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## A Qualitative Study of Ecstasy Sellers In the San Francisco Bay Area

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## Table of Contents

Table of Contents .....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Executive Summary.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Methodology.....	12
Description of the Sample.....	16
Becoming an Ecstasy Seller.....	18
Resisting the Dealer Identity.....	29
Social Relationships Between Buyers and Sellers .....	43
The Role of Branding in Ecstasy Markets .....	49
Outcomes of Ecstasy Sales .....	72
Summary and Discussion .....	94
Criminal Justice Implications .....	100
References.....	103

## Abstract

Due to the nature of the buyer and seller relationships, Ecstasy drug markets challenge our current understandings of drug distribution. We interviewed individuals who were 18 years of age or older and living in the San Francisco Bay Area. We conducted key informant interviews and field observations. Employing ethnographic sampling techniques, we recruited 80 sellers who had sold or exchanged five or more Ecstasy doses five or more times in the six months prior to interview. Interviewees were predominantly White, male, and middle to upper-middle class, housed and in their twenties. All of the interviewees had used Ecstasy, most (93%) before they began selling it. Participants resisted stigmatized drug dealer identities because they were not full time sellers, only sold to friends and did not market or push their drugs. Sellers' constructed their own labels calling themselves *service providers, enablers or facilitators*. Participants relied on their friendships with their customers to protect them from theft, violence or police intervention. With some exceptions, participants knew very little about where their Ecstasy came from or how their suppliers priced their products. Through our interview data and online research we found that Ecstasy manufacturers chose specific symbols for their pill brands to convey messages to consumers about their products. The most frequently cited method for testing Ecstasy was "take it yourself" (67%). Unlike cocaine or marijuana sales, selling Ecstasy did not

increase sellers' use. Heavy use increased the likelihood of not feeling the Ecstasy as intensely and experiencing more difficult hangovers. Long-term Ecstasy use was characterized by cycles or phases beginning with peak use periods followed by periods of abstention. Friends motivated them to begin selling Ecstasy, and opportunities to use Ecstasy with their friends kept many in business. Nonetheless, 54 percent reported that they wanted to quit selling citing legal risks, stress, and concern for their customers' health.

Interviewees were working (88%) or planning careers and a pervasive theme was it was time to grow up, stop taking unnecessary risks and assume the conventional social roles that were awaiting them. "Buy and bust" strategies may be difficult to implement in markets characterized by social bonding enhanced by the Ecstasy using experience. While these user/seller groups may have been winding down from Ecstasy use and sales, they were becoming interested in powder cocaine as an alternative. Sellers saw cocaine as "less of a commitment time wise" and without the immediate after effects.

# Executive Summary

## Findings in Brief

- Ecstasy sellers were White, male, middle to upper-middle class, housed and in their twenties.
- Long term Ecstasy use is characterized by cycles or phases with peak use periods followed by periods of abstinence.
- Friends motivated sellers to begin to sell Ecstasy and opportunities to use Ecstasy with their friends kept many of them in business.
- Selling Ecstasy was not perceived to be as criminal or immoral as dealing other drugs due to Ecstasy's reputation as a beneficial experience.
- Sellers resisted stigmatized dealer identities instead labeling themselves *service providers, enablers or facilitators*.
- Sellers relied on their friendships with their customers to protect them from theft, violence or police intervention.
- Women and men were equally divided on the issue of Ecstasy and sex. Sexual or sensual?
- The day after - Ecstasy hangovers were described from mildly debilitating to serious depression lasting several weeks or even months.
- Pill Branding - Ecstasy manufacturers choose specific symbols for their pills to convey messages to consumers about their product.
- 54% reported that they wanted to quit selling citing legal risks, stress, concern for their customers' health and "it's time to stop taking unnecessary risks."
- Ecstasy's unique psychopharmacology and the relationships between buyers and sellers combine to present challenges to traditional criminal justice interventions.

## **Introduction**

During the first phase of the project we conducted key informant interviews and field observations. During the second phase of the study, employing ethnographic sampling techniques, we recruited 80 sellers who had sold or exchanged five or more Ecstasy doses five or more times in the six months prior to interview.

## **Study Site**

It is important not to underestimate the significance of San Francisco's diverse, liberal community when looking at its drug markets. A majority of San Francisco's registered voters are Democrats or members of left-wing parties ([www.SFPolitics.com](http://www.SFPolitics.com) 2004). San Francisco, along with other Bay Area cities such as Oakland and Berkeley, is considered a sanctuary for medical marijuana users. Considering this social milieu, it is not surprising that drug use is not entirely demonized. In fact many drug users that we have interviewed during previous projects believe that San Francisco's drugs are more plentiful and of higher quality, and this is particularly true for the Ecstasy sellers we interviewed for this study.

## **Methods**

We employed the grounded theory approach, which entails the simultaneous process of data collection, analysis and theory construction. We began by expanding our contacts, with the help of our Community Consultants in social worlds of Ecstasy sellers. We asked our interviewees to refer project staff to fellow sellers and to the people from whom their purchased supplies

employing the snowball or chain referral sampling method. While field observations were important to understanding the Ecstasy scene and to help us to develop the sampling frame, fieldwork was less successful than we had imagined for recruiting study participants. Our most successful recruitment strategy was to rely on Community Consultants and study participants to vouch for our commitment to keeping interviewees' confidentiality and to the eventual presentation of Ecstasy selling from the interviewees' perspectives.

### **Description of the Sample**

Fifty-seven (71%) were men, 22 (28%) women, and 1 (1%) transgender with a median age of 26. Fifty (63%) of the interviewees were White, 8(10%) African-American, 7 (9%) Latino, 7 (9%) of mixed ethnicity, 5 (6%) Asian, 1 (1%) Native American, 1 (1%) Arab, and 1 (1%) refused to be categorized. Sixty-one (76%) were single, 12 (15%) were living with a partner, 5 (11%) were married, and 2 (3%) were divorced or separated. Only 10 (13%) interviewees had children.

Seventy-eight (98%) had at least a high school diploma. Thirty-six (45%) had some college education, 10 (13%) had an associate degree, 21 (26%) had a bachelor's degree, and 2 (3%) had graduate degrees. Twenty-nine (36%) were in school at the time of the interview. Of those, 14 were attending full-time, and 15 part-time.

During the 12 months prior to the interview, 70 (88%) were employed. Of those, 49 were employed full-time and 21 part-time. Employment-based earnings ranged from 280 to 8,000 dollars per month with a median monthly



income of 1,600 dollars. Income generated by drug sales ranged from 15 to 12,550 dollars per month, with a median drug sales income of 315 dollars per month. Interviewees' total annual income for the 12 months prior to the interview ranged from 3,500 to 212,592 dollars per year, with a median yearly income of 25,800 dollars. All but one interviewee were housed.

## **Becoming an Ecstasy Seller**

### *Ecstasy Use*

All of the interviewees had used Ecstasy. The median age at which they first tried Ecstasy was 19. The age in which they first used Ecstasy regularly was 20. Ninety-three percent had used Ecstasy prior to selling it.

During the 12 months prior to the interview, interviewees used Ecstasy from 1 to 120 days with a median of 10 days. Three interviewees had not used Ecstasy in the 12 months prior to the interview. The average number of hits used during one use episode ranged from half a hit to 4 hits with a median of 1.5 hits.

### *Initiation into Ecstasy Sales*

The median age of first sale was 21 years. Only two interviewees had sold Ecstasy before they began using. We identified three major types of initiation in to Ecstasy selling. 1) Drifting into dealing or being an Ecstasy user who knew a seller and began by buying for their friends. 2) We called the second group Established Sellers who added Ecstasy to their product line. 3) The third mode we characterized as entrepreneurial or profit motivated.

## **Resisting the Dealer Identity**

The stigmatized dealer identities inspired participants to distance themselves from its negative images and to construct more positive identities for themselves. From our interviewees' perspectives, they were not real dealers because they were not full time sellers, only sold to friends and did not market or push their drugs. Further, interviewees ranked themselves as mid or low level sellers irrespective of their actual sales levels. Finally, respondents felt that the psychoactive properties of the drugs they sold differentiated them from sellers of other drugs. They saw themselves as quality assurance agents for their customers.

Even long term sellers of other drugs saw their Ecstasy sales in a different light. Selling Ecstasy was not perceived to be as criminal or immoral as dealing other drugs because of Ecstasy's reputation as an important, even beneficial experience. Sellers' stake in conventional worlds precluded their adoption of deviant social identities. Sellers constructed their own identities labeling themselves service providers, enablers or facilitators. They often took pride in giving their friends positive drug experiences seeing themselves as providing a service for their communities.

### *Sales Practices*

Unlike findings from other drug distribution studies, where sellers describe detailed business practices, rules for their operations and contingency plans; the sellers we interviewed had very few rules for themselves or for their customers. Most reported their only precautions were to only sell to friends and to not talk

about drugs on the telephone. Participants relied on their friendships with their customers to protect them from theft, violence or police intervention. A majority sold in private or what we call privatized settings and only two interviewees reported engaged in cutting or adulterating the drugs they sold. Most participants had few friends who were Ecstasy sellers (average of five percent), which may have hampered the development of more sophisticated business practices. Ecstasy selling was not a daily activity, since most users used sporadically (on the weekends, for special events or even more infrequently) and sales patterns mirrored customers' use patterns.

### **Social Relationships Between Sellers and Buyers**

Essentially, for most participants it was their friends who made it possible for them to distribute Ecstasy. When asked who their customers were, 80% (64) replied friends and acquaintances. Not only was it convenient and easy to sell within their social networks, these participants trusted their friends to engage in illicit transactions without provoking problems.

While it was less common for the sellers to have a close relationship with their suppliers, most interviewees reported having friendly, business relationships. With some exceptions, participants knew very little about where the Ecstasy they sold came from or how their suppliers priced their product. Many adopted a "don't ask don't tell" policy and were careful not to ask too many questions.

## **The Role of Ecstasy Branding in the Ecstasy Market**

Early on in the project we learned about the importance of Ecstasy brands in understanding the ways in which interviewees evaluated the quality of the pills they bought and sold. Ecstasy manufacturers choose specific symbols for their pills to convey messages to consumers about their product. As we continued to learn the assortment of brand names for Ecstasy from our interview data and online research, it became apparent that there were a few categories of brands used for the marketing of this drug. We divided them into four major categories, although not every brand mentioned or reviewed online fell into one of these groups. The first brand type is designer or status references; some of the examples we came across include: Louis Vuitton, D&G, and Mercedes. Second, there were a number of corporate references in pill brands, including the popular Mitsubishi Ecstasy as well as Motorola. The third type we deemed pop culture since it was clear that popular culture inspired many Ecstasy brand names; Superman and Yellow Decepticons (from the 1980s cartoon series “The Transformers”) are just two examples. Finally, there were miscellaneous colors and shapes that characterized some Ecstasy pill brands, like the popular Blue Dolphins and Green Clovers.

The majority of our sample did not test their Ecstasy regularly. When asked if they tested the Ecstasy they sold, only 26 (32%) said they always tested it. The most frequently reported method for testing Ecstasy was “take it yourself” (67%).

### *The Internet and Ecstasy Brands*

Our tracking of Ecstasy pill brands online revealed consistent crossover between what we heard from interviewees and what we saw on the websites. While a small number of participants talked about checking specific pills online, the replication of brand names from both our interviews and from online research revealed the widespread nature of this branding phenomenon.

### **Outcomes of Ecstasy Sales**

#### *Effects of Sales on Distributors Use*

We knew from our own and others' previous studies of cocaine and marijuana sellers that one of the consequences of drug selling is increased often problematic use by the seller. Ecstasy use patterns did not appear to be related to Ecstasy sales. A number of interviewees claimed to have actually decreased their use as a result of their involvement in the Ecstasy market.

The inability to experience the same euphoria over time and the negative residual effects may explain the interviewees' descriptions of going through "phases" or "streaks" without the regular sustained use patterns common for other drugs (e.g. alcohol, marijuana or cocaine). Long term Ecstasy use is characterized by cycles or phases with peak use periods followed by periods of abstinence. Another possible explanation is that Ecstasy, more so than cocaine or marijuana is viewed as a social drug. With regular habitual use, cocaine and marijuana users often begin to use alone. Our interviewees used Ecstasy almost exclusively in social situations.

The positive consequences of Ecstasy use included enhanced communication, strengthened relationships with people, musical enjoyment and in two cases relief from depression. The positive outcomes of selling included social status and increased sociability.

Ecstasy has the reputation on the street as a “sex drug.” Interestingly, although participants talked about enjoying the sensual aspects of the experience about half the sample described the experience as sensual but not necessarily sexual. The other half enjoyed sexual experiences while intoxicated but told us that timing was important either starting sexual activities before they “came on” or having sex while they were in the comedown period. Women as well as men were equally divided on the issue of Ecstasy and sex.

#### *Negative Consequences of Ecstasy Using*

The most troublesome consequence of Ecstasy use was the hangover that followed the next day or two days later. Interviewees did not experience these low feelings after every episode or in the same intensity or duration. Ecstasy hangovers were described from mildly debilitating - feeling tired maybe a little cranky - to serious depression lasting several weeks even months. Interviewees reported that the severity of the hangover increased with long term (several months) increased levels of use.

#### *Positive Consequences of Ecstasy Selling*

Friends motivated them to begin selling Ecstasy and opportunities to use Ecstasy with their friends kept many of them in business. The psychopharmacological properties of Ecstasy empathy enhancement and

anxiety reduction increased the social bonds between buyer and seller. Ecstasy sellers enjoyed giving their friends a unique experience and having Ecstasy to sell increased socializing for some and made them feel special or important.

### *Negative Consequences of Ecstasy Selling*

Selling Ecstasy was not without its problems. Fifty-four percent reported that they wanted to quit selling giving a wide variety of reasons the top four were “high risk,” “it’s illegal,” “don’t want to go to jail,” and “stress.” We were surprised by how little our interviewees knew about the actual legal consequences they could face if they were arrested. Almost the entire sample (96%) believed it was highly unlikely or unlikely they would experience a law enforcement encounter.

They also had concerns about the potential health consequences for their customers and the problems of handling problematic customers. A few participants had experienced drug related violence. But a much more subtle theme emerged, especially for those immersed in legal careers. These sellers wanted to quit dealing because it no longer fit it into their lifestyles or the lifestyles they aspired to achieve. In the near future, they saw themselves maturing out of Ecstasy selling and taking up the conventional social roles that had been awaiting them all along.

### **Criminal Justice Implications**

Ecstasy’s unique psychopharmacology, its benign reputation among users and the relationships between buyers and sellers combine to present challenges to traditional criminal justice interventions. These sellers relied on the rather unsophisticated strategies of only selling to friends and not talking about drugs

on the telephone. The sporadic nature of the drug transactions presents a further problem. Routines are easier to track for anyone including law enforcement. All of these participants were housed so they had the privilege of access to private settings for drug sales.

“Buy and bust” strategies may be more difficult to implement in a drug market characterized by social bonding and possibly enhanced by the Ecstasy using experience. Traditional law enforcement infiltration strategies may be problematic since the market seems to be made up of mostly freelancing sellers with the organized manufacturing or importing operations remaining far away from the street and out of police surveillance. We found the Internet to be an important source of information about what was available on the street.

Interviewees had no idea what the legal penalties for selling Ecstasy were and the advertisement of the actual penalties may work as a deterrent. While these sellers were winding down from Ecstasy use and sales, they were becoming interested in powder cocaine as an alternative, seeing cocaine as “less of a commitment time wise” and without the immediate after effects. Out of the frying pan, into the fire.



## **INTRODUCTION**

This is the final report for National Institute of Justice funded 2-year (2002-2004) qualitative study of Ecstasy drug markets in the San Francisco Bay Area. Ecstasy's psychopharmacology, reputation among users and the nature of the buyer and sellers' relationships challenge our current understandings of drug distribution practices. In order to examine the nature of Ecstasy drug markets we interviewed 80 individuals involved in Ecstasy distribution who were 18 years of age or older and resided in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The first phase of the project consisted of key informant interviews and field observations in private settings where Ecstasy was used or sold. During the second phase of the study, employing ethnographic sampling techniques, we recruited 80 sellers who had sold or exchanged five or more Ecstasy doses five or more times in the six months prior to interview. We determined the appropriate age, gender, ethnic and sexual orientation breakdowns of our sample predicated on our analyses of the data collected during the first phase. We begin this report by describing the nature of Ecstasy, reviewing the literature on drug markets and describing our methods. The remainder of the report is made up of six sections entitled: Becoming an Ecstasy Seller; Resisting the Dealer Identity; The Social Relationships of Buyers and Sellers; The Role of Branding in Ecstasy Markets and Outcomes of Selling Ecstasy. The report ends with a summary and a discussion of the findings criminal justice implications.

### *What is Ecstasy?*

**MDMA** (3,4-methylenedioxyamphetamine), popularly known as “Ecstasy,” “E,” or “X,” is a psychoactive substance related to both amphetamines and mescaline. While labeled as a psychedelic drug, it also possesses stimulant properties (Beck, 1986; Rosenbaum, Morgan and Beck, 1995; Seymour, 1986; Shulgin, 1985). Ecstasy users often experience increased energy, an enhanced sense of pleasure, feelings of empathy, relaxation, and decreased anxiety. The physical effects include a decrease in appetite, involuntary teeth clenching, nausea, chills or sweating, increases in heart rate and blood pressure, and muscle tension. MDMA is most commonly taken orally in tablet form, although it can be smoked or snorted (or very rarely injected) as a powder. Although the term “Ecstasy” is used to refer to MDMA, other amphetamine analogues, including MDA, MDE (or “MDEA”) and MBDB, are sometimes used as substitutes. They all belong to a group of drugs called “phenethylamines”, and are more specifically referred to as “entactogens” because of their similar effects (Milroy, 1999; Nichols, 1986; Nichols and Oberlender, 1990). More than any of the other club drugs, MDMA has been associated with dance clubs and raves.

[DEA, 1999; Henry, 1992; NIDA, 1999b, 2000a; Peroutka, 1990]

Ecstasy can be classified as both relatively new and old. Old in the sense that its first real appearance in the U.S. occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s primarily as a potentially useful therapeutic drug, and by the mid 1980s a relatively extensive therapeutic literature existed (Greer and Tolbert, 1990; Shulgin and Shulgin, 1991). (In fact, MDMA had been first synthesized in 1912

in Germany and patented in 1914 [Beck and Rosenbaum, 1994].) However, after it became classified as a Schedule 1 Drug in 1984, interest in its use declined and little epidemiological data was collected. Today in the United States, a body of sociological literature is growing beginning with the work done by Petroutka (1988, 1990) and work conducted by ourselves and other researchers at our research institute, the Institute for Scientific Analysis in San Francisco (Beck, 1986, 1990; Beck and Morgan, 1986; Beck and Rosenbaum, 1990, 1994; Rosenbaum and Doblin, 1991; Rosenbaum, Morgan and Beck, 1995).

In the early years of Ecstasy use it became the ideal drug for "prolonged trance-dancing" (Beck and Rosenbaum, 1994:54), a feature emphasized by many European researchers. For example, Lenton, Boys and Norcross (1997) discovered that Ecstasy was the only drug that was used by more respondents in association with a rave than in any other setting. In fact 65 percent of his sample had first used Ecstasy at a rave. Lenton and his colleagues further noted that 75 percent of his respondents said that Ecstasy was the preferred drug of choice at raves, a finding also supported by Ward and Fitch (1998) who compared various studies on drug use at dance events in London (See also Pearson et al., 1991). Newcombe refers to it as "the prototypical drug of the rave scene, the mental state it produces being intimately related to the sounds, designs and concepts of house music culture" (1992:14). But the attraction of MDMA was not only based on its apparent suitability for "prolonged trance dancing", it also possessed a number of additionally attractive characteristics. First, it was identified as separate from the "sleazy and unhygienic lifestyle associated with heroin"

(Redhead, 1993:97), and second, its street name of "Ecstasy" hinted at a more pleasurable and non-problematic experience, especially in contrast to the perceived highly "addictive" qualities of heroin and crack.

In 2004 Ecstasy is used and sold at dance parties, clubs, concerts, in private homes – that is in wide variety of social gatherings and settings. For this study we concentrated on finding and interviewing sellers who sold in private settings. However, 39 percent (n = 31) of our sellers had sold at clubs or raves in the past and described those experiences for us as well. At time of interview all of the interviewees were selling primarily in private settings.

***Study Site: San Francisco Bay Area***

The wider context of the study is important to note. Our study examines Ecstasy distribution practices and use in San Francisco and the greater Bay Area. It is important not to underestimate the significance of San Francisco's diverse, liberal community when looking at its drug markets. According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2002, the population estimate was 764,049 individuals residing in this seven-square miles city. In 2000 the ethnic makeup of San Francisco consisted of 49.7% white, 7.8% African American, 30.8% Asian, 14.1% Hispanic/Latino, 6.5% reported other races, 4.3% reported 2 or more races (total is greater than 100% due to multiple race reporting) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). A majority of San Francisco's registered voters are Democrats or members of left-wing parties ([www.SFPolitics.com](http://www.SFPolitics.com) 2004). San Francisco, along with other Bay Area cities such as Oakland and Berkeley, is considered a sanctuary for medical marijuana users. Considering this social milieu, it is not surprising that

drug use is not entirely demonized. In fact many drug users that we have interviewed during previous projects believe that San Francisco's drugs are more plentiful and of higher quality, and this is particularly true for the Ecstasy sellers we interviewed for this study.

For example, one 26-year-old, white female seller who was a native San Franciscan told us how grateful she was to be part of the San Francisco drug scene. Although she did not have any definite knowledge regarding the actual origins of her Ecstasy, she believed that it was likely to have been manufactured somewhere in the Bay Area.

*Um, well, I was very, very lucky because I think where I grew up and where I ended up, there were a lot of resources, a lot of sources here in San Francisco for me. And because of the people that I knew who happened to be involved in the drug scene and just, you know, people who knew a lot about drugs, I was very privileged to be able to get quality drugs...I mean, you know, you hear about a lot of [Ecstasy] coming from Europe and other places, but just the fact that it's always been so available here in San Francisco, I have a feeling that a lot of it is made here in the area or very close by or at least in a location where it's easily transported to us. (02)*

In the following this 30-year-old white Midwesterner's account echoes reports from others who came here from other parts of the US:

*Well, I've definitely encountered much more [Ecstasy] in the West Coast than the Midwest. And I actually had a friend who lived in [name of Midwestern city] that when he'd come visit, he would take like 20 pills back on the plane, and he would sell them for \$30 each in [same city]. So I just- I feel like there's not a whole lot going on in the Midwest. I don't know about the East Coast, but I definitely feel like San Francisco's a hub, though.*

Additionally, San Francisco has long been associated with music, dance clubs and rave-like gatherings. As Beck and Rosenbaum (1994) point out, the

Avalon Ballroom and the Fillmore Auditorium were famous in the 1960s for dance events, hallucinogenic experiences, electronic sound and flashing lights. This City's association with new developments in dance music and dance clubs has continued throughout the 1990s and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. San Francisco's importance in the dance club scene has been attributed to a number of elements including its role in the 1960s acid rock and psychedelic movement, the strength of its gay community and their involvement in the club scene, and even to its close proximity to Silicon Valley and the development of "cyber/tech" culture (Push and Silcott, 2000; Reynolds, 1999; Silcott, 1999). Today, the music and club scene is vastly diverse, and the San Francisco Bay Area possesses a large dance community with a strong passion for music and dance. Since Ecstasy is considered a "club drug", there is a logical link between San Francisco's dance community and the drug. Along with more public venues where Ecstasy is sold, in the course of this study we discovered that Ecstasy is also used in private groupings (e.g. in bars, on picnics, in dorms and camping trips) and in private parties in private homes or in hotel suites booked for Ecstasy use parties.

### ***Ecstasy Use***

Although Americans have used Ecstasy for non-therapeutic reasons since the 1980s, only recently have studies of Ecstasy use emerged in this country. The studies that have been conducted have dealt mainly with the neurological effects of Ecstasy, recently revealing the possibility of impaired cognitive abilities and memory loss with repeated use of the drug (Halpern et al., 2004; Cowan et al., 2003; Sprague et al., 2003; Schmued, 2003; Byrne et al., 2000). In recent

years, some European nations have initiated research into Ecstasy use and its effects, corresponding to its emerging popularity in countries like England and Australia (Burgess et al., 2000; Gouzoulis-Mayfrank et al., 2000; Parott et al., 2000; Pedersen & Skrondal, 1999; Reneman et al., 2000; Rodgers, 2000; Topp et al., 1999; Wareing et al., 2000). In the U.S., recent sociological literature on Ecstasy use and distribution within the general population includes the work done by Peroutka (1990), Boyd and colleagues (2003), Klitzman and colleagues (2002) and Jean Schensul and Merrill Singers group's studies of club drug users (see Eiserman et al., 2003).

One major problem associated with Ecstasy doses identified in these contemporary studies is the possible addition of adulterants. International Ecstasy use research indicates that what is sold as Ecstasy, is often more than just MDMA (EMCDDA, 1999; Calafat et al., 2000; Fox & Thompson, 1997 referenced in Ward & Fitch, 1998; Sherlock et al., 1999; Saunders, 1997; Forsyth, 1995; McElrath & McEvoy, 2002). Saunders (1993) saw Ecstasy as a term used for MDMA, MDA, MDEA, a combination of these substances, or one or more of these substances combined with other substances. In spite of the fact that Ecstasy tablets and capsules are often sold with brand names and logos, the content of individual doses varies widely. In Western Australia, between 1995 and 1996, content analysis of MDMA revealed that 30 percent contained only MDMA, 42 percent only MDEA, 7 percent of the tablets had both, 7 percent contained no psychoactive substance and finally 14 percent contained a number of different illicit and licit substances (Lenton et al., 1997).

In the U.S., DanceSafe, a non profit harm reduction organization providing information and offering test kits for testing MDMA - estimates that up to 20 percent of pills sold at raves contained a substance other than MDMA, and 40 percent of the pills sent to their analysis program were not MDMA at all (Cloud, 2000). According to the recent results of DanceSafe testing in the United States, adulterants used in Ecstasy tablets include DXM (a legal cough suppressant and dissociative anaesthetic), PMA (a psychoactive stimulant), DOB (a hallucinogen), PCP, Ketamine, 4-MTA (an amphetamine analogue), amphetamines, as well as other ingredients used in over-the-counter medications (ephedrine, acetaminophen, caffeine, etc.). Some of these adulterants, such as DXM, PMA and DOB, can cause severe, potentially fatal adverse reactions and can be more dangerous than MDMA (DanceSafe, 2000; Erowid, 2000a, 2000b). Ecstasy is distinctive, as it refers not necessarily to one drug but possibly to several substances.

The movement of raves (all night dance parties) and dance culture into mainstream youth culture may be closely linked to the increasing popularity of Ecstasy use. Although researchers and especially devotees of current rave music have debated the relative importance of drugs versus the music (Reynolds, 1999), it is clear that the elements of dance, music and drugs are intimately tied together in the current culture of dance clubs and dance parties. Just as drugs are inextricably linked to the music, so also is the music an integral part of the drug experience (Dobkin de Rios, 1990). Ecstasy has gained a certain notoriety from the “rave scene” which emerged in Europe in the mid to



late 1980s and began as an underground phenomenon in United States' cities in the early 1990s. Some have proposed that raves and clubs are 'drug havens' where sales occur rampantly, but Lenton and Davidson's (1999) work in West Australia reveals that most rave-goers purchased their drugs days prior to the event. Clearly raves, clubs and underground parties provide a setting for Ecstasy use, but as our findings indicate private settings may be more conducive to sales transactions.

### ***Drug Distribution***

Early research on drug markets attended to drug selling as a social problem (Cuskey and Wathey, 1982; Inciardi, 1986; Inciardi, Lockwood & Pottieger, 1983). In the late 1980s the emergence of crack cocaine sparked an upsurge in drug market research (Bourgois, 1995; Fagan, 1995, 1994; Mieczkowski, 1994; Bourgois & Dunlap, 1993; Baskin, Sommers & Fagan, 1993; Wilson, 1993; Dunlap, Johnson & Manwar, 1994; Dunlap & Johnson, 1996; Levitt & Venkatesh, 2000; Reuter, MacCoun & Murphy 1990; Hagedorn, 1994). The most recent growth in heroin use and the decline of crack cocaine's popularity was noted by Inciardi and Harrison (1998) and Jacobs (1999), but little recent work has been done in the area of heroin sales (but see Denton, 2001).

Extensive research on drug distribution and drug markets has been conducted regarding illicit drugs such as cocaine, heroin and marijuana (Adler, 1990; Akhtar & South, 2000; Bourgois, 1989; Buerger, 1991; Curtis, 1998; Eck & Gersh, 2000; Fagan, 1989; Goldstein et al., 1984; Hamid et al., 1997; Johnson, 1973; Johnson et al., 1992; Johnson et al., 2000; Kleiman, 1988; Knutsson,

2000; Mieczkowski, 1990; Murphy & Arroyo, 2000; Murphy, Reinerman and Waldorf, 1990; Murphy et al., 1994; Renger et al., 2000; Ruggiero, 2000; VanNostrand & Tewksbury, 1999; Waldorf, Murphy, Reinerman and Joyce, 1977; Waldorf, Reinerman and Murphy, 1991; 1994; Waterston, 1993; Weiss, Kluger and McCoy, 2000; Wendel & Curtis, 2000; Wendel, 2004; Williams, 1989). Such research has established the foundation for future analyses on emerging drug markets. For example, Wendel and Curtis' (2000) ethnographic studies of a variety of drug markets within Manhattan's Lower East Side offer a novel method of comparing distinct drug distribution networks. They found differences by the social (freelance distributors, socially bonded businesses, and corporate-style distributors), technical (street-level sales, indoor sales, and delivery sales) and organizational aspects of distribution. The focus of this study was on heroin, cocaine, crack and marijuana. We found that in the San Francisco Bay Area Ecstasy is distributed for the most part by freelance distributors and sellers use cell phones and to a lesser extent the Internet to conduct their sales. The focus of our research was on sellers who sell in private settings.

The DEA has attempted to characterize the Ecstasy market and has had some success in identifying a few major distribution cartels. They have discovered that the Ecstasy drug market is primarily controlled by Western European-based drug traffickers. Israeli Organized Crime syndicates have joined Russian Organized Crime syndicates to dominate major distribution networks in Europe and the U.S. (DEA, 2000b). An estimated 80 percent of Ecstasy is imported from the Netherlands and Belgium, where it is thought to be primarily

manufactured. This recent evidence, associating organized crime with the Ecstasy market, indicates that traditional distribution enterprises have realized this valuable profit-making opportunity. Selling Ecstasy has become a highly lucrative industry; the manufacturing of a single dose costs less than a dollar, and the street value is twenty to forty dollars a dose (AFP, 2000; Cloud, 2000; Krane, 1999; McPhee, 2000; ONDCP, 2001; The Christian Science Monitor, 2000; Wiggins, 2000).

Most of the current research on Ecstasy selling has been conducted in Europe. One British study explored rave culture drug dealing, including Ecstasy selling, and Ward (2000) reports that most of the sellers interviewed had “drifted” unintentionally into dealing. Our own past research on drug distribution, specifically on cocaine dealing, recognized this notion of drifting into selling drugs on a gradual basis (Murphy, Reinerman & Waldorf, 1990). Many of the participants in Ward’s study did not even regard themselves as dealers, as they sold Ecstasy and other drugs to an extended network of friends. Parker (2000) notes, through his research on young British consumers and sellers of a variety of drugs, particularly cannabis, Ecstasy and amphetamines, that it was not always clear who was considered a dealer and who was simply a customer. While 77 percent of the study participants claimed that they had sold drugs to friends, they more often did not perceive themselves as drug dealers. They were typically users who would sometimes “sort out” drugs for friends. The majority of Parker’s young adult participants stayed away from “real” dealers, identifying the deliverer of the drugs as safe because s/he was either a friend or a friend of a

friend. As we will discuss in detail later on in this report, sellers in our study also resisted adopting drug dealer identities and characterized their relationships with their customers as friendship based however, with a few exceptions their relationships with their suppliers were “all business.”

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Theoretical Framework***

We began with guidelines from our own previous work on drug sales and the available literature about other drug markets to direct our investigation. However, as Agar (1993:524) notes: "When the research question is more global - Who are these people and what are they doing? - then ethnography provides the answers."

We employed what Glaser and Strauss refer to as the grounded theory approach. This entails the simultaneous process of data collection, analysis and theory construction (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). That is, as the data were collected, they were immediately analyzed for patterns and themes, taken back to the field for more study and analyzed further.

In an exploratory and descriptive approach to the issue of interest, we gathered detailed information about the characteristics of Ecstasy sellers, the influence of the nature of the buyer/seller relationship and the nature of drug markets on Ecstasy sales. The theoretical framework guiding these analyses was predicated on the assumption that in order to understand drug markets the investigator must begin with an understanding of the relationships between buyers and sellers and the dynamic social contexts in which drug markets are

embedded and these relationships are constructed and maintained (Curtis & Wendel, 2000; Murphy & Arroyo, 2000).

In our own work on becoming a cocaine seller, Matza's notion of drift, originally applied to the fluid and noncommittal movement between deviant and conventional social worlds, was very useful in conceptualizing participants' accounts of their modes of entry into Ecstasy selling social roles (Matza, 1964; 1969; Murphy, Reinerman & Waldorf, 1990). Matza's drift and Parker's conceptualization of identity transformation (e.g., friends vs. *real* dealers) helped us to understand the social constructions of Ecstasy sellers as not dealers but "enablers" or "service" providers.

### ***Sampling and Data Collection Methods***

We began by expanding our contacts, with the help of our Community Consultants and other contacts. We asked our interviewees to refer project staff to fellow sellers and to the people from whom they purchased supplies. This method, snowball or chain referral sampling, (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Watters & Biernacki, 1989) has been employed extensively by the principal investigator on numerous studies of drug use and drug sales (Murphy, 1987; Murphy, 1994; Murphy & Arroyo, 2000; Murphy, Reinerman & Waldorf, 1990; Murphy & Rosenbaum, 1999; Sales & Murphy, 2000; Murphy & Waldorf, 1994; Waldorf, Reinerman & Murphy, 1991).

### ***Field Observations and Key Informant Interviews***

During the first months of the project, our first task was to explore the private social settings in which Ecstasy was distributed. While conducting field

observations, field workers described the nature of the research project to anyone with whom they have more than a casual conversation. Observations were conducted at five parties in private homes and ten public parties in clubs and warehouses. The following excerpt from field notes illustrates the importance of conducting observations to understanding Ecstasy scenes:

*The Cyberfest (promoted by Coolworld) massive started at 4pm and I arrived at the Cow Palace at 8:50pm. While I was in line to get a parking pass, I saw numerous taxicabs driving in to drop off passengers. The parking attendants passed out flyers that had a map of the inside of the venue, a schedule of music times and a list of items not allowed inside. These prohibited items included backpacks, food and beverages, glass, studded jewelry, markers/paint cans, surgical masks, Vick's vapo rub, alcohol, video cameras, weapons, glow sticks and illegal substances. The flyer also noted, "Be advised that Cyberfest is a 'Drug Free Zone'. As I drove in I could hear the music from the inside of my car. There were two large parking areas, one close to the building and another a little farther away. I parked in the far one and sat in my car for a little while to see what people were doing. The lot had not been completely filled yet but there were about five full rows of cars. People were hanging out in and around their cars. Some were drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes. There were empty beer cans in and around the parking lot. I could also smell some marijuana coming from a car close to mine. I did not see any other drug use occurring however later on I talked to some people who said they took Ecstasy and other drugs in their cars before getting in line. I sat in the parking lot and observed for about 20 minutes and then proceeded to the get in line.*

Later on in the notes:

*There was no designated chill area, but it seemed like most people were relaxing and hanging out in the stadium seats in the main room. I could tell that people were smoking marijuana in this area because I could smell it. People also put glow stick light shows on for each other. Groups of about 2-5 people sat in the seats while someone would stand in front of them and wave glow sticks creating visual stimulation. "Stringing", where people use glow sticks attached to strings, primarily occurred in the other music rooms because there was more open space to move them around. People chilled and sat on the floor against the walls of the other music rooms. Most of these people were visibly on Ecstasy. They seemed really mesmerized by the "stringing". Some sat in groups and massaged each other. There were some couples cuddled up together, making out along the perimeter. There were also groups of people who sat in circles away from the walls around the dance floors.*

While field observations were important to understanding the Ecstasy scene, fieldwork was less successful than we had imagined for recruiting study participants. In the private party settings we observed party participants that already knew the fieldworker and without that personal connection we would not have been invited. In more public settings, observing Ecstasy sales was very difficult. We rarely actually witnessed a transaction. When we began interviewing we found that while some interviewees had sold Ecstasy in public (usually old style rave events) in the past, at time of interview most of our sample only sold in private settings. Most of the users they knew bought their Ecstasy before going out and ingested it before entering a club or party. Our most successful recruitment strategies were to rely on Community Consultants and study participants to vouch for our commitment to keeping interviewees' confidentiality and to the eventual presentation of Ecstasy sales from the distributor's perspective.

### ***The Interview***

The interview process began with the initial contact with staff or previous interviewees. If the potential participant met inclusion criteria, they were informed of human subjects and confidentiality procedures and an interview appointment was scheduled. At the time of interview, the interviewer began by acquainting the participant with the nature of the study and the human subjects protections. After the interviewee read and signed the Consent Form the interview began with the tape-recorded depth interview portion, followed by the questionnaire. The interviews took two to three hours and we provided an

honorarium of 100 dollars. Likewise, key informants and other locators were provided a remuneration of 50 dollars for their time spent doing the important work of recruiting participants. Once informed consent procedures were completed, we focused the interview on the following domains: individuals' history of drug use and sales, sellers' other lifestyle issues, identity, marketplace characteristics (including pricing, quality control, levels and settings of sales), customers' demographics, buyer and seller relationships, descriptions of distribution hierarchies, and from the sellers' perspective, the role of prevention efforts, criminal justice pressures and enforcement practices on all of the above.

### ***Questionnaires***

The questionnaire included basic demographics, family of origin information, living situation, schooling, employment, drug sales and drug use, and criminal involvement histories, current Ecstasy acquisition processes, quantities purchased and sold, relationship to other distributor(s), sales practices, personal Ecstasy use histories, customer demographics, testing/adulteration practices, attempts to discontinue use/sales, social and health consequences of use and sales and criminal justice involvements.

### **Description of the Sample**

Of the 80 Ecstasy sellers interviewed, 57 (71%) were men, 22 (28%) women, and 1 (1%) transgender between the ages of 19 and 60 with a median age of 26. Fifty (63%) of the interviewees were white, 8 (10%) African-American, 7 (9%) Latino, 7 (9%) of mixed ethnicity, 5 (6%) Asian, 1 (1%) Native American, 1 (1%) Arab, and 1 (1%) refused to be categorized. Sixty-one (76%) were single,



12 (15%) were living with a partner, 5 (11%) were married, and 2 (3%) were divorced or separated. Only 10 (13%) interviewees had children.

Seventy-eight (98%) of the Ecstasy sellers interviewed had at least a high school diploma. Thirty-six (45%) had some college education, 10 (13%) had an associate degree, 21 (26%) had a bachelor's degree, and 2 (3%) had graduate degrees. Twenty-nine (36%) of the interviewees were in school at the time of the interview. Of those, 14 were attending full-time, and 15 were attending part-time.

During the 12 months prior to the interview, 70 (88%) were employed. Of those, 49 were employed full-time and 21 were employed part-time.

Employment-based earnings ranged from 280 to 8,000 dollars per month with a median monthly income of 1,600 dollars. Income generated by drug sales ranged from 15 to 12,550 dollars per month, with a median drug sales income of 315 dollars per month. Interviewees' total annual income for the 12 months prior to the interview ranged from 3,500 to 212,592 dollars per year, with a median yearly income of 25,800 dollars.

All but one interviewee were housed with half of them living in an apartment or studio and 39 (49%) living in a house. Based on our interview data, Ecstasy sellers were predominantly white, male, middle to upper-middle class, and in their twenties.

### **Criminal Justice Involvement**

Twenty-eight interviewees (35%) had been arrested as juveniles, but only 15 (19%) were convicted. Charges mentioned were: shoplifting, joyriding, party without a license, drunk and disorderly conduct, possession of stolen goods,

assault and battery on an officer, possession of marijuana, assault, petty theft, DUI, 2<sup>nd</sup> degree looting, runaway, loitering, driving w/o a license, contributing to the delinquency of minors, resisting arrest, violation of probation, and grand theft auto. Eight interviewees (10%) served time ranging from 3 days to 240 days.

Twenty-one interviewees (26%) were arrested as adults. Charges mentioned were: selling marijuana to a minor, minor under the influence, DUI, counterfeiting, obstruction of justice, public intoxication, robbery, domestic violence, outstanding warrant, drug possession, possession of paraphernalia, marijuana sales, solicitation, forgery, bank robbery, graffiti, disorderly conduct, and assault. Twenty-five interviewees served time in jail ranging from 1 day to 180 days. Two interviewees served time in prison, one for 18 months, and the other for 17 years. Only one interviewee was arrested for selling Ecstasy. He was arrested twice serving 4 months in jail for the first conviction. Sentencing for the second conviction was still pending at the time of the interview.

## **BECOMING AN ECSTASY SELLER**

### **Ecstasy Use**

All of the interviewees had used Ecstasy. The age at which they first tried Ecstasy ranged from 14 to 56 years old, with a median of 19 years of age. The age in which they first used Ecstasy regularly also ranged from 14 to 56, but with a median of 20 years of age. Seventy-four interviewees (93%) had used Ecstasy prior to begin selling it.

During the 12 months prior to the interview, interviewees used Ecstasy from 1 to 120 days with a median of 10 days. Three interviewees had not used

Ecstasy in the 12 months prior to the interview. The average number of hits of Ecstasy used during one use episode ranged from half a hit to 4 hits with a median of 1.5 hits. When asked where they used Ecstasy most often, 44 (55%) mentioned public places and 33 (41%) mentioned private places (3 did not use in the 12 months prior to the interview).

### **Other Drug Sales**

During the 12 months prior to the interview, interviewees sold drugs worth between 20 dollars and 12,550 dollars per month, with a median quantity of 325 dollars per month. Fourteen of the interviewees (32%) had a monthly income from drug sales of over 1,000 dollars per month. On average, all drug sales accounted for 13 percent of their total monthly income. Drugs sold other than Ecstasy included: marijuana, cocaine, prescription drugs, mushrooms, DMT, methamphetamine, somas, Xanax, Valium, acid and hashish.

### **Initiation into Ecstasy Sales**

The age at which interviewees first sold Ecstasy ranged from 15 to 56 years old, with a median of 21 years of age. We asked interviewees how much time elapsed from the first time they sold Ecstasy until they were selling it regularly (at least once a month). Thirteen (16%) immediately began selling Ecstasy on a regular basis. Twenty-nine (36%) began selling regularly a month after the initial sale. Twelve (15%) interviewees began selling regularly a year after the first sale and nine (11%) began two years after the initial sale. The time between the first sale and regular Ecstasy sales for the rest of the sample ranged from 1 month up to 8 years.

Two interviewees sold Ecstasy before they began using. One sold a year before initial use; the other sold two years before. The rest of the sample began selling Ecstasy after their initial use. Twenty-nine (36%) interviewees began selling right away, 13 (16%) began selling a year after their first use, 12 (15%) began selling two years after initial use. The median period of time between first use and first sales was one year; the longest was eleven years.

Our sample's initiation into selling Ecstasy bears similarities to the extant drug market literature. Many of our participants did not make conscious decisions to become drug dealers and instead found opportunities to either help friends gain access to drugs or to make a little money on the side. Similarly, Murphy and colleagues' (1990) study participants gradually drifted into dealing through five modes of becoming a cocaine seller: go-between, stash dealer, connoisseur, apprenticeship and expansion of existing product line. Numerous researchers have found that one of the most common motivations to begin selling drugs is to fund the sellers' drug use (Atkyns and Hanneman, 1974; Waldorf, 1973; Murphy et al., 1990; Tunnell, 1993). There were many "stash dealers" among our sample. After using Ecstasy for about a year, this 26-year-old white male realized the cost benefit of buying enough Ecstasy to defer his own costs and began selling regularly. In the following he describes how he began selling.

*Well I considered myself lucky that I knew this guy I was getting it from, I was real close to him and I always felt like I was getting higher quality aside from my friends. And when I'd- would just- maybe I would buy five and give them all to my friends at exactly the price that I'd paid for them. And then all of a sudden I realized that my friends wanted to get it from me 'cause they liked what I had so from that point on...I would get them at 15*

*dollars a piece be able to sell them to my friends for 20. So I would get five or to ten at first and be able to do one or two for free and then that was a steady thing that from as soon as I realized that I could make money off doing it or-not make money but do mine for free. That's how it started. (26)*

Some participants expressed frustrations with relying on a dealer to get Ecstasy when they needed it. Becoming a dealer allowed them to gain control over access. A 26-year-old white male who was a frustrated customer describes how he grew tired of being at his dealer's mercy:

*I mean the reason I became a seller was 'cause I hated being a customer, I hated my dealer, you know what I mean, like I can only imagine some people felt the same way about me, you know what I mean...I became one because I didn't want to be at someone else's mercy. (36)*

#### *Drifting into Dealing*

Thirty-seven percent of our participants drifted into dealing and began their sales careers by acting as what Murphy and colleagues' called go-betweens. These "middlemen" had access to a good connection and started "hooking up" friends at their request. A 24-year-old white male described this often-serendipitous process:

*I started to get a job at uh [name of mall] and then there was a shoe store next to the mall, [name of store] or uh where I worked and the guy there, I became friends with him and uh he dealt E from time to time. And he was uh, and it was one of those things like I'd never really tried anything like that before or anything and he was like, 'Well you know here you go' and hook me up one time for like, it was ridiculously cheap, like five buck or something a piece. And I uh did it, had fun you know it was good experience. Went the next weekend to a couple of raves with him and stuff like that more and more and more. And then it went from casual use to friends I had at [name of community college] would say, 'Oh hey since you're getting such a good price could you hook me up, could you hook me up with this, could you hook me up with this.' And it became bigger and bigger and bigger off that. (03)*

A 24-year-old white female interviewee was close friends with a dealer and started out getting Ecstasy for her friends. In the following quote she describes how she became a middleman.

*Um just because I had good friends that I could trust and it was always good and my other friends started you know knowing it was always good and safe and you could count on it and everything else and because he was my friend, I kinda became the middleman. (28)*

Along with describing the importance of a reliable quality supply, sellers in this group expressed another motivator for Ecstasy sales, social status.

*And I would just distribute it to everyone I knew, and I got all these people who had never tried it before to absolutely love it. I mean it was really kind of neat because that was one of the things that kind of made me feel important. I mean as weird as that may be, I liked being known as the girl who could get you Ecstasy. (Laughs) (02)*

Male sellers said being the “go to” person for Ecstasy increased their status with women. In the following two excerpts a twenty-year-old Latino describes for us the ways in which Ecstasy could be a strategy to get women to spend time with him:

*I started selling because the opportunity arose that I could make a few dollars. But it wasn't even- it wasn't even about the money. It was more about the "I can get it for you. Sure, baby. I can get it for you.*

*I thought I looked cool. That was probably the biggest thing. I thought I looked cool. And uh, yeah, it worked out. You know, I'd go there. I'd sell something. There would always be a girl that would want to fucking hang out. Always be a girl that wanted to hang out. And I was okay with that. I mean I was okay with that. (57)*

Those sellers that we identified as drifting into dealing began by enjoying and valuing the Ecstasy experience. They wanted to continue using Ecstasy themselves and they wanted to provide “the experience” to their friends. Most

saw themselves as providing a service assuring their customers a quality product that was available and reasonably priced. In this way they are similar to the next group of sellers that we have categorized as sellers adding a new drug to their product line.

### *Established Sellers*

Twenty-eight percent of the interviewees were already experienced dealers who added Ecstasy to their product line. For the most part they were weed, cocaine, acid or nitrous sellers who used Ecstasy themselves and found that their customers were interested in Ecstasy as well. A 21-year-old white male described the process:

*I pretty much knew a lot of people that were distributing it. Two of the people that were, they were close friends. So, I was kind of hanging out with the same crowd. You know? And every now and then someone would be like, 'Hey, you know, I'm looking for some. Can you hook me up?' And I've always mostly been the middleman. I mean I've slang weed. I slang mushrooms, and I slang E and weed. So, I mean it wasn't any new thing. So, I was just like, 'Alright. I'll make a call for you.'* (32)

A 60-year-old white male interviewee was involved for ten years in a very organized marijuana sales operation. At the time of interview he was a freelancer who sold cocaine, mushrooms, Foxy methoxy and marijuana in addition to Ecstasy. He described himself as a one-stop shopping operation and would try to find a connection for any drug a customer requested. Acquiring Ecstasy was a service he provided for his regular marijuana customers. He made most of his profit from his marijuana sales.

### *Profit Makers*

Thirty-four percent of our participants realized there was money to be made from selling Ecstasy. Some of them were full-time students who were either unemployed or worked part-time and used Ecstasy sales as a means to supplement their income. Others were entrepreneurs who entered Ecstasy sales in order to make considerable money.

A 20-year-old white female student we interviewed used Ecstasy sales profits to help pay the bills while in school. In the following she describes how the profit potential influenced her decision to start selling.

*We had a really big party um for his birthday and there was, it was like a huge kegger you know like hundreds of people and just throughout the night everyone was asking like if I you know like if I knew where to get it. You know and stuff 'cause all my friends were like partying down and stuff. And the next day you know cleaning up after the party I was like geez you know like people really want this, my friends. I mean I don't even have to go far...And so it was just kind of like geez you know like and it was around the time where I was thinking like you know I gotta come up with something to pay the bills. I just kind of like all fell into place...That was really what um started it. I had been living in a very inexpensive living situation and I moved to um [SF district] and around there...My cost of living like skyrocketed and I don't have, like I'm a full time student, I work at two jobs as much as I can and I just wasn't getting by really. So I was like well I gotta do something else. (79)*

This 26-year-old white male in the music distributor's account of his entrée into high-level Ecstasy sales demonstrates the more business like orientation of the profit-making group. He knew quite a bit about manufacturing Ecstasy and even bankrolled the construction of a lab. Although at time of interview his sales had declined, at his peak he sold about four ounces of powder a month. His supplier was first in line from the manufacturer. In this excerpt from his interview he describes how he made that connection.



*I guess I was somewhat in a unique situation, like I said, the top people came and found me...I was one step away from the chemist, I guess...There was the chemist, there was the acquisitions man who acquired all the chemicals to make the product and he had the one distributor who he worked with. I worked with that distributor. Um they had a limited amount they could make they were working in a limited location. They asked me for, for me to front them 30 thousand dollars so that they could go build a lab. Um, in exchange for me giving them the money to build that lab I was given an incredibly discounted rate um for a quantity of six pounds um, over a period of six months.” (36)*

A number of interviewees started by working for higher-level dealers selling Ecstasy at raves for a percentage of the profits. This 24-year-old white male sold at raves for his dealer.

*Well people like in my situation like [name of dealer]. [Name of dealer] never went out to any raves. And he never dealt anywhere. It was always like his people that he would give stuff to go sell and then they'd take out a percentage take of it. You know and in that sense it was very hard, and as far as I know, it never did go back to him. In any, if anyone got caught it was their ass not his. (03)*

Like other sellers we interviewed, he sold at raves for a very short time preferring private sales for their relative safety from police and difficulties with other sellers.

In the following, another White male seller describes how being in the wrong crew (group of sellers working for the same dealer) cost him 200 pills or two thousand dollars:

*But from what I learned that being at the raves, it was really like, it was a lot of different crews at raves you know. Raves there was [sic] thousands of people so you can't get all the money. But there was different crews there and as I learned how the raves scene goes just I got caught one time but all it was they told me once they caught me, they just wanted me to leave the party. It was like, 'Hey we know you're with this crew. You just gotta go.' So I ended up losing like two hundred pills for nothin'. (38)*

We identified three major types of initiation in to Ecstasy selling. The first mode of entrée is conceptualized as drifting into dealing or being an Ecstasy user

who knew a seller and began by buying Ecstasy for their friends. The second mode of entrée was adding Ecstasy to your product line or sellers who were already selling drugs (e.g. marijuana or cocaine), began using Ecstasy themselves and were able to make connections to buy it for their customers. The third initiation method we have characterized as entrepreneurial or profit motivated. These are sellers began selling Ecstasy because they believed they could make money doing so.

#### *What Constitutes a “Real Dealer”?*

There are numerous definitions of a “dealer” in drug sales literature. Ward (2000) defined a “committed drug seller” as someone whose main source of income is from drug sales. He also noted that drug transactions are the seller’s main focus of day-to-day life. Murphy and colleagues (1990) defined a “dealer” as a person who is “fronted” or buys quantities of drugs for sale. They contend that in order to be considered a dealer one must 1) have one or more reliable suppliers; 2) make regular purchases to be sold in smaller quantities; 3) maintain a consistent stash for sale; and 4) have regular clients or customers.

Our respondents expressed a number of ideas about what constitutes a “dealer.” Similar to the findings from Ward’s work, a 25-year-old white male noted that a dealer is someone who moves large quantities (Ward 2000).

*I mean dealer to me like is more like, you know, just mad, large amounts of quantities or whatever, you know...someone who’s just moving lots of pills. I mean lots, though. You know? I don’t think a person that has like- I would even say like even a couple hundred pills, a few hundred pills, like I wouldn’t even really consider them a dealer per say. I mean they just have ‘em you know? And usually they’ll end up getting dispersed through friends or whatever, you know? Like, you know, I’d say anything over like 300 pills may be a dealer.” (09)*

Many believed that a dealer is someone whose drug sales are their main source of income. Although this 21-year-old white male no longer considers himself a drug dealer, he did when he earned most of his income from his Ecstasy sales.

*I was getting consistent cash flow. It was supporting me. I wasn't working. I didn't have to work. I was taking care of everyone. (32)*

A 22-year-old white male discussed how he did not fit the description of a dealer since drug sales were not his main job.

*Well somebody who's really it's kind of their fundamental source of income...No I mean again it's kinda just something where it's like I can make a couple extra bucks for the weekend here, you know so I can go out and have a good time, it's not like a livelihood thing...you know it's not my occupation." (58)*

Similar to Murphy and colleagues' (1990) third criteria for a dealer, some participants noted that a dealer is someone who reinvests for future product and maintains a stash for sales. A 26-year-old white male who considered himself a middleman told us,

*Yeah, things that were happening that I was first telling you about was just being a middle man. And now specifically plan out how much I can make off a certain amount, where it can get me, how much of that I'll need to reinvest into future product, and how much will they mind to personally spend. And when you're doing that you're a drug dealer. (26)*

A 23-year-old Asian male who responded only to once in a while requests from his friends defined dealing "as you keep making deals:"

*I think to be considered to, for me, I mean anyone can say, 'Oh you sold E one time, you're a dealer', but to me like the word dealer means that once like kinda you're out, you're looking to like replenish it...to sell more. Do you know? That to me is dealing because you know you're dealing some out and then you're getting some more and dealing some more and like I don't know, hence the word dealer like you keep making deals...You know*

*with me it's like isolated events like and if there wasn't the people calling me for it then I wouldn't be selling it. (22)*

Sales setting influenced our participants' perception of what constitutes a "real dealer". Those who sold in public settings, such as raves or clubs, were more likely to be labeled a dealer than those who sold in private settings. When asked how he would define an Ecstasy dealer this 23-year-old Native American male said,

*If you're promoting it in a party atmosphere. Um if you're a person that people just know that you have it, but they don't, you don't see them at parties and stuff, that's more of like a provider in my opinion. And like if someone's who is like promoting it all the time, to deal or sell it you know. (25)*

Similar to Adler's (1985) findings, some sellers' did not accept a dealer identity until some external event forced them to reevaluate their situation. A few of our participants experienced violent and unsafe situations while selling drugs. A 24-year-old white male, who sold at raves, described an event that caused him to change his identity perception.

*I really didn't until that night I get shot at. And I was like "Wow". It was such like a wake up call in a lot of ways it was like "Wow that's so heavy". It really is, because like up until that point I really hadn't to do anything really out of the ordinary. You know it was just kind of you here, you sell here, you get there, you know and you move on but it was never really that violent, it was never really over the top that way. You know you intimidate some people, you get some money and it was all good but it was like, you know the first time you got shot at it's like, "Jesus" you go, "What am I doing?" (03)*

In a similarly high stressed situation, this 26-year-old white male did not see himself as a dealer until he smuggled Ecstasy on an airplane. When asked at what point did he see himself as an Ecstasy seller he said,

*The second I got on a plane, and pound of Ecstasy strapped on my dick, walked through security that's when I knew what I was doing. (36)*

## **Resisting the Dealer Identity**

We found that the majority of respondents resisted the drug dealer identity for a number of reasons. Primarily it was the stigma associated with the “dealer” label. Drug dealers are portrayed as “depraved profiteers” who “push” drugs on vulnerable youth because of the stereotypical notion of a greedy, consumed-by-addiction schoolyard dealer (Coomber, 2003; Tunnell, 1993; Waldorf, 1973; Atkyns & Hanneman, 1974; Murphy, Waldorf & Reinerman, 1990). A 20-year-old white female, told us about her bad experiences with people who did not approve of her Ecstasy sales. In the following a 24-year-old male Pacific Islander who works as a web designer believes that people think he is a “dirt bag” because he sells Ecstasy:

*It's amusing to me the way people perceive you when you sell the drug...But I know like that there have been people that I like really respected and I know that they didn't respect me back because of that. They kind of like held it against me, thought less of me because of it...Yeah and I mean it's like someone who's doing something very illegal you know like more or less like a criminal. And to some people that's kind of cool and some people it's not at all. (79)*

A 30-year-old Native American and white male described some negative images of drug dealers and why he did not see himself that way. When asked if he sells to first time users he said,

*I don't follow it. You know that's why I like dealing with people I know and dealing with people that you know aren't going to hurt themselves for one. 'Cause that is important, you know I mean people think that drug dealers don't care about shit. I don't want that karma, you know...I try not to think of myself as a dealer... 'Cause a dealer will sell to anybody on the street...I kind of think, you know, more like I have actually a vested*

*interest in doing people right. (59)*

Another participant, a 32-year-old white male technology consultant, discussed why people may not want to associate with dealers.

*On one hand nobody wants to be the person who has to go and get it. And so if you are, they you're a little bit of the hero, but by the same token if people think that you are a quote unquote dealer, then that has very negative connotations... They're happy to know you and happy to get it, but nobody really wants to hang out with the dealer or have you back at their house or things like that. (17)*

A 20-year-old white male alludes to the stigma associated with being a drug dealer:

*Um well I keep it kinda to the point where I'm not known as like you know an Ecstasy dealer... Yeah like I don't want to be associated with that you know like you know if that kinda stuff gets around it's just kinda bad for all you know all kinds of reasons. (31)*

The stigma attached to the drug dealer identity inspired our participants to distance themselves from the negative images and to construct more positive identities for themselves. From our interviewees' perspectives, they were not real dealers because they were not full time sellers, only sold to friends and did not market or push their drugs. Further, our interviewees ranked themselves as mid or low level sellers irrespective of their actual sales levels and the low level sellers reported they were only making "extra money" from drug sales with most of their income coming from conventional sources. Profits from Ecstasy sales, on average accounted for 8 percent of their total monthly income. Finally, respondents felt that the psychoactive properties of the drugs they sold differentiated them from sellers of other drugs. They saw themselves as quality assurance agents for their customers. Ecstasy use was seen as a beneficial

experience to be shared with others and some of our interviewees claimed it had therapeutic benefits.

Some of our respondents did not identify as dealers because selling drugs was not a full time occupation for them. “Because that’s not all I do” was a common explanation. The participants were also involved in conventional life spheres such as legal work and school. During the 12 months prior to the interview, 70 (88%) were employed. Twenty-nine (36%) of the interviewees were in school at the time of the interview. Of those who were employed 55% (44) were employed in white-collar jobs including social services, computer programming and retail services. Thirty-three percent (26) worked in blue-collar occupations such in construction and restaurant services. Only 8 were neither employed or in school at time of interview. Similar to Adler’s (1985) findings, a majority our participants’ connections to non-deviant activities allowed them not to take on a deviant identity.

In this excerpt, a 26-year-old Latino male who worked intake at a public health clinic explained why he does not see himself as a dealer:

*I don't see myself as one...cause there's so many more aspects to me and my profession, you know. I've so moved on to other things, that I mean, there's bigger and better, you know? With my job and places I get to go to for that. Those kinds of things excite me, so I'm kinda like just sort of doing a service. (01)*

This 28-year-old Asian human resource consultant felt the same way.

*No, I don't see myself as a dealer, but it's one of those things where I love being able to whatever comes my way say I can do it. And I think what it is is- I don't think it's marred my reputation in any bad way. I think that the people who are coming to me are people who have come to for other things. And I think it's just more like, 'Wow. You can send her off to meet a celebrity. You can send her off to get drugs. You can send her off to*

*close deal. And she can do it.' So, it's just more- it's just like if anything I think it makes me seem cool because it's like [name] can go buy drugs, and [name] can go walk into a company. (14)*

Participants also resisted a dealer identity because their customer base comprised mainly friends. When asked to whom they distributed Ecstasy to most often, 58 interviewees (72%) said “friends,” 11 (14%) said “regular clients,” 6 (8%) said “acquaintances,” 1 said “partner or lover,” and 1 said “co-workers.” This is consistent with other studies’ findings, particularly Parker’s (2000), that found individuals who sell primarily to friends perceive their role as facilitative and do not see themselves as “real dealers” (Ward, 2000; Murphy, et al., 1990; Simpson, 2003). This resistance is reflected in a 24-year-old white male’s statement,

*I wouldn't say I sell drugs really. I mean I've bought enough to sell to my friends that I can get my share for free, which in the eyes of the law is selling. But I don't really consider myself a dealer. (08)*

A 26-year-old Latina believed that the nature of her relationships with her customers shielded her from being considered a dealer:

*I don't consider myself a seller because I've never had anybody that I don't know ask me for some...I only sell to a group that I know. (70)*

At the time of her interview this 32-year-old white transsexual female no longer considered herself a dealer but she used to when she “marketed” drugs to strangers.

*I wouldn't like the idea of somebody thinking I was a drug dealer. I don't feel like I'm a drug dealer. I've been a drug dealer, but I'm not a drug dealer now...I think when I was selling acid like I think that would qualify because I was selling it to just whoever and carrying it with me in preparation to sell it. Um, when I sold pot when I first came to the Bay Area, that was more being a drug dealer where I carried it with me and really just would sell to whoever wanted it. And I was looking and*



*marketing it. I was looking for someone to buy it, yeah. This is not the same way. I don't look for people to buy it. I'm not trying to get out there. I'm not marketing it. (47)*

This resistance of the dealer identity was further demonstrated during the questionnaire portion of the interview. When interviewees were asked to rate their level of sales fifty-two (65%) considered themselves low-level sellers, 17 (21%) said they were medium level sellers, 5 (6%) considered themselves high-level sellers, and 6 (8%) did not consider themselves sellers at all. We looked at the number of hits and actual value of Ecstasy sold in a typical week by their self-reported level of sales:

<b>Self-reported Level of Sales</b>	<b>Range # Hits</b>	<b>Median # Hits</b>	<b>Range Value</b>	<b>Median Value</b>
Not a Seller	1 – 7	5	\$20 – \$140	\$100
Low Level	1 – 250	10	\$17 – \$3,000	\$200
Mid Level	5 – 1,000	20	\$100 – \$25,000	\$400
High Level	10 – 300	70	\$200 – \$6,000	\$1,050

The group of self-reported medium level sellers encompassed a much broader range of values than any of the other groups. Although the median values correlated with the self-reported level of sales, it is important to note that a broader range of sellers considered themselves to be mid level sellers even though some sold much more than the highest of the high level sellers. Sellers tended to downplay their role in drug distribution networks preferring to see themselves as low or mid level sellers irrespective of their actual level of sales.

Similar to Tunnell's (1993) respondents, most of the sellers we interviewed did not desire to increase their sales. Most everyone claimed they were "winding down", which may explain why they did not undergo the identity transformation to "real dealer". Some believed they did not make a significant amount of money to warrant that label. When asked if he sees himself as a dealer this 24-year-old white male said,

*Um, I don't like to say lately, but I provide it... 'cause that's not how I'm making money. You know what I'm sayin? I got a 9 to 5... 'Cause with a job you really got your steady cash coming in. You got your bills paid and everything. And if you do make the extra money, that's extra money for you to save or extra money you know that you have. You know? So, I can't say that I'm a dealer because that's not what I do... A dealer's out there pushing. That's how they get paid. If that's your only source of income and that's what you do, you're a dealer." (69)*

A 21-year-old woman of mixed ethnicity did not make much money from her Ecstasy sales because she split the profits with her friend who fronted the money to buy the drugs.

*I'm not a drug distributor like by trade; it's not how I make a living. I've just kind of been an opportunist with it like if something can be done I'll do it, you know, if I can like usually I need somebody to front the money 'cause I don't have the ends to do it. (63)*

Ecstasy's benign reputation among our sample leads them to believe that selling was not criminal or immoral. In fact, many believed they provided a service for people. The 60-year-old white male college instructor added Ecstasy to his marijuana and cocaine business. He called his business "folk medicine" and saw himself as a provider:

*Yeah it's my life it's one of my primary purposes in society. (27)*

Another participant, a 27-year-old white female office administrator, felt she did something positive by introducing people to Ecstasy. Here she describes her experiences selling Ecstasy during college.

*And it really makes me feel appreciated because when someone does that for the first time and they have a really great experience like that, they are so grateful to you for introducing it to them and giving it to them that it really makes you feel like you've done something wonderful for them...It was almost like I was proud, you know, that I could not just get the drug itself, but I was able to give you an experience that you had never had before and that you loved. You know? So, it was really just on my own. I really just wanted people to do it. So, I got and sold it.(02)*

*My roommate at the time actually told me that she had heard someone saying that, that, 'You know that red-haired girl and that other like, tall girl with black hair? Those are the Ecstasy girls.' And I just thought that was so funny to me. I just never thought of myself as a dealer or a distributor or anything like that. And that just cracked me up. I thought it was so funny. But the more I thought about it, I was like, wait a minute. They really don't have it here. So I must be the Ecstasy girl because I'm bringing it, and you know? So, I accepted that...and if there was anything, Ecstasy was the one thing that I wouldn't mind being known for. So it was fine. (02)*

A 30-year-old white and Native American male who works as a telemarketer and sells mainly at underground raves and in private settings felt he provided a service because he believed Ecstasy had therapeutic value.

*I think it is a therapeutic drug. I think that a lot of people who maybe don't know how to live themselves can get a lot of good out of using this drug. Maybe not habitually but you know...Just one of my more favorite drugs, you know, like I said I really think it does a lot of good for people. The environments that I have been mainly selling in are, you know, are pretty safe and secret spaces, so...and then I feel like I'm doing a service to people. (59)*

A 30-year-old white female reported that selling to friends maintained the quality of the Ecstasy that they used:

*I like to be able to provide a service for friends. I also like it that like I know for myself and my friends, we're taking good drugs, that we're not ingesting something that's really harmful. (55)*

A 49-year-old African American male purchased pills for six dollars apiece. He sold single pills to his clients for ten dollars even though he knew he could get twenty. He ensured both quality and fair prices:

*I ensure two things that way. One is that you, you got it at a fair price and number two is that you got the real one, not the fake shit, you know? (44)*

#### *A Dealer by Another Name*

Since participants avoided describing themselves as “dealers” they created their own labels to identify themselves. For example, one 29-year-old African American man called himself a “broker” rather than a dealer. Another 29-year-old male, who refused to report his ethnicity, called himself an “enabler”. Most participants considered themselves “recreational users” or “middlemen” rather than dealers. In the following a 30-year-old Asian male described himself as more of a facilitator:

*I think I'm more of a recreational user than what a dealer is... Yeah I mean I think I consider myself somebody who helps facilitate things you know. Like sometimes I consider myself just a middleman for my friends. A friend of mine will be like, 'Hey listen I'm going somewhere Can you, you know, help me out with getting some Ecstasy?' And I'd say, 'Yes'. And that matter, that manner of form I had been a middleman. I actually literally been the middle person, getting the cash and getting the Ecstasy. Just crossing it over.(29)*

Accepting a dealer identity was problematic for our participants. Even long term sellers of other drugs saw their Ecstasy sales in a different light. Selling Ecstasy was not perceived to be as criminal or immoral as dealing other drugs because of Ecstasy's benign reputation as an important, perhaps even

therapeutic experience in their social worlds. Sellers' stake in conventional worlds precluded their adoption of deviant social identities. Sellers constructed their own identities labeling themselves service providers, enablers or facilitators. They often took pride in giving their friends positive drug experiences seeing themselves as providing a service for their communities. In the next section of the report we see how this reticence to see themselves as real dealers affected their sales practices and framed their buyer/seller relationships.

### **Sales Practices**

Unlike findings from other drug distribution studies where sellers describe detailed business practices, rules for their operations and contingency plans; (see for example Waldorf and colleagues 1991) the sellers we interviewed had very few rules for themselves or for their customers. Most reported their only precautions were to only sell to friends and to not talk about drugs on the telephone. Participants relied on their friendships with their customers to protect them from theft, violence or police intervention. A majority sold in private or what we call privatized settings and very few engaged in cutting or adulterating the drugs they sold. Most participants had few friends who were Ecstasy sellers (average of five percent), which may have hampered the development of more sophisticated business practices. For most interviewees, Ecstasy selling was not a daily activity, since most users used sporadically (on the weekends, for special events or even more infrequently). Sales patterns mirrored customers' use patterns. More than half the sample admitted to selling Ecstasy while they were

intoxicated (usually from marijuana or alcohol use) and giving away drugs to their friends.

When asked about their practices for protection from police detection, most participants replied that they simply did not sell to strangers and tried not to discuss drug sales over the telephone. Some used code words when talking with suppliers and customers in an attempt to avoid being detected by wiretaps. Some interviewees had specific types of customers that they avoided selling to people under 18, older middle-aged people or people they defined as “sketchy” or shady. For the most part, the interviewees did not seem to have developed purposeful sales practices/methods. Sometimes people broke their own rules by selling to friends of friends or giving away drugs rather than selling them.

On average, interviewees sold Ecstasy from 5 to 365 days out of the year with a median of 40 days a year. In a typical week, interviewees sold between 1 and 1,000 hits of Ecstasy with a median of 14.5 hits per week. Fifty-four (67%) sold in pressed tab form, 20 (25%) sold capsules, and 6 (8%) sold in powder form.

Sellers did make mistakes when they first began selling drugs. One of our Community Consultants, a 27-year-old, Asian male, described his own learning curve regarding Ecstasy sales. He was selling cocaine at the time and decided to sell Ecstasy because of a ready market and an established clientele. Due to Ecstasy’s widespread use in clubs and its rising popularity, his customers came and asked him for it. He initially expected his Ecstasy sales would resemble his cocaine sales. In preparation for high volume sales, he bought Ecstasy in large

quantities. He said this was a mistake; unlike cocaine, Ecstasy was not used on a daily basis, and he was forced to sit on (unable to sell) his product for an extended period of time, decreasing his drug buying money and therefore profits. He was not willing to go to clubs and risk confrontations with the law, so he chose to sell his Ecstasy in bulk to some of the heavier users/distributors he knew. He either sold or “fronted” (consignment sales) 100 hits at a time to users/distributors, who then took them to raves and Ecstasy parties and sold them in smaller units. Mid or higher level sellers had to learn what their particular market would bear or they could end up losing money.

When asked if they ever sold Ecstasy while high, 11 (14%) interviewees said “never,” 24 (30%) said “rarely,” 30 (37%) said “sometimes,” 9 (11%) said “most of the time,” and 6 (8%) said “always.” The drug most frequently reported was marijuana, used by 27 (34%) of the interviewees while selling. Other drugs mentioned were Ecstasy (10%) and alcohol (10%). Twenty-two (28%) had used a combination of marijuana, alcohol or Ecstasy or a combination of one or more of the above with other drugs. Sellers agreed that selling while intoxicated was not a good idea because they were more likely to give away drugs.

Sellers usually sold to a small, trusted network to minimize risk of arrest. When asked to whom they distributed Ecstasy to most often, 58 interviewees (72%) said “friends”, 11 (14%) said “regular clients,” 6 (8%) said “acquaintances,” 1 said “partner or lover,” and 1 said “coworkers.” Most interviewees said their main rule of protection was never selling to strangers. As this twenty-two year-old White male told us - sellers wanted to only deal with people they knew.

*Uh as far as sales of MDMA have gone in recent years it's just something to keep in close circles. Um deal with people you know, deal with people you trust. Deal with people that aren't going to waste your time, and have a good time. (56)*

When interviewees were asked what kind of customers they avoided, they almost always replied that they would not sell to strangers. While a minority of the sample (11%) did have experience selling to strangers, participants felt that selling only to people they knew was a safety precaution. Interviewees also talked about avoiding sales to teenagers and kids, “shady” individuals or those who seemed to have a problem with Ecstasy.

The following quote exemplifies the common response to the question: “Who won’t you do business with?” The interviewee was 25-year-old, white male low-level seller who sold primarily to friends and schoolmates.

INT: Are there people that you won’t deal with, like what kind of people?

*People I don’t know.*

INT: How come?

*Just ‘cause I don’t know them...yeah, if you come with a friend of mine that I trust, yeah, that’s cool. But just like I won’t even let people come like if a friend of mine goes, ‘Oh, there’s this friend that is going to come over and picks some up.’ No.*

*Yeah, if I think somebody’s sketchy or something like that, I wouldn’t sell it to them for sure. Little kids, for sure. You know? If it’s someone I know that’s like had problems with it in the past, I wouldn’t sell it to ‘em. I don’t know. I mean I’m not gonna [sic] sell it to anybody that shouldn’t have it, or you know? They’ve got to be like an adult. (09)*

Another participant, a 26-year-old, white male, often sold large quantities of Ecstasy at summer music festivals. Since he had distributed to strangers, he had a different perspective on specific customers to avoid.



*Who will I not deal with? Do you know like I would consider myself to be low enough on the scale that there's not- I'll deal with anyone really. Well, I'll tell you who I won't deal with. I won't deal with middle-aged people by themselves, like one time I was at the [name of venue] at a show and just a guy walked up to me, and he didn't seem like he was partying. He seemed like an undercover cop, and then he asked me and I just said, 'No, I don't know what you're talking about.'* (26)

The same participant also spoke about not wanting to sell to those under the age of 18.

*When I got Ecstasy, I will make a judgment whether or not someone is too young to talk to me. In my own personal [unclear] where I think they're under 18, I won't talk to them. You know? I'll tell them like, 'You're too young.' But it's just that they seem young, you know? Sixteen or 17-year-old kids might not seem young to me and I'll sell it to them not knowing. But there's an obvious point which you're like, 'No, I don't know what you're talking about, kid.'* (26)

Sales settings were also important in sellers' strategies for avoiding law enforcement intervention. We interviewed individuals who were primarily private sellers, some of whom had experience selling in public venues, such as massive parties and concert venues. In general, our participants preferred selling in private settings, such as people's homes. When asked where they distributed Ecstasy most often, 60 interviewees (75%) said they distributed in private settings (i.e., in their own home or someone else's home), and 20 (25%) said they distributed in public settings (rave, concert, club, bar, etc.). The implementation of the R.A.V.E. Act, has made it dangerous to sell in clubs because of increased private security hired by club owners. In order to avoid this problem, some people obtain their drugs before going to clubs or dance events (Forsyth, 1996). Other than a private residence, common places to get "sorted"

before entering clubs was in parking lots and cars (Gruppo Abele, 2003). In the following a woman seller describes the rationale for the pre-party transaction.

*At times people at parties would ask where you got it, and they would say, 'Oh, the girl in the red shirt.' You know? And at first I was okay with that, but then got a little apprehensive when people would be like, 'Oh, I've been looking for you.' And I didn't even know 'em, you know? And they're like, 'Oh, somebody told me that you had the Ecstasy.' And I was like, 'Who told you that?' And then after that it got to where we wouldn't really sell at a party unless it was kind of like a pre-party transaction, and we definitely knew the person. (04)*

One participant did not fit this pattern of casual sales practices. He was a 60-year-old White male (the oldest member of our sample) with 20 years of experience selling drugs including marijuana, cocaine, mushrooms, Foxy Methoxy and Ecstasy. He had been a part of a very large marijuana selling operation in the 1970s and 1980s and began freelancing in the early 1990s. In the following he describes some of his operational rules and policies, which were very developed and structured compared to the rest of the sample.

*I explain to people that there are rules and uh, and uh, there are certain, but not always, if they are with the police or law enforcement agency or any other right um, government employee... People have to know when they call not to say anything on the phone and that they have to remain discreet. Um, they need to know that it might take two or three days to call them back but I will call them back. Um, and that's just 'cause my work schedule often changes... Um, then um you always have to be accurate. Um, people have to come by appointment, you have a half hour window, um they don't get to bring a friend or anybody that I don't know... I have a policy that's very political. Um, I have a money back guarantee. We'll smoke it right now in my home and make sure you like it. You go home and smoke it with Mary and Joe and say, 'Oh this is fabulous.' I think it's shit so you can take back whatever percent and get your money back. I have a money back guarantee for all the products. And if you don't like it bring back any portion. And if it's a pill, you took it, you got sick you don't have to keep the other pills you bought... Your money will be refunded with a smile. Because I tell that to people. (27)*

The Ecstasy sellers we interviewed (with one notable exception) had very few sales practices or rules that they followed other than only to selling to friends and not talking on the phone. They preferred to sell in private settings although one quarter of the sample had sold in public settings at one time or another.

## **SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN BUYERS AND SELLERS**

### **Sellers' and Customers' Relationships**

Friendship formed the basis for many buyer-seller relationships in our sample. Essentially, for most participants it was their friends who made it possible for them to distribute Ecstasy. When asked who their customers were, 80% (64) replied friends and acquaintances.” Not only was it convenient and easy to sell within their social networks these participants trusted their friends to engage in illicit transactions without provoking problems.

*Regular customers are my neighbors, a lot of people who live next door to me and below me. A friend who is out of town but comes here sometimes, he's the person that I mailed them to. And also people that just know me but don't really go out and socialize in the same circle. It's kind of like acquaintances and friends...I never deal with anybody new now. It's all pretty much people I've known for like the last 4 years. (04)*

*My co-workers and friends...I would basically make sure I knew the person before, maybe even smoke some pot with them. I'm a pretty good judge of character, so I trust my instincts usually on that. (08)*

One participant sold at fairly high levels during his Ecstasy-selling career. He toured to various music festivals in the summer and had a diverse client base at home in San Francisco. He compared the different subcultural groups he dealt with.

*It's anybody, like I said, from investment bankers to just record store people to musicians to- musicians especially. Musicians come through town and that's what they want to do. That's rock 'n roll is their life...so a*

*lot of the music scene where people who are getting into that, just different random people that you meet along the way. You know, different bars I go to, you know, you start talking to people, get to know someone, and you know this special occasion they want to do this. So it's really like every demographic you could name from the hip hop scene to rave scene 'cause I listen to all of that. I'm part of all that...the subcultures of the drug culture...so I don't' really specify. I don't like to just sell to hippies. I don't like to deal with hippies at all because it's not- I don't know. It's not the same as dealing with people who are more professional. It's like, 'Alright, well, I'm working. I'm making money, you know? Here you go, I'm happy to give you this for you giving me this experience.' I like people who look at it that way rather than people who are always like, you know, 'Come on, dude. Just give it to me for cheaper,' and then eat three of them right in front of me. That's just not- what's the point, you know? So I like the more professional, regular people, just everyday people. (30)*

### **Sellers and Suppliers**

While it was less common for the sellers in our study to have a close relationship with their suppliers, most interviewees reported having friendly, business relationships. The relationship between this 20-year-old White seller and his connection is typical:

*We're friends, like not like- I wouldn't be like, 'Hey, do you want to sleep over?' Or like you know? Like, we're cool like we'll hang out. You know like stop by his house, you know what I mean, just play some video games, smoke real quick. (31)*

Some sellers, like this 26-year-old Latino, also talked about learning sales techniques from those who distributed to them.

*I learned how to deal because I was a buyer and I knew what the measurements were and then I knew that if I bought something and weighed it myself, like I'd see what their measurements were and if they were sort of giving me like the low end of a certain amount, like I knew that was a tactic you could use. And because at the time, the circle of people that were using drugs, I sort of knew who was who, and they knew who I was, so even if I hadn't made any direct contact with them, they could come up to me and ask if I had anything for sale. And I knew it was okay because I knew who they were, within a circle of friends. (01)*

A few participants were close friends with their suppliers, which allowed for less formal transactions and added trust. A 26-year-old, white female seller who sold at low levels to friends told us about her relationship with her Ecstasy supplier.

*We've known each other for a very, very long time, a decade almost I would say. I mean this is someone who I've know since my years in high school, and I feel although personality, I mean the guy really bugs me sometimes, but it's more of a personality thing. But we're good friends. Like, I feel like he is someone I can trust completely and totally. You know, like, he's known me for so long. He probably knows me better than most people do. You know? And vice versa. And therefore I feel a hundred percent comfortable buying from him, you know, talking to him about any issues, asking him anything about the drugs, and you know? Just the comfort level there is top notch. Like, yeah, I feel good. (02)*

We also asked our study participants about the effects that selling Ecstasy had on their relationships with suppliers, customers and other people in their lives. Since in most cases these individuals were selling to friends, there were some challenges in delineating the boundaries between business and personal relationships. Our first interviewee, a 26-year-old Latino male, related the way his selling practices influenced his social network.

*It's kinda [sic] more on me than it is on them. I kinda [sic] feel like if there's a professional relationship going, I almost want to connect it to a friendship level just 'cause that's the kind of person I am. And it's always sad to see when you lose that connection for whatever reason it is, they move away or they don't wanna [sic], you know, continue buying. Or um, sometimes things go sour between, and it's always difficult. (01)*

Another participant talked about Ecstasy sales affecting his relationship with his friend who was also a selling partner.

*Oh my god. My friend, my very close friend that you'll be meeting, it has put our friendship on the brink of being over with because of stress and money and owing money and being in debt. And just like the general*

*stress of one of us saying something to the other person that I really don't mean. It's just the stress talking. And also just like the effect that it has on you psychologically. Like you'll wake up in the morning and not really be in the best situation to deal with adversity and like you have to. And so you're more quick to be snappy with your friend and be like, 'Shut up,' or 'Go away, I don't want to talk to you.' And I get not only depended upon being with that person, each other, like if we could, neither of us can survive on our own. We couldn't just split the Ecstasy in half and take it with us. It wouldn't work. So that's affected our relationship.*

*You know, it's a case by case scenario. It's a plus or minus. I've lost friends over- well, friends slash acquaintances over business. I let 'em know it's just business. It's not pleasure. It's nothing personal. Some people can deal with that aspect a little more than others, a little better. Um, I haven't lost anyone really special over it, though that's probably something that- well, hopefully that's something that won't change, you know? So, the person I'm with right now I'm trying to keep that going. I'm trying to keep it clean. (32)*

## **Ecstasy Distribution**

With the exception of a few high level sellers, the majority of respondents had little or no knowledge regarding distribution hierarchies, price markup or manufacturing and trafficking information. Most information that the low level sellers gave they reported as speculative. In fact, we found that a lot of sellers did not discuss certain things with their dealers. Ten members of the sample had participated in Ecstasy trafficking carrying drugs on airplanes, receiving or sending Ecstasy through the mail.

It was considered taboo to ask where they got the Ecstasy and how much they paid for it. When asked if she knew her dealer's level of sales this 34-year-old multiracial woman said,

*I don't know and I'm glad...It's like don't ask don't tell. I don't want to know anything." (23)*

When asked if she knew the origin of the Ecstasy she sells this 26 year old white female said,

*I have no idea where it comes from. And I haven't really bothered to ask really because I know that a lot of the manufacturers and people that I've dealt with in the past are very private about that. And I don't want to upset, like upset the balance. So, I'm not too concerned. I know that it's good, and yeah. I just don't enquire too much. (02)*

A 20-year-old White female was not friends with her dealer did not even know his name. She had no knowledge about the origin of the Ecstasy that she sold.

*I mean I don't know exactly like where it comes from, has been, that information has been pretty heavily protected from me. So I don't know the consistency of how it's being manufactured or anything...It's very shrouded in mystery. Yeah it's just kind of like don't ask, don't tell type of arrangement. Um I think the guy who I get it from just really wants to be like as anonymous as possible. I don't really know if I know his real name. (79)*

The “don't ask don't tell” attitude towards their supplier's business was seen as protective by some sellers. A 20-year-old Latino male seller reported that he had business relationship with his dealer. When asked if he knew how much each dealer paid per hit he outlined appropriate dealer client etiquette.

*I think he was selling it to me- he was making some money off of me, which I was cool with, man. But I think he was getting it maybe for 10. But like I never asked him. I never wanted to confront him, go like, 'Hey, are you ripping me off?' I didn't want to feel awkward, you know, considering the fact that he was hooking me up. (57)*

The following passage details how asking how much the supplier pays for product constitutes a potentially problematic faux pas:

INT: How much do you know about the origin of the Ecstasy that you sell?

*Um, none. And I actually inquired at one point, and there was such a silence in the room that I've never done that again (laughs). Oh, I better just shut up.*

INT: Taboo (laughs)?

*Yeah, exactly.*

Some sellers had long distance relationships with their suppliers. They sent and received packages in the mail and through Federal Express services. In the following two excerpts a thirty-five year-old White male and a twenty-nine year-old African American man describe how they packaged Ecstasy for overnight delivery within the United States.

*I ah, put in uh, a Reynold's oven bag uh, bunch of pills, rolled them up real tight. Put them in that bag, cut it so it's tight, put it in a pill box and put uh, cotton on top of the pill box and like spread the cotton and then put them in a uh, pill jar with the prescription to the person that I was sending it to. As like, sleeping pills and two jars of those with four hundred in, in a regular uh, uh mail thing over night. (35)*

*I knew people that shipped it through FedEx. I was like, you know, FedEx is a large way of people getting it to the East. I have shipped some back to Georgia, to Georgia through FedEx...then you know- but they tell me just, you know, wrap 'em up individually, you know, no more than four tabs, you know, to individual packs...then just lay them all on a sheet of paper, notebook paper. I was like put another one on top of them... and just wrap it up again, and then put it in an envelope, a regular envelope. You want to keep it, you know, as flat as possible. And keep 'em down to a sheet 'cause if you get too many, it's too bulky, you know, outside of a two-pound envelope. Then you're subject to being searched. You make sure you send it from like a business...because those packages are not scrutinized because they understand the rush delivery from business to business. (16)*

A 26-year-old white and Latino male met a chemist in Amsterdam who manufactured Ecstasy. Two years prior to the interview, on four or five occasions he bought powder in Amsterdam and shipped back to the United



States. Until the Drug Enforcement Agency paid him a visit and although he was never formally charged he was too scared to continue his import business and confined himself to smaller-scale domestic sales.

*We had to get it from Amsterdam... 'cause anything that goes out Amsterdam in the mail is scrutinized um...and we packaged it up and we had a thing for kids toys. And um, so we bought these like really cool actually uh, like electronic pianos and, and microphones and uh, whatever and we, you know, just take 'em apart and, and uh, we'd set that packages inside, secure them, double wrap 'em and then carefully put that uh, toy back together. Put the cellophane around, you know, the original wrapping around the box. Then wrap it as uh, a gift and then wrap it in brown paper bags with the addresses on it and some, you know, obscure return address. (49)*

With some exceptions, participants knew very little about where the Ecstasy they sold came from or how their suppliers priced their product. Many adopted a “don't ask don't tell” policy and were careful not to ask too many questions. They relied on their suppliers' evaluations for quality assurance. In the next section of the report we examine the complex role of brands in the marketing of Ecstasy.

## **THE ROLE OF BRANDING IN THE ECSTASY MARKET**

### **The Role of Ecstasy Branding in Quality Control**

Early on in the project we learned about the importance of Ecstasy brands in understanding the ways in which interviewees evaluated the quality of the pills they bought and sold. In order to discuss branding in the context of the Ecstasy market, we must look at the definition of 'brand'. Wikipedia (2004) defines a brand as “...a symbol created by a marketer to represent a collection of information about a product or group of products.” Ecstasy distributors choose specific symbols for their pills to convey messages to consumers about their

product. According to consumer research on brands, individuals form relationships with particular brands depending on their experiences with them over time (Fournier, 1998). It is therefore understandable why a drug distributor would want to utilize branding to make a connection with his or her customers.

Ecstasy is not the first illicit drug to be distinguished by brand names. Drugs like LSD and heroin have been stamped with recognizable icons spawned from popular culture. McCormick (2003) discovered that LSD has the longest history of imagery in its marketing. The early designs were reminiscent of childhood fantasies inspired by popular cartoons of the time, including Mickey Mouse from Fantasia, Snoopy, and Alice in Wonderland. Often these images clearly referenced the surreal, psychedelic experience engendered by acid. As visual sampling became more accessible with technological advances over the years, blotter acid prints began to carry images mocking prevailing culture, ranging from national monuments to the official FBI emblem (McCormick, 2003).

Wendel and Curtis' (2000) work on heroin stamps in New York City reveals another subcultural artifact in the world of drug marketing. Heroin stamping occurred mainly in New York City from the mid 1970s through the mid 1990s where powder heroin was sold in small, glassine bags for ten dollars. These were also known as "dime bags". As the industry changed from sellers and buyers who knew each other intimately to a more anonymous market, distributors attempted to distinguish themselves by creating a brand name that would gain a reputation for being the best on the streets. Stamps became associated with the locations of dealers or dealing crews and included names like

“Laundromat”. More common names referred to the dark side of heroin use, such as “No Way Out” and “Poison”, while others advertised the purported quality of heroin with names like “The Choice” and “No Joke”. Also a number of brands were appropriated from media and consumer cultures (e.g. designer labels). In 2000, at the time of their writing, stamping had begun to fade as law enforcement officials caught on to the trend and cell phones and beepers increased in popularity for dealers. Wendel and Curtis suggest that heroin stamps functioned as a sort of chronicling of not only the heroin market at the time but also of inner city life, as a possibly subconscious response to what drug dealers saw in the world around them.

While Ecstasy brands are in some ways similar to heroin stamps and acid blotter sheets, we learned from our reviews of Ecstasy-related websites and from our participants, that Ecstasy branding is distinctive. Unlike heroin stamps, Ecstasy branding has occurred worldwide as Ecstasy use evolved from underground parties to more mainstream user groups. And while LSD iconography was steeped in hippie-inspired emblems like peace signs and rainbows, the commercial logos of Ecstasy brands represent a different ideology all together (McCormick, 2003). While not every Ecstasy brand was appropriated from corporate brands, the essence of consumer culture is apparent in the marketing of this drug.

### **Ecstasy Online**

We found the Internet to be a useful resource for discovering information about Ecstasy in general. From DEA operations to harm reduction guidelines,

Ecstasy information is plentiful online. Schifano and colleagues (2003) assert that the scope of the MDMA market can be easily assessed in cyberspace. Falck and colleagues asked young adult Ecstasy users to evaluate the accuracy and importance of sources of information for MDMA and found that non-government websites ranked second only to friends in importance followed by drug treatment and physicians. White, educated young adult men used the Internet the most for MDMA information (Falck et al., 2004). Evidently, young people today, especially those with backgrounds similar to our sample, see the Internet as an important tool for gathering and disseminating information about Ecstasy.

It is clear from our review of Internet content that Ecstasy users from all over the world log onto various websites and online bulletin boards to share information, particularly about specific Ecstasy brands. One such site is [www.Pillreports.com](http://www.Pillreports.com). This daughter site of the Australian [Bluelight.nu](http://Bluelight.nu) is a harm reduction site where users can post images of pills they have used and rate them on a scale from 1 to 10. Pills can only be rated above an 8 if they have been tested using a kit that is also available online. Internet users can find reviews of pills from their own region by clicking on a link. We went to the 'Northwest' of North America section to find information about brands in the San Francisco Bay area. This site proved most helpful for assessing information on various pill brands. Unfortunately, very few of our participants were familiar with this website. The websites they did access more often included harm reduction foci, such as [DanceSage.org](http://DanceSage.org) and [Erowid.org](http://Erowid.org).

This phenomenon of brands within the Ecstasy market, as has been documented online, led us to wonder about their significance to sellers. With minimal research on this subject, it was unclear how important brands were to individuals who both sold and used Ecstasy. Past work in other drug markets, such as the aforementioned Wendel and Curtis (2000) study of heroin stamps, suggest that any sort of drug imagery may serve as subcultural text. We were interested to see how that played out in the social world of Ecstasy from the perspective of those entrenched in the market.

Since the majority of our sample viewed themselves as low to mid level sellers none of them had personally chosen an insignia with which to stamp pills or had pressed tablets themselves. Still we were interested in their perceptions of the meaning and function of pill brands in Ecstasy markets. When asked for their ideas about why there were pill brands in the first place, our participants had a variety of responses. A 30-year-old, white female seller had experience with several brands and saw them functioning as identifiers of particular “flavors.”

*Probably just like quality assurance. You know like I'm sure it also backfires, and then other people can copy the logo and then sort of- but it is nice because a lot of times you'll get like a certain mixture of a pressed pill, and you're like, 'Wow. I don't know what they have in here, but I really like it.' And it's nice to then be able to look out for that. (55)*

An interviewee who used to distribute powder MDMA in capsules at the peak of her sales also felt that brand names were supposed to reference quality as a marketing technique. A 29-year-old, white female seller was one of the first participants to describe the role of pill brands.

*Ours was called “Molly” just because it was pure molecular Ecstasy. All the other ones had names, and that was in relationship to whatever*

*emblem or logo was stamped on the top of them. And they usually had like- I don't think a lot of people know it, but like it would be like a designer something because it was a designer drug, you know? So, it's like a Louis Vuitton or a Mercedes or a Mitsubishi, even though that's not too designer. But even like the alligators, I think, are supposed to be Lacoste. You know what I mean? Just like something that's more like higher end than normal. (04)*

Along the same lines as the notion of designer appeal, a 26-year-old, white male who only sold powder or capsule Ecstasy saw the capitalistic side of having brand names for Ecstasy. After telling us that he “would never distribute press tabs,” he shared his thoughts on the purpose of Ecstasy labels.

*Just for marketing. For marketing I think like if a certain pill is good and popular and people like that combination like cocktails, then people look for that name again and test that brand name. People are used to looking for brand names probably, so it's just kind of like replicating the same commodity...I think it's just an argument towards profit.*

Another participant, a 32-year-old, White transgender (female to male) noted the danger of relying on brand names. Although he sold at very low levels, he appeared to be a bit more cautious when it came to his purchasing practices. Like the previous interviewee, he also saw the logic in marking different types.

*I think that it might be dangerous for the producers of it because it kind of connects them, you know, to maybe a wide range of distribution. So it's kind of like a crack dealer using baggies with their initials on it or something (laughs). It's like, “Dude, that's stupid. Don't do that.” But I guess the draw to it is because you also get a certain sense of what the flavor is of that particular kind, how dirty it is, how clean it is, what the feeling is, other people's experiences with it, how strong it is...Um, so I understand the idea of marketing it in some way, but to use a symbol that is like your symbol is stupid. That's just dangerous. (47)*

A number of participants warned against depending heavily on the brand names of Ecstasy pills. It was clear to them that multiple batches could be made

of a pill with a specific stamp and that look-a-likes containing other substances could be out there. Previous research confirms this; for example, Sherlock and colleagues (1999) studied the makeup of Ecstasy tablets on the UK market and found that pills with the same brand name often had variations in the amount of active ingredients. Some interviewees were cognizant of this fact from their own experiences. Our interview with a 24-year-old male who sold 250 to 500 pills per month provided an example of variations in batches.

INT: Can you tell some of the types of Ecstasy that you've sold?

*The blue ones, there are dolphins printed on 'em. They got websites that you could like go to. I mean there's tons. I mean but you might get like a blue one that, say, has a dolphin on it. Right, you've got a blue one that has a dolphin. You have that for about a month or, you know, you have yours till you sold out. And then you get something else, and it has like a crown on it. Or you know what I'm sayin? It's like pinkish with a king's crown on it. And then 2 months later you end up getting Blue Dolphins again, but those Blue Dolphins aren't the same Blue Dolphins. The majority of the time those aren't the same Blue Dolphins you had.*

INT: Why is that?

*Because it's manmade, a different batch.*

INT: Is it the same manufacturer every time?

*I don't know...I've never been able to touch anybody that makes it...any man made is never the same as- no one pill is the same as another.*

INT: Do you think they're copying it?

*Well, you've got a picture, you know what I'm saying? You never know the guy who's cooking it might look at it and say, 'Oh, I'm gonna add- or I'm gonna accidentally spill 3 liters of this or 7 liters of this accidentally into it too much.' You know what I'm sayin? 'So I've got to take away this much.' I don't know what exactly drugs they use to make it, but maybe they don't have enough of this, so they've got to do it with this to dilate [sic] it up and still make it. But that's why some are more speedy, some of them are more heroin in it...it has nothing to do with the names. You know, who*

*cares? They could call it whatever you want. Some people get pills and name it whatever they want...so you really can't tell. You just hope that person that you're in with is, you know what I'm sayin, not gonna [sic] give you bad shit...this is a business. It's trust. It's trust, but like doing any manmade drug, you better be ready for consequences.*

A 19-year-old, Arabic male participant had distributed a variety of pill brands, so many that he couldn't "even keep track of ones" he had sold. He postulated that brands and logos helped to distinguish the source of each batch but felt that it was not smart to rely solely on brand names.

INT: Do you think the logos are important?

*I don't really think so just 'cause you know I feel they're so easy to I guess duplicate, so you know you can't really trust it through the logo or anything. You gotta [sic] trust it through, um you know, the people that [sell it to you].*

Some interviewees felt that brand names simply were not important and tainted the reputation of Ecstasy. When asked what he thought the role of pill brands in Ecstasy sales was, the following participant expressed a sentiment similar to some of our other interviewees'.

*I actually have never been really into- into that. I realized I would hear all the time people go, "Hey do you have the blue dolphins or the green whatever?" And it really means nothing in my mind (laughs) but in their mind it-it-it's sort of again that sort of drug related frenzy that's the party drug aspect versus more of the pure sense of what MDMA is. (62)*

#### *Popular Brand Names: The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent*

Despite some sellers' distrust of branding, from both our depth interviews and questionnaires, we found that there were particular brands that were popular among our sample. Interviewees reported selling a broad variety of Ecstasy pill brands, 70 different brands in all. The most frequently cited brands were



Mitsubishis and Alligators (n=33 each), followed by Motorolas (n=30), Christmas trees, No Names, and Blue Dolphins (n=25 each), Reds (n=13), Chanel (n=10), and Hondas and Doves (n=7 each). Furthermore, some types, such as the Mitsubishis, were perceived as good or strong while others were rumored or experienced to be bad, but our participants typically remembered those that were popular because of their positive effects.

One participant talked about becoming exposed to brand names of Ecstasy once he began to use more. This African American male seller was 29 years old at the time of the interview. He learned what pills he preferred from his personal experience.

*I started, you know, really learning once I started finding the different names. I was like and then once I find a cool one, then I would ask for it by name. "Do you have, you know, Blue Dolphins? Do you have this, that, you know?" 'Cause I know how it made me feel...I was like and I didn't want to learn, you know- have to expose myself to a different feeling. I was like 'cause I know, okay, I'm going to this place. You know, I took a Blue Dolphin or a Red Dragon on this night and basically what I was doing that particular night, you know?*

What we found most interesting was the wide variety of names that participants mentioned. Although many interviewees talked about some of the same brand names, we constantly heard new ones. For example, a 29-year-old white male sold both acid and Ecstasy at the peak of his drug-selling career. He spoke about the brands he distributed for both of those drugs.

INT: And were there any- were you guys using any labels or brand names for the stuff you were selling?

*Um, no, but they'd have- they would already be named, like the acid we sold. We had the gels. There was a series of gels that we had. They were black, and they were Black Gels. 'E' if it was capped, they were just Tic-Tacs or capsules. That's what you would*

*call them. The ones that were pre-printed, they would be pre-printed with everything from like Mercedes symbols to, you know, Green Clovers. So, that's the name they would get. They would be Green Clovers or the Mercedes.*

Some participants also reported a growth in the number of pill brands over time. Those who had experience with Ecstasy in its earlier days had some interesting things to say about what pills looked like then and what they had evolved to at the time of interview. In the following, a seller had been using and selling Ecstasy for several years at the time of the interview noted the changes he had witnessed over time.

*No logos none of that stuff. That- that started I think probably in the mid '90s because um, some of the chemicals were harder to come by to- to make. And this is my opinion but I believe that it- some of the chemicals were harder to make and so they had to do something to market these pills. So there were dollar signs and Polos and Rolls Royce logos and all the different logos and they started giving names to them too. And then I even knew a lot of dealers that would use food coloring to make maybe more of an impact of marketability on the product. So, green there'd be blue, there'd be purple, there'd be red, you'd have different colored so that you would actually be able- it's interesting...you'd even be able to- to market it and it would be a specific color that- that people would know and become familiar with. And they'd know, 'Oh, this is good.'*

A few other interviewees mentioned the color of tablets when talking about “good” and “bad” types of Ecstasy. For example, a 27-year-old, white male seller listed some of the names of what he perceived to be good Ecstasy. Yet he also pointed out that what's thought to be good or bad can be subjective.

*Like, well, Doves are good, the Bluebird's good. Um, Electrified Jesus is good. Those, I don't know if you've heard of 'em. They had X's on 'em. It's just an X. Snoopy was good...usually the bad ones are just white. I don't remember what they were called back then...but a lot of times even when it's bad, people are still happy because it fucks them up even if it's not necessarily smooth or whatever. I mean not my friends or people that I deal with now, but in general Ecstasy. So, what's bad to me might still be all right to them...in the general public a lot of people, as long as they're*

*just like altered and if they're not real familiar with the experience, they'll be fine. They just want to escape.*

Previous research findings support the notion that some Ecstasy consumers are not highly concerned with exactly what is in their Ecstasy pill (Calafat et al., 1998). However, if they repeatedly have positive experiences with a particular brand, this can lead them to believe that the brand is good (McElrath & McEvoy, 2002). The majority of our participants were quite experienced in Ecstasy use over time and their sales practices gave them added familiarity with brands. Unlike McElrath and McEvoy's respondents who often failed to realize that there could be variations within and across batches of one brand, most of our sample recognized this possibility.

It was not uncommon for interviewees to tell us that they did not pay attention to which brands were popular, and sometimes their customers were not concerned with names of pills either. When a White, 20-year-old woman was asked about the popularity of particular tablets, she talked about Ecstasy in terms of both her sales and her own use.

*I guess every time I've done it, it's been different because I've never done like the same two types or whatever, and like yeah, the experience I've had from it is different...but it's like more or less you still- it's like you know when you're doing Ecstasy, it's Ecstasy even if it's like a Blue Dolphin or a White Star or I don't know. I never really could remember the names. They always seemed so trivial...I mean I've never met anyone who had like a request for a specific kind or was like, 'Oh never mind. I don't want that.'*

### *Categories of Pill Brands*

As we continued to learn the assortment of brand names for Ecstasy from our interviews and online, it became apparent that there were a few categories of

brands used for the marketing of this drug. We divided them into four major categories, although not every brand mentioned or reviewed online fell into one of these groups. This categorization is similar to Wendel and Curtis' (2000) typology of heroin stamps. The first brand type is designer or status references; some of the examples we came across include: Louis Vuitton, D&G, and Mercedes. Second, there were a number of corporate references in pill brands, including the popular Mitsubishi Ecstasy as well as Motorola. The third type we deemed pop culture since it was clear that popular culture inspired many Ecstasy brand names; Superman and Yellow Decepticons (from the 1980s cartoon series "The Transformers") are just two examples. Finally, there were miscellaneous colors and shapes that characterized some Ecstasy pill brands, like the popular Blue Dolphins and Green Clovers.

The actual sources of most these brand names are unknown. Our participants had minimal knowledge of where their Ecstasy was coming from, let alone the origins of the names. Our participants assumed that manufacturers or major distributors gave their Ecstasy brand names to appeal to potential customers or simply to give buyers a way to identify their Ecstasy. As one 31-year-old white, female seller remarked, "*I think it's probably marketing. Marketing and identification.*"

Approximately a third of the sample had experience selling powder Ecstasy or Ecstasy in capsules. At the time of interview fifty-four (67%) sold in pressed tab form, 20 (25%) sold capsules, and 6 (8%) sold in powder form. Most of these individuals reported powder Ecstasy did not have a name. A handful of

participants called their powder Ecstasy “Molly” which was short for “pure, molecular MDMA.” Also, we came across the name “sassafras”, or “sass” for short, in several interviews. This moniker for powder Ecstasy was new to us. Yet we heard different definitions for sassafras from two participants. In the following, a 23-year-old white male interviewee describes Molly.

*People are just blown away about the stuff that's out here. It's a lot more- the psychedelic is really the best way to describe it because MDMA I think it's, it's methamphetamine, isn't it... When it's broken down. And it's not- MDMA is a little different than MDA which is what people call sass. People call MDMA Molly, if you ever heard that. And it's ah, sass is a little more, it's a lot more psychedelic so it appeals to that, that crowd and usually that's what I would- what I'd work with.*

INT: So why is MDA called sass?

*I don't know, a lot of people thinks- thought it came from a sassafras root which I don't think is true. So it's like people started calling it that and people- like there's- I know people who say some pretty funny things about it. I don't really know why and to try to ah, to give a good answer to it would make me just as bad as all the people who try to give you these crazy explanations for it. So I'm not really sure but it's a name that people recognize so they're sellin' it. That's pretty important to have that, you know, 'cause people know the difference it's basically like two concepts. Molly is the concept of hugging everyone and being happy and just like that, that rave ecstasy feel and sass is more the, you know, ah going to a concert type a- it's everybody has different- sass- MDA is a little more upsetting to the stomach where as MDMA is not. So a lot of girls don't like MDA where as a lot of guys don't like MDMA because it's not as strong, so. (30)*

Among this seller's network, it was clear that sassafras was a nickname for MDA as he distinguished it from Molly or MDMA, yet he talked about it in the context of his Ecstasy sales. It is important that he talked about the differences between these two substances yet referred to them under a sort of Ecstasy umbrella. Later he also told us that the cost and sales prices were about the

same for MDA and MDMA. This interviewee was a mid level seller on the jam band concert circuit.

Another interviewee, a 26-year-old white male, who was one of our highest-level dealers, also talked about sassafras. Yet he gave us a different definition for it and along with an in-depth explanation. He knew more about how Ecstasy was manufactured than most of our sample.

*They called it Molly. Molly was the only name because it was supposedly from molecule. It was created molecule by molecule or whatever the process is. Looking back on it I highly doubt it was Molly. My bet was that it was sassafras, that it came from sass- sassafras oil, that method of making Ecstasy was my bet.*

INT: What is that?

*Um, from my limited understanding, you can make Ecstasy by putting all the chemicals together and making Ecstasy or sassafras is two or three molecule- sassafras oil is two or three molecules off of what Ecstasy is the, the compound. And by removing and adding chemicals you can change sassafras oil into Ecstasy. It'll have a different high than Molly supposedly. Um, and was a lot cheaper and it- the chemicals were easier to purchase in the United States um, so.*

INT: Would that still be considered MDMA?

*Oh it was always MDMA, that I- the end molecule was always MDMA. There's just different scientific methods to get to the MDMA. Some methods, you know, like when it comes to a chemist and an acquisition- I mean when it comes to making Ecstasy there's, there's two limiting factors, your skill level and your available chemicals. And like, from my understanding, the skill level was impeccable. It was Ph.D. quality, the skill was there, so your only limiting factor was chemicals available. If you were making it within the United States, your chemical- your ability to acquire chemicals was highly limited so they had to move outside the country to acquire chemicals. And then you just want the cheapest chemicals or whatever method was safest to make it. Like, is this gonna blow up in my face? Well, how much time am I gonna be exposed to an explosion, you know what I mean? So for the chemist- and sassafras was a very safe way of making MDMA in a very easy way that a four year college student*

*can make Ecstasy as opposed to a Ph.D., so I think it was very easy, nonchalant. From my understanding the chemist was highly qualified but also a crank head so um, I'd be willing to bet that his uh, desire to work hard was fairly limited and would probably have taken the easiest route possible.*

INT: And what do you think the differences are like, feeling- like use wise between Molly and the sassafras?

*Um, sassafras from my understanding is a little more dopey, uh, a little more like heroin, a little more laid back like you take it, it kicks you on your butt and you're lying on the floor drooling and smiling and rubbing yourself. Where as like Molly and um, molecule is more upbeat, dance-y (sic), club, keep energy boost, grind your teeth all night type high. (36)*

Interestingly, both of these sellers dealt with similar but different hippie-type subcultures in which their customers seemed interested in the possible “natural” roots of Ecstasy. Even these interviewees’ suppliers were described as hippies. While these interviewees had distinct explanations for sassafras, both definitions seemed tailored to the markets in which they were selling. Perhaps that is the case for other categories of pill brands in which, for example, corporate and high status brands may appeal to those in the club scene. Further research would be needed to explore that possibility.

### **Ecstasy Preferences**

Since it appeared that sassafras sellers sold a particular type of Ecstasy to appeal to their hippie customers, we also wondered what motivated the rest of our sample to sell specific brands. In general some participants did not feel brand names were of primary importance in their Ecstasy sales. When we asked a 34-year-old woman of mixed ethnicity about the brands of Ecstasy she sold, her answer was similar to many of our other interviewees’ feelings on the matter.

*But I never really, you know that's the thing is I don't, I'm not into the whole like drug slang. 'Cause nobody- people that I'm getting it for, they trust already, they're not like, "Hey what kind is it?" You know? They just want to know if it's clean, if it's, like what the comedown is like. That kind of thing. Like if they're going to feel crappy the next day or are they going to feel all speedy. That kind of thing.*

Another interviewee, a 28-year-old Filipina seller, reported picking up Ecstasy brands she was familiar with, both for her own consumption and to sell to her customers. This practice reflected the practice of most of the sample since the majority were users who often put aside pills for their own use from the batches they sold. This participant tailored her sales of particular brands to her customers' preferences.

*I mean I think with Ecstasy now, you just never know. It doesn't matter. I mean it's one of those things where I would be amazed if I came across Ecstasy like it was back in the day. I think that now it's too rampant. There's no way to eyeball it. And the different thing with Ecstasy now is like there's versions of it. So...that's the interesting thing now. It's like there's different variations of it. And it's like Blue Dolphins. It's like White Fin, Ruby whatever. I can't stand when it's speedy. So, I've got to make sure. Like, I know I like Blue Dolphins. And I know that the White Fins are very, very mild. Or if I'm taking like the Blue Dolphin, I can only take half. But the next day you don't feel as bad. So, it's like now there are really different classes of it, and I'm not really as up on it as I've been in the past just 'cause it's not my drug of choice.*

INT: And so, when you do hook other people up, you try and hook them up with the kind that they like?

*When I try to hook- well, yeah. I know Blue Dolphins most people would like, but with these one guys- with these one guys- this one guy, I always try to get him mild stuff because, you know, I'm not there. And they're like 50-year-old dermatologists, so I'm like, okay, I don't want to give them some hardcore thing. So, I always give them something mild because they're gonna [sic] like it anyway. You know what I mean? I don't want them ever afraid to come back because, you know, they had some crazy experience one night. (14)*



Another participant also spoke about purchasing batches to sell that he and his selling partner preferred to use themselves. While the particular Ecstasy he described did not have a brand name, he recalled the urban myth that this type contained heroin. In the previous quote the woman seller talked about not liking “speedy” Ecstasy. Both interviewees provided examples of how Ecstasy is perceived to be more than just MDMA.

*We used to get stuff that would have like brown dots in it, and everyone would be like, “Oh, brown dots. That means that heroin’s in there.” And to this day I don’t know if they did or didn’t use heroin, but we were like, “We don’t care if it’s heroin or not. We love that stuff. Give it to us.” Because it was a great high. And that was the only one we recognized was the brown dots. But I had another discussion with a guy that actually sold heroin amongst other things, and he was like, “There’s no way in hell that they would put heroin in ‘e’. It’s too expensive. They wouldn’t cut it with it. It’s too expensive to use.” So, I don’t know.*

We noticed that our sample discussed their sales of types of Ecstasy, especially powder/capsules or pressed tablets, more often than they spoke about brands. Interviewees gave varying preferences for powder Ecstasy versus pressed pills and told us what their customers favored as well. As one 25-year-old, mixed Indian and Russian female participant stated, “...like I said, the pills like tend to have speed in ‘em, keep you up. Just from selling it, people always want the capsules, it seems to me.” Another interviewee, a 25-year-old, white male, sold mainly powder Ecstasy in capsules at music festivals. He talked about the difference in perceptions between pressed tablets and capsules according to what customers are comfortable with.

*I mean people could be selling you anything out of pills, I mean when it comes to strangers...if you’re giving something in a capsule, they have no idea what it is, but if they feel more secure if it has some recognizable*

*stamp on it- but again I mean it hasn't been a problem for me just selling capsules with powder just because people want it just because it's not strange to them.*

Another interviewee talked about his concern for his customers and their preference for powder or capsule Ecstasy. He chose to distribute powder Ecstasy primarily because he disliked the brand market.

*If it's the pressed pill, I only would do it if I've done my research, you know have tried it twice and three times, on how good it is. I don't want to be dealing with a product I have to get rid of 'cause it's nuts. I would rather destroy it at that point then give it to other people...most people like powder because they can choose which method they use on. And if somebody gets a good gram of powder then that's just good enough to like have on hand for a good, long while and not have to worry about where it's coming from...I never got into the brand names, but I just knew that that was generally, you know, a pretty backwards market to go into. It was fairly obvious that the brand competition shit around that seems just, I don't know, control mechanism in the methodology of distribution. And I didn't want to remain susceptible to that at any point. So as soon as I could find just pure powder MDMA, then that's all I would really want to deal with. (56)*

Alternately, some felt that the pressed pills were of higher quality and more likely to be pure since it seemed easier to adulterate powder. A White, male seller, 25 years of age, felt this way.

*Well, I like the pressed- you know, depending on the pressed pill, like usually the pressed pills are better. It's harder to get rid of the capsules because they're, you know- a lot of people don't want anything 'cause people can put other shit in there, you know?*

Another 25-year-old, White male participant also believed that pressed pills with labels would sell better than capsule Ecstasy. This seller had distributed a variety of drugs over a ten year period, but he had not sold Ecstasy

as much as other drugs. Still, his experience as a drug seller led him to have some expertise in what customers preferred.

*People will buy out pink, shaped heart with some kind of cool logo on it quicker than they'll buy a clear capsule with white powder that could be aspirin. It's white capsules, you know? Anyone could make those capsules, where pills are definitely manufactured. And people feel safer about not getting ripped off if they buy manufactured 'e'...I'm just imagining if I was in a club, buying Ecstasy, buying the pill with the cool logo, then, you know, that people wearing t-shirts of that logo or some white capsule someone could've made in their basement. So I definitely think it makes a difference. (71)*

The majority of our sample did not test their Ecstasy regularly. When asked if they tested the Ecstasy they sold, only 26 (32%) said they always tested it. Twenty-two (28%) said they never tested their Ecstasy, 16 (20%) said they rarely tested their Ecstasy, 11 (14%) said sometimes, and 5 (6%) said they tested it most of the time. The most frequently cited method for testing Ecstasy was "take it yourself" (n=54), followed by "give sample to others" (n=28), and "use test kit" (n=14). Other methods mentioned include: "asked dealer," "internet," and "asking friends or customers about it." Only two participants reported adding adulterants to the Ecstasy they sold. One added cocaine and heroin, the other added Viagra. Thirty-one (39%) sold Ecstasy they knew contained specific adulterants (including ephedrine, caffeine, DXM, PMA, methamphetamine, heroin, opiates, synthetic heroin, ketamine, manure, mescaline, aspirin, and foxy-methoxy).

When they did test it, they more often took the Ecstasy themselves instead of using a testing kit and any notions of their Ecstasy being "speedy" or otherwise came from their own or their customers' experiences. Many of them

also estimated the purity of the Ecstasy they were selling; their guesses ranged from 40 percent pure to 100 percent pure with a median reported purity of 83 percent.

### *The Internet and Ecstasy Brands*

Our tracking of Ecstasy pill brands online revealed consistent crossover between what we heard from interviewees and what we saw on the websites. While a small number of participants talked about checking specific pills online, the replication of brand names from both our interviews and from online research revealed the widespread nature of this branding phenomenon.

Forty-two (53%) interviewees said they browsed Ecstasy websites. The most visited website was Dancesafe.org (n=28), followed by both Ecstasy.org (n=18) and Erowid.org (n=18), and then Pillreports.com (n=5). Other websites mentioned were Bluelight.nu, Lycaeum, MSN health site, Midwestraves.org, and High Times. The most frequently cited reason for visiting those websites was for information regarding purity (n=32), followed by information about the effects of Ecstasy (n=31), information about health risks (n=30), information about dosage (n=25), images of pills (n=24), to find a rave (n=5), and to order test kits (n=4). Other reasons mentioned were: for current news, what is going on in the scene, molecular makeup/manufacturing, out of boredom, to find out about laws, to read about people's experiences, and for pill ratings.

We focused our online research by following the pill reports of the Ecstasy brands mentioned in the interviews. Not surprisingly, there seemed to be different batches of the same brand with various ratings. It is necessary to note

that the ratings on Pillreports.com are very subjective since those reviewing the pills are only experts insofar as they are mostly experienced users.

As previously mentioned, twenty-four of our participants had gone online to look at images of particular pills. Dancesafe.org and Pillreports.com are both websites that provide pictures of various pills from different regions around the country and even the world. Many times interviewees could not recall the name of the website they had accessed due to conducting searches on a major search engine which only linked them to a site. After being asked about researching pills on the Internet, this 24-year-old, white male said his friend introduced him to him to pill reports online.

*I had a friend that did it actually. We started doing that after a while...like people will post if there's a pill that comes out...people will go and like post things about their high, about what happened, if it's a shitty pill...they'll rate it. It's really funny (laughs), like on the Internet. (66)*

INT: So that's what you look for when you go on there?

*Well, if there's like a pill and say like someone- we bought a whole bunch and someone calls and goes, 'Tell everyone,' you know, me or my friends. Then they'll be like- if we don't know what to do about it, we'll look it up on the Internet. Or someone has a pill like that they found or something, you know, we can just look it up. Go on the Internet and see what it is.*

Another participant, a 27-year-old white male, talked about utilizing Ecstasy websites not only for reports on pills he plans to sell but also for his own knowledge. He mentioned liking Bluelight.nu a great deal the site linked to Pillreports.com.

*I look at various sites. I like Bluelight. That just talks about the pills and rates the quality. I just did it out of curiosity. I was just looking at Dancesafe the other night and that just kind of keeps- I don't know- keeps the public abreast on health issues and sometimes gives warnings for bad*

*shit going around...I mean I guess it's kind of a work resource, but I do it because of curiosity as well. (78)*

Ultimately, our findings gave us a glimpse into the social construction of Ecstasy brands from the point of view of San Francisco Bay Area Ecstasy sellers. The branding of Ecstasy tells us not only about this particular drug market and its subculture but also about our consumer-conscious society as a whole. Are Ecstasy manufacturers predicting that particular brand names will tap into this material culture's ultimate desires; or are they simply products of the society themselves, utilizing recognizable names by which they are surrounded? Clearly more research is needed in this area.

It is important to note that San Francisco Bay Area Ecstasy distributors seemed to be in a unique position. According to many of our participants who had lived in other parts of the country, San Francisco has a reputation for high quality, less expensive drugs, particularly Ecstasy. We wondered if this perception had anything to do with certain distributors' lack of trust in Ecstasy brand names. Perhaps they assumed that what they would have access to in San Francisco would be good regardless of brand name. Since some referred to powder Ecstasy as "pure MDMA" often from what they were told by suppliers, tablets pressed with symbols were not necessarily more appealing. There seemed to be an indication of less trust in colorful pressed tablets because they were mass-produced in unknown locations and allegedly less organic than powder Ecstasy. Yet there were also several people who felt that powder would

be easiest to adulterate and therefore they were suspicious of powder or capsule Ecstasy.

After comparing our sample to what we could glean from those individuals who posted on websites like Pillreports.com, we realized that our participants were a different group. Generally, our sample appeared to be older and had passed their peak usage of Ecstasy while those who posted on these websites seemed to be either initiating or fully immersed in an Ecstasy-taking social world. The participants in our study put less faith in brand names and relied more on trusting their sources for Ecstasy over trusting a label. This could be a function of age or membership in specific subcultures, but it is difficult to tell since there is not much information given about the people posting on these websites aside from what region they are from.

We repeatedly heard that trust in our interviewees' suppliers was a priority in obtaining quality Ecstasy, and the sellers in our study often expressed concern for their customers. For most participants brand names were secondary to giving their customers a positive experience with a minimum of health risks. We think this is a unique quality of the Ecstasy drug market when compared to popular and professional conceptualizations of other drug markets. While the branding phenomenon within the Ecstasy market is also unique, our sample revealed that the social worlds of Ecstasy sales and use have complex relationships with Ecstasy brands.

## OUTCOMES OF ECSTASY SALES

### Comparing Ecstasy and Cocaine Sales

Ecstasy distributors who also sold cocaine perceived Ecstasy, as one interviewee put it, as "...a drug for community and cocaine is for profit." Overall Ecstasy had a much more benign reputation than cocaine among our interviewees, despite the fact that sellers agreed that cocaine was "...making a comeback." One 26-year-old, white male parts-of-ounce seller reported that it was the return to the "retro" style of the 1970s and 1980s that explained cocaine's renewed popularity:

*The 70s slash 80s style. And a lot of people take that all the way to the extreme to the point of what drugs they use. They were doing coke in the 80s and stuff like that so now everyone wants to you know have the feeling.*

People under the influence of Ecstasy were characterized as mellow and cocaine users tended to be "...more jacked up and like you feel this crazy energy off of them." Several interviewees described cocaine as a "social drug" and felt that getting high on cocaine was "less of a commitment" than Ecstasy. A 28-year-old, Filipina seller explained why she preferred cocaine to Ecstasy intoxication telling us, "Ecstasy is like an 8-hour commitment, coke is a 20 minute commitment."

Cocaine and Ecstasy were seen as potentially equally profitable, but cocaine users bought their drug more often than Ecstasy users. Several interviewees told us that "... it is a lot easier to sell cocaine ...than Ecstasy right now." Cocaine customers were described as "friends they pick up for," working



people or students like themselves. Several sellers described their customers as professionals who bought eighths or quarter ounces at a time.

*It's like I sell it to investment bankers and people who own businesses . . . and a lot of affluent people... These are people who are more affluent they feel like they're in control of their life, you know, they are not struggling with day to day and when they party that's what they like to do is Ecstasy and coke . . . There's more professional people who do, who lean towards the white powders.*

Another 21-year-old, Latino dealer reflected other interviewees' reports when he described his cocaine customers as markedly different from his Ecstasy customers, not in terms of sociodemographic characteristics but in terms of behavior:

*But I mean people –just different drugs affect you differently. Cocaine is one of those. It's candy, you know? People just want it. They're greedy. They just –it's ugly. It's real ugly.*

Two of the 16 sellers described wanting to quit selling cocaine if not Ecstasy. A 29-year-old, white male knew the problems cocaine could cause because his mother had gotten into trouble with cocaine when he was a teenager. His roommate at the time of the interview was addicted to cocaine, so he planned to discontinue cocaine but not Ecstasy sales. A 21-year-old, Latino wanted to stop both his cocaine and Ecstasy sales because his girlfriend did not approve.

Most of the cocaine selling interviewees sold small amounts (grams or parts of grams) infrequently (no more than once or twice a month). However, four of the sellers sold ounces or parts of ounces once or twice a week. All of these sellers but one made a majority of their drug profits from Ecstasy. A 41-year-old Latino male made most of his money cultivating marijuana for medical

patients and selling it to a cannabis club. He sold a half an ounce of cocaine two to three times a month. Most sellers described their cocaine sales as providing a service for their friends or Ecstasy customers or to finance their own cocaine use. These findings indicate different attitudes toward cocaine sales among sellers, while sellers' practices and customer behaviors differed by types of drugs bought and sold. Ecstasy had a more benign reputation than cocaine, and cocaine customers were viewed as somewhat more problematic than Ecstasy buyers.

### **Effects of Sales on Sellers' Use**

One of the aims of the study was to explore the consequences of selling Ecstasy, including its effects on sellers' own use patterns. We knew from our previous studies of cocaine and marijuana sellers that one of the consequences of selling was increased use. Ecstasy use patterns did not appear to be related to Ecstasy sales. Interviewees reported that their Ecstasy sales affected their Ecstasy use. A number of interviewees claimed to have actually decreased their use as a result of their involvement in the Ecstasy market. Many felt they needed to have a clear head and that using Ecstasy interfered with their profit margin as explained by a 25-year-old woman of mixed ethnicity:

*I've (laughs)- I have bought some and gone out and taken it and tried to sell it, and it doesn't work. You give it all away. 'Cause once you take one, you're like, "You can have one!" So, pretty much now, um, although I will take it occasionally, like I said I've been working pretty consistently. So, I've been really just buying it to sell (20).*

A 31-year-old white man also felt that using interfered with sales:

*That's the issue, is all of a sudden you're not really that good of a drug dealer if you're giving it away and doing it yourself (13)*

A 20-year-old white male believed that Ecstasy use depended on the individual's frame of mind, not on Ecstasy sales:

*Um it can, it all depends on where you're head-, like where your head is, like what mode you're in. Like if you're in just get money mode, then you're not going to want to take a lot because you're going to be concentrating on getting all your money. But if you're in just like a fuck it mode, you know. (31)*

This interviewee felt that a mental focus on sales actually curbed Ecstasy use.

Others experienced a short-lived peak use period when they first started selling followed by long periods of no use at all. A 24-year-old White man explained:

*Um, I think I might have done it- I started doing it again a little bit more just 'cause I had it around a lot. I've kind of gone in phases. I would do it a lot and then not even see it again for maybe even up to a year and then start doing it again (08).*

Another interviewee, a 25-year-old White male felt that sales had no effect on his Ecstasy use because he did not use it regularly:

*No not really. I just don't like uh, I'm not really- I don't do it to maintain my habit on Ecstasy because I don't really do it that much. Like I said, I've had this batch of ah, pink ladies for about three, no, no, no about two weeks and I haven't done it yet. So it's not like I'm, I'm waiting for my next shipment to do my, my regular ten, you know. I don't take anything out unless I want it, you know. And I give, I give deals to my friends, you know what I'm sayin', you know (35).*

The interviewer had simply asked if his Ecstasy sales had affected his use. The interviewee's response reflects an assumption that drug sales fund drug use and he felt that it was not the case for him because he was not a habitual user.

Another interviewee, a 23-year-old Asian man felt that selling Ecstasy had actually caused him to stop using. He sold primarily to his friends and felt responsible for their safety:

*How did selling? Uh not at all, if anything it made me like think about not using it at all you know. Or a lot of times like I, people would be like, "OK we're going out tonight, [name] hook some E up for us please." I'm like, "I'll hook it up". And I'm going out with the people that are taking it and because they're taking it, it's like automatically I'm not going to take it. 'Cause I'm going to be the mentally stable one tonight. You know. 'Cause I'm a person that when I'm out with my friends and I know like I sold them E, it's like I have that conscience that I need to look out for them. Yeah like OK I sold this person the E like if anything like they're not going to get in trouble when they're on it, not with me at least you know (22).*

A 25-year-old white man claimed that Ecstasy sales definitely affected his use because the drug was readily available:

*Oh, I mean yeah. I mean if I have pills, yeah, I'll definitely tend to go on a streak of it or whatever, you know, like if I have pills and if it's free or super cheap and there's stuff going on, yeah. I'll usually end up doing more. You know? But uh, yeah, definitely, for sure. If I've got a whole bunch, I'll do it (09).*

It is important to note that the interviewee talked about going “on a streak” – not regular use – if the Ecstasy was free *and* “if there’s stuff going on.” A social situation was an important part of his decision to use Ecstasy. A 32-year-old white transgender interviewee felt Ecstasy sales had affected his use:

*Yeah, I'm sure it has. I mean it is accessible, so if I want it, I can have it. But I don't think that I want it more frequently. I think that previously I wanted the same amount. I just didn't have it. (47)*

The interviewee differentiated between increased use due to readily available drugs and increased use from a compulsive need. Another interviewee, a 26-year-old white male felt he would use more if it were available as long as it did not interfere with his profits:

*Um financially speaking, if I knew that I had a set goal of money to make and if I didn't have any for personal use then that was that, you know? And then it'd be all to sell. If I had excess, that's when I would get tempted*

*to be like, "Well I'm going to take two now. Fuck it." Or I would just like give 'em away to people. (33).*

Even if the interviewees felt they used more as a result of their sales, no one spoke about using regularly. Their use was sporadic. A 26-year-old white woman explains:

*Yeah. I mean that's the problem. Because like say you want some and, "Oh okay I'll get you some and then I'll keep two." [Laughs] You know what I'm saying and then I'll do it you know on the weekends. Yeah I mean, if it's in my hands, then okay (37).*

A 28-year-old African American man was more opportunistic: *"I'm more likely to grab one if I'm hookin up for somebody else"* (21). This interviewee did not sell regularly and his opportunistic "grab" of one hit did not reflect regular use either.

Clearly, the relationship between Ecstasy sales and use is very different from sales and use of cocaine or marijuana. Two salient themes from our interview data are possible explanations for this difference: the limited effects of Ecstasy and the perception of Ecstasy as a "community drug."

### **Ecstasy's Effects**

Users report that over time Ecstasy's pleasurable effects diminish especially after periods of heavy use. A 26-year-old white male explained: *"I definitely need more to experience the same high and you can still have a great time but it's never like it was the first time, the first couple times"* (26). After using for every weekend for several months, users no longer experience the euphoric

effects and are left only with the physical exhaustion and mild depression of the days following use as described by a 29-year-old African American man:

*No. I don't really do E now so it's not really a problem. Even back then when I was selling more it wouldn't be a problem. 'Cause I'm not really into it now. Kind of scared of the high. Not really scared of it but I guess it's more so the after effects of being groggy and tired and all the bullshit and want to lay down in bed all day. I don't think I want to deal with that (38).*

The inability to experience the same euphoria and the negative residual effects may explain the interviewees' descriptions of going through "phases" or "streaks" without the regular sustained use patterns common for other drugs (e.g. alcohol, marijuana or cocaine).

#### *Ecstasy as a Community Drug*

Another possible explanation is that Ecstasy is viewed as a social drug more so than cocaine or marijuana. With regular habitual use, cocaine and marijuana users will begin to use alone. Our interviewees used Ecstasy almost exclusively in social situations, in the company of others. They spoke of using Ecstasy in social settings even losing money as dealers for the sake of using with others. One interviewee in particular, a 37-year-old white man laughed at himself for being such a bad businessman:

*Yeah. And I'll do maybe two of them, I'll give away two or three, and sell the other five. Not much of a business man but it's just more fun to do it that way. It's just more about the experience.*

INT: So you're not really doing it for profit then?

*Yeah. OK so I mean that's a really good point is why am I doing it. [laughs] You know it's brilliant, and the answer I think would be . . . OK the issue is, to make a little bit of money isn't a bad idea. Yeah. Uh it's kinda*

*like, I'm not doing it only for the money aspect. But that's nice and who wouldn't like to make some money on the side and I'm not, I'm not rich you know but it's not as important to me right now. I'm working full time, in any case.*

INT: So why do you give it to people for free?

*Because it's a fun drug and it's fun to do with other people. It's a community sort of drug. (13)*

Other interviewees also described Ecstasy as a socially bonding drug. A 25-year-old man of mixed ethnicity sold Ecstasy to his friends for social occasions:

*Um yeah if I am selling Ecstasy I am intending to take it with them like if it was 4 or 5 friends, we all wanted to take some. And I could get it, so I'd be going to take it with them (07).*

A 28-year-old white woman felt that Ecstasy sales, like marijuana sales was a constant, steady business because it appealed to such a broad spectrum of people:

*I think that you could compare Ecstasy to marijuana in the sense that it's constant. It's a really steady, good business. You know? And one reason why, I think that it's socially addictive. It's like people that I know, even including myself, who have taken it and have been buying it have been doing it together for years and years and years. You know? And there's always like younger kids who are turned onto it. And then there's like older people. So, it kind of- it's like marijuana in the same sense, too. It's just like it covers many ages and sort of like different cultural backgrounds and ethnic race and all that stuff, too.*

The term “socially addictive” is very interesting. She and other interviewees felt that Ecstasy brought people together in social settings. A 26-year-old white woman liked to have Ecstasy around not for her own private use, but to use in social situations:

*Okay, well, I'm someone who kind of likes to have a little supply around because you never really know when some fun event is gonna come up, and sometimes I'm really spontaneous with it. Like, you know I'll just*

*decide on a whim, "Oh, I want to do this tonight." You know? "Let's do it" (02).*

Ecstasy use was associated with social bonding, not solitary use. The perception of Ecstasy as a social drug and the lack of desire to use it alone may protect against regular, habitual use.

There are two possible explanations for why Ecstasy sales did not necessarily increase Ecstasy use over time. Continual Ecstasy use ceases to produce the desired effects, leaving the user with diminished highs and the negative residual effects of the drug. Long-term Ecstasy use is then characterized by cycles or phases beginning with peak use followed by periods of abstention. After a period of abstention, some users believe that serotonin levels are replenished and the user may then experience a period of rediscovery, peak, and cessation. A continual increase in use as is the case with cocaine or heroin is unlikely given the nature of Ecstasy's pharmacological effects.

The social aspect of Ecstasy use also makes regular, habitual use unlikely. None of our interviewees reported using alone. They used exclusively in social settings in the company of others. Increases in Ecstasy use are in a sense bounded by the number of social events attended.

### **Perceived Consequences of Ecstasy Selling**

We begin this section of the report with a discussion of participants' perceptions of the positive consequences of Ecstasy use which included enhanced communication, strengthened relationships with people, musical



enjoyment and in two cases relief from depression. The positive outcomes of selling included increased social status and sociability.

With only two exceptions, interviewees reported positive consequences from their Ecstasy use. Most cited enhanced communication and increased sociability as one of the things they liked most about Ecstasy intoxication. The following two respondents' comments exemplify interviewees' accounts of their enjoyment of Ecstasy induced increased openness:

*I've had more conversations with uh people about serious things that are affecting their lives that are truthful on Ecstasy than I've had off Ecstasy. Cause it appears when people are on Ecstasy, they're way less guarded about things that are affecting their lives, you know. (03)*

*Um, I guess when you're high, you know, you're just a lot more open. You know happy, I guess. Yeah, you feel a lot closer to people. . . , I guess. (12)*

Participants recalled important conversations and experiences while on Ecstasy that resulted in increased social bonding and feelings of closeness with their friends and significant others.

*Yeah, absolutely. I think that occasional use in the right scenario with the right friends and in the right frame of mind, when you're really concentrating on what you're doing and what you're trying to achieve out of it, can be- can have extremely positive effects that outlast the actual experience and spill over into daily life in positive ways. (17)*

While most sellers would agree with the socially bonding aspect of the Ecstasy experience, participants warned us that chemical closeness has its limits. In the following, a twenty-nine year old White male recounted a well-known joke about relationships and Ecstasy. (05)

*Yeah, on a regular night I mean you do stupid stuff. You do stuff like you tell people things that like the next day, "What the heck was I talking about?" You- the downsides would be it really messes up with- it really got in the way with relationships for me, and I think for other people that I've talked to about it. I mean there's a joke that if you meet someone on 'e', you know, wait at least 3 weeks before you get married.*

Another reported outcome of this chemically induced feeling of closeness was increased self-esteem and self-image. Being able to express their emotions released their inhibitions and increased their self-confidence, and for women especially, Ecstasy made them feel beautiful. As this 28 year-old Filipina remembered:

*Oh, definitely. I mean I'm a very expressive person to begin with, but it was- for me it wasn't so much that it opened the floodgates. It just relieved me of any inhibitions I had at the time. And it really made me feel like aesthetically beautiful. Which is my biggest insecurity. So, I was more confident in that area which made me even more confident in expressing my feelings. (14)*

Some participants took it one step further by saying that Ecstasy use made them feel like they were part of a community. Interviewees described knowing several hundred people from going to clubs and parties where they listened to music, danced and took Ecstasy together. Others described Phish concerts or Burning Man annual gatherings where they believed that Ecstasy use helped to create a sense of community. A Burning Man attendee described how the effects of Ecstasy could make users feel a part of a larger group:

*Um, I'd say that a lot of times if you're- when you're on it [Ecstasy], if you go somewhere you feel more comfortable in that place. You know? And if there's a place where you don't know anybody, um, I mean that could be a bad thing. But in terms of parties where people are on it, everybody seems to be very welcoming and very accepting. Particularly a situation like Burning Man where everybody is there, and most people are on drugs.*

*And everybody's really friendly. It kind of can create a sense of community, I think. (20)*

Two participants reported that their Ecstasy use helped them to combat depression. Both saw this outcome as unique to their experience but both credited Ecstasy with helping them to overcome depressive feelings and become happier people:

*It was something that allowed me to overcome, honestly when I first started doing it, I was in a deep depression and like that's more like a chemical thing you know you can't really control that. And uh through like more of a personal therapy and counseling with friends and the opportunities that I actually took Ecstasy was different than most people. But that's why I feel I had a positive experience like it kind of brought me out of my depression and it gave me like a new motivation for my life and what I was doing, just because of my personal experience. (25)*

*Yeah, yeah I had a- I had a great experience um, ended up, you know, really- like it was very dream like it was very- so unique my- my first time. I mean it was- yeah it just very different and it enabled me to kind of see some of the reality that exists where I had this sort of darker uh, depressed um, sort of understanding of the world and it was my immediate world was this abusive dysfunctional family. I kind of was able to- to snap out of that and escape that- that and hang out with 20 people who I only knew two of them and they ended up becoming closer, more intimate um, uh friends than- than uh, than I ever assumed people could be with each other. It- it opened up channels that enabled that. (62)*

Unlike other studies of Ecstasy users, such as Beck and Rosenbaum's (1989) sample from the mid-eighties, most of our participants used Ecstasy recreationally. A few interviewees knew that it had been used in therapy prior to its scheduling in 1985 but most of our interviewees were primarily interested in Ecstasy as a party drug.

The Ecstasy experience by all accounts was enhanced listening to music. Whether dancing or just listening users described being able to “feel the music” and rather than just hearing the music they also felt it within their bodies.

*'Cause I've seen Phish, I've seen Phish a hundred times, literally, like exactly a hundred times. And uh, a lot of concerts, you know, you're with friends and it just increases the-it's all about the sensual perception, you know. And uh, just really like you can almost- I don't know it helps you kind of feel the music, you know, in a sense. It's not a uh, it's tough to describe.*  
(12)

Ecstasy has the reputation on the street as a “sex drug.” Interestingly, although participants talked about enjoying the sensual aspects of the experience about half the sample described the experience as sensual but not necessarily sexual. The other half enjoyed sexual experiences while intoxicated but told us that timing was important either starting sexual activities before they “came on” or having sex while they were in the comedown period. Women as well as men were equally divided on the issue of Ecstasy and sex.

#### *Negative Consequences of Ecstasy Using*

The most troublesome consequence of Ecstasy use was the hangover that followed the next day or two days later. Or what some interviewees called “the day after the day after.” Interviewees did not experience these low feelings after every episode or in the same intensity or duration. Ecstasy hangovers were described from mildly debilitating - feeling tired maybe a little cranky - to serious depression lasting several weeks or even months. Interviewees reported that the severity of the hangover increased with long term (several months) increased levels of use.

A twenty-nine year-old White male described variations in the comedown after an Ecstasy use episode.

*It's kinda strange. Sometimes I don't come down at all but other times I will. Honestly I'm trying to understand or trying to see some sort of pattern to when I do and when I don't. .... Um so the tweaking out experience or episode can last anywhere from nothing which is most of the time, to one to five hours let's say. Course there's the whole tweaking out the next day and feeling kinda edgy. (13)*

A twenty-eight year-old White woman seller who was a nursing assistant in a psychiatric ward examines her experiences with coming down from Ecstasy and points out that while intoxicated your self esteem is higher but, the day after the day after your self esteem can be lower.

*(Exhaled) Its just – you feel low and you can feel the difference between a chemical low and an emotional low. Um, there's a distinct difference. It doesn't matter, you just feel really lethargic and you can't quite shake it and I mean there's this like underlying – like I'm, I'm a pretty positive person so it's like I still feel like I'm happy but I can't quite get to that point 'cause I'm like God I just want a fire and hot chocolate, you know, and just like – and then you start feeling your self esteem starts getting lower and then it's no fun. (54)*

A twenty-five year-old White male, who was a full time student, spoke about both the variation in the intensity of the come down as well as its duration from one day to a whole week.

*I mean depending on how much you do, you're pretty – your energy is pretty gone the next day. And like uh, I don't mean I've definitely, you know – I think a lot of people felt depressed or not depressed but just kind of out of it. Yeah, I'd even say a mild depression too, you know the next day which kind of sucks. You kind of feel like 'Ugh' you know? And then negative, you feel pretty crappy the next day, sometimes it lasts for a whole week. One time I got, I mean you know one time out of hundreds, I got pretty depressed and that was like a miserable day that seemed like it lasted a month but it was only once. (09)*

Interviewees linked long term heavy use with increasingly worse comedowns. Most responded by slowing down their use or stopping all together

for a few months. In the following a twenty-seven year-old White male describes his experiences and how he discontinued use when he grew tired of dealing with the negative effects.

*(Laughs) I went through like a couple years, probably about, maybe three years ago and I did it, I did it Saturday every weekend for like (Laughs) 8 or 9 months.*

INT: How did that effect you?

*Like, I started getting depressed. Yeah I started getting a lot of bad –really depressed. That’s why I kind of slowed down.*

INT: After you were off the drug?

*No like after I kind of stopped ‘cause I was starting to get tired. I felt like I was on an emotional roller coaster, started fighting with my girlfriend. Not crying. You know you can just tell when you know when you feel down about shit, you know what I mean? You want to lay down, I didn’t even know why. It was like, it makes me feel like all fuckin’ moody and shit.*

INT: How long would that last?

*It lasted like, I want to say the real depressed part was probably like I want to say it was almost a month straight depressed.*

INT: Did you not use at all for a month or ...?

*Yeah, I had to cut for a while. I took like seven or eight months.*

Interviewees, like this twenty-two year old White male, who danced all night while high on Ecstasy attributed at least some of the physical part of the comedown to be the result of expended energy and tired muscles.

*It generally tends to make people’s back sore uh, tends to be a thing. Um and I think that might just be more associated to lots of energy and dance and relaxing of the muscles um through that period so it might um, might find themselves let’s say a bit sore and stretched out in a good way the day after. (56)*

Interviewees linked the intensity of the comedown with using large amounts of Ecstasy in one use episode. Some interviewees, particularly the ones who used in clubs and danced for hours, linked the lethargy to physical exertion. Participants believed that using every weekend for several months increased the likelihood of both not feeling the Ecstasy as intensely and experiencing more difficult comedowns. What was troublesome was their inability to predict the intensity or duration of the comedown or even if they would experience one at all.

#### *Positive Consequences of Ecstasy Selling*

As we have discussed in earlier sections of this report, sellers enjoyed “giving the Ecstasy experience” to their friends. Friends motivated them to begin selling Ecstasy and opportunities to use Ecstasy with their friends kept many of them in business. The psychopharmacological properties of Ecstasy - empathy enhancement and anxiety reduction increased the social bonds between buyer and seller.

In the following a twenty-six year old White woman describes her enjoyment at providing the Ecstasy experience, a sentiment that was echoed repeatedly in our interviews.

*And I would just distribute it to everyone I knew, and I got all these people who had never used it before to just love it. I mean it was really kind of neat because that was one of the things that kind of made me feel important. I mean as weird as that may be, I liked being known as the girl who could get you Ecstasy. (Laughs) (02)*

This same woman describes her first Ecstasy experiences as having changed her life for the better. She was abandoned by her mother as a child and believed that she was better able to cope and was happier as a result of her Ecstasy use.

Other sellers recounted that selling Ecstasy improved their social life by bringing friends around and making them feel more social and less isolated. In the following this twenty-four year old male who was unemployed at the time of interview relates how selling Ecstasy and marijuana kept him in contact with people.

*Well, I think that it sort of in a way keeps you in contact with people ' cause I think it's really easy to become isolated. I don't know. I don't know how to say this. I guess with me, a big problems is that I get lonely a lot, but I mean I'm not using it – I'm not justifying selling drugs as a way to keep friends around or keep people around. It certainly does bring people around, and you meet people because of that you have some kind of like smoking [someone] out, smoke bud, you know it's a social thing. (68)*

Study participants had positive things to say about selling Ecstasy. They enjoyed giving their friends a unique experience. Having Ecstasy to sell increased socializing for some and made them feel special or important. Selling Ecstasy was not without its problems. Forty-three (54%) reported that they wanted to quit selling giving a wide variety of reasons – 39 in all, including “high risk,” “it’s illegal,” “don’t want to go to jail,” and “stress.” We discuss the negative aspects of selling in this next section of the report.

#### *Negative Consequences of Ecstasy Selling*

Why did so many interviews tell us they wanted to stop selling Ecstasy? Interviewees talked about the legal risks and the stress associated with selling. We were surprised by how little our interviewees knew about the actual legal



consequences they would face if they were arrested. When we asked them how likely it was that they would come in contact with law enforcement almost the entire sample (96%) percent replied highly unlikely or unlikely.

They also had concerns about the potential health consequences for their customers and the problems of handling problematic customers. A few participants had experienced drug related violence. But a much subtler theme emerged especially for those immersed in legal careers. Selling Ecstasy no longer fit into their lifestyles or the lifestyles they aspired to achieve.

Interviewees usually had a combination of reasons for wanting to quit selling. For this twenty-six year old White male it was the legal risks but also his sense of responsibility for the well being of his customers.

*Um, well it's illegal, you know. There are repercussions, you know. It's not a healthy risk. People could argue that I am contributing to someone's demise, you know, to their substance use. (01)*

Interviewees described selling drugs as “stressful.” In this excerpt from a twenty-six year old male’s narrative he describes a very high stress level. He told us “the street just eats you alive.”

*Oh god yes. Yeah the street just eats you alive to the point where your stress has stress and you're sittin' in the car. So I bite my fingers nails and you'll be on [highway] and you'll just have your finger nails bit down to the point where you don't feel there's any left. You'll constantly like if, if the sun reflects off the car next to you and it's a red car and you see like some red in the rear view mirror, your heart's beating five thousand beats a minute and you to myself, " Oh my god if I get home from this trip and I have not been arrested by the police I will never- I don't know how many times I'll never do it again, never ever again. And you do again, of course you're just like h- you get back you realize okay everything is fine and you sober up a little bit and like the paranoid drug- paranoid goes away a little bit, you start to feel a little more calm about it but I've- and this time I think I might be more serious about it than ever, after these shows in July, that's it not- I'd hope that I'm not doing it anymore ex- especially with the-the-t-*

*people I don't know on the road carrying excessive amounts through the mid-west and if through [name of state]. Oh god that's just- that stresses me out. (26)*

A 24-year-old mixed race male reduced his level of sales drastically in response to the stress of possibly being arrested or making his customers sick:

*I pretty much quit. It's really nerve-racking. I would rather get caught with one or two than like two thousand. You'll go to jail forever...because you could get in a lot of trouble selling Ecstasy...it's more dangerous [than pot]. I do not like to sell Ecstasy. I hate it...'cause it keeps stressing me out. I don't feel good. I get all paranoid. I can't sleep. If I have it in my house, I just stay in my house all night watching TV. I can't sleep, and people fuckin' get sick taking that shit. So it's like, you know, I don't know. I don't really want to be involved, you know. (40)*

Interviewees expressed concern for their customers' health and talked about cutting off their friends or refusing to sell to them if they thought they were getting into trouble.

*Just like with any other drug after you've sold it for a while you kind of think maybe you're doing a disservice to certain people. And you have to cut them off pretty much. I tried to be somewhat responsible. I don't want to just be like the fisherman or whatever. If I see that somebody is getting too smacked out on something, it's just like any bartender would do. You know you're cut off. Take a cab home. (33)*

In the following excerpt, this thirty-five year old White male who was deeply involved in San Francisco's gay scene worried about his role in his customers becoming "e-tards" or people who have taken way too much Ecstasy.

*Mmm I think the only attitude that would change is that I have seen people really go over board on it and they're like E-tards now is what we call 'em. They're like permanent state of like- they were just using drugs too much. (60)*

A twenty-year old White male college student told us he was conflicted about selling Ecstasy. On the one hand he enjoyed making his friends happy, but

he worried about the effects of his sales on his customers. At time of interview he had not sold Ecstasy in two months.

*Um, what do I like about it? I like the fact to make people happy. People get really excited. That I don't like the fact is I am ruining young lives. I'm ruining young lives. And I have seen some of these kids. I'm just like, "You do not need no more, man. You do not need no more." (Laughs) But of course I sell it to 'em. I sold it to 'em. (57)*

Sellers complained about certain customers who always wanted a “deal” or who expected them to be available anytime they were needed. Generally, sellers disliked it when the service they were providing was not appreciated. A twenty-six year-old White male was a high level dealer who worked the music concert circuit. He described the problem of turning down people who wanted to pay less for their drugs.

*I dislike the fake friends and always having ah, people- everyone wants a deal, 'Oh, can you do this amount for this much money?' And you'd be like, you'd have to tell, 'You're not the only one that's going to ask me that and if I do that I won't make it to the last Phish shows, I'll be broke in the middle of [name of east coast state] with no product and no money.' So like, 'No, I can't.' And then people are like, 'Well, come on, you know, I just wan to enjoy the show, it's my only show I'm seein. You're seeing every show.' They think you have tons of money just 'cause you have a bunch in your pocket that really isn't yours. (26)*

Most of our interviewees did not experience violence related to their Ecstasy sales. Two of our interviewees were shot at but not wounded and one was robbed at gunpoint. Several young males in the study described getting into fights with people in the course of selling drugs. All of these altercations occurred when the interviewees were selling in public settings with people they did not know. A twenty-four year-old Native American described a period in his dealing career when he was selling for a higher-level seller at warehouse parties.

Over the course of the same evening, someone tried to rob him at the first warehouse party he went to and at a second location someone shot at him. He stopped selling in public places after these incidents.

*Everyone's getting arrested and I'm getting shot at now you know and it was like yeah the money was nice but it wasn't that nice. You know. It wasn't worth risking your life really. (03)*

Another twenty-two year old marijuana and Ecstasy seller reported that he was robbed at gunpoint on two different occasions by security at raves. He believed the security guards took the pills and then gave them to someone else to distribute. Soon after, he stopped selling at raves, and at time of interview he acted as a middleman for a friend who was a high level dealer.

Finally, interviewees, particularly those on a career path, felt they were maturing out of being Ecstasy sellers. Full time jobs and other responsibilities reduced their time for recreational activities. This twenty-nine year-old White male's account reflects this sense of it being time to grow up and stop taking unnecessary chances. He saw himself as on the way out of being "like a drug dealer:"

INT: Have you ever had any desire to stop selling?

*Um, I could see that day. I'm probably more on the way out of being like a drug dealer than on the way in... 'cause I feel like I'm growing up a little bit, and I just don't want to get in trouble. And um, you know now I work full time, and I don't need that. I don't need the money from drug sales anymore. You know, 'cause I'm getting paid. I get paid at work, you know, and make a just salary. (13)*

At twenty-nine years old, this White male seller wanted to opt for security. He no longer believed the risks were worth it. In the next excerpt, a twenty-six year old

White male saw his own and his friends' lifestyles changing. They were not in college anymore.

*I started noticing that it wasn't secure. I mean I needed to pay my rent. I was working temp jobs up here. I signed up with a temp firm, and I was doing temp jobs while- and then I went out on the weekends and was selling 'e'. And it just- it wasn't- I needed something secure. I needed more money that was secure. And here I was counting on selling my 'e' to make my rent that weekend, and I couldn't sell it because everyone in the place was selling it. And you know, I was like, 'Oh, I need to quit doing this.' And it's sketchy. I've had my turn with the police, and I didn't want to go back there. And that just kind of- I was like, this isn't worth it. I need to take a break. I need to get away from doing it all the time. Um, so I started to wind down. So, I stopped kind of selling it, but I continued to like hang out with that crowd...and I started to move away from selling anything. And I had a full time job. (05)*

*I was gettin' older. People just wasn't- I wasn't in college anymore. It wasn't a party atmosphere as much anymore. People were working. It was just the sales were dying down, and it just wasn't- it wasn't the lifestyle I was living anymore. (36)*

One twenty-four year old White female seller gave a unique explanation for wanting to stop selling. During the course of the interview she realized she had been selling for six years and this made her think it was time to quit.

*Like realistically. I wish I could say I don't want to do it anymore because like, you know, like this study has actually made me realize like, wow, I did it when I was 18. Now I'm 24. That's like 6 years. (12)*

In the questionnaire portion of the interview the top reason given for wanting to stop selling was legal risks, despite the fact that 96 percent of the participants believed it was highly unlikely or unlikely they would be arrested for Ecstasy sales. Upon analyzing the qualitative interviews, we found their reasons for wanting to stop selling were somewhat more complex. Concerns about health consequences for their customers, being tired of sales-related stress and

burn out from handling difficult customers were all important components of their reasons for wanting to stop selling. For most of the interviewees who were working full time or planning a career, the sense that it was time to grow up and stop taking unnecessary risks was equally pervasive.

## **SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION**

### **Becoming an Ecstasy Seller**

#### *Initiation into Ecstasy Sales*

Interviewees were in their early twenties when they began using and selling Ecstasy. Only two interviewees had sold Ecstasy before they began using. We identified three major types of initiation in to Ecstasy selling. The first mode of entrée is conceptualized as drifting into dealing or being an Ecstasy user who knew a seller and began by buying Ecstasy for their friends. The second mode of entrée we called the Established Seller who added Ecstasy to their product line. The third initiation method we have characterized as entrepreneurial or profit motivated. These are sellers who began selling Ecstasy because they believed they could make money doing so.

### **Resisting the Dealer Identity**

The stigma attached to the drug dealer identity inspired our participants to distance themselves from its negative images and to construct more positive identities for themselves. From our interviewees' perspectives, they were not real dealers because they were not full time sellers, only sold to friends and did not market or push their drugs. Further, interviewees ranked themselves as mid or low level sellers irrespective of their actual sales levels. The low level sellers

reported they were only making “extra money” from drug sales with most of their income coming from conventional sources. Finally, participants felt that the psychoactive properties of the drugs they sold differentiated them from sellers of other drugs. They saw themselves as quality assurance agents for their customers. Ecstasy use was seen as a beneficial experience to be shared with friends.

Even long term sellers of other drugs saw their Ecstasy sales in a different light. Selling Ecstasy was not perceived to be as criminal or immoral as dealing other drugs because of Ecstasy’s benign reputation as an important, perhaps even therapeutic experience. Sellers’ stake in conventional worlds precluded their adoption of deviant social identities. Sellers constructed their own identities, labeling themselves service providers, enablers or facilitators. They often took pride in giving their friends positive drug experiences, seeing themselves as providing a service for their communities.

### *Sales Practices*

Unlike findings from other drug distribution studies, where sellers describe detailed business practices, rules for their operations and contingency plans; the sellers we interviewed had very few rules for themselves or for their customers. Most reported their only precautions were to only sell to friends and to not talk about drugs on the telephone. Participants relied on their friendships with their customers to protect them from theft, violence or police intervention. A majority sold in private or what we call privatized settings, and only two interviewees reported engaging in cutting or adulterating the drugs they sold. Most

participants had few friends who were Ecstasy sellers (average of five percent), which may have hampered the development of more sophisticated business practices. Ecstasy selling was not a daily activity, since most customers used sporadically (on the weekends, for special events or even more infrequently) and sales patterns mirrored customers' use patterns.

### **Social Relationships Between Sellers and Buyers**

Essentially, for most participants it was their friends who made it possible for them to distribute Ecstasy. When asked who their customers were, 80% (64) replied friends and acquaintances. Not only was it convenient and easy to sell within their social networks, these participants trusted their friends to engage in illicit transactions without provoking problems.

While it was less common for the sellers in our study to have a close relationship with their suppliers, most interviewees reported having friendly, business relationships. With some exceptions, participants knew very little about where the Ecstasy they sold came from or how their suppliers priced their product. Many adopted a "don't ask, don't tell" policy and were careful not to ask too many questions.

### **The Role of Ecstasy Branding in the Ecstasy Market**

Early on in the project we learned about the importance of Ecstasy brands in understanding the ways in which interviewees evaluated the quality of the pills they bought and sold. Ecstasy manufacturers choose specific symbols for their pills to convey messages to consumers about their product. As we continued to learn the assortment of brand names for Ecstasy from our interviews and online,



it became apparent that there were a few categories of brands used for the marketing of this drug. We divided them into four major categories, although not every brand mentioned or reviewed online fell into one of these groups. The first brand type is designer or status references; some of the examples we came across include: Louis Vuitton, D&G, and Mercedes. Second, there were a number of corporate references in pill brands, including the popular Mitsubishi Ecstasy as well as Motorola. The third type we deemed pop culture since it was clear that popular culture inspired many Ecstasy brand names; Superman and Yellow Decepticons (from the 1980s cartoon series “The Transformers”) are just two examples. Finally, there were miscellaneous colors and shapes that characterized some Ecstasy pill brands, like the popular Blue Dolphins and Green Clovers.

The majority of our sample did not test their Ecstasy regularly. When asked if they tested the Ecstasy they sold, only 26 (32%) said they always tested it. The most frequently cited method for testing Ecstasy was “take it yourself.” Testing was not a priority to these sellers, but rather trust in their suppliers allowed our participants to feel good about the quality and safety of the ecstasy they were obtaining. Brands were also secondary to a trusting relationship between buyer and seller.

### *The Internet and Ecstasy Brands*

Our tracking of Ecstasy pill brands online revealed consistent crossover between what we heard from interviewees and what we saw on the websites. While a small number of participants talked about checking specific pills online,

the replication of brand names from both our interviews and from online research revealed the widespread nature of this branding phenomenon.

## **Outcomes of Ecstasy Sales**

### *Effects of Sales on Distributors Use*

We knew from our previous studies of cocaine and marijuana sellers that one of the consequences of drug selling is increased, often problematic use by the seller. Ecstasy use patterns did not appear to be related to Ecstasy sales. A number of interviewees claimed to have actually decreased their use as a result of their involvement in the Ecstasy market.

The inability to experience the same euphoria over time and the negative residual effects may explain the interviewees' descriptions of going through "phases" or "streaks" without the regular sustained use patterns common for other drugs (e.g. alcohol, marijuana or cocaine). Long term Ecstasy use is characterized by cycles or phases with peak use periods followed by periods of abstinence. Another possible explanation is that Ecstasy, more so than cocaine or marijuana is viewed as a social drug. With regular habitual use, cocaine and marijuana users will begin to use alone. Our interviewees used Ecstasy almost exclusively in social situations. Sellers lost drug sale profits for the sake of using with others. Increases in Ecstasy use are in a sense bounded by the number of social events attended.

### *Positive Consequences of Ecstasy Use*

The positive consequences of Ecstasy use included enhanced communication, strengthened relationships with people, musical enjoyment and

in two cases relief from depression. The positive outcomes of selling included social status and increased sociability.

Ecstasy has the reputation on the street as a “sex drug.” Interestingly, although participants talked about enjoying the sensual aspects of the experience, about half the sample described the experience as sensual but not necessarily sexual. The other half enjoyed sexual experiences while intoxicated but told us that timing was important, either starting sexual activities before they “came on” or having sex while they were in the comedown period. Women as well as men were equally divided on the issue of Ecstasy and sex.

#### *Negative Consequences of Ecstasy Using*

The most troublesome consequence of Ecstasy use was the hangover that followed the next day or two days later. Interviewees did not experience these low feelings after every episode or in the same intensity or duration. Ecstasy hangovers were described from mildly debilitating - feeling tired maybe a little cranky - to serious depression lasting several weeks, even months. Interviewees reported that the severity of the hangover increased with long term (several months) increased levels of use.

#### *Positive Consequences of Ecstasy Selling*

Friends motivated them to begin selling Ecstasy and opportunities to use Ecstasy with their friends kept many of them in business. The psychopharmacological properties of Ecstasy, empathy enhancement and anxiety reduction, enhanced the social bonds between buyer and seller. Ecstasy sellers had positive things to say about selling Ecstasy. They enjoyed giving

their friends a unique experience, and having Ecstasy to sell increased socializing for some and made them feel special or important.

### *Negative Consequences of Ecstasy Selling*

Selling Ecstasy was not without its problems. Forty-three (54%) reported that they wanted to quit selling, giving a wide variety of reasons; the top four were “high risk,” “it’s illegal,” “don’t want to go to jail,” and “stress.” We were surprised by how little our interviewees knew about the actual legal consequences they could face if they were arrested. When we asked them how likely it was that they would come in contact with law enforcement, 96 percent replied highly unlikely or unlikely. They also had concerns about the potential health consequences for their customers and the problems of handling difficult customers. Very few participants had experienced drug-related violence. But a much more subtle theme emerged, especially for those immersed in legal careers. These sellers wanted to quit dealing because selling Ecstasy no longer fit it into their lifestyles or the lifestyles they aspired to achieve. Interviewees saw themselves maturing out of Ecstasy selling and taking up the conventional social roles that were waiting for them all along.

### **Criminal Justice Implications**

Ecstasy’s unique psychopharmacology, its benign reputation among users and the social relationships between buyers and sellers combine to present challenges to traditional criminal justice interventions. These sellers relied on the rather unsophisticated strategies of only selling to friends and not talking about drugs on the telephone. Even the higher level sellers did not report implementing

strategies like regularly changing phone numbers, using drop spots, renting selling/storage spaces or mailbox addresses that usually characterize drug dealing operations. There was no advance planning in the event of law enforcement intervention like setting aside money for bail and lawyers. Only one of our interviewees was arrested for Ecstasy sales, even though 26 percent were arrested as adults for a variety of offenses. Nonetheless, almost the entire sample (96%) believed it was highly unlikely or unlikely they would experience a law enforcement encounter.

The sporadic nature of the drug transactions presents a further problem. Routines are easier to track for anyone including law enforcement. Transactions were conducted in private settings. All of these respondents were housed so they have the privilege of access to private settings for drug sales. Since 88 percent of the sample was employed they could pick and choose whether or not to make each transaction. Drug sales were not their bread and butter. In fact, Ecstasy sales accounted for only 8 percent of their total monthly income. This was a distinct advantage since every successful criminal (and policeman) knows that going with your instincts is your best protection on the street. Being able to walk away when things do not feel right is a real advantage.

“Buy and bust” strategies that have been successfully implemented among cocaine, heroin and marijuana distributors may be more difficult to implement in drug markets characterized by social bonding enhanced by the Ecstasy using experience itself. Traditional law enforcement infiltration strategies may be problematic since the market seems to be made up of mostly freelancing

sellers with the organized manufacturing or importing operations remaining far away from the street and away from police surveillance.

We found the Internet to be an important source of information about what was available on the street. Despite some sellers' somewhat cynical attitude about brands, they did use them as indicators of pill quality and so did their customers. In order to thoroughly monitor the hundreds of Internet sites, criminal justice resources would be severely stretched.

Interviewees had no idea what the legal penalties for selling Ecstasy were. Twenty-six percent admitted they did not know at all. The remaining 74 percent gave a total of 44 different answers indicating a lack of public knowledge about the legal repercussions of Ecstasy sales. Responses varied in severity from as mild as a fine, or community service to as severe as 10 to 15 years in prison. The advertisement of the actual penalties may work as a deterrent particularly for these relatively privileged sellers. The good news is that Ecstasy use seems to have a built-in limited shelf life. Users have peak use periods followed by periods of abstinence. Over time, users seem to tire of the experience. Other studies have reported that Ecstasy use is declining. The bad news is that while these user/seller groups may have been winding down from Ecstasy use and sales, they were becoming interested in powder cocaine as an alternative, seeing cocaine as "less of a commitment time wise" and without the immediate after effects. Out of the frying pan, into the fire.

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