

# ‘From Raves to Nightclubs’: Understanding the Evolution of Electronic Dance Music Culture in Stoke-on-Trent and the UK from 1990 to 2000

Matthew Lyons

Submitted to:  
Central European University  
Department of History  
Tokyo University of Foreign Studies

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Supervisor: Francesca Tacchi (UniFi)  
Second reader: Pedro Nunes (NOVA)

Budapest - Hungary  
Tokyo - Japan

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# ABSTRACT

Situated between the fields of public history and musicology, this thesis seeks to understand how, after exploding in the UK during the late 1980s, electronic dance music (or EDM) culture evolved during the 1990s. A small city—Stoke-on-Trent—located in England’s West Midlands region is used as the project’s central case study, though the thesis also considers the connections between the local, national and global scales. Indeed, as a broader, secondary research question, this project aims to understand why EDM has proven so long-lasting and successful. This is no easy question to answer, but it is certainly one worth asking: according to recent IMS Business Reports, EDM is now the third most popular genre of music in the world, with a total value of more than \$11 billion.<sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup> This is somewhat surprising when one considers the social and legal setbacks EDM culture has faced throughout the last three decades. For example, during the 1990s in the UK, EDM culture was widely condemned in public and by the tabloid press, and legislation was passed by the government to outlaw certain types of parties (also known as ‘raves’).

In spite of this, EDM culture not only survived, it thrived, becoming one of the most commercially successful genres in the history of popular music. What can we learn from this period of history that might explain EDM’s resilience? And what can studies of EDM culture tell us about this period of UK history? This thesis uses semi-structured interviews with former ravers, DJs, producers and party organisers to try to answer these questions, as well as an analytical framework adapted from the work of Tammy Anderson: a scholar working in the field of music scene transformation. It is argued that EDM’s ability to fragment and diversify made it able not only to survive several major setbacks and adapt to an ever-changing legal landscape during the 1990s, but also to stay relevant and fresh even today. Furthermore, the powerful combination of electronic dance music and drugs has bolstered EDM’s popularity whilst making the genre consistently controversial.

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<sup>1</sup> International Music Summit (2023) ‘The IMS Business Report 2023’. Available from: <https://www.internationalmusicsummit.com/business-report>.

<sup>2</sup> Grogan, L. (2019) ‘Electronic Music is the World’s Third Most Popular Genre’. *Mixmag*. Available from: <https://mixmag.net/read/electronic-music-third-popular-genre-news/>.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## ☀ 1.1 Purpose of the thesis

Broadly speaking, this thesis deals with the evolution of electronic dance music (or EDM) culture in the UK, which first rose to popularity during the late 1980s. Nightclubs in London and Manchester were amongst EDM's first proponents, but an illegal party scene also sprang up alongside these legitimate venues. The illegal side of the culture ran into significant complications with Margaret Thatcher and John Major's Conservative governments during the early 1990s and was eventually defeated by the 1994 Criminal Justice Act, which massively increased the penalties for organisers of illegal rave parties.<sup>3 4</sup> Despite these setbacks, EDM culture successfully adapted to the stricter laws that had been implemented.<sup>5</sup> The culture then snowballed in the mid- to late 1990s, becoming visible to wider audiences and attracting significant investment from record labels.<sup>6</sup> Tony Blair's New Labour government also took a more lenient approach towards EDM from 1997 onwards, aiming to promote the commercial value of the culture at home and abroad.<sup>7</sup> And besides several small peaks and troughs over the years, EDM has remained extremely popular, not only in the UK but also in Germany, France, the United States, Australia and many other places around the world.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from exploring the historical development of EDM, as many have done already, this thesis aims to consider what we can learn from this particular period of UK history (i.e. 1990-2000) about *why* EDM has proven so popular and long-lasting. According to recent IMS Business Reports, EDM is now the third most popular genre of music in the world, with a total value of more than \$11

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<sup>3</sup> Shukla, A. (2022) "It's Like the Criminal Justice Act Part Two": How New UK Protest Laws Echo the Aftermath of the Seminal Rave at Castlemorton'. *Resident Advisor*. Available from: <https://ra.co/news/77299>.

<sup>4</sup> UK Government Legislation (1994) 'Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994'. Section 63, Point 1) b). Available from: [legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1994/33/section/63](https://legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1994/33/section/63).

<sup>5</sup> Collin, M. (1997) *Altered State: The Story of Ecstasy Culture and Acid House*. London: Serpent's Tail.

<sup>6</sup> Langlois, T. (1992) 'Can You Feel It? DJs and House Music Culture in the UK'. *Popular Music*: Volume 11, Issue 2. 229-238.

<sup>7</sup> Osgerby, B. (n.d.) 'Generation "E": Rave Revolution and Cool Britannia'. *Museum of Youth Culture*. Available from: <https://museumofyouthculture.com/teen-intro-seven/>.

<sup>8</sup> Grogan (2019) [n. 2].

billion.<sup>9</sup> <sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the genre (or genres) shows few signs of slowing down. According to a report published in 2022 as part of the International Music Summit in Ibiza, EDM vinyl sales rose by 51% in 2021, with CD sales also seeing a 9% increase. The report values the EDM market at around \$6 billion: a 71% rise compared to the year before.<sup>11</sup> As one MTV music producer, Rawley Bornstein, commented in 2012, EDM can in many ways be thought of as ‘the new rock and roll’.<sup>12</sup> This is, of course, debatable, and there are many significant differences between rock and EDM. However, some music scholars now think of EDM as being amongst the most globally influential musical movements of all time, in the same class as rock.<sup>13</sup>

The period in question, 1990-2000 in the UK, is an important one in the global history of EDM and was chosen for this thesis for a number of reasons. Firstly, because it was at this time that the culture grew from a musical niche into a mainstream behemoth, expanding outwards from its birthplaces—the US and UK—and across the world.<sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> Secondly, because during the mid-1990s in the UK, EDM faced a complicated set of legal and social challenges that threatened to destroy the culture. It is surely worth studying how a music culture threatened with decline and extinction in the 1990s not only managed to survive, but went on to become one of the most successful global ‘mega-genres’. Useful lessons may be learned about how music cultures can be fostered, and their role in public life—as social movements and vehicles of political change—protected. Thirdly, because during the 1990s the genre went through an astonishing period of creativity, with literally hundreds of musical offshoots emerging from house, techno, trance and so on. Much of EDM culture’s staying power can most likely be credited to its adaptability, and if we are to understand when and how the genre developed these qualities, the 1990s are arguably the best years on which to focus.

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<sup>9</sup> International Music Summit (2023) [n. 1].

<sup>10</sup> Grogan (2019) [n. 2].

<sup>11</sup> Coney, B. (2022) ‘Tech-House Overtakes Techno as Most Popular Electronic Music Genre’. *DJMag*. Available from: <https://djmag.com/news/tech-house-overtakes-techno-most-popular-electronic-music-genre>.

<sup>12</sup> Rose, L. (2012) ‘N.J. Basks in the Glow of the Brave New Rave: Electronic Dance Festivals Go Mainstream’. *N.J.* Available from: ‘[https://www.nj.com/news/2012/05/new\\_jersey\\_basks\\_in\\_the\\_summer.html](https://www.nj.com/news/2012/05/new_jersey_basks_in_the_summer.html)’.

<sup>13</sup> Mazierska, E. (2021) ‘Introduction’. In: *The Evolution of Electronic Dance Music*. New York: Bloomsbury.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Nash Jenkins, P. (2013) ‘Electronic Dance Music’s Love Affair with Ecstasy: A History’. *The Atlantic*. Available from: <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/09/electronic-dance-music-s-love-affair-with-ecstasy-a-history/279815/>.

The primary sources this project draws on are interviews with people who participated in UK EDM culture during the 1990s, and one scene in particular: that of Stoke-on-Trent, a medium-sized city in England's West Midlands region. In the late '80s and '90s, Stoke had a booming EDM scene, at the centre of which was the infamous nightclub Shelley's Laserdome. Stoke was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, it is not London or Manchester. Much of what has been written about UK EDM culture focusses on these two places, ignoring peripheral regions. Stoke, on the other hand, is an academically unexplored context and thus a potentially untapped site of history. Furthermore, the Stoke scene was significant and appears to have represented a typical example of a regional UK EDM scene. By choosing such a place, it is hoped that this research's conclusions will be more generalisable, and therefore more useful to wider conversations surrounding EDM and the role of music within the public sphere. Besides this, an advantage of choosing the Stoke scene as a case study is that it has a number of fan websites and Facebook groups, maintained by the DJs, organisers, and promoters that were a part of it. The existence of these pages meant there was much interesting data ready and waiting to be collected, including many willing interview participants.

The findings from these interviews, eight in total, are then subjected to several stages of data analysis, from which useful conclusions can hopefully be drawn regarding the project's central research questions. This thesis utilises a factor-based analytical model that highlights a number of variables that are arguably under-appreciated in the existing literature. Laws such as the 1994 Criminal Justice Act and criticism from tabloid newspapers were not the only forces driving change in UK rave scenes during the 1990s. In reality, factors such as personal self-destruction (e.g. through excessive drug use) and the fragmentation of larger EDM scenes into smaller ones also had an effect. For the purposes of this research, a balanced analytical model was needed that would take into account all forces of change. This was found in the work of Tammy Anderson, a US scholar studying the social and cultural dynamics of music scene transformation. As her work on rave scenes in the city of Philadelphia makes clear, at least five variables (which are explained in detail below) must be considered. And, as the author herself encourages, this thesis will utilise Anderson's model whilst applying it to a different cultural context—the UK.

Electronic dance music's popularity, diversity and longevity make it highly important within the field of popular music, but studies of EDM also have significant implications for public history, especially when we consider the genre's controversial political status within the public sphere. As Henry John explains, rave culture's first iteration in Britain during the late 1980s stood as 'an

alternative ethos to the Thatcherite philosophy'<sup>16</sup>: a political culture based on individualism, free-market economics and conservative social values. By contrast, collectivism, equality and the rejection of consumerism infused EDM culture from the beginning, marking it as 'a true counterculture to the hegemonic efforts of the New Right'.<sup>17</sup> Equally, the hedonistic nature of EDM culture, and the prevalence of drugs within the scene, defied the Conservative Party's efforts to establish moral control in Britain—an aspect described by Steve Redhead as 'a pleasure for its own sake in times when moral regulation of youth is pervasive'.<sup>18</sup> If, as Nancy Fraser argues, the public sphere can be thought of as a social space where matters of public interest are proposed and contested, and where public opinion is formed, then EDM culture holds significant relevance for studies in this area.<sup>19</sup>

Elsewhere, Gardner and Hamilton argue public history is a democratic process by which the past is turned into history.<sup>20</sup> Kean and Martin similarly describe public history as 'a practice which has the capacity for involving people as well as nations and communities in the creation of their own histories.'<sup>21</sup> Thus, public history is exactly what this project aims to do, by understanding the evolution of a music culture by interviewing the very people who created and carried it. EDM is a community that unites millions of people across the world through a shared passion for music. Not only this, EDM scenes have in the past served as crucibles for political ideas, opposing the dominant order. In these ways, EDM cultures are deeply public phenomena, and studies of the genre arguably belong in the field of public history. Lastly, Winter explains that public history is often used to meet the intellectual needs of societies at large; in other words, its goal is to be *useful* to the public.<sup>22</sup> This project provides useful information about how EDM has thrived in the UK over more than three decades, as well as its historical and cultural importance to the city of Stoke-on-Trent.

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<sup>16</sup> John, H. (2015) 'UK Rave Culture and the Thatcherite Hegemony, 1988–94'. *Cultural History*: Volume 4, Issue 2. 162-186. p. 164.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 164.

<sup>18</sup> Redhead, S. (1993) *Rave Off*. London: Ashgate Publishing Limited. p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Fraser, N. (1990) 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy'. *Social Text*, 25-26: pp. 56-80.

<sup>20</sup> Gardner, J. and Hamilton, P. (2017) 'The Past and Future of Public History: Developments and Challenges'. In: Hamilton, P. and Garner, J. (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>21</sup> Kean, H. and Martin, P. (2013) *The Public History Reader*. London: Routledge. p. xiv.

<sup>22</sup> Winter, J. (1996) 'Public History and Historical Scholarship'. *History Workshop Journal*, 42: pp. 169-172.

## ☀ 1.2 Research problem and questions

This thesis's central research questions were formulated after a close reading of the secondary literature on the topic. Many journalists and some scholars have written about UK EDM culture, so there was no shortage of articles on which this project could draw. Specifically, scholars have focussed on governmental, legal and media responses to UK EDM culture. Andrew Hill, for example, a historian and sociologist and one of the key authors on the topic, examines why EDM provoked a 'moral panic' in Britain. He uses newspapers as primary sources to illustrate the fear and outrage EDM culture sparked amongst members of the British public. Moreover, Hill argues that acid house presented a disruptive presence to Thatcherism by defying some of its most important principles, including the rule of law, social order and decency.<sup>23</sup> Another scholar, Henry John, examines EDM culture's political and philosophical connections to Thatcherism. He states that in many ways, early EDM culture, with its emphasis on collectivism and altruism, stood in contrast to Thatcherism: a political and moral system based predominantly on individualism and entrepreneurialism. However, John argues that to view EDM culture and Thatcherism as polar opposites would be a mistake, because entrepreneurs organised—and sold drugs at—many of the aforementioned illegal raves.<sup>24</sup>

After an initial scan of the literature, it became clear that whilst the general story of EDM is well-known, few scholars have attempted to systematically understand the evolution of local scenes over time. In other words, there are not enough studies that analyse how, and in response to which specific factors, EDM scenes like Stoke-on-Trent's changed. And as we have seen, EDM faced significant challenges in the UK during the 1990s, some of which sociologists such as Hill and John examine in detail. Their works focus on newspaper sources and laws, for example the 1994 Criminal Justice Act, and what these meant: not only for EDM culture as a youth social movement, but for British society at large. What studies such as these do not explain is how EDM culture responded to these challenges, adapted, survived and thrived. What was it about this particular music culture that made it able to withstand and governmental and media onslaught during the early and mid-1990s? How did it adapt to a new legal landscape and go on to be so successful? In response, the following research questions were posed:

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<sup>23</sup> Hill, A. (2002) 'Acid House and Thatcherism: Noise, the Mob, and the English Countryside'. *British Journal of Sociology*: Volume 53, Issue 1. pp. 89-105.

<sup>24</sup> John (2015) [n. 12].

- The project's central research question: how and why did EDM culture in Stoke evolve during the 1990s, and which factors of change were most instrumental?
- A larger, secondary research question: what can we learn from this period that might explain EDM's longevity and popularity?

Anderson points out several shortcomings of the existing literature on music scene transformation, arguing that whilst much research has documented the emergence of EDM culture, few have systematically analysed its evolution over time. 'The result [of this],' she explains, 'is that models or explanations of cultural change that could help us predict and understand the trajectories of other scenes ahead of time are scarce.'<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Anderson observes that many existing explanations of music scene transformation use the same or similar arguments: a new culture emerges and is then taken over by rapacious capitalists who assume control of its organisation and distribution, exploiting it for exchange rather than artistic value.<sup>26</sup> Whilst valid, these arguments, which Keith Negus elaborates on and critiques, are ultimately insufficient to explain the transformation of UK EDM culture over time. As stated earlier, commercialisation and corporatisation were not the only factors causing UK EDM scenes to change. These processes are not wholly negative; in fact, they arguably played a role in EDM's diversification. Whatever the case may be, this thesis will attempt to complicate the historical arguments surrounding music scene transformation whilst adding further detail through an in-depth case study: Stoke-on-Trent.

Anderson's work does not tell the story of EDM's emergence, as many have done already in both the US and UK. Instead, she examines how and why rave scenes in the US—and Philadelphia in particular—have changed over time. Anderson evidences this change with data showing that the number of rave parties in Philadelphia decreased significantly during the 1990s. Through interviews with former ravers, she establishes that the decline of Philadelphia's rave scene was due to five main factors: commercialisation (i.e. commercial takeover), state control (i.e. legislation banning or restricting EDM parties), generational gaps (between older and younger ravers), self-destruction (e.g. through excessive drug use), and fragmentation (of a larger scene into smaller musical

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<sup>25</sup> Anderson, T. (2009) *Rave Culture: The Alteration and Decline of a Philadelphia Music Scene*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. p. 81.

<sup>26</sup> Negus, K. (1995) 'Where the Mystical Meets the Market: Creativity and Commerce in the Production of Popular Music'. *The Sociological Review*: Volume 43, Issue 2. pp. 316-341.

niches).<sup>27</sup> She elaborates on each of these things in turn, weighing each factor's importance and identifying connections between them. Anderson further distinguishes between factors that brought scene *alteration* (e.g. commercialisation, which changed the venues and styles of music being played) and those that brought direct scene *decline* (e.g. self-destruction, which caused the number of active partygoers to decrease over time).

Anderson's analytical model is used to evaluate this project's findings, which are drawn from its interviews. This model allowed the researcher to conveniently sort comments made by interview participants into categories, each of which corresponded to a distinct, yet sometimes overlapping, analytical factor. This allowed the researcher to approximate and compare the importance of each variable in bringing about change in Stoke-on-Trent's EDM scene during the 1990s. In that way, the analytical model chosen directly responded to the thesis' central research question. Moreover, the influence of factor five, fragmentation, is shown to be highly significant in relation to the project's broader secondary research question, which asks why EDM culture has remained so popular throughout the last three decades. This conclusion is significant because it appears to reverse the arguments of several participants, who were adamant in believing that fragmentation negatively impacted UK EDM culture.

### ☀ 1.3 Chapter summaries

Chapter 2 begins with an explanation of what is currently known about the history of EDM culture in the UK, including how it started and rose to popularity. As has already been stated, this project seeks to understand how, after exploding in the late 1980s, UK EDM evolved during the 1990s. Consequently, it is vital that we first understand the culture's historical origins. This first section, 2.1, also functions as something of a literature review, detailing much important secondary literature on the topic. After that, in section 2.2, Anderson's analytical model is explained in full. Information taken from the secondary literature on the topic is combined with, or rather inserted into, Anderson's analytical model, producing a useful framework with which the interview data was subsequently analysed. This process helped to identify the areas of study that are arguably in need of further academic attention—the areas this thesis targets. Ultimately, it was hoped that by addressing arguably under-studied areas of the topic, and by using a broad analytical model that

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<sup>27</sup> Anderson, T. (2009) 'Understanding the Alteration and Decline of a Music Scene: Observations from Rave Culture'. *Sociological Forum*: Volume 24, Issue 2. pp. 307-336.

takes into account a range of variables, this thesis could make a new contribution to the conversation surrounding the history and significance of EDM culture.

Chapter 3 introduces the project's methodology, which is based on three elements: Anderson's analytical model, semi-structured interviews and coding. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most suitable method after the project's central research questions and theoretical basis had been decided, which themselves arose from a close reading of the secondary literature on the topic. It was thought that this methodology would enable the researcher to discuss and analyse many of the factors influencing Stoke's EDM scene, not just governmental legislation, which scholars have examined before. Moreover, other sources, for example newspapers and city council meetings, were unavailable (see Chapter 3: Methodology), making interviews with former participants the most effective way of engaging with the topic. Next, coding—using Anderson's analytical factors as initial codes—was later chosen as the most productive way to extract insights and meaning from the interview data. Finally, whilst the recruitment of participants was not difficult, the project's methodology was ultimately limited by the narrowness of the sample, which consisted of eight former ravers, DJs, producers and party organisers. Other types of participants, for example former police officers and local politicians, could not be contacted for various reasons that are explained in Chapter 3. Still, the interviews that were conducted produced interesting insights that helped answer the project's central research questions.

Chapter 4, Results, discusses what was discovered. The chapter's first section, general insights, contains comments made by participants about Stoke's EDM scene that did not explicitly relate to any of the aforementioned analytical factors but were still relevant overall. This section was also used to paint a broader picture of the scene before delving deeper into the separate analytical factors, which are afterwards discussed in turn. Participants had much to say about factors one, two and five, but for a couple of the others factors, especially three and four, discussions were less fruitful. The reasons for this are discussed in Chapter 4, but in brief, many participants felt they did not know enough to comment on certain issues. For several of Anderson's analytical factors, other primary sources would have been beneficial. More discussion is given to this in the conclusion, which comments on the thesis' limitations. In any case, the project's central research question (concerning UK EDM's evolution during the 1990s) is addressed in section 4.1, whilst the secondary, broader research question (that asks why EDM has proven so successful and long-lasting) is considered to a greater extent in section 4.2—wider implications.

# Chapter 2: The research context

## ☀ 2.1 Historical background

### What is EDM culture?

EDM events, or raves as they are commonly known, are essentially dance parties. They involve hundreds—sometimes thousands—of people dancing for hours to rhythmic music. This is typically some kind of house music, though DJs may choose to blend genres as diverse as techno, disco, and hip-hop, depending on the event. Rave parties are intense and can last all night, or until dancers run out of energy, or until they run out of drugs. The association between raves and recreational drugs is and always has been strong, with ‘party drugs’ such as ecstasy, speed, and cocaine amongst the most common. These substances are said to enhance the party experience and give participants the energy required to dance for four, six, or eight hours straight.<sup>28</sup> Usually, a DJ stands at the front of each room, mixing the tracks to which attendees dance and attempting to produce the desired atmosphere. The status of the DJ varies from party to party. Sometimes this person is a bonafide celebrity in the mould of superstar DJs like Avicii, Calvin Harris, or Carl Cox. At other times the DJ is a relative unknown, with the party focussing more on the style of music being played than the status of the DJ themselves.

EDM parties have ‘proliferated and mutated’ alongside associated genres of electronic music.<sup>29</sup> However, according to some, EDM’s *values* (including peace, love, unity and respect: PLUR) remain largely unchanged.<sup>30</sup> These values were defined for the most part by the American (US) producers who invented house music (the precursor to techno, acid house, and other genres), many of whom were people of colour and LGBTQ+. Deriving from gospel, soul, and funk, as well as Latino salsa, house music is often said to have been invented by queer, racially diverse subcultural groups in Chicago, Detroit, and New York.<sup>31</sup> Tolerance is for this reason at the root of EDM culture,

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<sup>28</sup> Reynolds, S. (1999) *Generation Ecstasy*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>29</sup> St John, G. (2004) ‘Introduction’. In: *Rave Culture and Religion*. London: Routledge. p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Mazierska (2021) [n. 10].

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

and, unlike many other musical subcultures, violence is not common at rave parties. In fact, many ravers pride themselves on their good vibes ability to accept people who are different from them.<sup>32</sup> Ecstasy (or MDMA) certainly helps with this. The drug is known to produce intense feelings of love and euphoria in users who are often seen holding hands or hugging whilst dancing. Besides this, raving is also said to bring positive personal effects ranging from simple escapism to ‘healing’ and emotional transformation. It is not an overstatement to describe the movement as a ‘crucible of contemporary youth spirituality’.<sup>33</sup>

From the beginning to EDM culture’s initial peak in the UK, from approximately 1988 to 1992, many of these events (which were known at the time as ‘acid house parties’, not raves) would be organised illegally or ‘semi-legally’ in farmers fields, derelict buildings and other disused spaces. Similar events were also being held at the same time in legitimate venues, for example city centre nightclubs. This type of event would have more longevity: after the decline of the illegal rave scene during the mid-‘90s, which burned brightly but did not last long, legitimate EDM events in nightclubs carried on. There is some debate as to whether EDM parties in nightclubs and other legitimate venues can be called ‘raves’, with some purists believing that the word ‘rave’ should only be used to describe the illegal parties happening in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s. For these people, the rave era ended when those parties ended around the mid-‘90s. Others, however, might describe any kind of EDM party—legal or illegal—as a rave. In this thesis, for the sake of ease and clarity, the terms ‘EDM party’ and ‘rave’, and ‘EDM culture’ and ‘rave culture’ will be used interchangeably. When referring specifically to an illegal rave, the term ‘illegal rave’ will be used.

## **A brief history of UK EDM culture**

In historical terms, scholars tend to agree that EDM culture emerged in the mid- to late 1980s in the United Kingdom, and whilst it was unique, EDM built on the practices of musical subcultures that went before it. For example, EDM scenes featured ‘all-nighters’ from the beginning: a style of party that had grown in popularity with the Northern Soul movement of the 1960s and ‘70s.<sup>34</sup> Early UK rave DJs like Paul Oakenfold and Danny Rampling also took inspiration from the Ibiza club scene,

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<sup>32</sup> Anderson, T. (2009) [n. 22].

<sup>33</sup> St John (2004) [n. 26] p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> John (2015) [n. 12].

where they had experienced the powerful combination of dance music and ecstasy. After returning to the UK in 1987, Oakenfold, Rampling and others imported house records from the United States, presenting London audiences with an electrifying new style of music.<sup>35</sup> From 1988 onwards, the culture spread from London and across the UK. Warehouse parties—‘all-nighters’ held in abandoned warehouses or derelict buildings—began to spring up everywhere. And much to the shock of the UK public and tabloid newspapers, EDM’s spread was accompanied by reportedly massive increases in recreational drug use and other forms of deviant behaviour. This caused pressure to build on the police and politicians, who were called on to curtail the seemingly out of control culture.

But EDM’s growth could not be contained. ‘If anything,’ John observes, ‘the tabloid hysteria of 1988 merely served to advertise acid house and raving to a far wider audience than had previously been possible.’<sup>36</sup> Indeed, by the middle of 1988, rave’s popularity had reached stratospheric levels, culminating in the much-mythologised ‘Second Summer of Love’. At this time, huge ‘acid house’ club nights and warehouse parties were happening every weekend, with numbers of attendees in the thousands. This provoked a national ‘moral panic’: described by Andrew Hill as a climate of anxiety and hysteria surrounding EDM culture.<sup>37</sup> Raving was condemned by tabloid newspapers such as *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* who thought the culture was a threat to the country’s youth. Meanwhile, partygoers themselves were branded as delinquents and thugs. A special national police unit—the Pay Party Unit—was established in September 1989 to act against illegal rave parties and drug crime.<sup>38</sup> This unit deployed significant resources, as leader Keith Tappenden noted: ‘After three months, [...] we had monitored 4,380 phone calls and made 258 arrests. We were running 200 intelligence officers throughout the country. [...] The cost was colossal to the country and the government; we were spending money like water’.<sup>39</sup>

Clashes between partygoers and police became increasingly frequent from late 1989 onwards, as did mass arrests and drug seizures. The 1990 Entertainment Act dramatically increased the penalties

<sup>35</sup> Langlois (1992) [n. 4].

<sup>36</sup> John (2015) [n. 12] p. 170.

<sup>37</sup> Hill (2002) [n. 20].

<sup>38</sup> Collin (1997) [n. 5].

<sup>39</sup> Hill, A. (2000) *Acid House: Youth and Late Eighties Britain*. PhD Thesis, University of Manchester. John Rylands Library. Published online by ProQuest in 2018. p. 172.

for organising unlicensed rave parties, raising the maximum fine from £2,000 to £20,000 and six months' imprisonment.<sup>40</sup> This move that is thought by some to have given law enforcement agencies the upper hand in the struggle. For example, on the 22nd of July, 1990, 836 people were arrested at an illegal rave party in a significant coup for the (anti-)rave squad.<sup>41</sup> The war against illegal raves was effectively won with the passing of the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, which contained clauses designed to destroy the practice. The Act outlawed gatherings accompanied by 'sounds wholly or predominately characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats'; in other words, house and techno music. The significance of this cannot be understated: it was the first time in British history that criminal legislation targeting a specific style of music had been passed.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the governmental and societal backlash against EDM culture dwarfed those brought against earlier musical scenes and youth groups that were perceived as disruptive or deviant, such as punks and mods.<sup>43</sup>

Many have questioned whether the government's response was 'over the top'. This makes sense, especially considering EDM culture was known for being (mostly) free of violence.<sup>44</sup> But the Thatcher and Major administrations obviously felt that the culture posed a threat to young people and the fabric of British society.<sup>45</sup> Hill advances this hypothesis, arguing that the scene did not fit with Thatcherism's conception of a moral and orderly Britain.<sup>46</sup> Raving consisted of young people taking drugs and engaging in reckless, disruptive, and often illegal activities. In particular, the noise produced by unlicensed rave parties shattered the peace and quiet of the countryside, an important political space for the British Conservative Party. Illegal raves were difficult for police to anticipate and near-impossible for them to control before the passing of the Entertainment and Criminal Justice Acts; their very existence challenged the government's jurisdiction in Britain. In one sense, the marginal spaces ravers used as party venues (e.g. derelict warehouses, aircraft hangars, disused

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<sup>40</sup> UK Government Legislation (1990) 'Entertainments (Increased Penalties) Act 1990'. Section 1, Point 1) 3) a). Available from: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/20/enacted#:~:text=1990%20CHAPTER%2020,entertainments%20of%20a%20like%20kind>.

<sup>41</sup> Hill (2002) [n. 20].

<sup>42</sup> John (2015) [n. 12].

<sup>43</sup> Hebdige, D. (1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge.

<sup>44</sup> Reynolds (1999) [n. 25].

<sup>45</sup> Hill, A. (2003) 'Acid House and Thatcherism: Contesting Spaces in Late 1980s Britain'. *Space and Polity*: Volume 7, Issue 3. pp. 219-232.

<sup>46</sup> Hill (2002) [n. 20].

train stations), which were often unprotected and unsurveilled, could be seen as ‘blind spots’ or chinks in the government’s armour. Controlling ravers and eliminating illegal parties was crucial for a government that ‘desperately needed to re-establish the aura of control that had prevailed throughout the 1980s.’<sup>47</sup>

But it was not all about political control: during the early ‘90s, the rave scene became a breeding ground for criminal gangs seeking to take advantage of the new ecstasy craze. The drug was typically sold for around £10 per pill, and so was not the most lucrative product for dealers, falling well short of the high prices they could make selling cocaine. However, ecstasy could be cut with other, cheaper drugs like amphetamine, or diluents such as paracetamol or powdered sugar, to improve dealers’ profit margins. Sometimes ecstasy tablets were also mixed with dangerous adulterants like MDA (the unstable chemical parent of MDMA, the active component in ecstasy), dramatically increasing the risk of overdose for users.<sup>48</sup> It goes without saying that ‘80s and ‘90s ravers were not known for their strong sense of moderation: many dancers took two to ten (or more) pills in one night, depending on the pills’ strength and the duration of the party.<sup>49</sup> Excessive drug consumption, when combined with heat-stroke and dehydration resulting from hours of dancing in a hot, enclosed club environment, created health risks for ravers. Unsurprisingly, drug-related deaths occurred inside EDM scenes across Britain, though it is difficult to say exactly how many (more than a handful, but probably not a huge number).

## **1994: a turning point**

During the early and mid- ‘90s, illegal raves became too large and unruly and were frequently shut down by the police who, newly empowered by the 1990 Entertainment and 1994 Criminal Justice Acts, eventually wrestled control of the situation. It was then that illegal raves (mostly) died out and EDM events at nightclubs began to skyrocket. This was due to two main reasons. Firstly, with the government and police breathing down their necks, rave organisers realised they could not continue planning parties in the way they had been. Secondly, nightclub owners saw the popularity of raves as a way to make money, and were granted licenses by the government to schedule all-night

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<sup>47</sup> John (2015) [n. 12] p. 179.

<sup>48</sup> Reynolds, S. (1998) *Energy Flash*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>49</sup> Reynolds (1999) [n. 25].

events.<sup>50</sup> It was effectively a ‘carrot and stick’ approach by the UK government that worked exactly how they wanted it to. EDM culture was pushed into legitimate city-centre venues where it could be observed, limited, and controlled. At the same time, organising unlicensed parties as part of the free rave scene had become far too risky, with organisers facing massive legal and financial penalties if caught by the police.

The 1994 Criminal Justice Act sounded a death knell for the ‘free’ (i.e. illegal) rave scene, but the culture at large lived on, evolving and adapting continuously. Regular nightclub EDM parties became the norm, with many DJs taking up semi-permanent ‘residency’ positions at nightclubs of their choosing. This venture—as much about business as it was about music—proved lucrative for all those involved.<sup>51</sup> Some argue that it was at this time that the commercialisation of rave began in force, and with commercialisation a loss of ‘authenticity’ is often thought to follow. This is a story that has been told before: that of an edgy, grassroots music scene giving way to formal social control and eventual commercial takeover. But, as Keith Negus suggests, this narrative may be too simplistic, and creativity and commercialisation are not necessarily always in conflict.<sup>52</sup> The identities of music scenes are constantly in flux, and commercialisation, whilst bringing change, does not always result in decline or a loss of creativity. Some ravers may have felt that a big part of the scene ‘died’ after 1994, but for many others rave must have lived on, just in a different form. The illegal rave era had come and gone, and with it the fashions and behaviours that made it famous today.

Although precise figures do not exist, it is entirely possible that the numbers of people attending rave events in the UK *increased* during the mid- to late ‘90s, owing to rave’s new partnership with city-centre ‘superclubs’.<sup>53</sup> These clubs, for example the Ministry of Sound in London, were given formal licenses by the government to hold huge all-night parties, which many of them did three or more times per week. Super-clubs became mini-corporations in and of themselves, with their own merchandising and branding. A small circuit of mainstream ‘superstar DJs’ (Fatboy Slim, Pete Tong, Carl Cox, etc) toured the country earning enormous fees. Around the same time, or indeed

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<sup>50</sup> Hill (2000) [n. 35].

<sup>51</sup> Reynolds, S. (n.d.) ‘Post-Rave Rave Culture’. Museum of Youth Culture. Available from: <https://museumofyouthculture.com/90s-rave/>.

<sup>52</sup> Negus, K. (1995) [n. 26].

<sup>53</sup> Reynolds (n.d.) [n. 47].

before, dance music had begun to fragment into a plethora of sub-genres and micro-genres catering to specific musical niches and local taste patterns. Breakbeat fans went to breakbeat events, hardcore fans to hardcore events, and house fans to house events. This represented a significant change: in the free rave scene of the late '80s and early '90s, DJs had blended all styles and flavours of music within a single room. However, from the early to mid-'90s onwards, genre intermixing decreased and an increasingly 'tribal' feel prevailed, possibly undermining rave's original ethos of togetherness and unity.<sup>54</sup>

Simon Reynolds, in his 1998 and 1999 books *Energy Flash* and *Generation Ecstasy*, describes how in '95 or '96, every city centre had its own EDM club (or several).<sup>55 56</sup> Drugs were of course still popular, but rather than ecstasy, things like cocaine and amphetamine started to become more common. This had the effect of changing the vibe within nightclub crowds. Whilst during the illegal rave era a quasi-religious vibe characterised by togetherness and love—yet asexuality—had prevailed (due to the fact that nearly everyone was on the same drug: ecstasy), in the mid- to late '90s clubbers became more inward-looking, preferring to stay in their own separate groups. Alcohol drinkers also began to enter the scene, bringing with them a feeling of increased sexuality on nightclub dance floors. The prevailing fashions of the era of illegal rave (extremely baggy clothing, neon, glow sticks, and the like) also began to die out, with mid- to late '90s clubbers opting for a smarter, more chic aesthetic. People were wearing dresses, shirts, and smart jackets instead of tracksuits and vests. These changes gave the late '90s British EDM club scene a smoother, shinier, more adult feel—a huge change from the chaos and ecstasy-induced frenzy of illegal raves.<sup>57 58</sup>

From 1997 onwards, the New Labour government, under Prime Minister Tony Blair, took a different approach towards EDM culture—indeed, to culture in general—compared to the previous Conservative administrations.<sup>59</sup> Margaret Thatcher and John Major had promoted versions of British culture which, Luckhurst explains, often 'modulated into heritage: the deep English

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Reynolds (1998) [n. 44].

<sup>56</sup> Reynolds (1999) [n. 25].

<sup>57</sup> Reynolds (1998) [n. 44].

<sup>58</sup> Reynolds (1999) [n. 25].

<sup>59</sup> Luckhurst, R. (2003) 'Cultural Governance, New Labour, and the British SF Boom'. *Science Fiction Studies*, Volume 30, Issue Number 3. pp. 417-435.

traditions of cream teas and castles, country houses and costume dramas'.<sup>60</sup> By contrast, the new Blair administration adopted a policy known as 'Cool Britannia', which aimed to promote British youth culture, creativity, and innovation. This included music, fashion, and art.<sup>61</sup> As part of this campaign, EDM artists and events received more support, contributing to their visibility and acceptance.<sup>62</sup> Specifically, the New Labour government placed a significant emphasis on the cultural and creative industries as drivers of economic growth. This approach involved policies to financially support artistic and creative endeavours, including music production. Funding and initiatives were introduced to nurture talent and enhance the infrastructures supporting creative industries.<sup>63</sup> This allowed EDM festivals such as Creamfields to flourish during the late 1990s.<sup>64</sup>

## ☀ 2.2 Anderson's analytical model

This information, taken from the literature on the topic in question, will now be combined with, or rather inserted into, Anderson's analytical model. To recap, the five factors Anderson identifies in her research as driving change in a Philadelphia rave scene are: commercialisation, state control, generational gaps, self-destruction and fragmentation. As has already been said, this thesis adapts Anderson's analytical model, using it as a framework to research a different place: Stoke-on-Trent. Each of the following sub-sections sections is designed to zoom in on a single factor, which are given separate sub-headings but will be discussed in an interconnected way. Regarding the UK context and Stoke more specifically, what is already known about each factor will be detailed; what is *not* known will be highlighted. Anything that is *not* known—and is worth researching—can be considered as a 'gap' in the existing literature. This process helped to identify the areas of the topic that are well understood, in addition to, and perhaps more importantly, those that are poorly understood and therefore in need of further investigation by the researcher. Poorly understood areas were later addressed using targeted interview questions.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p. 417.

<sup>61</sup> Hesmondhalgh, D. et al. (2015) *Culture, Economy and Politics: The Case of New Labour*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

<sup>62</sup> Osgerby (n.d.) [n. 7].

<sup>63</sup> Hesmondhalgh (2015) [n. 60].

<sup>64</sup> Mullins, E. (2021) 'A Brief History of Creamfields'. *We Rave You*. Available from: <https://weraveyou.com/2021/08/creamfields-brief-history/>

Moreover, Anderson gives attention to public perceptions of EDM culture in bits, spread across several of her five distinct factors. Public perceptions of EDM culture (i.e. how the media and general public felt towards it) are variously referred to as ‘cultural otherness’, ‘deviance’, ‘fear’, and ‘moral panic’, and are conceptualised by Anderson as feeding into her other factors via a number of different pathways. However, it could be argued that in the UK context, and for the purposes of this research, public perceptions deserve to be given more importance and treated as a separate analytical factor. This is because during the late ‘80s and 1990s, significant tensions existed in the UK between those involved in the rave scene and those outside of it. Tensions were undoubtedly fuelled by sensationalist national media coverage (and *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* in particular) which, as mentioned earlier, sought to spark fear and outrage towards UK EDM culture. As Hill and John note, the resulting moral panic significantly influenced rave’s trajectory, boosting the culture’s popularity by creating an edgy, rebellious image, whilst at the same time inspiring a police crackdown. For these reasons, public perceptions will be treated in this thesis as a sixth distinct analytical factor.

## **Factor 1: Commercialisation**

Anderson begins her discussion of the commercialisation of EDM culture in Philadelphia by restating the ‘unilateral story of how grass-roots production gives way to commercial takeover’.<sup>65</sup> Here, the words ‘commercial’ and ‘commercialisation’ refer to the processes by which financially- or business-minded people enter a music scene and take control of event organisation, ticketing, and so on, usually with a view to making profit. This process is often said to create a situation in which the creatives (i.e. artists) are no longer in full control of their movement. A commercialised music scene is essentially one that has been monetised and brought into the mainstream, and for this reason can no longer be considered ‘underground’.<sup>66</sup> But it is unclear at what point a music scene can be said to have become ‘commercialised’, because any music scene surely involves some degree of commercialisation. How can any music scene exist without the organisation of events, the sale of tickets, or the payment of artists? It would appear that commercialisation means very different things to different people, and may for this reason be difficult to treat objectively.

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<sup>65</sup> Anderson (2009) [n. 24] p. 309.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Amongst some creatives, ‘commercialisation’ is a dirty word that is often used disparagingly in conversations about ‘parasitic’ businesspeople. It is also sometimes used by individuals who are perhaps best described as ‘culture snobs’: those who eschew anything they perceive to be ‘mainstream’ and are only interested in knowing what is rare and exclusive. Thornton develops this point in a study of British dance music culture in the late 1980s and early 1990s, showing how the social world of rave was structured around divisions between the ‘mainstream’ and the ‘underground’. The idea of the ‘mainstream’, in particular, ‘is a potent device deployed by discerning clubbers to distance themselves from consumers branded as fake. [...] A clubber’s “hipness” is defined, instead, by a specialist insider knowledge of labels and genres, wearing the right clothes and attending clubs perceived and constructed as authentic.’<sup>67</sup> For some, UK rave began to become commercialised in 1994, when the illegal party scene was thwarted and nights at city centre ‘superclubs’ started to be the norm. For others, the scene had already become too commercialised and mainstream by 1988 or 1989, when the Second Summer of Love was in full swing.

It may, however, be the case that commercialisation is a natural part of any successful music scene’s development, and that whilst it may bring some negative changes, commercial entities can also create bigger and better events. Indeed, Anderson argues that whilst bringing ‘corporate’ principles into the organisation of raves may seem strange on paper, in fact, entrepreneurialism ‘became a driving force behind the [UK rave] movement from 1990 onwards.’<sup>68</sup> For example, in the UK’s South East, huge outdoor parties attracting thousands of ravers were organised by bonafide rave companies around the M25 ‘Orbital’ ring road. Huge amounts of capital were invested here, and according to journalist Andreas Whittam Smith, ‘figures of £200,000 to £300,000 in profit for one well-organised party’ were not unheard of.<sup>69</sup> At the time, this kind of event would have been illegal if open to the public, but Colston-Hayter cleverly described them as private ‘members only’ events, which meant that the government could do nothing about it.<sup>70</sup> These rave party promoters were entrepreneurs through and through, suggesting the spirit of commercialism may have been present within the scene from near the beginning.

<sup>67</sup> Prior, N. (2013) ‘Bourdieu and the Sociology of Music Consumption: A Critical Assessment of Recent Developments’. *Sociology Compass*, Volume 7, Issue 3. p. 186.

<sup>68</sup> John (2015) [n. 12] p. 170.

<sup>69</sup> Whittam-Smith, A. Quoted in: John (2015) [n. 12] p. 171.

<sup>70</sup> House, A. (2017) ‘Acid reign’. *The Spectator*. Available from: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/acid-reign-10-august-2017/>.

Certainly, a more business-minded approach was necessary in the mid- to late '90s EDM scene, which saw a massive proliferation in the numbers of nightclubs and events catering for different types of electronic music fans. This happened in practically every UK city, with superclubs like Cream in Liverpool, Gatecrasher in Sheffield, and the Ministry of Sound in London achieving huge commercial success. EDM culture had of course been popular for years amongst younger people and those 'in the know', but it was at this time that EDM reached a truly mainstream audience. Regular weekly club nights became the norm, with people from all walks of life in attendance. With EDM clubs now on everyone's doorstep, the scene had become much more accessible and open to the masses. EDM sounds had also started to enter the charts, with pop artists like Kylie Minogue and Madonna amongst many others incorporating elements of house music in their productions. In this sense, commercialisation brought massively increased exposure. But did this benefit the culture as a whole? And how did smaller scenes like that of Stoke-on-Trent survive?

## **Factor 2: State control**

This factor has to do with national policymaking and law enforcement, which can combine to limit or ban parties and the activities of ravers—resulting in scene alteration and possibly decline. As has already been said several times, the 1990 Entertainment and 1994 Criminal Justice Acts were perhaps the two most important pieces of legislation passed by the UK government to stamp out unlicensed rave parties.<sup>71 72</sup> Other national policies, such as the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act, helped condition responses to EDM culture at the national scale.<sup>73</sup> At the local scale, however, a much finer level of detail is perceptible. It was the task of regional law enforcement agencies (relevant to this project are the Stoke-on-Trent Police divisions of the larger Staffordshire Police Authority) to carry out national policies within their local authorities. One example of this was 'Operation Patriot', a police operation launched in Stoke in September 1991, targeting several key rave clubs in the Longton area including the infamous (or legendary, depending on one's position) Shelley's Laserdome. Operation Patriot was said to be 'one of the most ambitious high-profile operations

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<sup>71</sup> UK Government Legislation (1990) [n. 36].

<sup>72</sup> UK Government Legislation (1994) [n. 4].

<sup>73</sup> UK Government Legislation (1971) 'Misuse of Drugs Act 1971'. Available from: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1971/38/contents>.

against the drug ecstasy' in the country at the time, involving weekly or sometimes nightly search parties and nightclub raids.

Operation Patriot is discussed at some length in a 1993 BBC 2 documentary.<sup>74</sup> The first half of the documentary focusses on the struggles of Staffordshire Police in putting a stop to drug crime in Stoke, whilst the second half emphasises the dangers of ecstasy for users and the need for more medical research into the drug's long-term effects. During the first part, the narrator states that Staffordshire police 'want Shelley's closed down. They say that drugs have been sold both inside and outside the club, and on the basis of these allegations, have persuaded Stoke-on-Trent's councillors and magistrates to withdraw the club's entertainment and liquor licenses. [...] [However,] the police are yet to prove their allegations in a court of law.'<sup>75</sup> John Matthews, then the owner of Shelley's Laserdome, retorts that police 'want Shelley's shut down to justify the high cost and poor results of Operation Patriot.'<sup>76</sup> Staffordshire Police were eventually successful in their efforts to close the club, which, after seeing its license revoked, had its final night on the 12th of September, 1992. The factor of state control seems relatively well understood overall, perhaps because of the large amount of media coverage the issue of drug crime received at the time. Still, more clarification and detail is needed at the local level.

### Factor 3: Generational gaps

Sufficient research has not yet been conducted in the UK to fully shed light on this factor. However, Anderson herself does touch on the concept of generational gaps in another work: a 2009 book that expands her shorter article (which came earlier that year). In her book, Anderson conducts a short, quasi-ethnographic study in London and compares it to the city she initially studied: Philadelphia. Interestingly, and of significant relevance to this research, she discovered that whilst raves transformed in both Philadelphia and London during the last decade of the twentieth century, 'change [was] accompanied by scene *decline* in Philadelphia and scene *expansion* in London' [emphasis added].<sup>77</sup> One of the main reasons for this has to do with the idea of

<sup>74</sup> BBC 2 (1993) 'BBC 2 Ecstasy & Shelley's Laserdome Rave Documentary 1993'. *YouTube*. No title. Available from: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=59BYGvxuy7M&t=774s&ab\\_channel=1972oldskool](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59BYGvxuy7M&t=774s&ab_channel=1972oldskool).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Anderson (2009) [n. 22] p. 152.

generational gaps. In her original study of Philadelphia, Anderson found that as people grew older, they seemed to age out of electronic dance music (EDM) clubbing—mostly because they had run out of energy or enthusiasm, had kids, secured a full-time job, or simply could not tolerate the rave lifestyle any longer. Meanwhile, she found that in London, people tended to age out of one sub-scene (e.g. trance, techno, and other ‘hardcore’ styles) and into another (e.g. house, which is often mixed with ‘lighter’ genres such as disco and soul).

Though this is difficult to quantify, Anderson suggests that during the late 1990s and early 2000s, nightclub rave parties in London existed on a sort of spectrum. At one end were the most ‘hardcore’ events: those with deeper, darker styles of music; typically younger ravers, many of whom were there just to ‘get fucked up’; and more extreme behaviours on display (e.g. people consuming large quantities or cocktails of drugs, engaging in risky sexual behaviour, and so on and so forth). At the other end were the more sophisticated rave events: those with lighter, more melodic styles of EDM and typically older ravers, many of whom were there to enjoy the music, appreciate a particular DJ, dance, and generally have a more ‘chill’ experience. In this way, the fragmentation of London’s EDM scene into age- and genre-specific sub-scenes may have allowed older ravers—living more conventional or adult lives—to stay involved and party with others like them. These people had grown ‘from financially strapped and rebellious ravers into better-off club connoisseurs’ and did not necessarily want to associate themselves with younger ravers, the activities of whom they found crazy, childish, or shocking.<sup>78</sup>

Overall, then, the opening up of generational gaps between older and younger ravers caused scene alteration in London. It is not known how this factor affected other UK rave scenes because studies have not been conducted into this matter. In London, where a large and diversified EDM scene has existed certainly since the early 1990s, ravers could easily attend different styles of parties, possibly ‘graduating’ from one type to another as they got older or refined their music tastes. In smaller, regional scenes, with fewer people and venues and therefore less variety, it could be the case that once a person had lost interest in one style of raving (for whatever reason), there was nothing else for them to move on to. What is clear is that the idea of generational gaps is closely related to the factors three and four: self-destruction and fragmentation. It could be argued that factors three, four, and five feed into one another. Indeed, they are in many ways products *of* each other, for

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p. 153.

generational gaps and differences in behaviour drove fragmentation in Anderson's study, whilst fragmentation created separate spaces for generations and groups that were pursuing different things and behaving in different ways.

#### **Factor 4: Self-destruction**

Factor 4 has to do with the behaviour of ravers (i.e. their lifestyle, habits, and raving activities) and the way EDM culture was perceived in society. Anderson argues that some United States rave scenes became too deviant for their own good, resulting in their decline. For example, Philadelphia ravers eventually ran into personal consequences from their drug-fuelled debauchery, leading many to leave the scene and criticise it in the same way as much of the general public. The first thing Anderson points to is a 'rejection of style or aesthetic', meaning that over time, people began to find the overall vibe of rave parties—from the clothes people wore to raves' asexual vibe—unattractive. Anderson's second point, which is related to her first, is this: excessive drug use at raves turned people off the scene and brought negative personal consequences for individuals. For many Philadelphia ravers, experiences with drug use that were initially pleasurable became more and more destructive, causing people to suffer mental and physical illness, relationship difficulties, and so on and so forth. Long-term drug addiction was also something Anderson encountered amongst her interview participants, some of whom she lost contact with during the research process.

Similar consequences in the UK context are evidenced by the aforementioned BBC documentary and newspapers, though these sources may be prone to exaggeration. Precise figures do not exist as to how many or what proportion of ravers suffered negative personal consequences. Shocking anecdotes do, however, exist that tell the stories of young people losing their lives due to excessive or reckless drug use. Many of these were published by news outlets as cautionary tales for young people thinking about entering the rave scene. On the other hand, it can be safely assumed that at least as many—and likely several times more—stories exist of young people having fun whilst taking drugs; if there weren't, the rave scene would probably not be remembered as fondly as it is. Still, it makes sense that as young ravers' lives progressed, many of them would not be able to 'keep up the pace'. Raving is a nocturnal culture that requires daytime rest and recuperation. Partying on drugs all-night is mentally and physically exhausting and would be very difficult to do alongside full-time work, childcare, and a generally 'grown-up' lifestyle. This caused many older ravers to drop out of the scene when they felt their time was up, resulting in scene decline.

More academic attention is needed here if we are to understand how London ravers were apparently able to age out of one scene and into another, instead of leaving the rave scene altogether (as many US ravers were forced to do). Was self-destruction (e.g. due to drug abuse) simply less of a factor in the UK, or were UK ravers somehow better able to balance the rave lifestyle with work and other mainstream activities as they aged? One possible factor explaining the difference between UK and US contexts is these countries' attitudes to drugs. In the US, the 'war on drugs'—a strict, decades-long policy against all forms of drug activity—is infamous for its punitive attitude towards drug use and addiction. On the other hand, a slightly more progressive stance is observable in the UK, with drugs being treated more as more of a health issue than in the US. Still, it is unlikely that this alone explains the apparent differences in Factor 4's impact on the US and UK contexts. This research will therefore aim to investigate the issues of self-destruction further during the interview process.

### **Factor 5: Fragmentation**

This factor concerns the fragmentation and differentiation of UK EDM culture over time into smaller musical niches catering to specific tastes and age-groups. From the existing literature on cultural studies, it stands to reason that the larger and more successful a music culture gets, the more likely it is to fragment into smaller groups to hold participants' interest. For example, during the 1990s, EDM culture splintered into many different styles and sub-genres, including house, techno, and drum and bass. These sub-genres even have even developed sub-categories within themselves. House, for instance, can be subdivided into the separate but largely overlapping styles of acid house, deep house, tech house, and so on. National or city styles are also perceptible, with French house, Italian house, Chicago house, and New York house all occupying separate musical spaces. Of course, to any outside observer, these distinctions would seem small or insignificant. But to those involved in electronic dance music scenes, sub-genres are meaningful and have concrete links to certain venues, DJs, and people. Kembrew McLeod illustrates this incredible diversity: 'a careful scan of electronic/dance-oriented magazines and electronic dance compilation CDs published or released in 1998 and 1999 yielded a list of more than 300 [genre] names.'<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Mazierska (2021) [n. 10] p. 3.

As seen in the discussion of Factor 3, Generational Gaps, genres and sub-genres often correspond to social boundaries between groups defined by differences in age, social class, or other activities and preferences. As music cultures evolve over time, these groups demand specialisation and the creation of a vibe that fits their tastes more specifically. As one of Anderson's interviewees explained, 'drum and bass is kind of on their own and they don't listen to anything else. And then there are the house heads, but there's all sorts of different kinds of house, but for the most part, if someone's into funky house, they're not going to listen to deep house. And then we have our little breaks scene. It's all by genre, it really is.'<sup>80</sup> Similar sentiments were echoed by participants in all her studies, including those in the UK, indicating a potential similarity between the UK and US contexts as regards genre fragmentation and its impact on EDM scenes. Interestingly, Anderson also found that genre fragmentation created a certain tribalism amongst EDM fans, which often took the form of disdain for others' tastes. In some cases, she elaborates, sub-scene participants believed their tastes in electronic music were superior, criticising those with tastes different to them.

It is likely that in a smaller city such as Stoke-on-Trent, fragmentation was not as big of a factor as it may have been in London, for example, where EDM scenes had the space, resources, and audiences to further diversify. The number of available venues in Stoke may simply have been too low to allow for a high degree of fragmentation or sub-scene specialisation. With that being said, the Stoke scene was extremely popular at its height, with ravers travelling from all over the country to attend parties at Shelley's. It is possible that some differentiation occurred through the organisation of different styles of parties at the same venue. Stoke ravers may also have travelled to other parts of the country to attend parties the style of which were not common in Stoke; for example, they may have journeyed to Sheffield to attend the 'bleep techno' parties that were popular there. Whatever the case may be, more information as to this factor will be obtained during the interviews. It is hoped that a good picture of Stoke's 'party landscape' can be gathered, including which styles of music were popular, where they were being played, and by whom the events were attended.

## **Factor 6: Public perceptions**

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<sup>80</sup> Anderson (2009) [n. 22] p. 106.

This factor was not a part of Anderson's original analytical model but will be included here because of the strong influence of tabloid newspapers on UK EDM culture. From near the beginning, the UK tabloid press seemed determined to demonise EDM culture and make ordinary people scared of it. Certainly, there were many negative aspects of EDM culture to criticise: drugs, reckless behaviour, illegal parties in disused buildings and fields, and so on and so forth. But even in light of these things, the media response seems somewhat disproportionate to the actual threat posed to the country by EDM culture. Hill focusses on this in a 2002 article, demonstrating how certain reporting styles contributed to, and perhaps even inspired, the moral panic surrounding raves. For example, *The Daily Mail's* front-page story on the 2nd of October, 1989 was headlined 'Acid guards rout police'. The following is an excerpt from the article taken by Hill:

The drugs crisis took a menacing twist yesterday when guards at an acid House party routed the police. A private army of security men attacked with baseball bats, CS gas and vicious dogs. They left 16 officers injured. A superintendent fearing for the lives of his men, ordered a retreat and had to release two prisoners. At one stage there were fears about an officer being taken hostage and the field where the event was held became a no-go area, leaving more than 10,000 revellers free to shatter the peace of a suburban weekend.<sup>81</sup>

Newspapers are often said to be arbiters of public opinion, and with headlines like this appearing with extreme regularity (according to scholars like Hill), it is easy to see how they could have created panic amongst members of the public. The choice of words has been specifically designed to create fear and sensationalise the events in question. Furthermore, *The Daily Mail's* readership has been extremely large for the last five decades, and since 2000 it has been the second most popular UK newspaper after *The Sun*, making it extremely influential in terms of public opinion. *The Daily Mail's* readership is also relatively old, with the average reader being 56 years old. People of this age, with little to no contact with or knowledge of EDM culture, hearing about the drug-fuelled craziness of rave parties, were only likely to hate and fear it.<sup>82</sup> And with so much of the general public in the UK up in arms about a seemingly out of control culture, the government and the police had no choice but to react and try to contain it, resulting in the state control measures discussed earlier. Newspaper sources, in addition to the semi-structured interviews this project is

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<sup>81</sup> Hill, A. (2002) [n. 20] p. 97.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

based around, would have been very useful in analysing public perceptions, but unfortunately were unavailable (see following section).

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## ☀ 3.1 Research questions

To recap, the following research questions were posed:

- The project's central research question: how and why did EDM culture in Stoke evolve during the 1990s, and which factors of change were most instrumental?
- A larger, secondary research question: what can we learn from this period that might explain EDM's longevity and popularity in the UK?

The project's methodology was designed with these research questions in mind, and clearly, a qualitative approach was required. In academic research, quantitative methods are often employed when 'factual' data are required to answer a research question. Variables in quantitative studies tend to be relatively clearly defined, and research problems are usually unambiguous. By contrast, qualitative methods are used to answer research questions about experience and meaning, often from the viewpoint of the participant. These concepts are more slippery and require a different methodological approach. The purpose of this research, as has already been stated, is to understand how Stoke's EDM scene evolved during the 1990s. Processes of cultural change are, of course, highly complex and can only be elucidated through the use of a range of quantitative and qualitative methods. Anderson, for instance, used qualitative approaches (including unstructured interviews and ethnography), combining them with quantitative methods such as data collection and analysis. Hill, on the other hand, uses predominantly qualitative content analysis to gauge responses to EDM culture in UK tabloid newspapers from the 1990s. These methods all have advantages and disadvantages, which were weighed by the researcher.

## ☀ 3.2 Semi-structured interviews

For this project, a methodology based mainly on semi-structured interviews was chosen. This was because little to nothing has been written about some of the areas this project's research questions address: in particular, factors three, four, and five—generational gaps, self-destruction and

fragmentation. Consequently, secondary literature could not be relied upon here. Secondary literature could also not be relied upon for contextualisation of the Stoke-on-Trent scene. As has already been stated, Stoke's EDM scene represents a relatively unexplored area and has not been examined in either popular music or public history studies. In fact, there were very few research materials available on this thesis' topic, aside from journalistic sources, which do not go into much depth, and general histories of Stoke, which were also not particularly useful. For these reasons, the best sources with which this project's research questions could be answered are human sources: people who were involved in Stoke's rave scene themselves. Indeed, the data this project sought to collect is stored in participants' memories, and the only way to access this was to talk to them.

It is also important to clarify here that potentially useful alternative sources were found to be unavailable. A senior archivist at the Stoke-on-Trent City Archives was contacted near the beginning of the project and asked for help in retrieving minutes from Stoke City Council meetings and relevant newspaper articles from the Staffordshire Sentinel, Stoke's largest newspaper. Regarding the former, the archivist said that after searching the database, she could not find minutes for a development control committee, so it is likely they have not survived. Any minutes that could be retrieved would also not be digitised or indexed, so it would not be practical to try searching them even if they did exist. Regarding the latter, the archivist said that the Staffordshire Sentinel newspapers they have at the Stoke City Archives are held on microfilm, which would have been highly impractical to access given the mobility demands of the HIPS programme. Several weeks of work in the Stoke City Archives would have been required; perhaps even longer. The archivist also said that microfilm versions of the newspapers are not indexed, so they would only be useful if one had the exact date or title of an article or was searching a very short time period (<1-3 months).<sup>83</sup>

The few relevant resources that might have been procured from the Stoke City Archives would most likely not have added much to this thesis' analysis and, given how time-consuming and impractical they would have been to retrieve, were judged to be unsuitable for the project. This was, however, extremely unfortunate, because semi-structured interviews were not an ideal methodology with which to investigate several of the factors in this project's analytical model: namely, factors two and six—state control and public perceptions. Despite this, council minutes and newspapers were not the only ways to investigate these two factors, and it was expected that data could still be gathered.

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<sup>83</sup> The cost quoted was £36 per hour for the research service, as well as £5 for the first copy of a newspaper sheet and £2 for each subsequent image.

This would be accomplished using targeted interview questions on topics such as participants' experiences of drugs, gang activity and policing, as well as their perceptions of the public response to EDM culture in Stoke and across the country. 'Public perceptions', for one, is rather a general category, and whilst this project did not seek to interview 'the public', those who were interviewed (i.e. former ravers, DJs, producers and party organisers) were expected to have insights into the ways EDM culture was judged by the rest of the UK because they were the recipients of said judgements.

Moving forward, what remained was to select the type of interview that would best fit the nature of the project. Judging from the literature on qualitative research methods, semi-structured interviews are widely thought of as a useful method for investigating behaviours, opinions, and emotions. This type of interview unfolds conversationally, allowing participants the chance to explore issues that are important to them within a broader framework of questioning set by the researcher. In that regard, semi-structured interviews are not random discussions, yet nor are they interrogations. They are focussed conversations with a non-rigid structure. This kind of interviewing is about talking, but it is also 'about listening. It is about paying attention. It is about being open to hear what people have to say. It is about being nonjudgmental. It is about creating a comfortable environment for people to share.'<sup>84</sup> This attitude was adopted by the researcher leading up to and during the interview process. Whilst it was assumed that the topics to be discussed were not overly sensitive, it was important to remember that some subjects (e.g. drug use) are potentially incriminating and would therefore have to be treated with discretion and sensitivity. Aside from this, participants were allowed to talk freely and respond in any way they saw fit.

### ☀ 3.3 Recruitment of participants

Thought was given to the kind of person who might make a suitable interview participant before the recruitment process began. It was obvious that those directly involved in the scene should comprise the bulk of the project's participants because these were the people who would understand how and to what extent Stoke's rave scene changed during the 1990s. Partygoers, DJs or nightclub owners would all make excellent participants. It was thought that the latter two might even have more useful perspectives than partygoers, given that they might better understand the organisational,

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<sup>84</sup> Krueger, R. & Casey, M. (2000) *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE. p. xi.

financial, and political aspects of this controversial music scene. Beyond this, former police officers and local governance officials were also thought of as fitting participants because of their potential knowledge of legal and law enforcement matters. However, it was expected that these groups might be more difficult to find and contact, which proved true. Whilst historical records of who served on, for example, the Stoke-on-Trent City Council, are sometimes retrievable, up-to-date contact lists do not exist, with many of those involved likely very old or deceased. One former police chief was contacted via Facebook, with no response. In the end, no former councillors or law enforcement officers could be recruited for the study.

However, former ravers, DJs, producers and party organisers were not difficult to find. Many social media pages exist that are devoted to the memory of local UK rave scenes, and Stoke is no exception. Facebook pages, blogs, and Soundcloud and Mixcloud accounts (websites on which people post audio files of DJ mixes) were all easily accessible online. Related Facebook groups include those devoted to specific nightclubs, for example Shelley's, those of former or current DJs, and more general appreciation groups. Some of these groups are still quite active, with members often posting comments, pictures, audio files, and the like for the enjoyment of others in the group. Several reunion nights have been held at Keele University (in Stoke) for Shelley's Laserdome, which—judging by the way it is memorialised online—seems to occupy a special place in people's memories. All that remained was to join these groups and contact people through Facebook, asking if they would like to be involved in this research project. It was assumed that former ravers would be enthusiastic about the interviews, given that they would be discussing one of the most exciting times of their young lives.

Interview participants were recruited through Facebook. An initial post in a public group called 'Shelley's Laserdome, Stoke-on-Trent' proved very successful. more than thirty former ravers commented on the post expressing their enthusiasm for the project and recommending themselves. These people were then asked to suggest others who might wish to take part in the study and to post small advertisements on their own social media accounts, which their contacts might see and respond to. In addition, several DJs with 'public figure' Facebook pages were contacted directly. This procurement strategy was successful for the modest purposes of this research, with a total of eight participants being recruited. It was assumed that this was enough interviewees; doubling the sample size would almost certainly not have doubled the yield of useful information, and instead would likely have resulted in data saturation. Furthermore, a 'representative' sample was not an

important methodological objective for this project. With such a small sample size, this could never have been achieved. But overall, it is unclear whether a more extensive, more diverse, or more randomly-recruited set of participants would have benefitted the project's aims or conclusions.

### ☀ 3.4 The interviews

Eight ~sixty minute interviews were conducted with former ravers, DJs, producers and party organisers. Participants' roles, ages, genders and ethnicities are listed in the table on the following page; each person has also been given a pseudonym to protect their anonymity. At the beginning each interview, each participant was asked to describe their role in Stoke's EDM scene, state their age (within brackets of ten years) and identify their gender and ethnicity. Unsurprisingly, most people in the 50-59 age bracket, having started raving in the late 1980s or early '90s. All participants were male, which, although this research has no formal gender component, could be seen as a limitation. Including females and people with alternative gender identities would have increased the diversity of this project's sample. However, the practical reality was that only people who volunteered to be interviewed could be interviewed, and all of these people happened to be male. A similar criticism could be made regarding the narrowness of participants' ethnicities, all of which were white British. But census data shows that during the 1990s, Stoke's population was overwhelmingly white: in 1991, white people made up 96.5% of Stoke's population, whilst in 2001, it was 94.8%.<sup>85</sup> This meant that with regard to ethnicity, this project's sample was not necessarily unrepresentative.

A fairly large list of questions was drawn up by the researcher before the interviews took place, which then had to be narrowed down. Each interview unfolded in a different way, but in general, the questions every participant was asked to respond to included the following:

- At its peak, what did Stoke's EDM scene look like?
- How was the Stoke scene restricted by the government and police?
- What happened after the 1994 Criminal Justice Act and the decline of the illegal rave scene?
- EDM culture was criticised in newspapers up and down the country, do you think this was fair?

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<sup>85</sup> Simpson, L. and Gavalas, V. (2021) 'Population forecasts for Stoke-on-Trent UA, with an ethnic group dimension'. CCSR Working Paper 2005-01. *The University of Manchester: Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research*. Available from: <https://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/cmist/archive-publications/working-papers/2005/2005-01-population-forecasts-for-stoke-on-trent.pdf>.

- How did EDM nightclub culture advance during the mid- to late '90s?
- In your view, did the scene ever become too commercialised or mainstream?

Clearly, these questions were designed to target different areas of Anderson's analytical model, with some relating to processes of commercialisation, some to state control, and so on. Other sets of questions were more general, relating to the participant's life and involvement in the Stoke scene. Most participants had not only been involved in Stoke's rave scene, but also those of London, Manchester, Sheffield, and other places. Here, questions included, but were not limited to:

- How did you first become involved with EDM?
- In what way did you take part in Stoke's rave scene?
- If anything, what made this scene special for you?
- How long did you stay in the rave scene and what made you eventually leave?

Not all of the questions listed above were asked in every single interview, nor were they put to participants in the same order. Instead, as is common with semi-structured interviews, topics were discussed and moved between freely. Questions were not forced, but were slipped into the conversation as and when an opportunity presented itself. This allowed a certain conversational flow to be retained. For instance, if the participant began talking about clashes between ravers and police, the sequence of questions put by the researcher would probe this area more deeply before shifting smoothly into another topic. This seems obvious, but in actual fact requires some skill and an awareness not only of how a conversation is unfolding, but where it could naturally progress to next. This took some practice, and it was difficult at first to conduct interviews completely smoothly, with no pauses or jumps in the conversation. But as time went on, and more interviews were conducted, this aspect improved significantly. Overall, the interviews went extremely well, and almost all of the participants seemed to be very pleased with the conversations and what they were able to express.

With that being said, it was crucial to include questions that would get the participant talking about how the scene changed over time and which factors were most influential here. Some participants seemed to want to talk more about the areas that are less relevant to this research: for example, how much fun raving was, their experiences with drugs, and why the atmosphere within the scene was so unique. It was sometimes tricky to keep these people on track (i.e. keep them talking about relevant

Name	Role	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Interview date
John	Raver, DJ, party organiser and producer	50-59	M	White British	21/02/2023
Mike	Raver, DJ and party organiser	50-59	M	White British	27/02/2023
Steve	Raver and producer	50-59	M	White British	14/03/2023
Chris	Raver	50-59	M	White British	21/03/2023
Paul	Party organiser and raver	40-49	M	White British	23/03/2023
Ben	Raver	50-59	M	White British	27/03/2023
Sam	Raver	40-49	M	White British	29/03/2023
Ian	Raver	50-59	M	White British	31/03/2023

topics), and from one point of view, much time was wasted discussing irrelevant things. From another point of view, however, this ‘wasting’ of time was unavoidable and perhaps even necessary. A level of rapport needed to be built with each participant, and this would not have happened if the researcher had controlled the interview discussions extremely strictly. Having a rigid, interrogative conversation would probably have made participants uncomfortable and unwilling to share their true thoughts and feelings. Instead, each conversation started in a friendly, relaxed manner before entering a period of more focussed questioning.

### ☀ 3.5 Data analysis

This short section outlines the methods used during the data analysis phase of this thesis, conducted on the researcher’s laptop. In truth, data analysis began with the interviews themselves, during which different kinds of notes were taken. Firstly, timestamps were recorded at several points during each interview that were perceived by the researcher to be significant. This allowed those points in the interview recordings to be easily revisited, listened to, and examined. Secondly, because discussions were long and complicated, several important points of information were noted by hand during each interview so that if the discussion moved on, they could be revisited later. Finally, comments that participants expressed with particularly strong emotion, or that were repeated several times, were also noted by hand. The importance of these was considered later, during the data analysis phase. Post-interviews, the data analysis process first involved, converting the interview recordings into text (i.e. transcription); secondly, applying a multi-step coding process

to the data in order to extract key themes and patterns; and thirdly, summarising the mass of coded data and communicating its salient features. This process of analysis was carried out to establish what one might call the ‘big picture’; in other words, the overall findings of the research.<sup>86</sup>

Transcription was then carried out in two phases. During the first phase, each recording was played and timestamps were made at the beginning and end of useful sections of each interview. It is important to say that the interviews included much small talk, chatting and other ‘non-productive’ conversational elements. As most transcription programmes only allow researchers to process small amounts of audio, it was vital to first trim down each interview into smaller sections for transcription. Next, a transcription app called Otter was used, which captured the bulk of each interaction with a relatively high level of accuracy, but not perfectly. Using this software incurred a small cost to the researcher. The second phase of transcription involved a replaying of each interview, with the researcher simultaneously combing through the transcripts produced by the online programme. This was done to better organise and label each transcript; to note down tones and pauses; and to ensure that the programme had not made any mistakes. Finally, a small number of handwritten notes taken by the researcher during each interview were combined with their respective digital transcripts in order to condense all the thesis’ findings. The process outlined above produced a set of interview texts that were perfectly transcribed and ordered, making the next phase of data analysis—coding—much easier.<sup>87</sup>

Before coding began, however, the researcher read through each transcript several times in order to establish a greater sense of familiarity with each participant’s answers. These read-throughs also allowed the overall meaning of each answer and conversation to be considered in-depth. Next, deductive coding was initiated. This process was structured, using a predetermined list of codes based on Anderson’s (modified) analytical model. The codes corresponded directly to the six factors discussed earlier: commercialisation, state control, generational gaps, self-destruction, fragmentation, and public perceptions. Once all the interview transcripts had been assigned these six initial codes, a second round of coding began, the aim of which was to break down these large codes into smaller, more precise ones. For example, for Factor 3, generational gaps, sub-codes included ‘change of taste’, ‘loss of interest’ and ‘growing up/moving on’. This two-stage coding

<sup>86</sup> Ayres, L. (2012) ‘Semi-Structured Interviews’. In: Given, L. M. (eds.) *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications. p. 811.

<sup>87</sup> Crang, M. (2005) ‘Analysing Qualitative Materials’. In: Flowerdew, R. and Martin, D. (eds.) *Methods in Human Geography: A Guide for Students Doing a Research Project*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited. pp. 218-232.

process was effective, producing a large set of detailed links between the interview transcripts and the analytical model on which the project is based. Furthermore, this process contributed significantly towards the analytical rigour of the thesis overall.<sup>88</sup>

After two stages of coding had been completed, the next step was to condense and reformulate this data into meaningful findings. The literature on music scene transformation and UK EDM culture was revisited here to help generate theoretical ties and arguments for discussion. The small sample size of this thesis allowed the researcher to consider each conversation in significant depth, breaking down patterns of meaning in the data and relating them to the broader conceptual themes of this research.<sup>89</sup> Key ideas were written down as they arose, along with supporting quotes, theoretical ties, and broader societal considerations. This process was time-consuming: in order to tie together all the strands of the thesis and condense them into coherent segments, much thought and reflection was required on the part of the researcher. The analytical clarity provided by Anderson's framework was extremely beneficial here, providing clear lines of analyse along which to work. Anderson's framework also presented a clear structure with which to present this thesis' findings. In other words, the six analytical factors on which this thesis concentrates are also its bricks and mortar.

### ☀ 3.6 History versus memory

The last important thing to note here is the difference between history and memory. History is what historians do; it is the process by which the past is recorded and made legible.<sup>90</sup> In one sense, history could be viewed as a set of methods or techniques, involving the interpretation of primary sources and their meaning, and the creation of narratives that help us to better understand the past and how it relates to the present.<sup>91</sup> On the other hand, memory is an important way in which each of us experiences past events in the present. Memory does not necessarily involve any kind of historical method; on the contrary, it is often personal, transient, and flawed. Memory is how the past seems to us at any given moment, and is therefore conditioned by our own personal feelings

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Assmann, A. (2008) 'Transformations between History and Memory'. *Social Research*: Volume 75, Issue 1. pp. 49-72.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

and state of mind. Moreover, memory exists at different scales, ranging from the personal, to that of communities, societies, and nation-states. But even the memories of nation-states or entire continents can ultimately be emotional, not intellectual. Memory is perhaps more similar to narrative than it is to history, and can therefore be altered and revised quite easily.<sup>92</sup>

These arguments, taken from the literature on history and memory studied during the History in the Public Sphere degree, were important to keep in mind whilst conducting this research project. This thesis' methodology is based on interviewing people about a period in the past some thirty years ago, and, for this reason, involves a significant memory component. Indeed, its primary sources are the memories of its participants. And whilst these are arguably some of the best sources with which to study the topic, this project's reliance on memory could be construed as a significant weakness. During the interviews, several strategies were employed in an attempt to minimise the potentially distorting influence of memory. For example, where possible, participants were gently asked to provide substantiation for their statements, such as photographs and links to videos or other online resources. They were also asked to include dates in their stories and comments and discuss as many concrete topics (i.e. events, people) as possible, instead of simply describing their feelings on the scene. Some participants only wanted to discuss their personal experiences, which whilst being useful in some ways are not historically verifiable.

Moreover, participants may have had a tendency to view the period in question nostalgically or with rose-tinted glasses; in other words, thinking of the period as better than it actually was. This is understandable: the period represented one of the most exciting times of their young lives, and participants were likely keen to impress upon me the cultural and historical importance of EDM music. And whilst the researcher shares this view, it was important to treat participants' comments in an analytical—and not emotional—fashion. Here, the researcher's own positionality as an EDM fan was important to remember. Lastly, participants might also have forgotten, minimised or repressed some negative aspects of the scene. People are, of course, less comfortable sharing difficult emotions than positive ones. However, participants were encouraged to think deeply about their memories and feelings and to consider alternate points of view. Additionally, questions designed to bring out some of the less comfortable aspects of the scene were specifically included to make sure balanced conversations were had.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

### ☀ 4.1 Findings and discussion

#### **General insights**

In the late 1980s, house music exploded in London and Manchester nightclubs, spreading rapidly across the UK. Around the same time, or slightly later, the illegal rave scene began, with ravers organising their own parties in farmers' fields, abandoned warehouses, and other disused spaces. Everything was hot and fresh, from the music to the drugs to the way people danced. Participants say they felt an incredible sense of energy and excitement at the time: 'It was a youth culture exploding... It felt like ours. It didn't feel like we were borrowing it off our parents or it was something people had done years before we started going out. It felt like a new, exciting musical movement.'<sup>93</sup> John described feelings of secrecy within the scene, which for him was exhilarating: 'It was some special music that, you know, we thought that no one knew about unless you were in on it.' He also implied a slight sense of exclusivity: 'It felt like your "regular" friends had no idea where you were going, what you were listening to.'<sup>94</sup>

Like most musical movements, UK ravers also had their own unique sense of style: 'It was loads of oversized, baggy clothes, you know, tracksuits. There was people wearing labels also, but it was all sort of very casual, as opposed to nightclubs in the '80s, which, you know, were all sort of very smart and dressed up. [...] It was the opposite of that really: it was people turning up for comfort, for a night of nothing other than dancing.'<sup>95</sup> And dance they did: many partied until the clubs closed (typically at 2 or 3 am in the late '80s and early '90s) and then went to an afterparty to continue. Afterparties were 'connected with people taking drugs and not wanting the night to end. [After the club,] people would go to a motorway services area or a car park, and they'd party there for an hour or two, and that was all really part of the scene.' In these ways, EDM culture was unique: 'It was

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<sup>93</sup> Mike, interviewed 27/02/2023.

<sup>94</sup> John, interviewed 21/02/2023.

<sup>95</sup> Steve, interviewed 14/03/2023.

fresh, it was new. Everything was a first. [...] Rave was our musical movement, our youth explosion of culture... We made it, we created it, we carried it.’<sup>96</sup>

However, the situation began to change around 1989, when EDM changed from a smaller, more exclusive culture into a huge musical phenomenon. It was at this time that an EDM scene began to emerge in Stoke, when several pre-existing nightclubs (The Excalibur, Entropy and Shelley’s) started putting on weekly house music events. Naturally, as one participant observed, ‘places like Stoke-on-Trent were a little bit behind the times compared with places like London or Manchester: places where there were larger and more receptive audiences.’<sup>97</sup> Still, by 1989, there were several house music nights in Stoke ‘running side by side on a Friday that were both absolutely packed to the rafters.’<sup>98</sup> Interestingly, one of the key figures in Stoke’s rave scene, DJ Sasha (now an internationally renowned DJ and producer), started out in Manchester. But already by 1989, Manchester’s rave scene was experiencing significant problems with crime and gang violence, so Sasha and a small group of others sought out a smaller, less complicated scene to get involved with. They chose Stoke, helping to create a EDM culture explosion there in the years 1990-1992.<sup>99</sup>

During these years, EDM culture thrived in Stoke, with a core group of followers and several dedicated nightclubs. The Stoke scene centred around the aforementioned nightclubs and there were not a huge number of illegal parties happening in the area: ‘It was just clubbers from Shelley’s or Entropy that would turn up [to the location of an illegal party]... Maybe a hundred people max that you would get to anything illegal in Stoke.’<sup>100</sup> <sup>101</sup> Because Stoke is a small city (~250,000 people)<sup>102</sup>, several participants describe a sense of closeness between Stoke ravers: ‘Everyone was your friend, you could talk to anybody, you could trust anybody. If you were having a bad time or a

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<sup>96</sup> Mike [n. 83].

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> John [n. 84].

<sup>99</sup> Mike [n. 83].

<sup>100</sup> John [n. 84].

<sup>101</sup> This is not to say that this thesis’ participants did not go to illegal rave parties. Quite the opposite: many were attending these sorts of event regularly, just in other areas of the country. In the 1990s, UK ravers would frequently travel twenty, thirty, even forty miles to attend a promising party.

<sup>102</sup> In truth, Stoke-on-Trent is comprised of a handful of small adjoining towns: Stoke-on-Trent, Hanley, Burslem, Tunstall, Longton and Fenton. These towns were amalgamated in the Early 20th century to create a new system of local governance in the area.

bad trip, everyone would help you.’<sup>103</sup> Participants said they made many lasting friendships by raving: ‘You’d get to know people because every time you went back to that club, because it was every week, you’d get familiar with people... So, you know, it became really like a family.’<sup>104</sup> Participants all agreed that ecstasy was crucial in creating this atmosphere of love and unity. This is because of the particular emotional response it causes in users and the fact that nearly everyone in the clubs was taking it.<sup>105</sup>

This atmosphere, whilst memorable for participants, was ultimately short-lived. Several agreed that encroachment by criminal gangs had a strongly negative impact on the scene as a whole: ‘People started to see methods of selling their drugs, so it started to get run by gangs, rather than just some guys wanting to put on a party. And then there were fights and stabbings and things, and that’s where it all started to go wrong, probably around ’92.’<sup>106</sup> Increased violent gang activity and organised drug crime prompted the police to intervene. ‘Operation Patriot’, mentioned earlier, was a police operation launched in Stoke in September 1991 targeting several key rave clubs in the Longton area. Operation Patriot was said to be ‘one of the most ambitious high-profile operations against the drug ecstasy’ in the country at the time, involving extremely frequent raids on nightclubs and stop and search parties.<sup>107</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, participants said they did not recall many (or any) negative interactions with police; in Stoke, police were apparently not as forceful as they reportedly were in other areas. In any case, in 1992, the Staffordshire Police were eventually successful in their efforts to close Shelley’s Laserdome: an important part of the Stoke scene.

Raving went on in Stoke after this crescendo, but, according to Paul, much of the fun had been lost due to the increased violent gang activity and subsequent police scrutiny. John admitted to having left the Stoke scene at this time, though he did continue DJing and partying in another area. During the mid- to late ‘90s, what continued in Stoke was essentially a smattering of weekly rave music events run by the aforementioned nightclubs. Other nightclubs and bars also began jumping on the

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<sup>103</sup> Paul, interviewed 23/03/2023.

<sup>104</sup> John [n. 84].

<sup>105</sup> Ecstasy triggers a massive rush of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that plays an important role in mood regulation, causing users to feel extreme happiness and energy as well as heightened empathy towards others.

<sup>106</sup> John [n. 84].

<sup>107</sup> UK police have the right to stop and search a person if they have ‘reasonable grounds’ of suspecting they are withholding illegal drugs. Source: UK Government (n.d.) ‘Police powers to stop and search: your rights’. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/police-powers-to-stop-and-search-your-rights>.

bandwagon because of EDM's rising mainstream popularity. Whilst the Stoke scene had come to a boil during the years 1990-1992, participants recall it simmering more gently in the years 1992 to approximately ~1994, before gradually declining during the mid- and later 1990s. By that time, many of those who had done most of their raving in the late '80s or early '90s had dropped out. Simultaneously, with every big city developing its own EDM clubs and brand of EDM culture, increasing numbers of younger, up-and-coming ravers were choosing the parties on offer in places like Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester—not Stoke.

## Factor 1: Commercialisation

The word 'commercialisation' refers to the takeover, partially or fully, of a music scene (e.g. ticketing, event organisation) by entrepreneurs or corporations with a view to making profit. And as we have seen, commercialisation means different things to different people. To some, it is a negative process through which a music scene's creativity is harvested by businesspeople; for others, it is a natural part of any scene's expansion and development. As Mike commented insightfully, commercialisation is often a loaded term 'because it makes it sound like the creatives aren't at the forefront anymore.'<sup>108</sup> But, he went on to say, 'with anything that's popular and good, it grows to a point where the creatives aren't at the forefront of things anymore. And that goes for fashion, music, and any other kind of culture or entertainment.'<sup>109</sup> This participant felt positively about the commercialisation of UK EDM culture during the 1990s for several reasons. Firstly, with more venues wanting to play EDM and involve themselves in the scene's success, the number of good parties on offer for ravers increased. Furthermore, the distance one had to travel to attend a good party decreased dramatically: 'By '93, every city had its own little scene, its own little club or rave, and all of a sudden you didn't have to travel—it was on your doorstep.'<sup>110</sup>

Secondly, commercialisation arguably brought increased visibility (i.e. more people became interested in EDM) and investment in music production technologies and different types of parties. This caused the scene to diversify: 'The music was changing all the time. New genres were being started and created... It was new things happening all the time.'<sup>111</sup> Thirdly, for some participants,

<sup>108</sup> Mike [n. 83].

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Steve [n. 85].

commercialisation, and in particular the transition from illegal raves to nightclubs<sup>112</sup>, seemed to clean the scene up slightly: ‘[It went] from raves to nightclubs... Nightclubs were starting to get their arms around dance music a lot more. [...] They were like “we want to do this, but we want to clean it up and make it a little bit shinier and a little bit, sort of, less dirty”. So, you know, [nightclubs] were expecting people to go back to making an effort to dress up, and it wasn’t so casual anymore.’<sup>113</sup> At the same time, with many people wanting to step away from the drug-fuelled craziness of the early rave era and ‘immerse themselves in club culture a little bit more’<sup>114</sup>, everything felt calmer for some participants, and EDM culture’s public image became less extreme.

But, Mike observed, it is open to debate ‘whether [these perceived changes happened] because businessmen were starting to get involved, or people were just growing up more in general, or they just didn’t want to focus on the drugs aspect of it so much, or they preferred the music then. Everyone will have their own reasoning and perception of those times and how it was changing.’<sup>115</sup> This has proved true, with other participants having totally different views on the changes stated above. Firstly, instead of expanding and diversifying UK rave scenes, John felt that commercialisation, and the increased mainstream exposure it brought, drained the excitement and creativity out of the scene: ‘Sort of ’93, [the UK rave scene] started to become more boring and commercial. [EDM] started to filter through the charts, and so it did become more commercialised.’<sup>116</sup> The commercialisation of EDM may have led to a dilution of the genre, with artists, promoters and record labels focussing more on profit than artistic merit. Some participants reported that throughout the mid- to late ‘90s, much of the EDM being produced was more commercial and formulaic, though again this may be a matter of personal opinion.

A more concrete argument made by one participant concerns the perceived loss of EDM’s originally DIY ethos and a shift away from the underground culture that had initially fostered the genre’s growth: ‘The clubs that were the unique, niche clubs, the underground clubs, started to get less busy

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<sup>112</sup> Whilst commercialisation did not end the illegal rave scene (see Factor 2: State Control) in 1993 and ‘94, it appears to have accelerated when the illegal scene was in decline. This makes complete sense: with the number of illegal parties on offer going down, ravers who wanted to continue their involvement with EDM music started going to nightclubs more regularly.

<sup>113</sup> Mike [n. 83].

<sup>114</sup> Chris, interviewed 21/03/2023.

<sup>115</sup> Mike [n. 83].

<sup>116</sup> John [n. 84].

because a load of other clubs started to play house music.’<sup>117</sup> In the eyes of this participant, commercialisation played a part in the decline of his favourite EDM venues in Stoke: places that he thought were more authentic than those that came afterwards. Furthermore, some participants thought that the scene in general started to become more pretentious from around 1993 onwards: ‘A lot of clubs back then started to be really fussy [i.e. selective] about who they let in. [...] You know, very cliquy, and the bouncers were brutal on the door. If you’re not wearing certain clothes, you’re not getting in.’<sup>118</sup> For this participant and others, commercialisation caused the scene to become more status-driven: ‘People were then starting to make an effort to go out again: girls were wearing dresses rather than tracksuits, and lads were sort of starting to go out and, you know, buy labels and make little bit more effort. And it wasn’t just so much about having a great time anymore.’<sup>119</sup>

Overall, regarding the factor of commercialisation, participants seemed to find it difficult to restrict their comments to Stoke-on-Trent, preferring to talk more generally about the national context. This was understandable firstly, because most participants had been involved in many different EDM scenes, not just Stoke’s; and secondly, because the situations and events in question are spatially, temporally and theoretically complex and took place thirty years ago. It makes sense that many participants would only be able to remember the broadest brushstrokes—in other words, the biggest changes occurring at the national level. These findings unfortunately underscored the difference between history and memory and the relevance of this academic debate to historical research projects that involve semi-structured interviews and other forms of qualitative human data. In any case, the fact that participants mostly discussed the national context was a slight problem, given that this thesis focusses on Stoke.

To conclude this short section, commercialisation undeniably brought increased visibility and investment to the scene by bringing it into the mainstream. Throughout the 1990s, the genre became more accessible to a wider audience, leading to more events, album sales and media coverage, all of which helped to promote EDM. Commercialisation also created new opportunities for artists and producers who, with increased investment and corporate backing, were able to develop new technologies and create fresh, exciting sounds. However, commercialisation also created significant concerns amongst artists and ravers about the dilution of the genre and the loss of its DIY ethos and

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<sup>117</sup> Paul [n. 93].

<sup>118</sup> Ben, interviewed 27/03/2023.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

underground culture. For some participants, commercialisation brought about a loss of authenticity in UK EDM scenes, with original, ‘old school’ nightclubs being pushed out of the market by newer, flashier establishments. This was a particular problem in Stoke. After the closure of Shelley’s in 1992 and the decline of several other key nightclubs, young ravers started looking elsewhere to party, and with new EDM nightclubs springing up all over the country, there was no shortage of options.

## **Factor 2: State control**

Many participants agreed that the 1994 Criminal Justice Bill was a turning point in the history of UK rave, which introduced new measures to crack down on illegal raves and gatherings.<sup>120</sup> As we have seen, this piece of legislation made it illegal to hold large gatherings whilst playing music characterised by successions of repetitive beats (i.e. all EDM music). It also introduced massive penalties for those found guilty of organising or attending illegal raves, including fines and up to six months in prison. But as Mike observed, EDM ‘found a way to live and breath even though the Criminal Justice Bill came about. It’s found a way into nightclubs, you know, it made itself a legal thing. The government just prevented it from being illegal, really.’<sup>121</sup> The fact that the Criminal Justice Bill ended only illegal raves is highly significant to this thesis because the Stoke scene did not feature many, or any, illegal parties. And though the Criminal Justice Bill may not have had a huge impact on the Stoke scene, it did influence EDM culture at the national scale, forcing it to adapt to a new set of laws.

However, that is not to say that other forms of state control did not influence the Stoke scene. Police activity played a role: for example, the Staffordshire Police’s Operation Patriot was a local initiative designed to crack down on drug crime that resulted in the closure of Shelley’s Laserdome. Despite this, most participants supported what the Staffordshire Police had done to curb gang activity in Stoke. Ravers feeling positively towards the police was uncommon in the 1990s: from the literature, it is clear that most rave scenes had an antagonistic relationship with local police, leading to frequent clashes and even riots in the early ‘90s. In any case, by 1992, certain nightclubs in Stoke were overrun with criminals and drug pushers. Violent crime and conflict had become

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<sup>120</sup> UK Government Legislation (1994) [n. 62].

<sup>121</sup> Mike [n. 83].

commonplace, which for some gave the whole scene an uncomfortable feel. When asked what caused Stoke's EDM scene to decline after two or three incredible peak years, one participant immediately responded: 'It was the gangs... They destroyed it, really.'<sup>122</sup>

Besides this and the Criminal Justice Bill, which was discussed in almost every interview, participants did not have a huge amount to say about the factor of state control. The fact that nothing much came to participant's minds could be another indication that the Stoke scene was not treated particularly harshly by the police, which one participant suggested: 'At a lot of the parties I went to, the police would be really nice. You know, if it's a legitimate party there was nothing they could really do, they were just there to make sure nobody really did anything illegal. And there'd be paramedics there too, and you know, you'd say hello to them all and everything was alright.'<sup>123</sup> That is not to say, however, that police officers were not aggressive in other places: 'I know that in some places up North, [the police] started to get really nasty (around 1992). They started to arrest random people for no reason whatsoever, shutting down events, and they were just being ruthless the police. They were using batons on these parties, being really brutal.'<sup>124</sup> Still, this did not seem to be the case in Stoke.

### **Factor 3: Generational gaps**

Participants generally agreed that whilst younger people made up the majority of the Stoke scene, there was a mixed crowd at EDM events there from the beginning (~1989-1990), suggesting a lack of generational gaps: 'There was a lot of older people. I mean, I wouldn't say a lot, but there were more than you would find in a normal nightclub. In the normal nightclubs you would just get the younger generation... But with these type of events you were getting the mums and dads, the adults... Not a lot, but they were there.'<sup>125</sup> When asked why this might have been, John referred again to the atmosphere of togetherness and unity that characterised the rave scene for many. With that being said, participants generally agreed that belonging to a nightlife scene has a natural shelf life for most people. In other words, whilst rave parties can be extremely exciting at the beginning, this enthusiasm often decreases over time as a person ages and becomes more experienced: 'For the

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<sup>122</sup> John [n. 84].

<sup>123</sup> Steve [n. 85].

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> John [n. 84].

new generation, they were starting to go out, popping pills and everything. And for them it was like “WOW!”, but for us we’d already done it.’<sup>126</sup> In this way, a kind of generational gap opens up between newcomers and those who have already been involved in the scene for some time.

But generational gaps can only exist within music scenes that are intrinsically diverse and contain people of different ages and experience levels. For example, Tammy Anderson’s work on London EDM scenes suggests that ravers there, unlike those in Philadelphia, were more likely to evolve their tastes than stop partying altogether, ageing out of one area of the scene and into another. Thus, over time, different kinds of people end up coexisting within the same scene, creating generational gaps between those who are older and those who are younger, those who are more experienced and those who are less experienced, those who like certain styles of music and those who prefer others. This did not seem to be the case in Stoke-on-Trent, with Mike—who has worked a party organiser and DJ for over thirty years—saying that he could not recall many people who had stayed in the scene long enough to create a new or separate generation: ‘[Over time,] most people end up, you know, just listening to [EDM] every now and again, or they just go clubbing once in a blue moon.’<sup>127</sup> This, he said, was understandable: ‘You can be a big advocate of dance music, but it’s very hard to go out clubbing every weekend if you’ve got a mortgage to pay, a job to go to on Monday, you’ve maybe got children in the mix, you’ve got responsibilities.’<sup>128</sup>

Stoke’s EDM scene peaked in the years 1990-1992 and may simply not have thrived for long enough—or may not have been sufficiently large or diverse—for any significant generational gaps to exist between ravers. And though EDM parties continued in Stoke throughout the mid- to late ‘90s, many of those who had been part of the scene’s early years apparently did not continue their involvement, either leaving the culture altogether or seeking out parties elsewhere. This, Mike thought, was no bad thing: ‘[A music scene] usually needs revitalising by a new, young youth movement or culture, taking over the reins and going with it.’<sup>129</sup> He carried on to say that the few older DJs and ravers that remained—some of whom were early rave purists—may have actually impeded the scene’s development: ‘[They] weren’t moving with the times and just wanted to play exactly what they had been playing back then [in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s]. They maybe got

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Mike [n. 83].

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

caught in that, you know, everything else is moving on and they're not. [...] It depends on what viewpoint you have. But things have to move forward or they become stale.'<sup>130</sup> There is more on this to follow in the discussion of Factor 5.

#### **Factor 4: Self-destruction**

Participants were generally unsure regarding this factor. Most agreed that whilst a few people overdid it with drugs and alcohol, most managed to maintain a reasonably healthy lifestyle: 'Even though you were going out and taking a pill or something, it didn't affect the way you functioned. It was just like going out and having a drink... It wasn't something that affected your lifestyle, you were just the same really. And yeah the next day you might be a bit hungover, but Sunday and then Monday you were back to normal and then back to work.'<sup>131</sup> However, for some people, the drugs became more important than the music, the dancing or the socialising: 'I think some people became casualties of it. The dark side of it, the drug side, you know, took over some people and it became bigger for them than actually going out.'<sup>132</sup> This, Mike said, is an inevitable part of all dance music scenes. For him, EDM and drugs are closely connected, inseparable even: 'Dance music goes hand-in-hand with drugs. And drugs never go out of fashion, unfortunately.'<sup>133</sup>

Interestingly, one participant said that it became easier to overdo it with drugs (i.e. overdose or become addicted) because they got cheaper over time: 'Back then, in '88, '89, you were paying twenty, twenty-five pounds for a pill, so you couldn't get to [a dangerous point] unless you had a load of money, which nobody did. I mean twenty-five pounds back then... you know, it was a lot for me and for a lot of other people as well. [...] It wasn't like everyone going out and getting wasted when it first started. It became a lot more like that, but it wasn't like that when it started.'<sup>134</sup> The decreasing price of ecstasy pills meant that ravers could afford to purchase perhaps three or more each night, making the likelihood of an overdose or health complications much more likely. Still, participants had overwhelmingly positive experiences: 'Yeah, I mean there's always going to be danger... People were going out and some were overdoing it. But they were in a state of

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Paul [n. 93].

<sup>132</sup> John [n. 84].

<sup>133</sup> Mike [n. 83].

<sup>134</sup> John [n. 84].

pleasure, you know, with ecstasy, it wasn't like they were throwing up on the floor and having to be dragged out.'<sup>135</sup>

## **Factor 5: Fragmentation**

From a situation of incredible unity at the beginning, participants agreed that EDM scenes across the country—Stoke included—started to fragment musically in the early to mid-'90s, with new styles and genres being invented all the time. These included drum and bass, jungle, trance and hardcore. DJs, who had once played a little bit of everything throughout the course of a night, began focussing predominantly on one particular sound: 'Once upon a time, you'd have everyone in there together, and the music was very much across the board. [...] As time went on, people started to find their feet with one particular sound and hone in on it. So you would have house purists that were just playing American house, or acid house, or garage, or, you know, whatever.'<sup>136</sup> This created separation within the scene because ravers only wanted to go to the events where their favourite style of music was being played: 'So you'd have techno clubs, hardcore clubs, and drum and bass clubs... those were your three main other ones. [...] So, you know, it did fragment. Like the techno heads wouldn't go to a drum and bass night, and vice versa.'<sup>137</sup>

John strongly regretted this change: 'Rather than the music all being in one venue, it started to fragment, and in my eyes it all went wrong. [...] I'm saying that because it split everybody up. You know, rather than going to a club and listening to all kinds of music, you were going there and you were listening to your particular genre of music all night.'<sup>138</sup> He continued: 'You'd be speaking to your friends at work, and you'd ask them "oh, are you coming out tonight? Are you coming to this techno club?" And they'd say "no, we're going for the drum and bass tonight". And so already, you know, there was an element of division... it divided everybody.'<sup>139</sup> The scene also fragmented in terms of the drugs people were taking. In the early era of rave, nearly everyone took ecstasy, creating a unified feel at parties. However, in the mid-'90s, different drugs became more popular within the scene, including cocaine and amphetamine. This resulted in an increased feeling of

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<sup>135</sup> Steve [n. 85].

<sup>136</sup> Mike [n. 83].

<sup>137</sup> John [n. 84].

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

separation between ravers: ‘You would go to a techno night, and a lot of people there were taking speed, you know, amphetamine. There wasn’t much ecstasy in there. [That] divided it, there were divisions: what drugs you were taking, what music you were listening to.’<sup>140</sup>

Moreover, EDM’s increasing popularity and visibility started to dilute the scene and break it apart. During rave’s early years, participants say they felt a real sense of community amongst partygoers—especially in Stoke. Back then, the scene revolved around a handful of weekly club nights and was made up of friends, friends of friends, and those in-the-know. However, as the scene grew and diversified, these feelings of community diminished. Clubs became busier and more impersonal, particularly the ‘superclubs’ that started popping up in the mid-‘90s in larger towns and cities. And instead of staying in Stoke, many younger ravers looked to these superclubs for bigger, more exciting parties. In that sense, Stoke’s EDM may not have fragmented as much as it simply fizzled out; indeed, the scene may not have been sufficiently large or diverse for any real fragmentation to happen. The word fragmentation suggests a large scene splitting up into several smaller, coexisting strands, which to an extent did happen in Stoke. But it would be difficult to say that during the mid- and later 1990s, the city retained several distinct EDM scenes. It is probably more accurate to say that a smattering of EDM parties continued in Stoke after the scene’s peak in 1990-1992, but that things became more dispersed.

In any case, whilst the Stoke scene did fragment and disperse, the other side of the coin was that EDM as a whole diversified massively. One participant said that change is always difficult for those who love the original version of something, but for those who weren’t early rave devotees, EDM’s diversification was most likely exciting. He went further, arguing that some kind of change is necessary if a music culture is to stay fresh and interesting: ‘If you carried on playing the same things that were being played in aircraft hangars in 1988, in 1998 then it would’ve just been stale, you know, people would’ve been bored of it.’<sup>141</sup> Mike attributed EDM’s incredible longevity to its ability to change: ‘It wasn’t just two or three years like punk was, which was one sound and it burned very brightly, and then it died. It morphed dance music did, because there were so many sub-genres. And as I say, I think that’s what made it exciting, that’s what’s made it be so popular for

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<sup>140</sup> Steve [n. 85].

<sup>141</sup> Mike [n. 83].

such a long period of time. We're talking about a music scene now that has been running for over thirty years. Never in the history of music has anything been that dominant. Never.'<sup>142</sup>

## **Factor 6: Public perceptions**

Participants all agreed that the UK tabloid press had a huge influence on how members of the public perceived EDM culture: 'They sort of held the narrative on the scene. And with any big business like that, with newspapers, with TV, with magazines, it's usually controlled by older people, powerful people, and people with money. Basically, the youth and the people who were living and breathing the scene didn't really have a say.'<sup>143</sup> Participants also thought that the narrative newspapers created around EDM culture was overwhelmingly negative: 'They could only see the negative aspects of it: that there was drugs involved, recklessness, chaos, people turning up in a field, tens of thousands of people wanting to party illegally near where people lived.'<sup>144</sup> Chris had an extremely critical view of the media, arguing that they deliberately stigmatised EDM culture and sensationalised events to sell more newspapers: 'They were saying that we were taking over the place, and then the police would go in and find a few drugs on the floor and they'd make it look worse than what it was. [...] Anything they could find to put a negative spin on it, they'd use it. That's just the press, isn't it?'<sup>145</sup>

Other participants felt differently, arguing that whilst EDM culture was treated somewhat unfairly by the media, its scandalous reputation was not wholly undeserved. Ben said he totally understood the negative reactions EDM culture received in the UK media: 'If you're an older person, if you've got a family, if you've got kids, and then you've got hundred and thousands of people turning up in a field near your house playing loud music, staying there for days... And you find drug wrappers and condoms in your hedges, things that like, you're not going to like that, are you? You know, what's there to like about that?'<sup>146</sup> Another participant suggested that though EDM culture was not deliberately disruptive or destructive, and did not try to generate social conflict as a whole, many ravers would have enjoyed the controversial nature of the movement because it felt more edgy that

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Paul [n. 93].

<sup>145</sup> Chris [n. 104].

<sup>146</sup> Ben [n. 108].

way. In any case, EDM culture's relationship with the general public in Stoke was not as fraught as in other places because few to no illegal parties happened in the area. In Stoke-on-Trent, ravers' activities were generally confined to nightclubs, creating less friction with those not involved.

## ☀ 4.2 Wider implications

This chapter's first section, general insights, contains comments made by participants about Stoke's EDM scene. Interesting points that arose here included the fact that few to no illegal raves happened in or around Stoke; that criminal gangs were perhaps the main factor that caused alteration and decline within the Stoke scene; and that in the mid- and later 1990s, or after ~1993, EDM culture in Stoke saw a notable decline as younger ravers sought out bigger, better parties elsewhere. The second statement is particularly significant as it explains much of why Stoke's EDM scene was forced to change and why it later declined after hitting an incredible peak in the years 1990-1992. With drug crime and violence rife, the Staffordshire Police had no choice but to act, shutting down Shelley's Laserdome and surveilling other venues. According to participants, the scene was much less enjoyable after that. Unfortunately, though, drugs and EDM are inseparable, and with rave parties presenting significant moneymaking potential for drug dealers, some level of gang activity was probably inevitable.

Next, whilst some participants thought that commercialisation brought increased visibility and investment, helping EDM scenes to grow and diversify, others argued it diluted the culture's originally underground ethos. This resonated with the work of Keith Negus, who examines the typically oppositional way in which creativity and commerce are framed within discussions of popular music cultures. The commercialisation of EDM culture across the UK certainly had a negative impact on the Stoke-on-Trent scene: with investment pouring in and new nightclubs opening continuously across the country, young ravers were increasingly drawn away from Stoke to larger cities like Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham. This spelled decline for the Stoke scene throughout the mid- and later 1990s as there were simply fewer people wanting to attend the events happening there. Zooming out to the national scale, it appears as though EDM's commercialisation led to a centralisation of the culture in larger urban centres: places with the biggest, 'coolest' venues and the resources to attract the most popular superstar DJs. This signalled a shift in EDM culture's spatial organisation, which was previously based on a multiplicity of smaller, interconnected scenes

and one-off illegal raves. It also marked a change in EDM culture's social organisation, with parties becoming more about individual experiences than local rave communities.

With all that being said, there can be no doubt that commercialisation and corporate investment benefitted EDM in a musical sense: firstly, by helping the culture adapt to a new set of laws after the passing of the 1994 Criminal Justice Act, which dealt a deadly blow to the illegal rave scene. It was at this time that nightclub culture began to accelerate in the UK, with EDM creating the soundtrack for the years and decades that were to follow. This particular cultural form—the combination of nightclubs, EDM, DJing and drugs—has proven incredibly long-lasting and resilient, thanks in part to the policies of culture promotion assumed by Tony Blair's New Labour government. As Mike humorously noted, perhaps never has there been a situation in which young people generations apart (possibly even grandparents and grandchildren!) have attended the same style of party and listened to the same style of music. And this could not be closer to the truth: Manchester's Warehouse Project, one of the most popular EDM events in the UK at the moment, seeks to recreate the experience of an early-era rave by holding parties in a disused warehouse underneath Manchester Piccadilly train station.

This research suggests that although commercialisation and creativity can sometimes clash in music cultures, they are not inherently opposites. The tension between these two forces arises from the different objectives and priorities each represents, and whilst commercialisation can provide artists with financial support and wider recognition, as the development of UK EDM cultures demonstrates, it can sometimes impact creative freedom and artistic integrity. Several participants, especially the DJs and producers, were adamant that commercialisation leads to a homogenisation of music styles and a focus on formulaic sounds, which they said limits the scope for experimentation and creativity. Other participants acknowledged that the pursuit of commercial success sometimes requires artists to make compromises or sacrifice creative control. But this is not to say that commercialisation and creativity cannot exist harmoniously. A balance must be struck between commercial considerations and artistic visions and creativity, which EDM seems to have accomplished with great success.

So, with increasing numbers of people being attracted to the genre, and more sophisticated music production technologies being made available all the time, EDM proliferated during the 1990s, with literally hundreds of successful offshoots emerging. EDM's adaptability and diversity have most

likely been the keys to its continuing success: from the literature on music scenes and subcultures, it is clear that new people and ideas are required to keep things fresh and moving forward. If a music culture stagnates creatively, demographically or financially, it cannot progress. But none of these things happened to EDM culture, which has continuously replenished and reinvented itself over three and a half decades. In this sense, Anderson's fourth factor, fragmentation, could perhaps be rephrased as 'scene diversification', because the word 'fragmentation' implies that something that was once whole has shattered or broken. And though for many of those involved in Stoke's once tight-knit EDM scene this may feel true, the culture's fragmentation, far from breaking it, appears to have been the key to its success in the long term.

Concerning this thesis' secondary, broader research question, it seems that the long-term success of music cultures depends on a network of interconnected factors. The first, and perhaps most important, of these relates to government policy. During the late '80s and '90s, Conservative governments led by Margaret Thatcher and John Major attempted to stamp out a music culture they saw as a threat to the country's safety and stability. In the end, they were successful in shutting down only the illegal rave scene, which, in fairness, showed some destructive elements. However, EDM culture at large still managed to thrive, thanks in large part to its adaptability and ability to diversify. But government policies that recognise the relevance, popularity and cultural value of youth music cultures such as EDM are needed if we are to support music's role in society and the public sphere, not hinder it. These were later found in the policies of the New Labour government led by Prime Minister Tony Blair, with his 'Cool Britannia' campaign.<sup>147</sup> Music cultures are invaluable social movement, vehicles of political discussion and change, and crucibles of 'contemporary youth spirituality'.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Hesmondhalgh et al. (2015) [n. 61].

<sup>148</sup> St John (2004) [n. 26] p. 2.

# Conclusion

## **Summary and limitations**

The first section identified the aims of the thesis, which can be summarised as follows: to better understand how Stoke-on-Trent's EDM scene evolved during the 1990s, and learn more from this period about why EDM has proven so long-lasting in the UK and around the world. The chosen methodology—based on semi-structured interviews, a factor-based analytical model and coding—produced some interesting insights into the topic. In the most general sense, this project contributes to the public historical conversation surrounding UK EDM by providing an in-depth case study of a local scene: Stoke-on-Trent. Moreover, it was found that because of a lack of illegal rave parties, Stoke's EDM scene was not negatively influenced by the 1994 Criminal Justice Act: often cited as the most important event in the history of UK EDM. However, gang activity had a hugely negative impact, as did commercialisation, which pulled young ravers away from local scenes towards larger urban centres like Liverpool and Manchester. With investment in EDM also accelerating in the mid-'90s, new ideas and music production technologies led to fragmentation and diversification within the culture. This had the effect of breaking apart what had once been a very tightly-knit scene in Stoke.

With that being said, elements of this thesis show significant limitations. Firstly, this project was designed in response to a number of gaps in the existing literature on the history of UK EDM culture, much of which focusses solely on London or Manchester. It was hoped that by concentrating on a new and unexplored context, Stoke, and by employing an analytical model designed to highlight hitherto under-appreciated factors, new perspectives on the topic could be discovered. This was true to an extent: some interesting findings were generated for factors 1, 2 and 5, commercialisation, state control and fragmentation respectively, and more detail was added to the general history of EDM in the UK. However, other results merely verified or corroborated things that have already been established in the literature. This was especially true for factors 3, 4 and 6, on which participants had very little to say or could not be specific. With hindsight, taking a more specific analytical approach might have been better, for example by focussing on just one or two factors. Although, at the beginning of the project, a broader analytical model made up of six factors

seemed to make more sense, because that way a more comprehensive dataset might have been produced.

Moreover, potentially useful alternative sources were unavailable. A senior archivist at the Stoke-on-Trent City Archives was contacted near the beginning of the project and asked for help in retrieving minutes from Stoke City Council meetings and relevant newspaper articles from the Staffordshire Sentinel, Stoke's largest newspaper. The archivist said firstly, that the former have likely not survived, and secondly, that the latter would be highly impractical to access because of the way in which they are stored (in addition to the mobility demands of the HIPS programme). The few relevant resources that might have been procured from the Stoke City Archives would most likely not have added much to this thesis' analysis and, given how time-consuming and impractical they would have been to retrieve, were judged to be unsuitable for the project. This was, however, extremely unfortunate, because semi-structured interviews were not an ideal methodology with which to investigate several of the factors in this project's analytical model: namely, factors two and six—state control and public perceptions. In particular, it would have been interesting to examine minutes from Stoke City Council meetings to better understand the decisions behind local policing and development strategies, and the closure of Shelley's Laserdome.

The small sample size this project took was also a limitation. In total, eight people were interviewed, all of whom were white British men. Not all of these interviews produced interesting or useful insights into the topic. Participants often seemed to repeat the same or similar things: for example, regarding the influence of the 1994 Criminal Justice Act. Of course, this was a highly significant law and it was absolutely necessary to discuss it, but this project could have benefitted from a larger and more diverse set of participants. Perhaps—but not definitely—then data saturation would not have occurred quite so soon, and more wide-ranging insights into the topic could have been collected. As mentioned in the methodology section, this project's participants were all either former ravers, DJs, producers and party organisers. These were by far the easiest people to find and get in contact with, and seemingly the people who wanted to participate in the project the most. Other groups, for example former local politicians and policepeople, were extremely difficult to locate. One former police chief was contacted, with no response. The narrow range of participants limited the diversity of this project's findings.

A final limitation concerns the semi-structured interview process. During the literature review and data analysis phases, factors three, four and five appeared the least well understood, so the plan was to focus on these areas in the interviews. It was hoped that by doing so, several gaps in the literature could be addressed and new insight into the topic could be produced. However, this methodology could not always be followed in the strictest sense, because some participants had significant gaps in their knowledge, memory or understanding of the topics at hand. Here, again, a larger and more diverse sample size would have benefitted the project's findings. Furthermore, during the interviews, participants often veered away from the questions being asked towards areas they themselves were more interested in. This made certain conversations unproductive at times, but could not really be avoided; obviously, human sources cannot be controlled in the same ways documents or other static sources can. In any case, the interviews were quite fruitful overall, with participants providing interesting perspectives on the local dynamics of Stoke's rave scene as well as currents at the national scale.

## **Suggestions for future work**

Firstly, more research is needed in the field of EDM studies if we are to properly understand the regional differences between UK dance music cultures. This project took a new case study, Stoke-on-Trent, but there are still many unexplored areas of the country, and with every scene demonstrating its own social and political dynamics at the local scale, it would be useful for future research to examine how EDM cultures sprang up and evolved in other areas. The role of EDM in local youth cultures, and the impact of EDM parties and festivals on local communities, would be interesting to investigate. Secondly, this thesis emphasised the importance of EDM's fragmentation and diversification to its long-term success. Further research could focus on analysing specific sub-genres, understanding the development of new production techniques, and in general exploring the creative processes behind successful EDM tracks. As stated earlier, different areas of the UK were, and still are, associated with different styles of EDM, so it would be useful to examine the links between music, technology and location. This research could benefit both aspiring producers and scholars interested in the history of music production.

One of this thesis' limitations was the narrowness of its sample, which showed a lack of women and ethnic minorities (though census data taken from the 1990s showed that the latter was not necessarily unrepresentative for Stoke-on-Trent). Further work could therefore shed light on issues

of representation, inequality, and inclusion in EDM culture. For example, research could examine the potential underrepresentation of women and minority ethnic groups in UK EDM culture, analyse the experiences of female DJs and producers, or investigate strategies for promoting diversity and inclusivity within EDM communities today. Lastly, research that seeks to better understand the behaviour and engagement of EDM audiences could be extremely beneficial for artists and other industry professionals. During this thesis, it was found that a large and highly active online community exists that is devoted to the memory of Stoke's EDM scene. Further research could thus explore topics such as online fan communities, the impact of social media on fan interactions, the influence of live events (and perhaps even reunion events, like the ones held for Shelley's Laserdome) on fan experiences, and the motivations behind fan participation.

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