

K-holes, skint students and zombified dance floors: why is ketamine Bristol's favourite party drug?



The UK's ketamine use in the past year is now the highest on record. But certain areas are synonymous with certain party favours. Londoners snort 23kg of cocaine a day, in techno-hooked Manchester its MDMA, and the crusty colony more commonly known as Bristol, takes the top spot as Britain's ketamine capital. How did a drug that's used to tranquilise horses become so widely used within the city's legendary rave scene?

So, do raves act as a means for people to take drugs?

No, yes, maybe. Party culture has always been associated with the use of drugs ever since MDMA took the UK by storm during the late 1980s. Whether you were a baggy-clothed Mancunian two-stepping to chuggy acid house, or you were winding in a glittery stranger's embrace under the winking lights of Heaven nightclub. Disco biscuits were all the rage. Tens of thousands of previously uptight brits were gabbering until dawn in clubs, fields and warehouses.

Numerous studies over the years have shown that most partygoers don't think of drug use as an absolute necessity for their nights out. Besides the obvious synonymities between some music and specific drugs, drugs are just a singular component of a much broader identity, like strengthening social bonds and whatnot. We know that for centuries, musicians have used drugs to enhance their creative minds. Would we have got acid rock without LSD? Or SoundCloud rap without an opioid epidemic? Would house music have stayed niche if it wasn't for MDMA? In all honesty, we can't say for certain.

Dr Zach Walsh, an associate professor at the University of British Columbia's Department of Psychology conducted research into the synonymous culture of drugs and music and clarified some valid points. "If we think about what makes music engaging, we want familiarity, but we also want novelty. So, what some drugs will do, particularly if we're talking about psychedelic drugs, is activate and enhance the part of our brain that detects 'novelty', meaning that part of the drug experience is like 'oh my god, I've never seen the world this way before.' So, when you hear music on drugs, you have the experience of it being entirely new, like you're hearing it for the very first time."

But without getting too political, when a synthetic stimulant and hallucinogen turns your psychological dial all the way up to ten, your heart rate is thumping in time with the

bassy drums, and the heightened awareness orders every second eighth note hi-hats to echo around you... The brain gets very happy. Ecstasy riles up our dopamine levels and its popularity in late 1980's Britain along with the acceleration of upbeat electronic music was like a match made in heaven.

Let's talk about ketamine.

Considering that drugs are historically intertwined with the vibe of the music and the social setting; the use of a dissociative anesthetic in the party scene is a bit confusing. Ketamine appeared in the UK in the early 2000s and was made an illegal Class B drug in January 2005, when only a recorded two percent of 16 to 24-year-olds had tried it. And the British government is now seeking advice on the classification of the drug which may result in it being upgraded to a Class A.

Ketamine first came about as an anesthetic for soldiers during the Vietnam War and the FDA approved it for medical use in 1970. It wasn't until the mid-80s that capsules, powders, tablets, solutions, and injectable forms of ketamine became popular in subcultures such as the rave scene. Ketamine can induce psychedelic experiences, and its amplification of sensory reactions satisfies many partygoers. Unlike your typical 'uppers' such as MDMA or cocaine, it distorts your perceptions of sight and sound and can send you into a 'K-hole' if you've taken too large a dose. You most likely know what I'm talking about. Whether you've fallen into the out-of-body experience yourself or been allocated as the shepherd to your wobbly mate in the crowd. Ketamine is provenly tricky when it comes to knowing your limits.

For years, the kind of dissociation that ketamine induces made it very popular for extending the night at after-parties and levelling out your uppers buzz. But Ketamine, K, special K, wonk, donkey dust – whatever you call it, has noticeably risen in popularity on the dance floor and now appears to be our decade's defining drug. What was once reserved for sinking-into-random's-sofas is now the average Brit's go-to party drug and it's near impossible to avoid, with 58% of participants voting in a recent survey that they would choose ketamine over any other drug at drum and bass raves.

Although not everybody is onboard. DJs amongst the scene have suggested that ketamine is 'killing' the dance floor and changing the vibe in the dance. The drug trips up the senses meaning that it can cause a lot of dissociation, and there's a lot less engagement to the music compared to when everyone was off their rockers on ecstasy. *Ketty* ravers are tottering around spaces which used to be filled with people jaws-clenched and full of jittery love, and a big part of the problem may be that the line between feeling wobbly off a few bumps and turning into a 'ket zombie' is very, very thin.

Welcome to Britain's ketamine capital.

Bristol is one of the UK's best cities for student life with diverse cultures and strong artistic and music scenes. But it's also one of the most expensive cities for students, just second to London. Notorious for its drum and bass scene, something which students and residents have relished for decades, there's no doubt that inflating costs of living are crushing the scene. Venues are struggling; beloved music venue Motion has announced its closure months after Bristol staple Crofters Rights unexpectedly shut its doors. And students can't afford drinks when having to pay two-hundred-quid a week for

housing. The affordability of ketamine priced at roughly £20 a gram and its zero-hangover effect may just be why so many opt for the drug on their nights out.

“Ket has ruined the rave scene because no one actually dances, everyone is too zonked and looking like zombies.” Says Bristol-based music artist DJ Nothing.



Bristol's strong party scene and ketamine's link to the subculture has found it being widely used through peer influence, in a city with a thriving youth and student network it has become massively available. Ketamine has a huge presence in today's pop culture, seemingly over any other party drug, pop icon Charli XCX is "bumpin' that," ghetto-tech artist Partiboi69 loves ketamine so much he puts it all on his crotch (Those are actually his lyrics) and "ketamine chic" is a largely perpetuated aesthetic on Instagram, TikTok

and in media which is majorly consumed by younger generations. The romanticisation of any drug is regarded as scandalous, just think back to the “cocaine chic” era of Kate Moss during the noughties. Ket’s always been around but its visibility in the party scene is clearer than ever, and its use by young people may be associated with the normalisation of it in online spaces.

I’m not simply saying that ketamine’s mass popularity is just thanks to chronically online Gen-Zers. Ketamine has been used for decades by ravers and getting “ketty” can induce a floating kind of feeling which many users find appealing, particularly in a problem-free community space like a rave. The 2000’s UK free-party scene saw ketamine amplifying the sensory experiences of bass-heavy music. Bristol was and still is in fact a thriving hub for the illegal rave scene and has a strong tradition of countercultural movements, activism, and anti-authoritarian sentiment. In times when freedom is oppressed by government and a never-ending invention of oppressive legislation, free parties provide freedom to gather and dance and an overall sense of community. Feelings of relaxation and emotional release when using the dissociative anesthetic can be desirably sought after in settings of liberation and can make social interactions more fluid in contribution to carefree environments like the underground rave scene.

The problem with ket.

A big factor in the increased visibility of ketamine is users misjudging their doses and overconsumption is not fun. Partygoers or more often, young ravers wanting to experiment, are mixing the drug with alcohol and other substances and consequently ending up in the welfare tent. An attendee of Teletech Festival in Manchester reported to me that when asking a paramedic what kinds of states they’d witnessed over the

weekend in the medical tents was, they responded “K-holes.” During ‘k-holes’ the user themselves may be in a dreamlike state but to outsiders they appear completely unconscious. There’s a demand in the scene for users to better educate themselves on the substances and amounts that they’re consuming, as it’s clearly becoming a strain on welfare workers, event staff and even DJ’s that have stated there’s a weakened sense of engagement between the crowd and the music.

An even bigger issue some may argue is that is the use of a dissociative drug amongst young people highlighting how they may be struggling? Ketamine is thought to be non-addictive, but its sense of euphoria and the disconnection from reality it can create does have addictive potential for many that are struggling mentally and searching for something to fuzz the mind. The pleasurable effects can encourage people to use the drug repeatedly, leading to psychological dependence. Drug addiction has been long associated with escapism but with a repeated use of ketamine, a very high tolerance can be built meaning users need higher doses to achieve the same effects and prolonged use of the drug can cause bladder problems, nerve damage, infectious diseases – just to name a few. Ketamine feeds into the dopamine system which creates a feedback loop in the brain of more ket equating more happiness. These factors combined, like most drugs, make users want more, and more, and more...

Surprisingly, ketamine has been used for treating depression in those who are not responsive to other treatments. It has rapid and effective symptom relief and can seriously reduce suicidal thoughts. But we’re talking medically supervised treatments done by qualified practitioners, not bashed-with-benzocaine-ket from a mate’s mate.

When speaking to Bristol ravers, I found that they had a lot to say about the popular use of ketamine in the city’s party scene. One person said, “I get so uncomfortable and

nervous seeing people stumbling around, lacking motor skills and not being conscious because they've done too much." Whereas another pointed out that "I don't think it's the ket that's the problem, it's the attitude towards it." But everyone agreed on one thing, 'ket zombies' are real.

Is ketamine here to stay?

It's provenly certain that drugs in the rave scene and student culture aren't going anywhere. Drugs and music were intertwined centuries before electronic music came around and will be long after the era of electronic music done and forgotten, with whichever new genre and on-trend substances crop up next. Scenes and subcultures will continue to experiment with new and old drugs and authorities will prevail to shut it down with newer laws and harsher tactics.

I've delved right into many factors and maybe fears around the use of ketamine and it's found niche within Bristol's club and rave scenes. And there's been a whole lot to cover to say the very least. Ketamine's rise as a dominating party drug entirely illuminates the complex relationship between music, subcultures and drug use, and while it does offer a distinctive experience for partygoers seeking a one-of-a-kind sensory enhancement, its increasing popularity fairly raises health concerns – both physically and mentally. The potential for harmful dependencies shouldn't be ignored. Responsibility and education are major when experimenting with substances and something that rave-veterans and DJs in the scene punctuate extensively.

Everybody wants to have a lush time. Ravers, welfare workers, event planners, DJs and whoever else is heading into the dance. So, know your limits. As ketamine sways our

social dynamics, we're reminded of the ongoing tension between the pursuit of freedom and escapism in underground subcultures. And it goes without saying that ketamine has left an indelible mark on the party landscape of today.