established friendships, it was important to understand any effects gender differences could make. Interviews with gender differences between the researcher and interviewee have been criticised as shaping interviews in negative ways (Manderson et al., 2006). However, there is an abundance of research to suggest the contrary: in many cases it can promote more honesty from the interviewee. Pini (2005) postulates that women interviewing men can be advantageous as men may feel less threatened and more comfortable. In addition to this, many researchers have suggested that gender is negotiable in interviews, with many female researchers adopting an 'honorary male' status whilst interviewing males by assuming both male and female qualities (Brown, 2001). In the current study this status was adopted with the researcher presenting herself in an androgynous manner with both her appearance and mannerisms, being sure not to adopt too much of a feminine role so as to keep the power relationship of the interview equal.

Furthermore, in the current study, despite being an outsider in terms of gender, the researcher had an 'in' to the group via her lesbian identity. This led to the gay men wanting to 'share their desire to rectify societal misconceptions of their group' (LaSala, 2011:18). Additionally, it is suggested that interviewees may be reluctant to share vulnerabilities with members of their group (the gay community) in fear of losing face (ibid). It is here that the difference in gender between the researcher and interviewee could have been advantageous as, though the researcher is lesbian, there is still an element of distance between both due to the LGBT groupings.

Data Analysis

Narrative analysis was chosen for this study so that the story of being a gay man on the scene could be told through the eyes of the interviewees. Though thematic analysis was originally considered, the importance of representing the interviewees was always the forefront of this study, therefore the narrative approach seemed apposite. Narrative analysis focuses on the way the interviewees view themselves, the world and their identity using their own accounts and subjective experiences (Linde, 1993). Furthermore, Crossely (2000:10) suggests that 'in order to understand ourselves and others, we need to explore… meaning systems'. This type of analysis was also suited to this study as each interview unrolled with a predictable chronology; this started with 'coming out', then typically veered towards a reflection of past experiences. This is characteristic of 'story telling' as people tend to: establish a time frame which marks the beginning and end of a story; be selective in the information they chose to divulge; tell stories in a manner which culminates at a conclusion; and clarify the importance of the information disclosed in relation to overall story (Polkinghorne, 2006). Finally, the use of narrative analysis permitted the explanation of a narrative thread which gives context to the themes discussed. This also means that less of the interviewees' stories was missed out due to the structural restraints of analysis.

Ethics

In accordance with BPS guidelines, an application for ethics approval form (AEAF (appendix 8) was completed and signed off by a supervisor before any data was collected. This was to ensure that the study was ethically sound before any interviewees were approached.

As the research area was highly sensitive, steps were taken to make the study as ethically sound as possible. Anonymity was ensured throughout by the use of pseudonyms which were chosen by the interviewees. Furthermore, the interviewees were volunteers with the right to: withdraw from the study at any point (up until the 24th of March), refuse to answer any questions during the interview and edit any parts of the transcript if they do so wish. Furthermore, contact was kept with the volunteers throughout the study in order to make them feel like they had not been abandoned after the study, especially after discussing topics of a sensitive nature. Finally, help websites and contact details were provided in the closing information sheet in case any of the subjects raised has any emotional implications.

Analysis and Discussion

Narrative Thread

A narrative thread is important as it gives context to the themes presented later on in the journal report (Thomas et al., 2008) as well as storying the interviewees' lives as told through the interviews.

The paths each interviewee took to get where they are now were similar, typically starting when they came out as being gay. This was a pivotal point in their lives as it permitted them to explore their sexualities at gay venues such as gay bars without fear of being 'found out' by family or friends. This stage was also important as it tended to be when most of the homosexual males interviewed indulged in risky behaviours such as intoxicant abuse and promiscuity. This appeared to be because they wanted to reaffirm their sexuality to themselves and others by having sex with other men, and they took drugs and drunk excessively to get the confidence to do so. This confidence was needed as the homosexual men felt they were constantly being judged for their behaviour and wanted to fit in. These risky behaviours were reinforced by a number of things including societal pressures and other gay men on the scene.

All of the interviewees talked retrospectively about their experiences, suggesting they do not engage in that behaviour anymore. This point was important to them as they describe their past behaviours in a negative manner, and perhaps do not want to be associated with that behaviour anymore. Ultimately, each interviewee appeared to end their story with a sense of acceptance of their homosexuality and appeared to be at peace with their past behaviour and who they are now.

The overall 'moral' that transpired from their accounts was that of 'identity synthesis' (Cass, 1979), with the interviewees accepting their homosexuality as part of their life but that it doesn't dominate it and they do not necessarily feel compelled to give in to pressures to act a certain way.
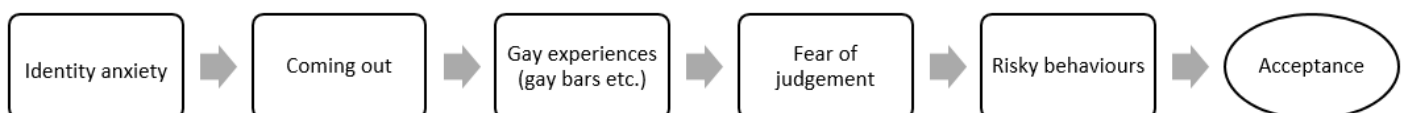

Figure 3. A model to demonstrate the narrative thread of the interviews.

Tone. The Lack of Pride in Gay Pride

Understanding the tone of a narrative is of high importance as it can provide the researcher with clues to the 'personally meaningful images, symbols and metaphors' which the interviewee may hold (McAdams, 1993:257). Furthermore, it is suggested that the tone of a narrative is the most pervasive and can be optimistic or pessimistic, depending on an individual's interpretation of events (Crossley, 2000). Understanding the tone in which the interviewee talks permits the researcher to go beyond the mere language used, and delve in to the feelings held about the narrative being told. Within this research this was essential as the interviewees underlying feelings about the topics discussed were as important as their views.

Throughout the six transcripts the tone that transpired was palpable and powerful. A negative tone which had connotations of self-flagellation and condemnation of past behaviour was observed in all of the interviews. This type of language occurred most prominently in the interviews with Jack and Matt, which can be seen below.

J-… *my body was ready to go oh destroy yourself and he gave me to tools in which to do that. (Jack, 185-186)*

J-… *I sort of thought it was dirty. Even though it isn't…like it it it was it is, its people taking drugs and having a good time its only because I associated it with this sort of seedy….grim (Jack, 253-255)*

And with Matt:

M- …*went a bit wild …erm…and then I just kind of felt bad about myself after that…like that I had abused my body…and myself (Matt, 57-58)*

This lack of pride in their behaviour shines through the idea that they were enjoying themselves, and very rarely do the interviewees discuss missing that aspect of their life. As well as a tone of self-destruction and abuse encapsulating the description of their former selves, the way in which the interviewees talk about their sexual activity and drug use also holds negative connotations.

When talking about engaging in sexual activity with multiple partners, Ben said the following:

B: *most people take mkat…the dirty drug…yeah (Ben, 54)*

A similar tone can be observed in the interview with Dave:

D: *When I was drunk I would erm… tak-e people in to club toilets n stuff like that…which is just dirty really [laughs] (Dave, 43-44)*

Despite the laughter, it is apparent that when looking back and reflecting on their past behaviour, both Ben and Dave view their behaviour negatively.

However, though the general tone of the interviews suggest a level of self-denigration from the interviewees, the overall tone towards the end of the interviews is that of acceptance. This tone transpired as the interviewees were speaking retrospectively about their past, and appear to have worked through their issues and become a more secure person.

> S: I'm not proud of it but…but I think it made me grow up and start to ignore it and stuff like that. (Sam, 192-193)

Theme One. Coming Out: The Two Sides of the Gay Scene.

Throughout all six of the interviews, each male discussed coming out and entering in to the gay scene. It became apparent that through entering in to the gay scene, these men found acceptance and a place to 'be themselves' and explore their sexuality, which ultimately helped them come to terms with their homosexuality.

> S: Yeah I started going to like open my eyes a bit… n see what the worlds like n stuff[…] and it's a good place to…share experiences… and obviously work out yourself properly (Sam, 28-33)

> J- There is like a strong solidarity with being gay…like gay mafia is a term in London and everyone has each other's back purely because they are gay (Jack, 465-466)

The concept that other homosexual males can act as a support system is not uncommon as Riggle et al. (2008) and Leznoff & Westley (1956) suggest that the gay community can act as a surrogate family who both understand and empathise with its members. This support is important for new members of the gay community as it is postulated that they may experience many stressors related to sexuality (Doty et al., 2010). This support is further highlighted in this study as it is suggested that 'sexual minority' friends provided the highest amount of support for sexuality anxiety which in turn lead to reduced levels of emotional stress. These findings enumerate the importance of the gay community.

However, though the gay scene can provide social support for men who have sex with men, it can also be a dangerous territory in which homosexual men who have just come out can be led astray and feel pressured to engage in risky behaviours in order to fit in to the group norms, a notion which has been previously noted by Fiske (2004). A passive tone came through in the interviews, with one of the reasons interviewees chose to engage in risky behaviours was because it was 'the done thing' and everyone else was doing it when they came out.

B: all your friends do it and you feel pressured cause all your friends are doing it…and you wanna be on the same level as them (Ben, 59-60)

W: I always thought I would never do drugs when I was like 16 but then when I started going out on the gay scene people did it regularly so I felt like I should too (William, 72-74)

This side of coming out can obviously have detrimental effects on an individual and can make them participate in behaviour they would not have done usually. As well as the idea that everyone else on the scene was doing it, many of the interviewees stated that when they came out, they felt a pressure to adhere to stereotypes as a guideline of how to behave. These stereotypes were enforced by society, other homosexual men on the scene or the individual themselves.

J: and you will follow every stereotype that society expects (Jack, 445-446)

D: it's almost like pressure you give yourself to fit in…erm……and if you have just come out you don't want to not fit in (Dave, 79-80)

S: they think that other gay men are a good influence and they must be right or something so they do what they do (Sam, 174-175)

This notion, paired with the aforementioned about fitting in to the norm provides an insight in to why homosexual men engage in risky behaviours. Stereotypes suggesting engagement in risky behaviours is just a common part of the gay lifestyle can in fact encourage participation in these behaviours as homosexual men feel it is almost a rite of passage. Furthermore, Crandall et al., (2002) and suggest that people will work hard to adopt their interpretation of the group norms and will 'act the part' until they eventually adopt these values as their own, a notion previously explored by Kelman(1958, 2006). Due to this adoption of values, men who have sex with men can find it hard to distinguish between their own values, and those of others around them which can make participation in risky behaviours a regular occurrence.

B: and I think some of them are getting to much in to a habit of doing [drugs] every week…so they just…it's a habit to them now (Ben, 81-82)

S: some people take things…they get a bit caught up in it…take it to higher levels…and it ruins people's lives. It starts off just trying to fit in then you end up addicted to stuff or you get reckless…you sleep with an entire bar and think that is acceptable (Sam, 202-204)

The adoption of these values can prove dangerous for new members of the scene as it can be hard to break free of them and homosexual males can be sucked in to the scene all too easily.

Theme 2. A Crises of Confidence

> *J: I took drugs because it made me feel outside of myself…and they gave me a confidence that I had never had before…erm…and they heightened this feeling of being loved (Jack, 230-232)*

> *W: obviously there's the whole 'tortured soul' thing, like gay people turn to it to escape reality if they're not 100% comfortable being gay or feel outcast (William, 82-83)*

Taking drugs and drinking excessively to feel more confident became a prominent theme throughout the six transcripts. Though admittedly participating in risky behaviours, the homosexual males interviewed discussed the reasons behind their substance abuse, which is topic that has been underexplored. Once they had come out, some of the interviewees were apprehensive entering to the gay scene with Matt stating that the idea of it '*terrified [him]'* and Jack stating that he was *'SO nervous'.*

This fear ultimately led the interviewees to take drugs in order to gain confidence to do a number of things like dance and talk to other men, sometimes with the intention of taking things further.

> *M: it's the confidence thing…being able to dance more…even having a kiss with somebody I'd say it was more…….you are a lot more relaxed (Matt, 88-90)*

It is suggested by Boys et al. (2009) those stimulants such as cocaine cause people to lose their inhibitions which may encourage users to engage in risky behaviours such as unprotected sex more freely. Though the loss of inhibitions is typically seen as being risky, in the case of the males interviewed some felt it necessary in order to overcome the judgement of the gay scene and to feel confident about themselves, a notion which was explored by Hunt and Evans (2008).

> *S: like the first time [he took cocaine] was in a gay bar and it made me want to take it more in gay bars like for the confidence as well as being able to hack your drink more so you can spend more time talking to people (Sam, 82-84)*

This explanation of drug taking in gay bars tends to be overlooked, with many studies focussing on the link between gay bars and drugs and simply enumerating the prevalence of risky behaviours such as drugs and their link to unprotected sex (Greenwood et al., 2001). Though it is suggested in the interviews that intoxicants can affect a gay male's sexual behaviour, it is not a dominant theme and the

intoxicant use discussed was for more of a personal nature linked to self-esteem over general recklessness.

In addition to this, many of the homosexual males interviewed discussed their views on the gay scene and the men who frequent it. These gave an insight in to why their confidence may be low, and participation in risky behaviours such drug/alcohol consumption and casual sex is prevalent on the scene.

The anxiety that prompted the interviewees to engage in risky behaviours appeared to come from a preconception of the gay scene being '*bitchy*'[4] (a term used to describe the scene by Ben, Dave, Matt and Sam) and a fear of being judged if they didn't act a certain way.

> *B: you feel like you can't […] be different cause you will get judged… actually I mean I went out to this bar once and I felt really pressured to take pills […] I have given in before and took them cause everyone else was and saying I should (Ben, 66-69)*

The judgemental nature of the gay scene not only prompted the interviewees to indulge in intoxicants, but also in potentially risky sexual behaviour. Ridge et al. (2006) suggest there is a pecking order on the gay scene and a battle for social status which could explain the interviewees need to fit in, and the lengths they go to in order to '*assert*' their sexuality to others, and themselves.

> *I: you said some people would find it laughable…would that ever make you feel like you had to sleep with more people? (Interviewer, 407-408)*
> *J: yeah…to up your numbers…there was an element of that in the beginning that I found definitely (Jack, 410)*
> *M: when you think to be in that group you have to be…to have slept with so many people to be accepted… (Matt, 204-205)*

This notion not only helps to explain the gay scene, but also the stereotype that homosexual males are promiscuous (Crossley, 2004). Though the interviewees openly admit to engaging in sexual activity with strangers, their motives behind it seem to be less about pleasure and more about gaining status. However, though the use of intoxicants and participation in casual sex can be used to gain confidence and fit in to the gay scene, these actions in themselves can be a cause of judgement.

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[4] Bitchy- Malicious, catty (Oxford English Dictionary, 2014)

J: the pressure of being a man and sleep around and but not too many cause then you're a slut…you're in one circle and it's like oh that not enough then the other it's too many (Jack, 414-415)

This concatenation of events appears to continually place pressure on homosexual males, inducing confusion about what is 'the done thing' on the gay scene. It is easy to see how men who have sex with men may engage in an array of risky behaviours with so many double standards to try and adhere to.

Reflexivity

As the researcher ultimately controls how the data is analysed and the different parts of the interviews which will be brought to light, it is important to disclose any biases or preconceptions the researcher may hold which could influence the results.

As a lesbian, my fascination with men who have sex with men and their behaviour stems from more than just a fleeting interest. As a firm believer in gay rights, it was important to me that the interviewees got to voice their opinion on some of the more detrimental stereotypes attached to them. However, my own personal beliefs may have influenced the information which was chosen for analysis and discussion in an attempt to try and present the interviewees in a more positive light. In addition to this, I have known some of the interviewees for many years which may have allowed me to get a more detailed interview as the initial discomfort of an interview was lessened, it may also have biased the results somewhat as I again tried to portray them in the most positive light possible. However, as the interviews were carried out, I found that my friendship with the interviewees was more beneficial than it was detrimental to the research. The interviewees both wanted to help me in my research but also knew they could disclose any information they wished as ultimately this research attempted to represent homosexual men as opposed to stigmatising them. However, though the themes which emerged from the interviews were bold and powerful, I am aware that this cannot be generalised to the entire gay population. The sample chosen meant that the interviewees were all men who had frequented the gay scene at some point, and this study does not use the opinions and experiences of men who choose to opt out of that scene.

To summarise, I believe the research has given an insight in to this scene which has not previously been well documented. It is apparent that gay men who frequent the scene do engage in some risky behaviours such as substance abuse and occasionally unprotected sex. However, the root of this behaviour appears to come from pressures from the gay scene and a degree of insecurity as opposed to thrill seeking. I believe this research has allowed homosexual men to voice their opinions and challenge popular stereotypes about risky behaviours and the gay scene which is a notion which was important to me from the offset.

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