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# The Politics of Partying: Electronic Dance Music as Collectivist Experimentation and Subversion

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## **Abstract**

This study examines how EDM events in Leeds function as a form of political action, using ethnographic research in the form of interviews and observations. This study looks at political action through the lens of Jacques Rancière (1999; 2006), who characterises it as a disruption of the dominant social order. The research also borrows from Elias Canetti's (1962) crowd theory as well as varying conceptualisations of ritual. The study finds that EDM events are able to provide an opportunity for participants to experiment with collectivism in a way that subverts society's neoliberal individualism. This is especially important for marginalised communities as a way of building solidarity and empowerment. Commercialisation, through the infiltration of brands and capital-orientation, threatens the politicisation of these events because it takes focus away from the collectivist experience. However, local collectives in Leeds further subvert this by using socialist organising structures such as being non-profit and the horizontal organisation of collectives.

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## Introduction

Electronic dance music (EDM) is a unique genre in popular music due to how it can communicate meaning without saying anything at all: “The fact that dance music is a new form of popular *instrumental* music is what makes it so striking: it is a music which is not based on songs” (Gilbert & Pearson, 1999, p.38, emphasis in original). It can easily be cast aside as repetitive and meaningless; at best, only a tool for mindless hedonism or disappearance, as Melechi (1993) characterises it. However, it is clear that in recent years, different events revolving around EDM have exemplified the interplay between this genre and political action. For example, DJs and EDM artists recently pushed forward the ‘#DJsForPalestine’ campaign as part of the wider BDS movement (Faber, 2018), London welcomed the ‘Stop Brexit Soundsystem’ during the People’s Vote demonstration (Eede, 2019), and Georgian citizens have protested their country’s growing conservatism with a “rave-olution” (MacDonald & Vestbirk, 2018, n.p).

The connection between music and politics also has the potential to go beyond these traditional modes of political participation by carving out a space for a unique type of collectivism to take shape. The idea of EDM bringing people together is prevalent in popular discourse, but this is usually without explanation as to why or how this happens. Beyond popular culture, there is a wealth of literature that investigates the unique properties of music in a collective setting. This includes Turino’s (2008) examination of participation as a type of musical performance, Hesmondhalgh’s (2014) understanding of collective flourishing, and Street’s (2012) case for how music has the potential to politically engage citizens. This theory help to understand how music contributes to a collective experience.

Fisher & Gilbert (2013) argue that we are living in a post-political era enforced by a hegemonic capitalist realism, where it seems as if a capitalist system is the only option. A “counter-hegemonic intervention” (p.98) that focuses on subverting individualism is the most

viable strategy for re-politicising everyday life, and one way in which this can be done is incorporating communitarian values into cultural activities. This highlights the importance of culture, including EDM, in engaging citizens in political action; therefore it is essential to understand whether, at this present time, these events are embodying the values that play into a counter-hegemonic intervention.

This study looks to expand on this notion by drawing a connection to political action as Rancière (1999; 2006) understands it: a disruption of the dominant social order. Through this lens, I examine how EDM can interact with politics in a variety of ways, with particular focus on how the powerful collective experiences of EDM events can work as a subversion against the individualist and neoliberal ideologies that are prevalent in modern British society.

The research is shaped by the question, is political action present in the organisation and experience of EDM events in Leeds? If so, how does this take shape? The study will be using theory surrounding political action, collectivism, ritual, and collective musical experience and applying it to ethnographic research focused on Leeds's local music scene. This research is implemented through interviews with participants of EDM events and observation of a number of these events.

I argue that EDM events in Leeds can act as an opportunity for participants to experiment with collectivism in a way that is inherently subversive in the UK's modern, individualist and neoliberal society (Dean, 2016). These events are subversive on a multitude of levels, starting with the powerful, meaningful personal experiences of individuals and how this feeds into a feeling of community and collectivism on the dancefloor. There is also experimentation with socialist organising structures within collectives as a way of subverting the growing commercialism and capital-orientation of EDM events. Throughout this, ritual as a form of social change is an essential mechanism, where participants in EDM events have taken the tradition of collective social experimentation that is prevalent in traditional ritual (Turner,

1967) and have transformed it into an activity that is accessible for citizens in today's society. This is especially essential for marginalised communities, such as the LGBTQ+ community, who see EDM events as a space to build empowerment and solidarity. On top of this, EDM events are also sometimes sites of overt political action, for example, being a vehicle for fundraising and raising awareness for particular social concerns in the political sphere. The pushback from capitalism, embodied in the infiltration of brands into this subculture, is also subverted by EDM event organisers' experimentation with socialist values, rooted in the horizontal organisation of collectives and non-profit structures.

## Literature Review

This literature review will be examining key themes of political action and ritual before connecting these concepts to EDM and academia concerning raves. The first section explores the concept of political action, which has been used to guide my research, with special consideration towards Jacques Rancière's (1999; 2006) conceptualisation of politics as subversion and applying this to collectivism and social movements. The second section looks at previous work on ritual studies and begins to make connections between trance and music. The third section will be discussing in more detail literature that looks at music as a form of collectivism, as well as the politicisation of music, with emphasis on 1990s UK rave culture, where much academia about EDM is focused. This culminates into the argument that political action can be embodied by not only formal political participation but also through subverting the dominant social order in a number of ways, one of these being the experimental, collective ritualism that is prevalent in EDM events.

## Characterising Political Action in a Cultural Context

It is important to acknowledge a distinction between traditional definitions of political action as opposed to characterisations that explore participation in a broader sense. Milbrath & Goel (1982) define political participation as “actions of private citizens by which they seek to influence or to support government and politics” (p.2). More specifically, political participation can involve activities such as writing to representatives, canvassing or protesting (Street, 2012). However, political scientists have begun to favour definitions that fall outside of formal political arenas, in part due to the rising significance of social issues like feminism, which are marked by slogans such as ‘the personal is political’ (Hay, 2007). It has been argued that politics can occur outside of traditional realms, but it continues to always be inherently linked to human agency (Street, 2012). Hay (2007) takes a more flexible approach with his definition: “Politics, I suggest, is the capacity for agency and deliberation in situations of genuine collective or social choice” (p.77).

This characterisation is too broad thus unhelpful when attempting to apply it to this research. Therefore, Rancière’s (1999; 2006) account of political action will be used to understand this concept in relation to EDM events. He defines politics as “when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part” (1999, p.11). ‘The part who have no part’ refers to those in society who are more disadvantaged or marginalised, with the ‘part’ signifying the conditions that entitle one to being part of a community. In effect, Rancière’s conception of democratic politics is rooted in the disruption of the status quo rather than the more formal routes of political participation that revolve around governmental activity. Rancière (2006) goes on to outline how politics can occur in a cultural context, introducing the concept of the distribution of the sensible. This term conceptualises how the dominant order determines which individuals, groups and identities are more



privileged based on what is received by the senses, causing both inclusion and exclusion and determining what voices are worth listening to. Politics occurs when an individual or group, belonging to an identity that is not ordinarily recognised in the distribution of the sensible, disrupts what one would normally see and hear; people we rarely see taking the centre stage. Rancière focuses on subversive art, but this concept can easily be extended into other cultural arenas such as music.

Taking this idea of politics as a disruption of the dominant social order, it is important to understand the context in which this disruption would occur. In the UK, there has been a convergence of the neoliberalism originating from Thatcher's government in the 1980s and social and demographic changes where new social groupings have replaced traditional ideas of family, class and community (McRobbie, 2002). This change in values has promoted individualism, where "people increasingly have to become their own micro-structures" (ibid, p.518), meaning that there is an increasing push on self-reliance rather than the community values of working with others to achieve a collective goal. "Neurotic individualism" (Fisher & Gilbert, 2013, p.94) has become increasingly prevalent, where individuals anxiously construct their identities, constantly feeling in competition with others and repressing collaboration. This is reproduced in mainstream media, especially with the rise of reality TV, which consistently highlights and reflects these values. Western society is increasingly shaped by what Jodi Dean (2016) terms communicative capitalism, which leads to intense individualisation: "Each is told, repeatedly, that she is unique and encouraged to cultivate this uniqueness. We learn to insist on and enjoy our difference, intensifying processes of self-individuation" (p.31). Dean argues that this process has diminished the power of modern left-wing politics because the assertion of autonomous individualisation has taken focus away from collective objectives, thus atomising members of a movement and shifting focus onto individual interests.

The stagnant nature of some politics is characterised through the term ‘capitalist realism’, articulating the idea that we are living in a post-political era where there is no need for politics or “big ideological conflicts” (Fisher & Gilbert, 2013, p.90) anymore, and capitalism has dominated our conceptualisation of politics in the form of neoliberal hegemony to the point that it is increasingly difficult to see any alternatives. It has resulted in the depoliticization of work and everyday life, alongside a sense of resignation and lack of hope in how society is structured. May (2008) uses Rancière’s understanding of politics in his approach, arguing that political action must be borne out of centring collectivism as an antithesis to wider society’s growing emphasis on individualism. Within this, centring the same principles and expressing equality in our daily practices will, in Rancière’s (1999) terms, disrupt the dominant order and trigger politics.

Canetti’s (1962) crowd theory helps to understand how crowds can embody the collectivism that has the potential to disrupt the dominant order. He argues that the crowd is a space of equality through its complete lack of distinction when ‘discharge’ occurs:

In that density, where there is scarcely any space in between, and body presses against body, each man is as near the other as he is to himself; and an immense feeling of relief ensues. It is for the sake of this blessed moment, when no-one is greater or better than the other, that people become a crowd. (Canetti, 1962, p.18)

The egalitarian nature of the crowd subverts the hierarchical structure of everyday society, as well as contributing to the force of social movements. For example, Dean (2016) argues that Canetti’s conception of the crowd, especially the egalitarian quality of ‘discharge’, can be translated into party politics, making room for a more collective approach to political objectives, thereby furthering political aims more successfully.

Eyerman & Jamison (1998) argue that “the collective identity formation that takes place in social movements is a central catalyst of broader changes in values, ideas, and ways of life” (p.7). The subversive symbolic action that is often enacted by social movements can help to

form a new collective identity, which in turn challenges the dominant political order (ibid). In social movements, there has been a transition from traditional political issues to culture. Where a movement “originally stood for an entity acting against the political and governmental system, [it] has now been rendered inadequate as a description of the reality of reticular and diffuse forms of collective action” (Melucci, 1996, p.4). This refers to how collective action has begun to be taken through culture itself, where collective action can take place at different levels beyond traditional political participation (ibid). Fisher & Gilbert (2013) extend on this, arguing that “one of the most effective first steps in the struggle against capitalist realism will be the invention of new ways in which people can become involved with politics” (p.91). Anti-individualism is emphasised here as a counter-hegemonic strategy, with Fisher & Gilbert also suggesting that reclaiming the festival form could be a viable option for introducing a concept of forward-thinking communitarianism. This argument highlights that a subversive, anti-individualist politics can find engagement through non-traditional routes such as musical and cultural events.

### Ritual as Socially Transformative Collectivism

One means of collective action comes in the form of ritual. I will be drawing a connection between electronic music events and the socially transformative power of ritual in order to understand how this music can be involved in some forms of political action.

Victor Turner (1967) has been a proponent in the anthropological study of ritual, and originally defined it as “prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers” (ibid, p.19). However, this definition can be restrictive because, due to its strong focus on tribal ritual, it

assumes that ritual is defined by a belief in supernatural beings or processes. It also characterises ritual as a formal activity, not acknowledging any room for spontaneity or improvisation. Therefore, many other types of ritual are overlooked (Alexander, 1991).

Alexander uses Turner's work as a basis for his definition of ritual:

A symbolic, self-reflective, performance that makes a transition to a time and space out of the ordinary in order to reflect on an ideal of community and to create, sometimes through routine and sometimes through experimentation, the experience of community. (Alexander, 1991, p.24)

Ritual can work as a form of challenging or transgressing the hegemonic status quo (Rietveld, 1993), as well as working as a social practice with the aim of tying members of a society or social group together (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998). Alexander (1991) argues that ritual is socially transformative through its response to the divisiveness and alienation of everyday social structures and the introduction of communitarian values: "Because it is in the nature of social structure to work against the community, ritual emerges again and again" (p.3). They often involve suspending the individual's social status through what Turner (1967) calls 'communitas', which allows for egalitarian exchanges that oppose the traditional social structure, questioning social roles and opening up new possibilities through experimentation – much like Canetti's (1962) conceptualisation of the crowd.

Focusing more closely on musical events, Alexander (1991) outlines the concept of liminoid genres, which can be embodied in collective activities relating to art and music. Liminality refers to "ritual's transcending the fixed social and cultural systems of the everyday world while exploring alternative arrangements" (p.15). Liminoid genres are liminal-like; not identical to traditional ritual yet similar in function. They differ to what can be conceived of as 'traditional' ritual through how they are non-religious, not necessarily collective, not obligatory for every member of society, and not central to the social process. As a result, this type of ritual isn't as beneficial for the working of social structure and tends to offer critique instead, but it

can still provide a “transitional framework” (p.21). In modern societies, liminoid genres tend to be more prevalent, and this is the kind of ritual that EDM events belong to.

Schechner (1993) highlights how expressive non-verbal communication is often present in ritual as a way of potentially shortcutting thinking and consideration:

Individual and collective anxieties are relieved by rituals whose qualities of repetition, rhythmicity, exaggeration, condensation, and simplification, stimulate the brain into releasing endorphins directly into the bloodstream yielding ritual’s second benefit, a relief from pain, a surfeit of pleasure. (Schechner, 1993, p.233)

These personal, pleasurable experiences are related to trance. Trance has long been examined in an attempt to decipher its connection to music, but there are many conflicting accounts of this relationship (Rouget, 1985). Rouget (1985) describes this phenomenon as often embodying movement, noise and sensory overstimulation, and occurring in company of others. It can also often induce impulsive behaviour that would be considered strange in a normal setting. Rouget (1985) attempts to determine what features of music induce a trance state by comparing many different cultures that incorporate trance into their ritual practices. He identifies two significant musical features in rhythmic breaks and an intensification of sound, for example, an acceleration of tempo or a building crescendo. He also notes that dance is very significant as a form of physical release and expression: “In all its aspects, it is, above all, communication – with oneself and with others” (p.17). Many of these characteristics of trance that Rouget (1985) identifies can be found in experiences of electronic dance music. For example, the intensification of music that Rouget describes is a common trait in this genre, with a very common structure of breakdowns and crescendos that are further emphasised when mixed by DJs. Dancing is also a common activity at these events.

Canetti (1962) also discusses the significance of the ‘rhythmic crowd’, where the crowd is focused on movement, revolving around intense, growing excitement and frenzy: “There appears to be a single creature dancing, a creature with fifty heads and a hundred legs and arms,

all performing in exactly the same way and with the same purpose” (p.32). Canetti focuses on synchronised dancing, but this idea can be communicated to the more improvised nature of electronic dance music events, where everyone who partakes in the crowd is guided by the same music.

These concepts all feed into an idea of ritual as primarily functioning to facilitate social exploration, equality, collectivism and impulsive expression that can be encouraged by specific musical features. The key features of ritual that have been identified historically draw close connections to typical behaviour at EDM events, emphasising the subversive value of anti-individualist community in these spaces, as well as the potential for ritualistic activities to be translated into a contemporary context.

### Rave as Ritual and Resistance

Important connections between culture and politics are often downplayed (Eyerman & Jamison, 1998). Street (2012) argues that music events can work as unconventional political action and have historically acted as an infrastructure for such politics by inspiring collective action and providing a foundation for social action. The arts can emotionally engage us to allow for internally reflective political deliberation, in turn allowing for the development of an ability to empathise, which, as Street (2012) argues, reinforces the importance of cultural experience: “Music can help constitute identities and communities; it can create organization and institutions; it can embody ideals and values” (ibid, p.173). Music itself can help to construct individual identity, which can then contribute to the building of collectivism through shared values (DeNora, 2000; Hesmondhalgh, 2014).

Turino (2008) focuses more closely on how people can engage with music. His idea of participatory performance helps to understand more explicitly how music can encourage collectivism. He defines participatory performance as having “no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants performing different roles, and the primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in the same performance role” (Turino, 2008, p.26). Some music can be shaped specifically for participation, and the quality of the music is judged by the level of participation, which can be as simple as dancing, and how these participants feel rather than sound quality. This strong focus on participants emphasises how participatory performance has the potential to be a force for social bonding. These activities create an egalitarian environment and are subversively democratic:

As compared with the other musical fields, participatory music making/dancing is the most democratic, the least formally competitive, and the least hierarchical. As such, participatory performance does not fit well with the broader cultural values of the capitalist-cosmopolitan formation where competition and hierarchy are prominent and profit-making is a primary goal. (Turino, 2008, p.35)

Many of the characteristics of participatory performance correlate with what can be expected at EDM events, for example, the value placed on the level of participation displayed through dance. Turino points out that participatory performance doesn't fit with the wider capitalist, competitive approach to music-making and societal structure and can go towards emphasising Rancière's (1999; 2006) concept of politics as a disruption of the status quo.

Looking more specifically at EDM, Rietveld (1998) argues that raves (EDM parties popularised in the UK in the 1990s) are inherently political – even sound systems playing techno in public are deemed problematic and disruptive where other forms of music are not. This disruptiveness is used as a form of protest today, with one example being a ‘Stop Brexit’ protest in London on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2019 revolving around a sound system and hosting a line-up of well-known techno DJs. The poster advertising the event contained the statement, ‘Kick out

the Tories! Demand Labour reconsider’ highlighting the overt relationship between this genre of music and political activism, and how the disruptive nature of this music has tied in to making a political statement (Eede, 2019).

In the 1990s, the politicism of this genre was emphasised when ‘rave’ was written into law in 1994’s Part V Section 53 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, named ‘Powers in relation to raves’ (Rietveld, 1998). Essentially, this legislation outlawed unlicensed open-air music events with specific emphasis on repetitive beats, in turn placing significant restriction on this subculture (Gilbert & Pearson, 1999). Acid house parties and raves need to be understood in the context of Thatcherite politics where restraints were constantly put on ‘moral excesses’, highlighting a fear of the unregulated body. This was further emphasised by the moral panics reinforced constantly by the sensationalist press, which is historically common regarding the working-class youth that these parties attracted (Rietveld, 1993). This again reflects the subversive nature of politics that Rancière draws attention to.

However, there is a clear split in literature regarding rave as a means of escape, where some academics view it as an apolitical void, and others view it as an intense, affective experience that can feed into politics. Fraser (2012) sees electronic dance music clubs and spaces as oriented towards producing hedonistic spaces, where it is difficult to find a political message, even if there is subversion and resistance. There are strong themes of disappearance and ‘the void’ in this literature; Rietveld (1993) writes,

Rather than creating a spectacle of resistance or ‘alternative’ patterns of living, the rave offered a release from day to day realities, a temporary escapist disappearance like the weekend or holiday. (Rietveld, 1993, p.58).

Melechi (1993) goes into more detail with this, highlighting that popular music critics saw rave as the death of youth culture with no resistance or empowerment. Ravers ‘implode’ and disappear into the music: “A fantasy of liberation, an escape from identity. A place where



nobody is, but everybody belongs” (p.37). However, Hutson (1999) acknowledges the strong personal experiences potentially acquired in raves, making a clear connection between rave and ritual as a form of spiritual healing by identifying the DJ as the shaman who guides the ravers on their journey, achieving synchronicity by being guided by the same music. In Hutson’s research, many interviewees expressed how EDM events had released their anxieties, opened their minds, empowered them and helped them find inner peace. The similarities between rave and traditional ritual even run through the religious terminology that is used in reference to rave, and how raves have quite often taken place in religious locations. Hutson also acknowledges the anti-individualist, anti-capitalist element to rave, in one way embodied by the lack of focus on the DJ (Hutson, 1999). Dance music has consistently been viewed as subversive in a number of histories. Straw (2001) notes how Britain’s rave culture is often considered a revolutionary subculture. Dancing has consistently been seen as controversial through how it is uniquely intimate and expressive in a way that would be perceived very differently outside of the context of dance music events - “the very model of social disorder” (Straw, 2001, p.158).

Generally, it is clear that EDM events, including raves, offer a way of subverting the dominant social order through their disruptive nature as well as their focus on communitarian values.

### The Commercialisation of Electronic Dance Music

Even though EDM has historically been considered subversive, as this music scene has grown in popularity, it has become more commercialised and increasingly reflects neoliberal, capitalist ideologies because they have started to feed into how these events are run (Fraser,

2012; McRobbie, 2002). Fisher & Gilbert (2013) deem modern festivals, a popular type of EDM event, as being “sanitised and corporate” (p.101). This has been an issue for almost as long as EDM has existed, with Brewster & Broughton (2006) pointing out that even one of the original gay clubs oriented towards house music in the early eighties, the Warehouse, became “increasingly diluted” (p.318) as more straight clientele were entering the space and owners doubled the entry fee in light of the club’s growing success. Relating to Turino’s (2008) argument that participatory performance is antithetical to profit-making, competition and hierarchy, there is an increasing conflict between the powerful collective experience of EDM and the commercialisation and corporate interference that directly contradicts the collectivist values of this experience.

EDM has been increasingly infiltrated by corporate sponsorship and branding as companies have co-opted dance music culture as a way to reach a new audience. Moore (2005) outlines how, as baby boomers grew older, advertisers found the younger generation was a more difficult market to penetrate as they were considerably more sceptical of advertising. Because of this, advertisers began to use associations with music, fashion and celebrities in order to construct an image of authenticity, realising that “youthful expressions of alienation and rebellion can be valuable commodities” (p.231). This led to a commercialisation of subcultures that had been valuable for youth as a symbol of rebellion, and as this developed, young people began to feel alienated “because they no longer own or control the culture they have produced and their expressions of rebellion are now consumed by the ‘mainstream’ audience they define themselves against” (p.233).

On top of wanting to penetrate a new market, brands want to connect emotionally with customers in order to increase loyalty in a climate where competition is constantly increasing. Developing a brand personality, where the brand is associated with human characteristics so that they are perceived as a friend, can be achieved through entering new, ‘cool’ markets such

as the music business (Taylor, 2016). This works as a “trojan horse” (ibid, p.59) where brands can more subtly insert themselves into youth cultures. There are increasing examples of this, for example, stages at festivals across Europe branded as ‘#SmirnoffHouse’, with the alcohol brand even running sponsored editorials in popular music press (Mixmag, 2017). Additionally, energy drink company Red Bull has had a long-term involvement in music via the Red Bull Music Academy. Running for twenty years, the company took aspiring musicians and DJs to various cities across the world for a series of workshops focused on electronic music, marketing itself as a “global music institution committed to fostering creativity in music” (Red Bull Music Academy, 2019).

The penetration of branding into EDM culture is also not a recent development. 1994’s Criminal Justice and Public Order Act caused large, unlicensed dance events to be outlawed and replaced with the clubs that are a more familiar environment for EDM today: “The underground scene was legalised (and largely sanitised), and the money started rolling in” (Brewster & Broughton, 2006, p.533). Because of this mainstreaming of EDM, advertisers saw clubbers as ideal targets, meaning that they increasingly penetrated the clubbing scene through brand deals with some of the UK’s larger clubs. Brewster & Broughton (2006) argue that “never before had a musical culture been so thoroughly infiltrated” (p.544).

This literature review has outlined how political action can take the form of a subversion of the status quo or dominant social order, as per Rancière’s (1999; 2006) theory. Ritual can play an important part in subverting traditional social structures and acting as a method of experimenting with new social organisation. Previous literature has looked at some of the ways in which EDM events can work as a platform for this social experimentation and subversion as well as more traditional types of political participation. However, most academia focuses on

UK rave culture in the 1990s, so it is important to understand how EDM has developed from there to present day. In addition, there is growing infiltration from capitalism and commercialism into musical subcultures that can often de-politicise EDM events through taking value and focus away from the collective experience. This theoretical basis will be used to explore how political action is implemented in Leeds's EDM scene.

## Methodology

The research consisted of semi-structured interviews and participant-observation. I interviewed six people in Leeds who are active participants in the local EDM scene, ranging from local promoters and DJs to people who regularly attend EDM events. I also attended and observed a number of various EDM events in Leeds over a period of around four months.

Qualitative, ethnographic research was most appropriate for this project because the research involves understanding participants' world-views and opinions. I wanted to gain a detailed understanding of their personal experiences of EDM events and their attitudes towards certain subjects. Therefore, this information cannot be easily measured by quantitative data. It also means that as a researcher, I can have a more flexible involvement in data collection, where I can explore new paths in the research where this would otherwise be impossible (Allan, 1991).

To find a sample for the interviews, I used my already-established trust network in the local community, as Garcia (2011) suggests, to find participants in the local EDM scene who would have enough experience to contribute to the research. This included some 'snowball sampling' and was one of the few options to find interviewees when conducting research in 'closed' communities such as small, local music scenes. However, this can lead to only sampling a social network rather than a whole scene, so it was important that I branched out by attending events in Leeds to meet new people to interview (Garcia, 2011). It was also important to interview a varied sample of people from diverse backgrounds who were not just promoters and DJs in order to avoid data that was homogenous and potentially biased.

The interviews were semi-structured, so I prepared a list of questions (Appendix 3) which were the same for each interview, albeit some minor differences depending on the interviewee's occupation in Leeds's music scene. This meant that I had some structure through which I could compare what different interviewees said but could probe further if needed, for

example, where I wanted more details from interviewees, or to explore an idea in more detail (May, 2011). I recorded the interviews with the interviewee's permission and later fully transcribed from the recordings to allow for better analysis and the use of full quotes when exploring the material further (Sherman Heyl, 2001).

In regard to ethical considerations (appendix 4), I ensured that I had informed consent through having participants sign a consent form (appendix 1) and provided each interviewee with an information sheet (appendix 2) that gave detailed information about what the research was for and how their data would be used. I also kept interviewees' data safe and private, and protected their identity through the use of pseudonyms. The interviewees were also informed before giving consent, given how the interviews concern public events, that even with the use of pseudonyms, it may be possible for their identity to be deduced if they are well-known in Leeds's local music scene (Garcia, 2011). Consent was given with this in mind.

The main objective of participant-observation was to understand Leeds's EDM events in more detail through my own experience. Emerson et al (2001) write that it involves "establishing a place in some natural setting on a relatively long-term basis in order to investigate, experience and represent the social life and social processes that occur in that setting" (p.352). Most of the research is guided by the interviews, but the incorporation of observation meant that I was able to validate some of the interviewees' claims and also experience these spaces first-hand. This meant that I was later able to make connections between the interviewees' own experiences and beliefs, what was observed at these events and the principal themes of this study, including political action and collectivism.

I attended a number of different EDM events in Leeds from January 2019 to April 2019. I immersed myself in the event, talked to other attendees as well as the event's organisers, and observed how they were organised and how people behaved and engaged in the event. In ordinary participant-observation, it is expected to take constant field notes and other means of

recording such as photos and videos. However, Garcia (2011) argues that doing nightlife fieldwork is very unique, and traditional ethnographic methods do not fit or apply in this circumstance, partly on ethical grounds, because these methods originated from a different context. First, people often go to EDM events as a “remove” (Garcia, 2011, p.5) from their ordinary lives, even adopting a different persona. Therefore, this must be acknowledged through respecting attendees’ anonymity and confidentiality. Second, it is virtually impossible to receive consent to record in these environments, and it can also be very disruptive, which may jeopardise the authenticity of the event and the research gathered while there. Therefore, it is important to only take photos and videos when it seems appropriate and ensure that these do not include anyone’s face in the frame in order to protect their identity. Garcia (2011) recommends to mostly use field notes as a means of recording. This can also be disruptive in EDM spaces, so to avoid this he also suggests doing “memory work”:

During my time at an EDM event, I focus on “being there”: taking note of and interacting with the music, the people and the environment. Then, when I return home (or immediately after I wake up the next morning), I write down as much as I can recall from the event—including any details that I have retained, such as verbatim quotations, particular music tracks played, clothing, décor and so on. (Garcia, 2011, p.9).

Taking this approach ensures that the research is as genuine and realistic as possible and the unique environment of EDM events isn’t being disturbed by my observation. Generally, Garcia (2011) suggests that it is essential to embody what is appropriate, and the norms and habits of these spaces.

The final factor to be aware of when conducting ethnographic research is acknowledging that researchers can construct reality through how they present their research, which means that readers can only engage in an interpretation. Therefore, it is essential to be aware of how language is used and treat it as a transparent medium. In addition, researchers must be reflexive: “The mature ethnography requires a reflexive awareness of its own writing, the possibilities

and limits of its own language, and a principle of exploration of its own modes of representation” (Atkinson, 1990, p.180). An awareness of all these factors meant that I was conscious of producing an interpretation of Leeds’s local EDM scene that reflected reality as much as possible.



## Findings

The findings and discussion of this research are separated into three sections. The first section outlines the overt politics that can be found in Leeds's EDM scene, based on the interviewees' own identification of political action. This involves particular focus on fundraising, house and techno's origins in gay black clubs in the US, and attitudes prevalent in 1990s British rave culture. The second section looks at how interviewees' powerful, personal experiences at EDM events feed into a feeling of community and collectivism on the dancefloor through ritualistic behaviour. In turn, this constitutes political action in Rancière's (1999; 2006) terms as these collectivist behaviours and attitudes subvert the individualist, neoliberal structure underpinning British society. This has been especially significant for marginalised communities, such as Leeds's LGBTQ+ community, as this collective environment has contributed to the formation of solidarity and empowerment. The third section looks how commercialisation has posed a threat to the potential politicisation of an EDM event. This is due to brands increasingly appropriating EDM culture as a means of co-opting subcultural capital (Moore, 2005) as well as capital-orientation in the organisation of EDM events, taking focus away from collectivism and subversion. Despite this, many of the actors participating in grassroots EDM projects in Leeds are aware of this and use alternative methods to subvert the capitalist framework that is prevalent in popular culture.

## Overt Politics in Electronic Dance Music

The use of EDM events as an arena for political action is evident in how a Leeds-based charity uses EDM events to fundraise. The charity provides alternative education for disadvantaged young people in Leeds who are struggling in traditional educational environments with the objective of reintegrating them into mainstream school. Joe, the communications manager at the charity, emphasised the “de-prioritisation” of arts funding by the UK’s conservative government, emphasising a class divide where the poorest areas in Leeds have little to no arts provisions. This has put onus on the charity to engage disadvantaged youth in creative and practical skill-building.. The charity has gained a high profile in the UK’s wider EDM scene through its monthly fundraising parties, hosting a number of famous DJs in the room next door to its education facilities. Joe regularly sees an effective and direct relationship between music and politics: “What I think is really special about [the fundraising parties] is the tangibility... the fact that directly in the room next door to our club space is our classroom space.” Essentially, connecting the charity’s political cause to an interactive and enjoyable experience like EDM events has, in Joe’s view, encouraged attendees of the fundraising parties to take a more community-minded attitude both at the party and with their wider political participation.

A number of the interviewees saw dance music as holding a strong connection to its history, in turn creating an inherent relationship between EDM and politics. Two moments in EDM’s history were brought up: the origins of house and techno in gay, black, disenfranchised communities in Chicago, Detroit and New York, and British rave culture in the 1990s. Especially for those involved in events catering for the LGBTQ+ community, an emphasis was placed on reconnecting with this music’s roots in order to develop their own local communities and form their own sense of identity.

In regard to this history, house originated from Chicago as a more electronic progression from disco and started to become popular in this locality during the early eighties. One of the iconic venues for this genre was the Warehouse, which was a space for marginalised communities that was generally seen as sitting at the outskirts of popular culture: “At first, the Warehouse was seen by the wider Chicago club world as marginal – it was a club for black gay people (of both sexes) with a black gay DJ – and Frankie [Knuckles’] music was written off as ‘fag music’” (Brewster & Broughton, 2006, p.317). This history, according to Arnie and Hank, two members of Leeds’s LGBTQ+ community, is relevant to how they navigate the organisation of EDM events today. Arnie, as a gay man, felt a need to connect with the LGBTQ+ community in his city after feeling like he had neglected that part of his identity in relation to dance music growing up. He is a DJ and also part of a collective that organises a popular LGBTQ+ party in Leeds that occurs on a monthly basis. The party takes place in a small co-operative venue in the city where the main events space has a capacity of 200 people. Arnie feels a connection to LGBTQ+ culture through the medium of house music and has tried to connect this to the ethos of his event:

That is kind of what house music was about, it was a space for disenfranchised people to hang out that didn’t exist otherwise... And a way to empower people who otherwise wouldn’t be able to be. (Arnie, promoter).

Hank, a non-binary DJ with South East Asian heritage, organises their own events in Leeds as well as helping with Arnie’s party. They felt a need to reclaim this music and emphasise the importance of creating spaces for the LGBTQ+ community, especially because Hank and some of their friends often do not feel as comfortable in mainstream EDM environments. Hank felt that prioritising these communities, with emphasis on QTPOC (Queer, Trans and Intersex People of Colour), was essential because they were such an influential catalyst in the beginnings of EDM. Arnie and Hank’s acute awareness of the

LGBTQ+ identities that they see as ingrained into EDM has meant that they felt a deeper political connection to this music because it is connected to their own identities as well as the wider political challenges that the LGBTQ+ community continues to face. This demonstrates Hesmondhalgh's (2014) argument that music can provide a basis for forming both collective and self-identity. Here, Arnie and Hank drew on the collective identity formation that occurred in the LGBTQ+ community during the birth of house and techno, and they used this to feel more connected to their own sexuality and gender expression.

Interviewees' accounts of the presence of politics in EDM in 1990s rave culture further evidences the connection between EDM and politics. The political aspect of rave was particularly prevalent in light of the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act that placed heavy restrictions on unlicensed music events, which specifically targeted raves (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999). Joe identified rave as a significant political period in EDM's history because of the government pushback against EDM events. He emphasised the rebellion and subversion that was prevalent in this period as something that can be built upon today. Noah, a local Leeds DJ, longed for EDM to return to its roots, when participants in EDM were considerably more engaged with politics and its relationship with the music:

Why isn't there a bit more political discussion in the scene anymore? Like music, electronic music, has become quite like distanced from... when it started, its roots of being against the law. Well, became against the law, sorry, and there were literally riots in the streets to stop that happening, and now I don't feel like anyone would care if... there was like a pushback to it. (Noah, DJ).

Tim, an amateur DJ and regular attendee of EDM events, also inferred that others had denied that EDM had connections to politics while emphasising that, despite this, EDM is inherently political because of its origins.

Dance music is politics... Dance music started through gay clubs... Because it was like, 'We're not welcome anywhere else so we're gonna go here', so to say

that dance music and politics can be in any way separated is completely wrong and really naïve. (Tim, DJ & party-goer).

Overall, there was a strong awareness amongst interviewees that EDM had, during different periods in the last forty years, functioned as a means of political action, either through LGBTQ+ empowerment and solidarity, or the subversive nature of the UK's nineties rave culture. However, some interviewees found it difficult to recognise a similar political action in modern EDM culture. This can be explained by how a number of the parties in Leeds that were identified by interviewees as overtly political cater for specific identities, for example, people of colour, the LGBTQ+ community, or women. The political aims of these parties seemed to be much more obvious to those they were catering for, where those on the outskirts of these identity-based groups didn't register the political meaning as easily.

The way in which some events are considerably more politically significant for marginalised communities was epitomised by attending Arnie's event and talking to someone who had been working on the door. He told me about how a group of men, who he suspected were straight, had come to the door late in the night to try to get in, but the party was sold out and the venue was very busy, so he turned them away. Not much time had gone by before he had found this group of men trying to sneak into the party, at which point he stopped them and berated them for trying to intrude on the space without paying, especially when all the money that is made from ticket sales goes towards booking popular DJs that sometimes come from abroad. He seemed very discouraged by the situation, saying, "I don't think they understand what this means to the people here. I think it means so much more to me than it does to them." This highlights how an individual's identity and their place in society inherently ties into the political value that they can find in an EDM event that is focusing on empowering a specific community.

Generally, it is clear that EDM events can be used to fundraise as well as raising awareness for specific political issues, which is embodied by the charity that Joe works for. In addition to this, for most interviewees, EDM in Leeds embodies politics because of the way in which its subversive history has set a foundation for attitudes towards EDM today, as well as historically working as a platform for solidarity, community and empowerment for those belonging to marginalised communities, which will be explored in more detail in the next section.

### Forming Collectivism on the Dancefloor

At EDM events, strong personal experiences can, in the right moment, initiate a chain reaction that creates a sense of community and collectivism on the dancefloor. Intense and emotional experiences can reinforce music as a basis for collectivism and vice versa (Hesmondhalgh, 2014). These collectivist values are inherently political due to their subversion of the neoliberal individualism that is prominent in British society, where “neo-liberal rhetoric draws on discourses of individualism and self-responsibility to constitute the self as a project of self-realization” (Riley et al, 2010, p.35). The powerful personal experiences of EDM events are often intertwined with trance, which has the potential to feed into a collective trance, relating to Canetti’s (1962) crowd theory. This creates a space for ritualistic social experimentation, where new social structures and communitarian values can be explored in a collective environment (Alexander, 1991). This experimentation is often embodied by a sense of ‘oneness’ or ‘togetherness’ at these events; in effect, constructing a feeling of community that is increasingly difficult to experience in a society inundated with individualism.

All of the interviewees were easily able to recall their most memorable experiences of EDM events, whether they were an attendee, promoter or DJ. The descriptions of these experiences were passionate and detailed, with Tim, an amateur DJ and regular party-goer, even able to remember the exact set times of an event he attended over three years prior. EDM events were also important for some in negotiating their personal lives and identities. Arnie said that EDM helped him ‘find himself’ as a teenager, and Hank said that these experiences were very significant in helping them come out as non-binary:

It was like one of, one of many things that kind of shaped my own process of being able to come out, and [queer parties] gave me a space where I could genuinely be who I wanted to be and explore that side which was fantastic. (Hank, DJ/promoter).

Music can act as a basis for helping an individual “identify identity” (DeNora, 2000, p.69), and it can be “appropriated” (ibid) as a way of constructing self-identity. Here, it is clear that both Hank and Arnie have used music to explore their identities as part of the LGBTQ+ community. They explored collectivism through the experience of being at a queer party that is rooted in solidarity as well as through an understanding of house and techno’s origins in gay clubs.

A number of interviewees referred to escapism - attending EDM events allowed them to be released from the normalities and stresses of everyday life, where they can ‘shut off’, ‘lose themselves’ and ‘let go’. Hank explained how the feeling of letting go at these events through dancing could work in contrast to the strains of everyday routine:

I think especially when you get into kind of like 9-to-5s and when you’ve got, like, routines that you have to do to just pay the bills, you kind of... just like letting go and refreshing yourself [sic], and I think that’s always been the case like historically. When you look at northern soul, like, that was industrial workers literally doing ridiculous hours until Friday and then just dancing until they couldn’t stop on the Saturday. I think it’s just part of it, it is just the fact that you can just wash away a week, and, like, ‘Yeah, I’m over that,’ and start something new. (Hank, promoter and DJ).

On a personal level, trance can be a very powerful meditative experience for attendees. Tim said that he has often intentionally tried to achieve a trance state in order to connect to the music and “get in the zone”. Noah, a local DJ, characterised this as a “meditation” that is easy to connect to at EDM events because of its simplicity and repetition.

This pure feeling of rhythm, because it’s not tied to thought, it’s not tied to language necessarily, it can be just a way of losing yourself. And I think that goes through most disciplines, if somebody likes a discipline, if it’s art or it’s music, usually it’s, I think, to shut off that voice in your head, like we’re forgetting about that for now. It’s just you know, it’s like, it’s kind of this nice focus that it gives, and dancing is a way to kind of get a lot more in line with your body and feel, you know, work yourself out I guess. (Noah, DJ & party-goer).

Arnie similarly described this experience as a type of work or exercise:

Just on a psychological or a mental level, there’s something incredibly powerful about just dancing to repetitive beats to just feel in the moment and be very present where you are now... like... ‘I feel like I’ve exercised something there, I feel like I’ve got something out my system’. So I think on a psychological, mental health, mental wellbeing level, I think it’s incredibly important and I think I definitely get something from it, from that perspective. (Arnie, DJ & promoter).

These rich descriptions demonstrate how the experience of participating in an EDM event can involve a juxtaposition of “focus” and being “present” with shutting off and losing yourself. This demonstrates that there is more engagement here than some academics have described in their analysis of EDM (Rietveld, 1993; Melechi, 1993). The escapism that these academics have outlined can in fact *feed into* a form of meditative engagement, where actors have a heightened awareness of the present, their experience of trance and ritual, and the feeling of community that comes with this. This is highlighted by Hank’s description of what they felt was the perfect environment for an event: “You want a space to be kind of like not too dark



but... enough that you can see each other but dark enough that you can let loose.” This emphasises the careful balance between being free from the ordinary restrictions and stresses of everyday life while still feeling present in a collective experience. The way in which individuals often ‘let go’ at EDM events through engaging in trance has the potential to translate into a collective trance, which helps to build a subversive collectivism in a space. The process of achieving a collective trance holds similarities with Canetti’s (1962) characterisation of crowds, especially his concept of discharge, which is the moment where the crowd rids itself of its individual differences and in pursuit of equality, moving as one body. This is inherently subversive when, outside of these spaces, hierarchies are ubiquitous and emphasis is put on individual difference (ibid). In terms of EDM events, discharge can be achieved in a variety of ways that are centred around collectivism and equality, including the relationship between the DJ and the crowd as well as a feeling of shared values within that crowd.

Most of the interviewees pointed out how they liked to feel connected to the DJ, with both Hank and Tim describing a feeling of being “with the DJ”. This can be embodied on a physical level where the DJ booth is at crowd level rather than on a stage, with a smaller, more “intimate” crowd. This highlights the importance of creating a communal, egalitarian space, breaking down traditional hierarchies in a similar fashion to Canetti’s (1962) crowds. Noah and Tim both expressed a disdain for elitism and the concept of a ‘superstar’ DJ because this created a disconnect between the crowd and the DJ, with Noah stating that “it’s not about the DJ”. Noah also referred to a quote painted above the DJ booth in the bar he works in: “You’re not God, you’re a DJ.” This emphasises the importance for these interviewees that a feeling of equality is prioritised, contrasting against more performative moments of music which are elaborated in Turino’s (2008) more dichotomous approach to participatory versus presentational performance. He argues that there is no artist-audience distinction in

participatory performance, with all focus on “the sonic and kinesic interaction among participants” (p.28).

Another aspect of collectivism in EDM events comes from knowing that other attendees share similar values. Joe said that, because there is a clear community-based and political focus in his charity’s objectives, the fundraising parties maintain an ethos revolving around community that most attendees will be aware of. In Joe’s view, the objectives of the charity and how it operates, based in community values, feed into how attendees approach the fundraising parties:

I really do think that the element of the charitable aspect and the fact that we’re, there’s a deeper purpose for it, you know, it transforms the clubbing experience, and we so rarely have people coming down here being, you know, arseholes, basically. People show a respect that they wouldn’t maybe show at, in other spaces or at other nights. (Joe, charity worker).

These shared values can also be important at EDM events in more subtle ways. For example, Arnie said that he wanted a “good crowd” at his events that was “non-confrontational” with an “absence... of toxic masculinity”. Noah identified that the very action of going to these spaces and relating to other people on the basis of shared values was “in its way a little bit political” and this was a principal reason that he enjoyed going out and dancing: “[Seeing] other people who think the same way as me, that’s kind of political in its aim, isn’t it? Like, to go out and see versions of yourself in the world or whatever.”

These ideas of collectivism, relating to one another and feeling ‘together’ with others, including the DJ, are particularly pertinent for those belonging to marginalised communities. Hank explained their approach to this by pointing out that varying forms of collectivism at events, both within and outside the LGBTQ+ community, can allow marginalised people to feel empowered within their community:

With everything that I've ever done, it's about, 'We will create segregated spaces, but we will also create spaces for everyone.' And in doing that we're creating a segregated space where we can kind of recuperate, reclaim our space, be empowered and love what we're doing and embrace ourselves as people and who we are, but then we have the joint spaces so that when once we're strong enough, our allies can come into the space and see our strength. (Hank, promoter & DJ).

Hank hinted at a significant point that resonates in Rancière's (2006) work focusing on the distribution of the sensible. In the spaces that Hank describes, the distribution of the sensible is being disrupted through the overwhelming presence of people who are never usually in the spotlight, which translates into political action through the act of subversion. Hank further highlighted this concept through how, in terms of physical space, they champion QTIPOC dancing at the front when they DJ because it creates a symbolic form of solidarity and empowerment. Despite this only being symbolic, it clearly has a lasting impact on Hank, and they believe that they are able to effect social change by showing 'outsiders' the collective empowerment of LGBTQ+ and QTIPOC communities.

The most powerful forms of collectivism that I witnessed were in spaces that were carved out for marginalised communities. For example, an event that was launching a zine focused on race, Arnie's party, and events run by a local feminist collective. These events had more diverse crowds than the average EDM event in Leeds, as well as more diverse DJ line-ups, and the feeling of solidarity was palpable, mostly because these events were inherently connected to the empowerment of marginalised communities.

Overall, EDM events are able to facilitate an experience of collectivism and equality in a similar vein to the traditional ritual described by academics such as Victor Turner (1967). This ritual often takes shape through escaping from the mundanities of everyday life and experimenting with non-hierarchical, collectivist crowds in a way that echoes Canetti's (1962) crowd theory. Collectivism is a common theme in many EDM events in Leeds, and inherently subverts wider structures of neoliberal individualism.

## Commercialisation and Responding through Socialist Experimentation

A prominent theme in these interviews was a wariness of the commercialisation of EDM through the infiltration of corporate branding and a capitalist approach to the organisation of events. This has effects as seemingly inconsequential as an overcrowded venue but can extend to the repackaging of genres such as house and techno that is so extreme that it can strip this music of its heritage and meaning, especially to LGBTQ+/QTIPOC communities. Any of these effects can dramatically de-politicise EDM through filtering out the importance of community and collectivism, shifting attention onto business and branding. Hank said that they felt EDM was being appropriated:

[Queer people of colour have] been part of our music for so long, and that music is now becoming appropriated, watered down and fed to kind of like the white [cisgender] male masses.

Hank emphasised the harm that this ‘watering down’ could do to LGBTQ+ and QTIPOC communities in particular, who have essentially relied on this space for a sense of community and empowerment, as mentioned in the previous section.

Joe echoed this scepticism using his experiences of promoting as an example, where a colleague who ran numerous EDM events in Europe asked him to organise an event that was paid for by an e-cigarette company. The event was covered in their branding and Joe expressed discomfort with the event, calling it a “data mining exercise” as the event was free entry if attendees provided their email address. He identified how brands like this “try to latch onto cool or trendy cultural events” but he said that it “strips the event of any real authenticity.” When asked to elaborate on what he meant by authenticity, he explained,

It shifts the focus away from the music and the dancing and the lights and the, you know, the conversations you’re having with people, and it shifts it towards,

you know, a kind of profit-driven capitalist agenda which is about selling a product. (Joe, charity worker)

This demonstrates the way in which brands have attempted to infiltrate this ‘authentic’, ‘alternative’ subculture, but brand involvement in EDM potentially strips the events of their focus on community and collectivist values.

The politics of EDM events is also threatened by an increasing pursuit of money by promoters instead of aiming to give attendees an ‘authentic’, enjoyable experience. Both Tim and Elizabeth, another regular party-goer, mentioned the same event as an example of a bad night because it was too crowded. The night was a dub, dubstep and drum & bass event that is held in a West Indian community centre. This event has held a significance for Leeds’s black communities, with Hank identifying it as being an important space for people of colour. Much of this is rooted in dub’s origins as a highly politicised genre focusing on the “persistent racism and police brutality” (Stirling, 2016, p.137) that black men in particular face in Britain. However, compared with previous versions of this event, it was overcrowded and filled with a young and predominantly white crowd that was incessantly pushing against each other – very few individuals were engaged in the music compared to how the event worked in the past, with more room to move and engagement between older members of the crowd and the younger dancers who may be experiencing this music for the first time.

There is also a tension between the more traditional ideology of ritual at EDM events and pursuit of money, usually made obvious by an overcrowded venue. One of these contradictions, and an important example of how the ritualistic ideology of rave can be appropriated, was in a club that had been converted from a church. I met the promoter at the front of the grand venue at about half past midnight. He gave me a gold wristband that read, ‘FOR WHAT WE ARE ABOUT TO RECEIVE’ and lead me further into the venue and through a sea of people towards the looming stained glass window that stood behind the DJs who were currently playing on a

massive stage. An immense light rig was installed in front of the window, providing an intense, flashing light show for everyone below. It seemed like a pit had been carved out in the centre of the room, which was filled to the brim with heads. The music was loud and intense, and the main area for dancing was filled with people to the point where it was uncomfortable. The experience watching from the stage, which was positioned high above the crowd, felt detached from everything else that was going on below. I was surprised by how little people were dancing, mostly looking blankly towards the stage and swaying with the movement of everyone around them. Later, I went to the bar at the back of the room and could see the DJs as distant figures. A more old-school rave track was mixed in and in almost perfect synchronisation I saw at least 10 people take their phones out to record a video. It was a strange contradiction of a venue that was trying to incorporate elements of ritual through the construction of the space around the architecture of the old church, as well as the religious phrases on the wristbands, but it didn't translate into the feeling in the room. Looking at people as I walked past them, they were detached and just shuffling where they could, with the occasional 'whoop!' as a beat kicked in. There was little engagement with the environment or with each other, therefore little embodiment of the collectivism that I had seen in other venues. There was a clear money-oriented approach to this event that had appropriated tropes of rave culture, such as using religious language and symbolism (Hutson, 1999), without emphasising the collectivism and engagement that many other events in Leeds highly valued.

Demonstrating this focus on community above all, Arnie expressed a wariness of prioritising capitalist objectives with his LGBTQ+ party, sacrificing selling a large amount of tickets at once for a system where an individual can only buy two tickets. This approach has the intention of making the parties more accessible to a wider range of people and curating a community feeling inside.

...So an idea that it should be as cheap as possible for people to access, and that all the profit that comes from the organisation or that we make on the night goes back into the... and I think when you start operating like that you can put on world-class DJs for £5. Unfortunately, it does mean that the rest of us all work full time, there's no opportunity for people to work full time, to have this as a full-time job. So it is a lot of hard work, but I think the rewards that you get from that, are sort of far... it gives me a lot of creative freedom operating like that. Whereas if I was trying to like pay my own wage or pay my own rent, you might make different decisions about what DJs you book and how much you charge. And therefore, who comes through the door and who can afford it and who... you know what I mean? (Arnie, DJ & promoter).

Arnie also described his collective as “fundamentally socialist” as a not-for-profit organisation with a horizontal organising structure. Evidently, Arnie has prioritised collectivism and community over profit by placing value on accessibility for all and equality within the collective. Many of the regular events that interviewees identified as being political or community-based, such as Arnie's LGBTQ+ event, a local feminist collective's parties and the fundraising parties for Joe's charity, follow a similar not-for-profit system, often with a horizontal organisational structure. Generally, working to put on events from within a collective is very popular in Leeds's EDM scene – Hank plays a part in numerous collectives in Leeds and believes that it is much easier to achieve goals working within a community where people can collaborate, encourage each other and build on each other's successes. This demonstrates how, through the way they organise, participants in Leeds's local EDM scene are experimenting with socialist practices, which has the potential to translate into the collectivist values that are experienced at these events. This is another way in which certain aspects of Leeds's local EDM scene subvert the neoliberal practices of wider society, as the proliferation of working within a not-for-profit system with a socialist backbone is actively protesting against the capital-orientation and brand infiltration of more mainstream divisions of EDM and wider culture.

## Conclusions

In Leeds, EDM events have been used as a fundraising platform as well as to draw local attention to specific social and political issues. In the case of Joe's charity, this is emphasised by the deliberate formation of a connection between a community focus in traditional political spheres and a communitarian ethos at EDM events. Participants in Leeds's EDM scene also see a significance in EDM's history as contributing to subversive and rebellious subcultures such as house and techno's emergence in the early eighties, facilitated by black, gay communities. British rave culture has also been very influential in how the community-based values of EDM are translated into today's culture, especially due to its subversion of the strictly conservative politics that developed from eleven years of Thatcherite influence in the UK.

Rancière's (1999; 2006) conceptualisation of the democratic politics being enacted through subversion helps to bring a new perspective to understanding how politics is manifested in EDM, as well as Canetti's (1962) crowd theory and academia surrounding ritual as a form of social experimentation. Using this literature as a basis for the research highlights that EDM events have the potential to be inherently political through their prioritisation of collectivist values that subvert the neoliberal individualism prevalent in wider society. This collectivism is embodied by participants' involvement in an escape to meditative engagement that has previously been misinterpreted as a detachment from their environment. This engagement opens up an opportunity to experiment with new social arrangements, which is often seen in traditional ritual, and embodies Canetti's (1962) conceptualisation of the crowd through the breaking down of hierarchies and an emphasis on equality. All of these features contribute to an understanding of many EDM events in Leeds as collectivist, community-oriented, and inherently subversive – therefore embodying a form of political action. Fisher & Gilbert (2013) argue that “to really make a political challenge to neoliberalism viable, we would need to see some significant cultural upswell of radically democratic, libertarian yet



anti-individualist sentiment” (p.100). In effect, many EDM events in Leeds have embodied this in the way that local collectives function and the values that they prioritise, for example, equality and community.

This is especially significant for marginalised communities, with interviewees who belong to the LGBTQ+ community emphasising the value of unity and cooperation in these spaces as a form of symbolic solidarity and empowerment. The collectivist sentiment of EDM events is even more pertinent in spaces that are emphasising the empowerment of marginalised communities, and the contribution of these events to the personal development of self-identity is extremely significant for some participants.

Smaller promoters in Leeds also subvert neoliberal values of competition and capital-orientation by experimenting with socialist practices that emphasise the importance of community over profit, through improving accessibility and removing corporate and brand influence from the event. This is exemplified by the horizontal organising structures of local EDM collectives and the reinvestment of revenue into future events over the pursuit of profit, which dramatically improves accessibility for these events.

Focusing on one city with a limited range of interviewees and limited time frame means that this research cannot reflect EDM culture as a whole. However, this research highlights the value of EDM events in engaging local communities in a vast array of political and social issues as well as the potential for this phenomenon to be translated into political action on a wider scale. This research can be taken further by extending the study in Leeds with more interviews and observations to get a bigger picture of not only the subversive collectivism of EDM events, but also the effect of commercialisation and capital-orientation on a local music scene. The theoretical structure that I have used, focusing on ideas surrounding politics as subversion, ritual and crowds would be useful in examining other genres of popular music and their relationship to collectivism and politics. It would also be useful to understand the organising

structures of local collectives on a more in-depth level as well as within local venues in order to understand the interplay of capitalism and commercialism within local musical cultures. This research structure could also be applied to other localities in order to understand any similarities and differences between places and what potential reasons for this may be.

Essentially, the somewhat pessimistic outlook from academia on how EDM is depoliticised due to increasing commercialisation (Fraser, 2012; McRobbie, 2002) as well as only acting as a tool for escape (Melechi, 1993; Fraser, 2012; Rietveld, 1993) is not necessarily true. While is commercialisation and neoliberalism are threats and EDM can provide an escape from everyday life, it is essential to understand that on this local level, collectives are prioritising community and ritualistically experimenting with socialist organising structures as a way of subverting the neoliberal individualism that is prevalent in today's society. These events are also provoking a unique type of engagement among participants that places significant value on collectivism, equality and solidarity. There is value in experimenting with collectivism and this, on a smaller, local scale, translates into political action that engages participants with values that subvert and challenge the prevalence of neoliberalism in modern society.

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