Oskar Enghoff

Jakob Demant

University of
Copenhagen

Denmark

view presentation

Revisiting the situated nature of recreational drug use by reading 21,000 trip reports with digital methods

Previous literature has shown that recreational drug use takes place within a wide array of different local contexts (distinct spaces, practices and relations), and that recreational users articulate the pleasures of drug use as highly situated within these contexts. However, the actual significance of different local contexts for the experience of recreational drug use has never been the object of a comparative study founded within a solid theoretical framework. In an attempt to engage with this emerging field, a digital study of the local contexts of recreational drug use is proposed. *Erowid Experience Vaults*, an online database comprising over 21,000 qualitative reports on individual drug use experiences, provides the data. Drawing on recent developments within digital text-analysis, a *Structural Topic Model (STM)* is used to digitally model the latent semantic structure of the database, and thus make it accessible for a quali-quantitative analysis. Duff's Deleuze-inspired theory of drug use contexts as assemblages of embodiment, space and practice is employed as the theoretical framework for the analysis, and this combination of data, method and theory provides the basis for a study of empirical convergence amongst thousands of recreational drug use experiences.

The STM resulted in 82 semantically *topics* (groups of words which tend to co-occur within the same reports), several of which describe specific examples of embodiment, space and practice. Thus, the STM enabled an operationalization of Duff's drug use assemblage. By examining the words assembled in each topic and the empirical co-occurence of the topics themselves, the relations between the components of drug use assemblages as they are expressed in the database were analyzed – using quantitative measures (i.e. correlations) as well as qualitative readings of exemplary texts. A simple cluster analysis approach identified three clusters of topics relevant to the research question, each describing a significant convergence within the drug use experiences in the database. These clusters (rave, psychedelic introspection and psychedelic togetherness) describe distinct drug use experiences, and assemble distinct drugs, social practices and social spaces. While the rave cluster assembles entactogens, a destabilizing social practice and an inclusive social space, the two psychedelic clusters assemble psychedelics, a stabilizing social practice and an exclusive social space. Within each cluster, the social practice is closely related to the relations between the individuals present, while the social space interacts with the local physical environment. Thus, the clusters illustrate how different drug use experiences arise in different local contexts. These findings corroborate previous research and further elaborate the highly situated nature of recreational drug use, especially within the use of psychedelic drugs. Furthermore, they point to the value of contextual diversity in research on recreational drug use, which has traditionally tended to focus on the nightlife environment.