Moments of Connection As Means of Survival: A Study of Queer Identity, Freedom and Community in UK Raves During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

From the start of the pandemic in the UK, reports emerged of illegal raves being held by young people in violation of social distancing regulation. Media discourse was laden with condemnation levelled at the public health risk and the perceived immorality and unfairness associated with the behaviour. Drawing on 11 semi-structured interviews with attendees, this study explores the motivations for going to and experiences of raves during Covid-19. Raves are unique social safe spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals to create community, emotional connections and express their sexual identity. Additionally, the pursuit of escapism via raves was no longer only symbolic, as individuals chose to escape the confines of lockdown. These findings illuminate the function of raves as social spaces outside normal society where participants can experience identity expression, connection, and freedom. They offer a more nuanced understanding of raves beyond stereotypes of hedonist youth and immorality.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, identity, raves, community, Covid-19

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Introduction

The social isolation and mass upheaval generated by the Covid-19 pandemic provide a unique backdrop for the re-emergence of illegal raves in the UK. Raves are defined here as unlicensed all-night parties featuring electronically produced dance music, drug usage and a PLUR (peace, love, unity, respect) ethos (Anderson and Kavanaugh 2007). During the pandemic, the physical closeness characteristic of raves made them problematic in new ways, beyond concerns of drug-use and hedonism. These included health risks to the individual and potentially the public and fines of up to £800 for attending or £10,000 for organising (Heren 2020). The public outcry and media discourse surrounding raves was predominantly oppositional, describing them as "plague raves" populated by "covidiots" (Vice Media 2021). As a phenomenon which has instigated abundant news articles and critique from the prime minister for the alleged "flagrant disregard" exhibited by attendees, the relevance of the topic is clear (Clark 2020: 1). This research advances our understanding of how attendees' experiences of raves relate to the wider climate in Covid-19. By interviewing 11 individuals who attended, organised, or performed at raves during the pandemic in the UK, this study offers insights into their experiences and motivations for going. There is a specific focus on the significance of community, identity, resistance and how these experiences may hold particular relevance for queer identities.

History of UK Raves

Emerging in the UK in 1988, the alternative behaviours associated with raves contributed to growing alarm by parents and policymakers who feared that an entire generation would fall victim to hedonism and drugs (Hill 2002; Reynolds 2013). This reaction can be situated in Thatcher's neo-Victorian morals and the neo-liberal rhetoric of an individualistic, free market Britain. Rave culture was not the antithesis to Thatcherism, but rather an alternative space for youth to explore collectivism, hedonism and solidarity. As raves grew in popularity in the early 1990s, the scene blurred with rave-traveller free-party groups, which culminated in 1992 with the Castlemorton rave and 20,000 attendees in a stand-off with the police. The subsequent media coverage of drug use, criminality and hedonism provoked political backlash, and raves were outlawed with the Criminal Justice Act of 1994. Despite protesting the bill and continuing to organise raves, the immediate police suppression of both signalled the end of the rave era (Hill 2002). The scene has since grown into the commercialised, legal EDM (electronic dance music) club scene; whilst the illegal rave or free party scene has remained largely undocumented by scholarship (Griffin et al. 2016). This history of media-fuelled tension and government backlash informs existing narratives surrounding raves in the UK, therein making their return to public discourse significant.

Covid-19 and the Re-emergence of Raves

In March 2020, the UK entered a lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This legally mandated the population to stay at home and forced the immediate closing of all

restaurants, venues and bars. Though the severity of the lockdowns fluctuated, with the strictest period being from March-June 2020, the closure of clubs remained in place for a full year. During this time, the impacts of Covid-19, lockdown and mass isolation became more apparent. This included the doubling of self-reported symptoms of depression, and average anxiety scores increased by 3 points to 5.2/10 (ONS 2020: 1). The deterioration of mental health disproportionally affected young people; due to the uncertain future they were facing (Pierce et al. 2020). The far-reaching economic and social challenges included a 1.1% rise in unemployment, a 65% rise in calls to domestic violence hotlines and increased usage of food banks.[1] Additionally, behavioural fatigue associated with adhering to Covid-19 restrictions emerged (Reicher and Drury 2021).

Though Covid-19 was a disruptive force, threatening the security of health and incomes, this threat was not shared equally. Elderly people were most at risk from the virus whilst healthy younger people were unlikely to face complications or death, a distinction which complicated individual responses to social distancing regulations. Circumstantial context also impacted how tolerable lockdown was on an individual level. Attempting to aid economic recovery, government responses saw certain areas of society, such as gastronomy, transparently prioritised over others, such as nightlife. Widespread throughout the music industry was a "sense of nightlife being hung out to dry" (Gillett 2021). Despite the many policies like "Eat out to Help out" that offered economic aid to restaurants, the only meaningful source of state support for music was an Arts Council funding pot distributed across the entire cultural sector. Competing against established cultural institutions with greater experience in public funding applications, many dance music applicants were unable to secure financial aid (Gillett 2021).

With few alternatives to clubbing and a particularly warm spring, reports of illegal raves appeared in local and national media in May 2020. Tabloid headlines read "Police are battling to stop illegal raves" (Daily Mail 2020) and "Lockdown raves are putting huge strain on police resources" (Telegraph 2020). The Daily Mail later added that raves represented "one of the ugliest and most disturbing by-products of the nation's 14-week coronavirus lockdown" (Boyle 2020). A minority of publications adopted a more investigative tone, including Dazed Digital's "Inside the UK's illegal rave scene, flourishing during lockdown", which situated raves within their wider history. Nonetheless, the dominant narrative often blamed the worsening of the pandemic on widespread non-adherence, individual behaviours and immoral psychological motivations. Echoing the media-fuelled outrage surrounding raves in the 1990s, the rhetoric that emerged during the pandemic was marked by strident moralising which saw any social gathering reflective of immense irresponsibility. As is typical of much public discourse, these prevalent perceptions of selfish hedonism failed to grapple with the question of whether the re-emergence of illegal raves could be understood in relation to neglected psychosocial needs during Covid-19. This research is framed by the psychological, economic and social effects of the pandemic, as well as the large media-fuelled moral tension surrounding the topic.

Literature Review

As a site of research, raves have been used to examine multiple aspects of youth culture in contemporary society (Anderson and Kavanaugh 2007). Raves have been portrayed as rooted in a deep sense of community and empathy, which has served to explore social and personal identity (Hollands 2002), cultural capital (Thornton 1996), hedonism and freedom (Reynolds 2013) and interpersonal connection (Takahashi and Olaveson 2003; Riley, Griffin and Morey 2010). Other cultural research has depicted raves as a quasi-social movement centred around their countercultural ideology (Hill 2002). Of the empirical research, most is qualitative and examines the 1988-1994 rave era. For many researchers, this era was inseparable from the socio-political effects of growing neo-liberalism in the UK (John 2015). After they were outlawed, academic interest in raves reduced significantly, as accessing them became increasingly difficult for researchers. Nonetheless, Griffin et al. (2016) and Riley, Griffin and Morey (2010) have conducted qualitative research on the rural free party scene, whilst the rest of recent research has explored legal EDM events (Anderson 2009; Conner and Katz 2020). There is good reason to give greater analytic attention to illegal raves, particularly because their illegality often affects the organisation and atmosphere, as well as the behaviours people exhibit. This article is furthermore an examination of their resurgence against the novel and embattled backdrop of Covid-19; this may help us develop our understanding not only of the ongoing lives of rave culture, but also how these rituals speak to the ever-changing challenges faced in our contemporary moment.

Community within raves is described as both a fleeting sensation, characteristic of its fluid membership structure, and as a culture fostering solidarity and belonging (Thornton 1995; Anderson and Kavanaugh 2008; Riley, Griffin and Morey 2010). The term "community" is however, highly contested within sociology. In its basic form, it refers to having something in common, either a geographically specific "territorial community" or an activity-based "interest community" (Crow and Allen 1994: 3). These two concepts coincide in raves with a shared occupation of space, and a uniting countercultural interest. However, the lack of a shared definition throughout the literature, and the subjective nature of the term in cultural vernacular, makes comparisons across research challenging.

Early research constructs raves across a mainstream/subculture or commercial/alternative divide, whereby members create community founded on shared countercultural interests (Thornton 1995). Though this theory was initially popular, Bennett (1999) and Riley, Griffin and Morey (2010) have since contested this. Instead, they characterise raves using Maffesoli's (1996) neo-tribal theory, which argues that in contemporary Western society people constantly move between small and temporary groups based on different values and consumption practices. Therefore, raves cannot be understood as a sealed subculture as members shifts groups based on the changing "nature of youth's musical and stylistic preferences" (Bennett 1999: 614). Riley, Griffin and Morey (2010) used qualitative research to study the drum and bass club scene, and the rural free party scene, identifying two forms of community. Firstly, sociality and proxemics, referring to the emotional attachment and

pleasure in being together; secondly solidarity and belonging which fosters a "keeping warm together" and belonging even in temporary communities (Maffesoli 1996: 83). Theorising raves as neo-tribal emphasises the fragmented, ephemeral and heterogenous nature of their community. The neo-tribal perspective has prompted further scholarship examining the localised nature of rave communities and EDM scenes underlining the cultural forces informing their operation of identity and solidarity (Kavanaugh and Anderson 2008). Recent research has also found that social media enables users to belong to more online communities across a wider variety of interests; membership to interest-based neo-tribes by today's youth is similarly characterised as ephemeral and temporary (Robards 2018).

Shared behavioural norms in raving such as synchronised dancing, altruistic behaviours and shared musical interest have been associated with fostering interpersonal crowd connection. Canetti conceptualises ritual dance through the "rhythmic crowd" which becomes a "single creature dancing, a creature with fifty legs and a hundred arms" united by the "same purpose" (1962: 32). A crowd dancing in unison explicitly expresses their non-verbal connections through their bodies. The trance music DJ therefore becomes a focal point or "technoshaman" who manipulates the crowd's mood through a unified physical and auditory sensation (Silcott 1999: 58). This theoretical work has prompted recent research to explore these experiences empirically. Takahashi and Olaveson attended raves in Canada for 8 months, committing fully to the visceral "embodied" experience of raving (2003: 90). Their survey data revealed the most reported experience at raves was "interpersonal connection"; 81% of survey respondents reported feeling positive toward other ravers, and 36% said "to be with people" was their main motivation for going (Takahashi and Olaveson 2003: 77, 79). Distributing the survey at raves may be critiqued for the accuracy of responses, considering the effects of drugs and the party environment. And this simple matter raises questions about how we understand the experiences of ravers within this context. The rave environment is complicated to navigate as a research site, and the temporary and sometimes forgotten experiences it enables muddles a cultural understanding that assumes all meaningful experiences are memorable. Nonetheless, their findings provided empirical support for the popular historical scholarship which describes feelings of connection to fellow ravers (Collin 1997; Silcott 1999). Whilst acknowledging the innate complexity of researching experiences of community and connectedness, it is clear this is an important theme within the literature.

Against the backdrop of homophobic and racist sentiment during the 1990s' AIDS crisis in the UK, raves' PLUR ethos positioned them as countercultural (Reynolds 2013). However, this tendency to portray raves or EDM culture as utopias neglects how different identities intersect within the culture. EDM culture was profoundly shaped by Black and Latinx queer communities in the United States, and yet as the music found its popularity in the UK, raves became a primarily straight, white, middle and working-class activity with distinct segregations between gay and straight rave cultures (Thornton 1995; Garcia 2014).

If we consider evidence of queer spaces built around dance music, the absence of these identities within the literature on UK raves does not mean these groups were not apparent.

Rather, within the small body of research, their stories may have been neglected. In the 1990s, ballroom culture was a thriving queer dance subculture for African American and Latinx queers based around fashion, dance and catwalk competitions. Along with Circuit Parties, often termed gay raves, these undergrounds allowed queer people to experience social acceptance and cultural authority in a protected space. Ballroom culture's practices of beauty pageants and runway walks can be seen as "a response to the rejection and humiliation queer folks endure in daily life" (Garcia 2014). Drawing on Buckland's idea of queer world-making in nightlife, ballroom culture exemplifies how the "imaginative possibilities" of queerness are realised through dress and socialising (2002: 36). The value of queer nightlife is also in the creation of support structures. Buckland finds that "many queers are worldless", often cut off from "family, church, and other institutions of community-building" (2002: 38). Despite the legalisation of homosexuality and increasingly progressive attitudes towards marginalised sexual identities, many queer people in the UK still report experiencing rejection from their existing support networks when first disclosing their sexual orientation (Guasp 2010). The absence of these support networks and the suppressing of their sexual identity position queer spaces which enable these experiences as meaningful.

More recently, Campkin and Marshall's (2016) survey-based research evidenced the importance of London's LGBTQ+ nightlife spaces for community creation and self-expression. Participants felt "safe" in these spaces; this was attributed to gender-neutral bathrooms and "not feeling other" (Campbell and Marshall 2016: 3). They also found that 58% of London's LGBTQ+ nightlife spaces had closed between 2006 and 2017, a figure that likely worsened during the pandemic (Campbell and Marshall 2016: 5). Citing large-scale transport projects as the reason for many closures, this constant displacement demonstrates a "hierarchy of desirable spaces" where new projects and identities are prioritised over existing ones (Campbell and Marshall 2016: 6). Despite the gap in research into queer experiences of illegal raves, the broader literature demonstrates the particular significance of community, fashion and safety in queer dance undergrounds. It stands in an ameliorative and agonistic relationship to the structural disavowal and exclusions committed by hegemonic community institutions such as the heteronormative family and the church.

Raves do not exist in a social vacuum. The nature of the music, the style of dance and the people it attracts are all intimately tied to the socio-cultural landscape in which they emerge. During the 1980s, the hedonism and excess of raves provided an escape from Thatcher's neo-liberal imperative in which all actions were to be productive (John 2015). Redhead argues that under Thatcher raves symbolised "a pleasure for its own sake in a time when moral regulation of youth is pervasive" (1993: 7). This frames the pursuit of pleasure in raves as contrary to dominant society, but not as confrontational. More recently, EDM events have been defined as hedonistic spaces; by carving out public space to enact hedonistic values, raves escape social norms of rational behaviour (Fraser 2012). John (2015) and Redhead (1993) find that raves both contest and reflect the norms of society. They mimic an entrepreneurial drive characteristic of Britain's neo-liberal values, whilst contesting the

belief that all activity must be productive. Riley, Griffin and Morey (2010) have interpreted the prevalent element of escapism in raves as a form of everyday politics of aloofness. These accounts all position raves as an escape from the trappings of contemporary society, thus drawing a powerful opposition between the two.

UK music festivals market themselves through narratives of freedom and hedonism, echoing the original ethos of raves. However, because of laws about drug usage and licensing and commercial values that operate in these festivals, they do not grant freedom in the same way as raves (Griffin et al. 2016). Neo-liberal theorists have increasingly argued that even within leisure spaces and one's demarcated free time, traditional displays of freedom remain bounded, and risk is managed under this ideological governance (Griffin et al. 2016). Drawing on qualitative research into rural free parties (raves), Griffin et al. find that freedom is renegotiated in raves as "an alternative way of life co-produced in a collective form" (2016: 24). Rather than positioning festivals and raves across a binary of unfree/free relative to structures of governance and neo-liberal ideology, the lack of visible regulation in raves enabled a greater sense of freedom for their attendees (Griffin et al. 2016: 24). Nonetheless, the socio-political climate of neoliberalism which continues to operate around raves frames the do you what you want freedom of raves articulated through neoliberal discourse and as an individual right (Riley, Morey and Griffin 2010). Discourses of freedom within raves are shaped by the ideological expansion of neoliberalism even as they contest its commercial values; raves are constantly communicating with this socio-political climate.

Music collectives and events have historically provided an infrastructure for inspiring politics and collective action; the Riot Grrrl feminist movement and Rock Against Racism both used music to construct a collective identity and direct this toward social change (Street 2012). Though resistance and politics is an area of academic interest within raves, it is highly contested among those who view raves as a social movement in the minority (Hutson 2000). This is because equating raves and youth subcultures (mods, rockers, punks) with social movements is problematic, as these groups are directed toward personal enjoyment rather than a social change agenda (Redhead 1993).

However, there is a larger body of literature which finds that raves do exhibit a form of subversive politics. They contest public space by playing electronic music from sound systems, and their disregard toward licensing laws is disruptive in a way other forms of music are not. This is especially true in the context of Thatcherite moral regulation (Rietveld 1998). This public display of playfulness and irony can be understood as a spectacle of resistance which attracts attention and parodies mass culture (Conner and Katz 2020). Using multi-site qualitative methods and a historical approach, Conner and Katz (2020) find the concept of spectacle is a resistance technique in legal American EDM. This is not, however, comparable to structured forms of resistance in social movements, as the momentary and fleeting nature of EDM events means any resistance is inconsistent (Conner and Katz 2020). Overall, raves seem to exhibit several forms of subversive politics; however, from the current literature it is hard to determine the degree of consistency to which these political possibilities manifest.

This literature review has highlighted a significant gap in research on illegal raves held outside of the 1988-1994 period, aside from a small body of empirical research into the free party and illegal rave scene (Wilson 2006; Riley, Griffin and Morey 2010; Griffin et al. 2016). The outlawing of raves and their subsequent inaccessibility means many researchers have explored legal EDM events instead which though useful, are not entirely transferable to this research (Fraser 2012; Conner and Katz 2020). This work nonetheless demonstrates the efficacy of qualitative methods in investigating ravers' worldviews and lived experiences.

The overwhelming and rapid social upheaval caused by the pandemic has created a unique social environment that raves are presumably responding to. Reynolds (2013) and John (2015) have situated their understanding of raves firmly in relation to Thatcherite Britain, highlighting the constant communication between raves and their wider social spaces. To this end, the re-emergence of raves within, and in relation to, the novel context of the pandemic warrants specific attention. Furthermore, aside from references to the existence of queer spaces in dance music undergrounds, academic research into these spaces vis-à-vis raves and Covid-19 is noticeably quiet. Queer undergrounds hold significance for their members as they adopt their own social and cultural norms, particularly in relation to sexual and gender non-conforming identities (Buckland 2002). If we understand illegal raves as granting attendees momentary freedom from society through similar means, the overlap of these two worlds provides fertile ground for investigation.

Methods

A fully qualitative research design was adopted with 11 semi-structured interviews lasting from 35 to 75 minutes each. Interviews were held on Zoom between February 3rd, 2021 and March 23rd, 2021. As the research addresses illegal activities, navigating the ethical complexity of this research meant ensuring confidentiality, anonymity and the participants' right to leave the study. Pseudonyms chosen by me were used throughout the research and data storage. Before participating, individuals were provided with an Information and Consent Sheet. This research was granted ethical clearance by the UCL Social Research Unit in November 2020.

As the rave community is a closed group, I used convenience sampling to contact potential participants through my social networks. These established several starting points for snowball sampling. Of the 11 participants, I knew 4 beforehand; these relationships were crucial in signalling my trustworthiness to the other participants. The sample criteria were to have attended at least 3 raves in the UK between March 2020 and March 2021. Takahashi and Olaveson critique much of the research on raves for poor methodology, commenting that "the methodology required to adequately explore this experience involves 1) talking to ravers, and 2) raving oneself" (2003: 74). My positionality as an insider in the rave scene and as a young person was an asset to the research process as the rave scene often operates with an insider/outsider binary. However, as I did not attend any raves during the pandemic, I was able to maintain distance from the experiences of the participants. This research does not intend to be generalisable to all raves during the pandemic, nor does it intend to be positivistic.

Most raves attended took place over the summer and autumn of 2020. Thereafter, nearly all participants reported no longer attending raves, coinciding with the worsening of the pandemic and the introduction of new fines during Christmas 2020 and into 2021. The music characteristic of raves was electronic, generally techno, breakbeat and electro. During the summer, many raves took place outside in forests on the outskirts of London, or on boats in Hackney. Indoor locations included squats in central London, spaces under railways bridges, disused warehouses and non-residential buildings. The size of raves varied from 200-800 attendees. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Role	Attended Queer raves	No. of raves attended in Covid-19
Josh	M	21	Attendee, DJ	Yes	5–4
Max	NB*	20	Attendee	Yes	4
Ezra	M	19	Attendee	Yes	5
Noah	M	23	Organiser, DJ	Yes	~20
Oliver	M	n/a**	Organiser, DJ	Yes	6
Ben	NB	21	Attendee	Yes	4
Alex	M	21	Attendee	No	4
Ethan	M	28	Attendee	No	4–5
Lucy	F	20	Attendee, Organiser	No	~20
Isabel	F	19	Attendee	No	~10
Rosie	F	20	Attendee	No	3

Table 1. Overview of the interviewees. *Non-binary. **Unwilling to answer.

The apparent gender imbalance of this sample (only 3 women) should be understood in relation to wider trends within rave culture. Keeler's quantitative research of raves found only a quarter of her participants were women, and that they were also less likely than men to hold a significant role such as DJ or organiser (2017: 162). Similarly, Riley, Griffin and Morey found that their subject pool from participant observation was 65-70% male, suggesting that in the context of raves this study's sample profile is not unexpected (2010: 353).

The interview transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) outline for thematic analysis (TA). TA is highly flexible with extensive theoretical freedom allowing for the identification of both explicit and implicit themes of the data. As this research takes a multidisciplinary approach, the adaptability of this method was beneficial (King 2004; Braun and Clarke 2006). During TA, the active role of the researcher in identifying and reporting the data is also acknowledged, as is the social constructivist epistemological

stance of the research. Recognising these theoretical values and biases, as well as the position between insider and outsider that I occupy, is meant to enhance the credibility of the research.

A clear limitation of this study is the skew in the sample towards London raves. Furthermore, participants may have struggled to articulate the experience of raving fully. Reflecting on Takahashi and Olaveson (2003), they illuminated the limits of using text to capture the physical and psychological experience of raves; the use of interview may have slightly flattened the reality.

Analysis

This study aimed to understand the experience of raves and motivations for going during Covid-19 while focusing on community, identity and resistance. In keeping with research on raves before Covid-19, these findings confirm that (i) raves facilitate powerful feelings of connection; (ii) community and solidarity are central experiences of raves; (iii) raves can provide a sense of escape and freedom. The findings also extend the literature by (i) supplementing the gap in recent research on illegal raves; (ii) showing that common themes take on new meanings in the context of Covid-19; (iii) examining how queer identities intersect with the experiences of attending illegal raves during Covid-19.

Theme 1: Community Creation in Raves

This research finds that community was experienced through the non-verbal connection in the crowd, the organisation of raves and in the relationships and friendships based around raves. Within the context of Covid-19, community became more significant against a backdrop of profound isolation. The value of experiencing community was intensified by its rarity, but complicated by the newfound danger of physical closeness.

Ethan described raves as a source of "real connection, togetherness, presence and joy". For Isabel, these were distinctly non-verbal: "you don't really need to talk to each other, people connect through the music and, the dancing and all of it". Raves as a space for non-verbal connection with a larger group has been linked to synchronised dancing, altruistic behavioural norms and shared music taste (Schechner 1995). However, the fleeting nature of this feeling was expressed by Josh who found that "in that moment you feel like yeah these are my people, but away from that they could be strangers walking past you on the street and you wouldn't know". These findings support the characterisation of "sociality and proxemics" within raves, where there is a momentary joy in sharing spaces and activities (Bennett 1999; Riley, Griffin and Morey 2010). The creation of communities based on fleeting relationships, even where members do not know one another appeared meaningful in fostering belonging.

Those who had been attending raves for longer foregrounded the role of community in the organisation, enjoyment and marketing of raves. Increasingly, the raves explicitly

emphasised this. Isabel noted that "they [rave organisers] do speak about it as kind of like a family", whilst Lucy saw raves being "advertised through the whole community thing". Nearly all participants described a collective approach to putting on a rave. Ethan often helped construct sound equipment, whilst others mentioned scouting for possible locations. Oliver, who has been organising raves for 10 years, found the community of raves particularly important: "you have a social environment that connects all these dots together, you know friends meet friends, people get together, people fall in love. I think it's very relevant to the human experience". Viewing raves as a microcosm of human experiences connects the operation of community more closely to how we understand it in other interest-based social groups.

Against the backdrop of extensive social isolation and the danger of physical closeness, the significance of community was intensified for the participants. Lucy found that "because of covid people want to come together and a lot of people kind of have that mentality of community". Ethan, who lived alone, with no family in the UK, realised that raves had become a "big, big part of my social life", creating "proper friend groups". The scarcity of feeling connected to other people, especially new people, during the pandemic may have made these moments more memorable for the participants. Though this research was unable to uncover all the personal circumstances of the participants' during lockdown, individual differences in living situation and their isolation may have informed their motivation to seek out community in raves, or their justification for doing so. Max found raves were important for their mental health; they would "go to one rave in a blue moon, just for my own mental sanity, just to be around people and have fun".

Closeness was also described in relation to instances of unsafety at raves as participants were aware of the danger of being near others. Some participants directly addressed this risk. Lucy recalled:

> I remember on Halloween being stuffed into an archway and the police were outside. And they [the rave organisers] had to lock the door so no one could get in or out, because the police were right there. And this archway was so hot, and everyone was so sweaty that there was like condensation on the roof dripping down onto people, like oh God. You couldn't even light a cigarette in there because there was no oxygen in the air, it was just water vapor. It was, yeah, [pause] I was pretty scared.

This image of inescapable closeness in a poorly ventilated environment powerfully demonstrates the extent of the risks many participants faced. Though this description might be seen to fuel accusations of the irresponsibility of raving in the pandemic, the evidence of profound community and moments of connection complicate these accusations. Not only do these findings inform our perspectives on lockdown regulation, but also the real impact of social isolation on the individual. This is further demonstrated by the relevance of community, experienced as non-verbal, as emotional relationships and as a motivation in itself for going. On a policy level, more effective tools may be required to prioritise creating and maintaining community through non-physical means.

Theme 2: Raves as Queer Safe Spaces

The particular significance of queer identities within raves was an unexpected finding of this research, and a consequence of using snowball sampling which began with participants of this scene. Like the wider sample, participants who attended queer raves emphasised their experiences of community, self-expression and safety. However, the social conditions that subtend this overlapping of queer safe space and illegal raves complicates a restrictive view of raves in Covid-19 as only immoral or unsafe.

Queer raves were described as safe spaces associated with an absence of hostility and powerful feelings of community. Culturally, queer safe spaces are defined both materially and metaphorically as a site of refuge for LGBTQ+ communities by operating outside heteronormative bounds (Campkin and Marshall 2014). Five of the participants commented on this. Josh, for instance, remarked, "I always get the feeling that you're safe with these people, and it's safe space". Ezra described queer raves as "an environment that isn't hostile... there's no judgment on the dance floor". This view was echoed by Max, who characterised them as "genuinely non-judgmental spaces". The freedom from judgement appeared unique to these spaces and related queer raves to the safety found in other underground spaces. Ben drew an illuminating parallel between queer raves and the New York "ballroom culture, where you'd walk and pull a look", inferring the significance of fashion in these spaces.

Queer raves as spaces for identity expression and performing queerness through fashion, dance and behaviour was unique to the literature on raves. Ben comments:

> So much of my identity is based on like turning looks and being seen as like a non-binary person and a trans person. Which is something like in the day-to-day walking down the street I'm not going to do, because I'm unsafe in that environment.

These remarks resonate with Buckland's research on queer dance clubs where participants "get their gayness" from the ritual of "self-fashioning" as queer and performing their sexual identity publicly (2002: 37). Regardless of the effects of lockdown, expressing queer sexual identity in public carries risks of abuse which are not present for those who adhere to heteronormative codes of presentation. Recognising the importance of experiencing queerness as a community raises questions about the impact of Covid-19 on marginalised sexual identities regarding their sense of identity and mental wellbeing. These experiences did not exist in heteronormative environments and distinguished these from rave culture more widely. Max shared that their behaviour "depends like on whether I'm surrounded by straight people". Josh commented that at raves which were "heteronormative, you're slightly more, I guess, conservative". The need to adjust their behaviour dependent on composition of the space points directly to the importance of queer spaces in allowing identity expression.

With the closure of public social spaces, and by proxy many support structures for queer people, during Covid-19, queer raves become a rare and valued space for community creation and support. They were important for Ben in enabling trans people to come together: "[in the] trans techno scene it's like we're hiding until they [raves] happen. Then you come out

and see your friends and then you don't really see them again". Using the terms community and family interchangeably, they referred to queer raves as "a lot more of a family thing because we [trans people] don't have the same support structures." Recognising queer raves as a source of familial networks supports Buckland's (2002) argument that queer nightlife can help mediate queer peoples' challenges in accessing traditional support networks. Raves facilitated a bonding experience for Ben with other trans and non-binary folks: "there's a collective trauma, everyone can just joke about the same shit happening to them and that brings us together". Max, who also identifies as non-binary, simply stated "I miss my community". The emotional significance of queer community in raves was profound for participants who related the value of raves to their personal lives and instances of persecution on account of their sexual identity.

Virtual queer clubs such as Club Quarantine and Queer House Party also emerged in the pandemic and were popular, credited as a source of queer belonging (Pavka 2020). However, the experience of physically sharing queer spaces is irreplaceable (Tayler 2012). The newfound challenge in accessing these spaces may have amplified the isolation felt by queer people, who are more likely to be cut off from family and institutions of community (Buckland 2002). Situated in a wider environment of feeling unable to express their identity safely and detached from queer community in nightlife spaces, queer raves offered a unique opportunity for this. Furthermore, these findings inform our understanding of hierarchies of identity within public spaces, and the damage of inhibiting access to queer ones. A more concentrated effort by policymakers to fund queer spaces outside of nightlife may be needed. Nightlife, though valuable, is often focussed on drinking and sexual courting. By complimenting these institutions with queer spaces guaranteed by public funding, queer people may be granted more opportunities to build support structures.

Theme 3: Experiencing Escape through Raves

The literature depicts raves as spaces away from the symbolic repression of the state, neoliberalism and social norms (Griffin et al. 2016). The absence of what Ethan calls the "normal constructs of society" in raves suggests they can still be understood this way. During the pandemic environment of perceived confinement, raves became profound sources of experiencing freedom and escapism.

Raves provided a sense of escape as an opportunity to leave the physical confines of lockdown and return to normality. Josh articulated the "sense of like escapism and wanting some normality" he sought from raves. This was also expressed as a joyful form of release. Ezra found raves were a chance to "forget about all the deadlines, you forget about the fact that you don't have a job, and you don't have money coming in, because for eight hours you're just going to dance". For many participants, choosing to go to a rave also involved a rational assessment of the potential risks and benefits. Josh described it as "weighing up the need for some normality, seeing my friends and my mental health, versus getting covid was, like, just a risk, I guess." The economic uncertainty, deteriorating job market, and poor

mental health that many young people were experiencing contributed to the participants' decision to go to raves. Moments of respite from these feelings positioned raves as a space of escape.

Many of the participants were very aware that going to raves also meant facing the wider consequences of their actions. As Oliver put it, "now, you're not just escaping from yourself, you're escaping from what's happening in the world, and I think that has a different taste in Covid". He later added: "while in Covid, escapism is not a very personal thing, it's a very global thing. It doesn't matter where you stand, you're ignoring a global issue". During Thatcherite Britain and the height of rave culture, experiencing escapism in raves was associated with its alternative social ideals of collectivism and hedonism (Reynolds 2013; John 2015). These findings instead portray raves as a risky chance to briefly escape the reality of the virus and return to a feeling of normality found before Covid-19. Reflecting on Lucy's description of being stuck in an archway at a rave without ventilation, the extent of the personal risk becomes emphasised. Though raves may have offered an escape from the regulation of Covid-19, participants were not ignorant to the danger of their choices.

During Covid-19, individual behaviours became significant in their potential larger effect on virus transmission. The public and the private spheres blurred, and escapism was no longer a chiefly individual choice. Defining raves through freedom is not to position them across restrictive binaries of free/unfree. Rather, these findings suggest that within a complex web of experiences of raves during Covid-19, the desire for freedom was influenced and intensified in its opposition to daily life in lockdown.

Theme 4: The Politics and Resistance of Raving in Covid-19

Feeling misrepresented and misunderstood by both government and the public was a common experience articulated by participants. For some, this feeling was fuelled by the perceived failings of the government during the pandemic, fostering resentment towards these institutions. This resentment, however, did not directly challenge political institutions so much as it seemed to critique government action during the pandemic. Ethan remarked that "I don't really trust government, I never trusted government figures before this [Covid-19] so it's hard for me to just start trusting them now". A generalised sense of ambivalence and hostility was popular across participants. Max described it as a "fuck the government, um, let's have fun kind of tone", whilst Oliver characterised raves as "definitely anti-establishment and anti-government in some ways but it doesn't necessarily hate government". This generalized anti-establishment stance of many of the participants deviates from Riley, Griffin and Morey's (2010) description of aloofness from official institutions. Though the participants were not actively resisting government, for example as Hutson (2000) argues, as aloofness infers complete disengagement. In the 12 years since Riley, Griffin and Morey's (2010) research, the political landscape of the UK has changed considerably and undergone divisive government austerity policies and Brexit. These policies and those under Covid-19 have had significant impacts on the daily life of many citizens,

meaning the likelihood of political aloofness may be far less. Anti-government rhetoric was far more prevalent than rhetoric resembling Riley, Griffin and Morey's (2010) description of aloofness. The participants expressed frustration at the perceived scapegoating of raves and their misrepresentation by politicians and the media. Ben articulated this sense of misrepresentation:

> Raves are a social interaction that like young people cherish the most, especially when you're unemployed. It's like, oh, so none of my social interaction is deemed like valuable enough by the government to take place, because it's for emotional reward rather than monetary rewards. You can understand why for me it feels like a rejection of trans people.

Relating this back to the value queer raves hold for the expression of sexual identity, the banning of raves converged with a feeling of personal rejection for Ben.

Other participants were concerned that the pandemic would provide an excuse for anti-rave regulation to remain even after the virus subsided. Oliver thought this may be because of the anti-capitalist features of raves: "I think the government is doing a great job, it's what they wanted to do, to restrict raves because it's not taxed, and they're not getting anything out of it." Noah, an organiser, evoked a similar sentiment by highlighting how official narratives expediently explained the worsening of the pandemic through the individual failings of ravers.

> The government is kind of blaming raves as the main reason for Covid spreading, when there's a lot of things that don't get highlighted which do generate the government money… but they go out of their way to portray raves in as negative a light as possible.

Max thought this was because:

> symbolically raving feels quite trivial to people and, you could just not do it, is people's perspective. But it isn't that simple. To act like its insignificant [pause] I don't know, I feel like it's a bit unfair and then to blame it all [Covid-19] on the ravers.

Exasperation with the government's failings during Covid-19 and feelings of misrepresentation more generally may have informed a sentiment of us vs them (Thornton 1995). However, unlike Thornton's (1995) model, this specific sentiment did not accord to a subculture/mainstream divide or aesthetic ideals. Evidence of resistance to government does not politicise raves in the same way as resistant social movements (Huston 2000). Rather, in Covid-19, where attending raves was a defiance of government regulation, there is inevitable and implicit opposition between the groups.

This oppositional sentiment may also help explain the unexpected prevalence of conspiratorial thinking in these findings. Though none of the participants expressed any personal allegiance to these conspiracies, all of them commented on their existence within the scene. Ben commented that "some people have gone kind of conspiracy theorist about it, like don't believe in Covid, or just completely minimize it". Likewise, Max recalled, "they just think the whole thing is a lie, for the government to plot things against us to like

restrict our freedom and control our life". For some participants, this feeling was informed by a history of raves being oppositional to the police and government. Oliver detailed some of the popular conspiracies he'd heard, "that they're [the government] using certain technology that can actually detect where people are, it's the same one they use for the track and trace". Ethan even saw a rave "called Scamdemic". Rave attendees have been shown to exhibit greater endorsement of alternative religions and spirituality (Takahashi and Olaveson 2003). However, this research discovered theories about government surveillance, suggesting certain specificities to the Covid-19 context.

Factoring in the history of tension between raves and authority, and its escalation during the pandemic, conspiracies may serve to justify feelings of persecution. Further research could explore this avenue at greater length. This study has merely identified the phenomenon, but without any participants who resonated with these theories explicitly, it is hard to offer more comprehensive explanations.

Theme 5: The Many Motivations for Raving

Exploring why people went to raves during Covid-19 was an important question when the decision involved facing potential financial and health risks. The opportunity to socialise, to experience joy and feel free provides clues to their motivations. However, when asked explicitly, their reasons were to have fun and to improve their mental wellbeing. The significance of mental health within these findings was unexpected in relation to the literature, but coherent in the context of Covid-19. Ezra added:

> Mental health has never been worse, and the government is neither investing in mental health or allowing us to do things that will improve our mental health… for a lot of people going out is something that we need to survive.

Discussions of mental health illuminated a powerful contrast between the momentary elation of raving and the monotony of life during the pandemic. Max found that "they're so overstimulating and like now, when I'm so used to being lethargic and sleepy, having something that is so intense and so like mind-blowing, it's like pretty wonderful". Others explained the popularity of raves directly in relation to the worsening of mental health during the pandemic. Isabel found for many of her friends, raves had a "deeper meaning . . . because a lot of people's mental health has suffered so much through Covid".

The desire to exert agency was another motivation expressed explicitly by participants. For Ethan raves were an opportunity to "take control over, sort of, my own existence again". When asked about the public health risks of raving, he commented that "it just comes down to like your personal liberties and like I'm sort of taking my life into my hands every time I step out of my door". Other participants alluded to a desire to live their youth fully and exercise their right to do so. Rosie, who is 19, commented that "I'm getting older, so I just want to like go out as much as possible, in case something happens, and like the world ends". A similar concern was mentioned by Lucy who felt "I'm not going to get these youthful years back". Supporting Griffin et al. (2016), these discourses express freedom in

raves through neo-liberal discourses, and they position raves as an opportunity to reclaim lives, which people increasingly felt unable to control.

The motivations for doing something are difficult to attribute to any single cause, and many of the participants struggled to explain why they wanted to go to raves; they just did. Attempts to explain motivations for going therefore risk inadvertently pathologizing the participants. In the same way that Reynolds critiques the literature for "over-politicising" raves, I am aware of the risk of overexplaining the motivations for raving (2013: 515). The profound mundanity and anxiety which characterises the world during Covid-19 may mean the simple experience of socialising and enjoying music became more valuable. Additionally, this discussion of mental wellbeing as a motivation for attending raves is not to justify the behaviours of attendants as medical necessity, but rather to underscore that this area requires greater attention from policy makers. In this research, recognising the vitality and contribution of raves to mental health goes some way to explain the significant risks people were prepared to undertake to dance during the pandemic.

This research has begun to address the gap in empirical literature on illegal raves. It has also extended findings from EDM research on the significance of community, resistance, freedom, and identity within the novel context of Covid-19. Situating these findings in relation to the mental health crisis and its impact on young people, the need to address this in wider policy is emphasised. Further research may address this in finer detail and explore the unexpected findings, particularly the experience of LGBTQ+ individuals in raves and the notable presence of conspiratorial thinking.

Conclusion

This research has found that the prevalent depiction of raves during Covid-19 as immoral, selfish and risky is reductive with regard to the complexity and value they have for those attending. Against a backdrop of isolation, a mental health crisis, homophobia and government distrust intensified by Covid-19, raves offered participants meaningful experiences of community, identity expression and joy. Within this unique context, the motivations for going to raves and the experiences of them became deeply intertwined. The only motivation explicitly mentioned by several participants was mental health, which likely reflects a wider trend in deteriorating mental health during the pandemic. The relevance of community and identity expression within raves was especially significant and had special characteristics for those attending queer raves. In a wider social environment where creating community without fear of judgement was more difficult, queer raves adopted a new role as socially safe for this group.

Raves during Covid-19 were closely tied to the unique challenges of this environment. The relevance of connection, safe spaces, belonging and escapism mirror corresponding experiences of isolation and stress throughout the pandemic. By acknowledging the nuance of these concepts beyond binary models of morality, raves can be reframed as spaces that, while undoubtedly posing risks, encompass diverse and meaningful experiences for those attending.

Notes

1 For unemployment statistics, see International Labour Organisation (2021: 2). For domestic violence statistics, see Office for National Statistics (2020b: 1). For food bank statistics, see Trussell Trust (2020).

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