

Weekend Offenders: Clubs, Drugs and Deviant Leisure in Post-socialist Romania

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Abstract: During recent years, leisure can no longer be strictly associated with the concepts of 'good' and 'pleasure': a critical perspective offered by the recent theory of 'deviant leisure' (Smith and Raymen, 2016; Ayres, 2019) shows how the relationship between leisure, freedom and pleasure is no longer clear, and how, in the context of late capitalism consumption, a part of leisure activities imply harm, exploitation and vulnerability. Throughout the article I tried to follow the deviant cultural component of the drug use leisure activity in the context of clubbing, going through the concept of depressive hedonia (Fisher, 2009). The depressive hedonism scene among Bucharest clubbers is defined by extended club 'marathons,' FOMO ('fear of missing out'), and the 'injunction to enjoy,' where harm and hedonism go hand in hand. For Romanian youth, recreational drug use becomes an element of subcultural capital which is different from their parents' culture, as well as an (experience) consumption marker of class distinction, Western and trendy.

Keywords: deviant leisure, depressive hedonia, clubbing, recreational drugs, rominimal

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Introduction

Since 2012 and until today, Ana and Tudor¹ have attended minimal-tech parties at least once every 2-3 weeks, be it in one of the clubs hosting them in Bucharest, or at festivals or parties in Berlin. Going out is ritualistic, as they celebrate year after year the most important festivals and parties, regularly scheduled during the same period of the year. They follow certain DJs and big production labels relevant for the scene. Usually, after a night of sleep they will arrive at the club in the morning, around 7 or 8, and will stay there until the next morning, sometimes even more. They will start with half an ecstasy pill to enter the party mood and they will continue dancing and socializing on the club's terrace on other drugs, usually speed, cocaine and/or ketamine. Ana and Tudor, like most of their friends, are working in the creative sector (advertising, IT, NGO), and usually work for more than 8 hours per day. They usually take a day off after these weekends to 'recover'. They are the 'party going youth', and they spend even more than 24 hours at music marathons on recreational drugs. Every weekend, a few thousand people like them take part in the minimal-tech and electronica scene in Bucharest. The vast majority lead a parallel life as model children and employees, hiding from their parents and work colleagues the "guilty pleasure" of going to parties.

The first 'pre-ecstasy' period in Romania is defined by a mimicry of the Western scenes and came with a consumption of marks of uniqueness by the Bucharest youth and with an explicit opposition to

1. The identity of all people and clubs in this article are changed to protect their identity.



mainstream pop music². The second clubbing period is defined by the emergence of promoters and money coming from big corporations to support the scene, but also by an increase of consumption power and the emergence of a small middle class³. During this period, the local event organisers (which later became big industry names) are set up: The Mission (2000), Sunrise (2001), Hysteria (2001), Nights.ro (2001). Raving and clubbing melted in a sea of advertising and branding, transforming from a few microscopic scenes into democratized consumption spaces. Recreational drugs appeared in Romania during its economic liberalization and the growth of the leisure market, at the same time with the globalisation of electronic music and the first dedicated festivals (The Mission, 2000, Sunwaves, 2006, Rokolectiv, 2006), after the scene was tested with the opening of a few clubs (Studio Martin, 1993, Web, 1997 etc.). Initially, the club scene was marked by elitism, rooted in both subcultural and economic factors. However, by the mid-2000s, it became more accessible, leading to *en masse* consumption of electronica by youth. During the same period, an electro sound made in Bucharest emerges, derived from minimal-techno and generically called 'ro-minimal'. Today, it became a scene with dozens of DJs, a few record labels, a relatively dense network of booking/promoting/clubbing, which clearly dominates the local electronic music market⁴. Most interviewees for this article are part of this scene, with the exception of two members of the techno scene, which is less present in Romania.

It is important to mention that it is exactly because they belong to this well-defined Romanian genre that a *musical national identity* emerged, and there are several labels, web pages and social media groups (*La românași* [At the Romanians], *Romanian club culture*, *rominimal*, etc.)⁵ which mix the (questionable) Romanian identity of ro-minimal with the national identity. In other words, this techno sub-genre becomes for Romanian clubbers a source of pride, of membership to the middle class and an 'export good' on the international electronica scene. As in the case of Malbon's⁶ London ravers, several interviewees describe themselves as being part of a cool, trendy group, considering clubbing a sort of avant-garde activity in an otherwise conservative society. For Romanian youth, clubbing and the rave are both a hallmark of subcultural capital, different from their parents' 'communist' culture, as well as a marker of (experience) consumerism, of class distinction, Western and fashionable.

This article analyzes recreational drug use within Bucharest's clubbing scene through the lens of deviant leisure theory. The study focuses on individuals who use drugs as a leisure activity associated with clubbing, including those involved in the local electronic music industry (VJs, DJs, producers) who engage in similar consumption patterns. To explore this phenomenon empirically, I employed a combination of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. This mixed-methods qualitative approach allows for both in-depth individual perspectives and an understanding of the social dynamics and shared meanings within the clubbing scene. Focus groups are valuable for exploring how individuals collectively construct their understanding of drug use and its associated risks and pleasures. Following the theoretical framework, I analyze the various types of harm associated with this form of leisure.

Deviant leisure

The study of leisure gained particular attention from social scientists as consumer society and its paradoxes expanded in the Western world. Apart from the 'triumphant' positions which dominated leisure studies, the fusion of consumer capitalism with liberalism "has elevated leisure to a position of not just a social good but also a moral right"⁷. At the same time, Cederström and Spicer claim that in Post-Fordism the distinction between labour and free time is no longer clear, and the battle is no longer taking place between capital and labour, but between capital and life:

"[...] this new generation of flexible workers [...] are not split between home and work, but perpetually stuck in a fluid work-home hybrid. [...] These images capture two dramatically different spirits of capitalism. Collins St,

2. Paul Breazu, "În căutarea Web-ului pierdut," in *Hipsteri, bobos și clase creative*, eds. Ciprian State and Dinu Guțu (Chișinău: Cartier, 2019).

3. Ibid.

4. Ciprian State and Dinu Guțu, *Hipsteri, bobos și clase creative* (Chișinău: Cartier, 2019).

5. See <https://www.facebook.com/laromanasi>; <https://www.instagram.com/romanianclubculture/>; <https://www.instagram.com/rominimal/>. Accessed November 1, 2024.

6. Ben Malbon, *Clubbing: Dancing, Ecstasy, Vitality* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999).

7. Oliver Smith and Thomas Raymen, "Deviant Leisure: A Criminological Perspective," *Theoretical Criminology Studies* 29, no. 3 (2016): 241–252.

5 p.m. depicts life under the Fordist spirit of capitalism – a mass of relatively affluent, efficiently organized, standardized bureaucrats. They have a place called work and a place called home.”⁸

During recent years, leisure can no longer be strictly associated with the concepts of ‘good’ and ‘pleasure’: a critical perspective offered by the recent theory of ‘deviant leisure’ shows how the relation between leisure, freedom and pleasure is no longer clear, and how, in the context of late capitalism, a part of leisure activities implies harm, exploitation and vulnerability. In summary, Smith and Raymen⁹ claim that in the current context, norms and values are manipulated by consumerist capitalism’s ideological domination, which opens a space for harm resulting from the individualistic pursuit of leisure as a moral right, in what Žižek¹⁰ calls ‘cultural injunction to enjoy’ and against the idea of Bauman’s ‘duty to the other.’¹¹

By various types of deviant leisure, I do not mean the contradictions with prevailing norms and values, but a transgression of the ‘duty to the other’ ethics which is rooted in the social values of late capitalism; by deviance I mean harms generated by commodified leisure. Although there is a considerable decrease of criminality in the Western world, as the ultra-realists insist, many harms are swallowed by consumerism¹², becoming normalized and entering the routine. Gambling), luxury tourism¹³, techno-tourism on recreational drugs¹⁴, consumption of expensive brands by football ultras¹⁵ are only a few examples of contemporary social harm. This type of harm cannot be reduced to a fixed number of identifiable problems, but it always mirrors a desirable, imagined status quo¹⁶. If Marx once spoke about ideology as a matter ‘of doing it without knowing it’, in postmodernity there is a reversal, as the harm is most often acknowledged and internalized. The lack of meaning, the fragile narcissism and the fear of missing out created by consumer culture are harmful for mental health and ontological security, and they generate anxiety¹⁷ despite the fact that we continue functioning in this symbolic order.

We must therefore be cautious of the vast number of studies which perpetuate Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) theories word by word, trying to celebrate youth movements and subcultures as revolutionary by default and bearing the signs of resistance to the mainstream. For example, Hall et al¹⁸ show how, in postmodernism, youth cultures which were politically progressive ended up internalizing neoliberal values: individualism, consumerism and meaningless hedonism; capitalism encompasses thus the ideas of even the most anti-mainstream cultures. The tendency is therefore to deny any type of political potential from current youth cultures, but as Dimou and Ilan¹⁹ suggest, if ‘we take seriously the idea of pleasure’ and the proto-policies which exist in the new values of youth cultures, we need new analysis instruments for post-structural theories. The new practices of youth cultures bear different meanings for the concept of ‘resistance’ of CCCS, without consciously adhering to a given type of political conscience or ideology.

The styles and behaviors related to the practices and routines of raves are representative for the new youth cultures and are a relatively new subject which has not been studied thus far in a contemporary Romanian academic context. For many young people, the club becomes “the ultimate hedonistic environment promoting the culture of excess and conspicuous, wasteful consumption for a weekend of

8. Carl Cederström and Andre Spicer. *The Wellness Syndrome* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

9. Smith and Raymen, “Deviant leisure.”

10. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002).

11. Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

12. Oliver Smith and Thomas Raymen, *Deviant Leisure. Criminological Perspectives on Leisure and Harm* (London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)

13. idem

14. Luis-Manuel Garcia, “Techno-tourism and Post-industrial Neo-romanticism in Berlin’s Electronic Dance Music Scenes,” *Tourist Studies* 16, no. 3 (2015): 258–275.

15. Dinu Guțu. “Casuals’ Culture: Bricolage and Consumerism in Football Supporters’ Culture. Case study–Dinamo Bucharest Ultras.” *Soccer & Society* 18, no. 7 (2017): 914–936.

16. Simon Pemberton, *Harmful Societies: Understanding Social Harm* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2016).

17. Smith and Raymen, *Deviant Leisure*, 20.

18. Steve Hall, Simon Winlow, and Craig Ancrum, *Criminal Identities and Consumer Culture: Crime, Exclusion and the New Culture of Narcissism* (Collumpton: Willan, 2008).

19. Eleni Dimou, and Jonathan Ilan, “Taking pleasure seriously: the political significance of subcultural practice,” *Journal of Youth Studies* 21, no. 1 (2018): 1–18.



recreation.²⁰ Globally, recreational drug use associated directly with electronic music grew especially in the early 2000s, when it was estimated that four million young people in the UK alone went to raves every weekend.²¹ At its peak, cumulative attendance of clubs and raves reached 50 million in the same country.²² Global electronic music values 11,8bn in 2024²³, as it became a capitalist consumption good which grew with the expansion of the internet as “a digital culture for digital times”. In the “world capital of techno,” the 3 million tourists which visited Berlin in 2022 for clubbing contributed to the local economy nearly 1.4 billion euro.²⁴ In the UK, official reports estimate that in 2010-2011 a million people used club drugs, while the number of drugs increased tenfold: while in 2005 there were 7 types of recognized drugs, in 2010 that number reached 70, the list expanding to include beta-keto amphetamine, piperazine, ketamine or GHB.²⁵ If, during the 1980s, there were a few isolated psychedelic circles which associated drugs with club music, according to Statista²⁶ the global ecstasy consumption reached 37,53 million users in 2018, an exponential growth from 28.2 million in 2012. These numbers show the global trend of the drug leaving subcultures and entering a ‘pill-populism’ through electronic music festivals which sometimes surpass 427.000 attendees in 2024, as is the case of the new Untold festival in Cluj. As several deviant leisure studies show, substance abuse in the Nighttime economy is not deviant in a traditional sense, but rather conformist²⁷ and an integral part of the systemic harm and inherent violence of contemporary consumerist capitalism²⁸. The neoliberal play space of the club, defined by infantilization, liminality and transgression is part of the larger microcosm of society²⁹.

Methodology

The method for data collection was based on participative observation in clubs and raves from September 2017 to March 2023, on semi-structured individual interviews, but also on two focus groups applying critical discourse analysis to the collected data. Apart from interviews and participative observation, the focus group becomes an extremely efficient method to study drug use, building a social setting on the interactions between participants and generating important information. Demant et al³⁰ believe that “when sociality is central to the study, as when investigating drug use in the social setting of the club, focus group interviewing thus becomes especially relevant.” I organized a total of 14 semi-structured interviews and two focus groups attended by people who constantly go to electronic music parties in Bucharest and Berlin and do recreational drugs. I used purposeful sampling, including snowball sampling, with the aim of achieving empirical and theoretical saturation. I began the research with a focus group to which I invited acquaintances that frequently attended parties, and then they recommended other contacts who go clubbing, but I also approached people during the participative observation period.

As is also the case in other parts of Europe, the profile of those taking club drugs does not fit the stereotype of the ‘drug user’. In the UK³¹, they are usually young, employed and well connected socially, and the three biggest overlapping groups are students, LGBT people and a smaller psychedelic group.

20. Dina Perrone, “New York City Club Kids: A Contextual Understanding of Club Drug Use,” in *Drugs, Clubs and Young People*, ed. Bill Sanders (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 38.

21. Russell Webster, Mike Goodman, and Grainne Whalley. *Safer clubbing: guidance for licensing authorities, club managers and promoters* (Home Office Drug Prevention Advisory Service, 2002).

22. Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).

23. IMS Business Report, 2024. <https://www.internationalmusicsummit.com/business-report>.

24. Bobby Allyn, “How a whiskey-fueled meeting in 1949 led to Berlin’s famed techno scene,” NPR, September 23, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1121435229>.

25. Hamid Ghodse, John Corkery, Hugh Claridge, Christine Goodair, and Fabrizio Schifano, *Drug-Related Deaths in the UK. Annual Report 2011* (University of London, 2012).

26. Statista, Estimated number of ecstasy consumers worldwide from 2010 to 2021, by region. 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264742/ecstasy-consumers-worldwide-by-region/>. Accessed November 1, 2024.

27. Tammy Ayres, “Substance Use in the Night-Time Economy: Deviant Leisure?,” in *Deviant Leisure*.

28. *Ibid.*, 151.

29. *Ibid.*, 136.

30. Jakob Demant, Signe Ravn, and Sidsel Kirstine Thorsen. “Club Studies: Methodological Perspectives for Researching Drug Use in a Central Youth Social Space,” *Leisure Studies* 29, no. 3 (2010): 241–252.

31. Bowden-Jones Owen, “Legal Highs’ and Other ‘Club drugs’: Why the Song and Dance?,” *The Psychiatrist* 37 (2013): 185-187.

Their age is between 21 and 39 years old. In Bucharest, the vast majority of the interviewed youth going to parties are white, with above average education. In terms of background, most interviewees are middle class, working almost exclusively in the creative sector, IT, NGOs, advertising etc. The interviewees are still going to parties as of the writing of this article. With few exceptions and taking into account the relatively recent context of the emergence of Romanian club culture (early 2000s), I was unable to identify anybody over 40 years old who is active in the Bucharest club culture and who uses recreational drugs. However, there is a tension and a status marker between 'experienced' clubbers (30 or older) and the younger ones. The first are more selective when it comes to attending parties, try to experiment with other musical genres (techno, classical or going to parties abroad), while the latter are seen as consumers of commercial minimal-tech which lack artistic aspirations.

Most interviewed clubbers are either members of the middle class or aspiring to be, they are civically active and have participated in the recent anti-corruption protests (2014–2018). Therefore, there is a cleavage between the new neoliberal, pro-European forces voted by middle class youth from large Romanian towns and the old establishment (the Social Democrat Party) associated with the 'the old regime' and the local, provincial capital. As anthropologists Crăciun and Lipan³² mention, "in post-socialist Europe the notions of 'middle class' and 'good life' have become interchangeable. Related dialectically, each can be substituted for the other as a signifier of a field of aspirations and possibilities. In the current period of persistent economic crisis, deepening social inequality, and growing political turmoil, this interchangeability is a significant ideational conjunction, making it possible to declare middle class aspirations inherently ethical and thus depoliticize them." Clubbing represents a borrowed, self-colonizing Western consumerist practice, regarded as part of a desirable 'European' middle class status: 'People believe that they are doing something western, modern and new', a Romanian DJ states in Nagy and Plecadite³³. This phenomenon matches Donner's analysis³⁴, who identified, through the second wave of anthropology of the middle class, a tendency towards tensions and contradictions between expectations and experiences, rather than achievements. At the same time, as Dzenovska and Kurtović³⁵ mention, in this article I understand the concept of post-socialism not so much as "the most salient challenges" in post-1989 Eastern Europe which originate "not in the socialist past but in the (neo)liberal present".

For example, an ethnography of the Romanian middle class³⁶ speaks about parents who invest enormously in extra-curricular activities, hoping that this educational capital will make their children more competitive in the Romanian neoliberal society. Their "fear of failing" is natural in a society where the state has deeply retired, social safety nets are almost non-existent, and consumerism and the promise of a Western 'good life' are the dogma of the middle class to which the interviewees of this article belong.

On marathons

In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Jonathan Crary speaks about sleep as one of the last survivors which must be conquered by capitalism in the name of production and consumption. Entertainment is no exception, and this slogan of electronic music parties was used to title a famous documentary on the subculture: "Don't forget to go home"³⁷. Extra hours and overcoming physical limits as an employee in production are replicated during the weekends in dance marathons and substance abuse. Marathons, as Bucharest clubbers call extremely long clubbing sessions of over 15–20 hours, are a key element in understanding the types of deviance and harm which are involved in the leisure activity of going to parties. Marathons are a type of extended head space to the physical limits. However, not any party is one worth turning into a marathon: physical abuse, self-extenuation and

32. Magdalena Crăciun and Ștefan Lipan, "Introduction: The Middle Class in Post-socialist Europe: Ethnographies of Its 'Good Life.'" *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 34, no. 2 (2020): 423.

33. Raluca Nagy and Cristina Plecadite, "Identități de noapte. Clubbing și clubberi în București," in *Etnografii urbane*, ed. Vintilă Mihăilescu (Iași: Polirom, 2009), 145.

34. Henrike Donner, "The Anthropology of the Middle Class across the Globe," *Anthropology of This Century* 18, no. 1 (2017). <http://aotcpress.com/articles/anthropology-middle-class-globe/>.

35. Dace Dzenovska and Larisa Kurtović, "Lessons for Liberalism from the 'Illiberal East,'" *Fieldsights*, April 25, 2018.

36. Alin Savu, Ștefan Lipan, and Magdalena Crăciun, "Preparing for a 'Good Life': Extracurriculars and the Romanian Middle Class," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 34, no. 2 (2020).

37. *Feiren*. Director Maja Classen (2006).



pushing the body to the limit can take place as a ritual, at established parties where famous DJs play and the music is considered 'very good'. Some respondents declared that they stayed up to 35 hours at such a marathon, constantly mixing drugs to experience 'new sensations' in real tests of resistance against themselves and their group. Although this is only a speculation, marathons also stem from the characteristics of periphery neoliberalism, where pain, suffering and ambition are part of a 'super-human' game³⁸. Prolonged marathons are like overtime for fun, a sign of individual competition where the physical sacrifice is worthwhile because it makes it possible to be a symbolic winner by leaving last, the 'champion' of a party. The majority admits that this practice is irrational and harmful at the same time, the priority being to stop noticing time passing:

"[Marathons]... are a sort of bubble in time. When you stay a lot at a party, I think you lose track of time. You came there Friday night and you left Saturday-Sunday. I like to push myself to see how long I last. Towards the end I no longer take stuff, I simply sit around like a zombie, pushing myself. Low energy. The end is cool, you get to see who's left standing." (Cosmin, 31)

On the other hand, marathons create the context for leisure and socialization while consciousness is altered by drugs. The societies of late capitalism thus create such personalities which find it hard to socialize outside a consumerist framework. In the club, the group often works as a common body, and this sort of parties are rites of passage which create solidarity and strengthen the group:

"If somebody tells you that they're going home that's huge drama, the group unites when you're starting to take stuff and to have fun and when somebody comes and says: I'm going home, everything falls apart." (Ana, 30)

"I stayed for 20 hours at a party for [DJ] Barac, bro, you were there, everybody was there. And you started leaving one by one, and I was the last one there, and Barac just started and it was great, but I was so wasted after 20 hours and everyone was gone that I wasn't in the mood to enjoy Barac alone, I stayed for 10 minutes and I left." (Dana, 29)

The marathons which are attended by most members of the scene become a way to *snooze* external social constraints. Although I was unable to gain sufficient data, there is a correlation worth researching that the interviewees are making between their exhausting job and the need to evade in prolonged 'head spaces', what Lyng³⁹ called adrenaline-fueled, risk-taking leisure driven by the desire to escape mundane daily life, from "symbolic constraints and thus their symbolic castration"⁴⁰:

"When I go clubbing, I enter and I know that I'm signing up for a long thing and then, when it's finished, the next day in the evening I'm still there, and I realize that I still don't want to go home. I take a break in which I don't even check my phone and I'm free from everything: I don't think about work, my mom, my sister, I'm there and I try to prolong somehow this thing. I get home, I go to bed and only the next day when I wake up I take my phone and I say let's see what happened. It feels like a break from life, which I want to make as long as possible." (Ana, 30)

Another harmful practice which is especially common among women is drug use for the purpose of weight loss and appetite suppression. Some club drugs like MDMA or GHB⁴¹ either metabolize fats or work as appetite suppressants, and dancing can be seen as a fitness work out and a weight loss method, which is a clear harmful consequence of the image that the ideal consumerist ego imposes on women's bodies as desirable:

"After a party I wouldn't eat for two days, I'd only get really hungry on Thursday, and Friday I'd start over. I

38. Crăciun and Lipan, "Introduction."

39. Stephen Lyng, "Edgework: A Social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk-taking," *American Journal of Sociology* 95 (1990): 851-886.

40. Slavoj Žižek, *The Universal Exception* (London: Continuum, 2006).

41. Dina Perrone, "New York City Club Kids. A Contextual Understanding of Club Drug Use," in *Drugs, Clubs and Young People*, ed. Bill Sanders (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 38.

ended up weighing 45 kilos and I really liked that.” (Dana, 29)

As we have seen above, for several interviewees drug use is a futile attempt to relieve that “paradise lost” feeling given by their first ecstasy pill, but also to extend the time spent in the club, regardless of the physical and emotional consequence. For this reason, it is worth introducing Mark Fisher’s concept of *depressive hedonia*⁴². Fisher says that depression is completely anhedonic, but today’s youth are incapable of doing anything but seek pleasure (and not that they are unable to obtain it). There is a general feeling that something is missing, but this mysterious missing enjoyment can only be found after overcoming the need to receive pleasure. As Winlow⁴³ notes, when you are forced to enjoy something, you fail to receive any type of satisfaction or enjoyment, and the contemporary consumption subject becomes ‘forever wan, cynical and dissatisfied’:

“That feeling of the first pill never repeated.” (Alina, 29)

“Yeah, I still think we’re taking a ton of drugs and think about that experience that maybe, maybe you’ll have it again. And maybe you feel good, but you’re never exactly there.” (Maria, 30)

Most of the interviewees declared that they go to parties even when they don’t necessarily want to, often staying over 24 hours in the club because of their fear of missing out (FOMO). Therefore, as Smith and Raymen⁴⁴ claim, there is a general anxiety among youth in regards to cultural irrelevance and FOMO “that drives the basic hedonism excess and competitive consumerism of the night-time economy”. An interviewee declared that she goes through depressive and anxious episodes because of FOMO, which is the main reason why she spends so much time in the club:

“I had FOMO if I left. I knew that everybody was there, why am I leaving? You got FOMO when you got those texts at home – this or that DJ started playing. You were home in your PJs and thought OMG, he came on... everybody is here, I feel like the biggest loser, I can’t go home like this. And every time I was home the music was phenomenal.” (Dana, 29)

Sometimes, harmful feelings can become physical. Most interviewees felt sick because of drug use at least once. They say that the source for it is most likely the ‘strange’ ingredients drugs can contain, being aware that they have no control of their quality, even when buying from acquaintances. As Smith and Raymen⁴⁵ show, today’s leisure activities carry risk-taking elements which are little or not at all managed, despite a perfect understanding of their possible consequences:

“There are no harm reduction NGOs in Romania [for recreational drugs]. People take stuff [drugs] without knowing what they are taking and it’s strange that you don’t hear of more bad cases. I’m surprised that they are so ignorant of what they’re taking, that they’re not interested at all when they’re taking a pill or if somebody gives them a line, they’ll just do it and only later worry about it.” (Liviu, 30)

These *para-suicidal* behaviors go hand in hand with conforming to consumerist values and lifestyles, at the same time being “faithful reflections of the drive-based models that marketing promotes”⁴⁶. These *para-suicidal* behaviors are the direct consequence of mental changes provoked by what Mark Fisher⁴⁷ calls capitalist realism and the ‘road to whatever’⁴⁸ depressive apathy of youth generations from late modernity. Clubbing’s harmful traits can sometimes stem directly from what Žižek⁴⁹ calls the ‘cultural

42. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009), 21-22.

43. Simon Winlow, “What Lies Beneath? Some Notes on Ultra-realism, and the Intellectual Foundations of the ‘Deviant Leisure’ Perspective,” in *Deviant Leisure*.

44. Smith and Raymen, “Deviant leisure.”

45. Ibid.

46. Bernard Stiegler, *Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 62.

47. Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*.

48. Elliott Currie, *The Road to Whatever: Middle-Class Culture and the Crisis of Adolescence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

49. Slavoj Žižek. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London: Verso, 2002).



injunction to enjoy'. Norms and desires are manipulated by the dominating ideology of consumerist capitalism, sometimes like in the case below, against physical pain. It is becoming obvious that self-reflection and the perception of reality are numbed:

"Do you know my ankle story? I strained it at B club and afterward I went to a bar and then to the party. I had ice in my boot, it hurt a bit but I said fuck it. I stayed there all night and I danced with it like that, after I went home in the middle of the day. I went to bed with ice and frozen vegetables on my ankle, I woke up the next morning with it super swollen and I went to the ER, it was broken.' (Maria, 30)

The cause of the depressive hedonism of Bucharest club going youth is not only a dip in serotonin every Monday, but also an inability to accept their status of recreational drug users, which results from the conservative and moral opposition of the culture in which they grew up. This aspect is especially common among women who are clubbing. According to a survey made by the biggest minimal-tech club in Bucharest, women tend to end this lifestyle after they turn 28. The causes could stem firstly from Romania's conservative culture, but also from gender stereotypes which are internalized by many clubbers:

'There is a duality in our head, I judge myself. I'm there, I'm having a lot of fun and the worst thing I do to myself then is this: you've done it again. I don't even need my mom to give me a lecture, or worry that my folks would find out, it's me against myself, the self who was there a few hours ago having fun.' (Ana, 30)

More tension is created because many clubbers are paradoxically interested in maintaining good health and victims of the 'wellness syndrome',⁵⁰ constantly taking up yoga challenges or going to retreats in the country, in Tibet, Peru or India etc. Some of them stopped smoking or became vegetarian in recent years, and this ideology paradoxically goes hand in hand with recreational drug use. For many, these are therapy substitutes and are explained as self-discovery journeys, not just pure hedonism. In many drugs user's wellness philosophy, drugs are perfectly acceptable as long as they are included in the user's wellness plan. Excesses are only allowed for special events and the consumption routine has a predetermined event calendar which is followed by 'recovery' periods, asceticism being followed by excessive *jouissance* episodes. The embodiment for this type of user is Dragoș Bucurenci, who was part of the cool, junkie, electronic music scene in Bucharest in the late 90s, and even wrote a novel on recreational drug use.⁵¹ Shortly after that, he turns into a millionaire entrepreneur, coach, climate activist and wellness philosophy advocate. But, as in the case of recreational drug use, staying in the 'wellness command' zone means being nihilistically passive⁵²:

"Rather than acting in the world and trying to transform it, the passive nihilist simply focuses on himself and his particular pleasures and projects for perfecting himself, whether through discovering the inner child, manipulating pyramids, writing pessimistic-sounding literary essays, taking up yoga, bird-watching or botany." The wellness syndrome is a must for remaining on a labor market where quitting smoking gives you a better personal market rating because "healthy bodies are productive bodies."⁵³

Biomorality or the moral need to feel good and to be happy is an attribute of the consumer economy of neoliberal societies (*idem*), where being sick means being "unable to work", as David Harvey said⁵⁴. Although seemingly at opposite ends, club drugs and wellness can go hand in hand because they are both safe pleasure and self-help sources for upgraded bodies and towards the maximization of one's idea of happiness. As Hervé Juvin⁵⁵ said, being a good person in late capitalism means to constantly seek pleasure sources and to turn your life into a continuous exercise of wellness optimization. At the same time, drug consumption is charged with coolness, with subcultural capital, following the self-colonizing pattern of many young Romanians in relation to the West. For many Romanian teenagers

50. Carl Cederström and André Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

51. Dragoș Bucurenci. *Real K* (Iași: Polirom, 2004).

52. Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007), 4.

53. Carl Cederström and André Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 14.

54. David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (London: Verso Books, 1982).

55. Herve Juvin, *The Coming of the Body* (London: Verso, 2010).

and youths, the creation of their identity is based on imitating Western youth cultures and can be created through consumption of ecstasy and pop culture:

"I took pills in my native town. We swore love to girls, there were very intense moments and we listened to cool music, house parties. We watched *Skins* and lived the same things, only in Romania. We had the same group dynamic, for a while." (Liviu, 30)

Consumption of drugs and electronic music is a part of being 'European', western: aesthetic and consumption standards come from Berlin, London or Barcelona and are used by clubbers from the periphery as a justification for the harm of drug use as a part of a desirable lifestyle for creating their ideal ego:

"We have this group in Berlin which takes drugs 100 times more than we do, and they're more hardcore, and they don't have this thing oh no, wait I have to go to work, I'm going home." (Tudor, 33)

Discussion

Although clubbing and drug use practices can be harmful and self-destructive, it does not mean that scene members have no agency or are unable to find meaning in this activity. This youth group is not doomed in 'the tunnel of late capitalism', but they are building a community through club practices, they are affirming their identity and this type of hedonism can be constructive and empowering: "experiencing of these crowds can provide pleasurable sensations of 'in-betweenness' —or exstasis— as crowd members flux between awareness and sensations of their own identities on the one hand and the identifications and belongings achievable through the crowd on the other."⁵⁶ Recreational drug use creates the feeling of *communitas*. Some of the respondents believe that they became more tolerant and less classist by going to these parties; outside of them, there are several class and habitus biases in Romanian society between different categories of club goers:

"Parties mean dancing, getting high and I'd say tolerance, bro. As much as I was ugh, 'cocalari' (chavs). Well, cause I haven't danced with them, and I think it's super cool to talk a lot, to watch people and to look at them differently." (Ana, 30)

Most of this youth interact and create communities outside of clubs. Communitarian aspects are important: groups of friends who met in the club have a good social life outside of it, many couples were started with this leisure activity as a common element, while most participants agree that they couldn't have a partner which opposes clubbing. Many of them started a family after meeting in a club context.⁵⁷

Conclusions

Throughout the article I tried to follow recreational drug use within Bucharest's clubbing scene through the framework of deviant leisure theory, focusing on the intersection of harm, hedonism, and identity formation in post-socialism. The analysis revealed a complex interplay of factors contributing to the harms associated with leisure: the pursuit of extended "head spaces" through "club marathons", the constant pressure of FOMO, and the "injunction to enjoy," all of these factors contribute to a culture characterized by depressive hedonia.

At the same time, for Romanian youth, recreational drug use becomes an element of subcultural capital which is different from their parents' culture, as well as an (experience) consumption marker of class distinction, Western and trendy. Among Bucharest clubbers, there is a strong self-colonizing sentiment of using the cultural practices of Western scenes as references, but there is also a tension between recreational drug use and the breach of dominating moral values. The types of harm encountered by the scene members vary widely, from FOMO and irrelevance among peers to

56. Ben Malbon. *Clubbing: Dancing, Ecstasy, Vitality, Critical Geographies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 71.

57. This is also confirmed in a 2009 ethnography on Romanian clubbers – "the interest for electronic music changes the dynamics between friends" in Raluca Nagy and Cristina Plecadite, "Identități de noapte. Clubbing și clubberii în București," *Etnografii urbane*, 137.



physical harm resulted from drug use (anorexia, sickness etc.), especially as a result of the marathons through which they push the club experience to its limits. Recreational drug use is not only a way to induce 'head spaces' and escapism, but also to establish social relations and communities with a common history, defining an identity (e.g., queer) which is often clashing with their parents' values or the establishment. Extended club marathons, FOMO and the "injunction to enjoy" are some of the elements which define the depressive hedonism scene of Bucharest clubbers. If we were to follow Delistrey's⁵⁸ historic argument that drugs reflect our desires and inadequacies and the emotions which create the cultures to which we belong, then the current scene relies on a general need to escape in utopian spaces and time bubbles through marathons in which harm and hedonism go hand in hand.

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58. Cody Delistraty. *Drugs du jour*, AEON, January 4, 2017. <https://aeon.co/essays/how-each-generation-gets-the-drugs-it-deserves>.

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