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## What's in a Label? Ecstasy Sellers' Perceptions of Pill Brands†

**Micheline Duterte, B.A. [Research Associate II], Camille Jacinto, B.A. [Research Associate], Paloma Sales, Ph.D. [Project Director], and Sheigla Murphy, Ph.D. [Principal Investigator]**

Institute for Scientific Analysis, 390 Fourth Street, Second floor, Suite D, San Francisco, California 94107.

### Abstract

This article presents selected findings from a qualitative study of Ecstasy sellers and their sales practices, knowledge of distribution networks, buyer-seller relationships, and self-reported drug use. In-depth interviews were conducted with 80 men and women who had sold five or more hits of Ecstasy five or more times in the six months prior to the interview. Study participants described their perceptions of the various types of Ecstasy they had distributed or used themselves. The participants had experience with a variety of Ecstasy labels, from the popular “Blue Dolphin” tablets to the powdered form called “Molly.” We tracked pill brand mentions on Ecstasy-related websites to compare with interviewees’ descriptions of Ecstasy brands. This study examines Ecstasy sellers’ ideas about the role of brand names in Ecstasy markets and their relationship to their beliefs about different types of Ecstasy’s purity and quality. We demonstrate that considering Ecstasy branding increases our understanding of buyer and seller relationships.

### Keywords

Ecstasy; drug distribution; brands; buyer-seller relationships

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In the early years of the twenty-first century the word Ecstasy has come to signify more than a synonym for “elation” or “excitement.” For some, Ecstasy evokes a brightly hued tablet, a four-hour-plus experience and a night out dancing; others may think of jaw-clenching or “coming down,” the antithesis of a euphoric experience. Ecstasy is the street nomenclature for MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine). During the early stages of recreational Ecstasy use in the United States, a supplier reportedly hoped to call MDMA “Empathy” since he felt it appropriately described the drug’s effects; but he later decided the name “Ecstasy” would be more appealing to potential customers (Saunders 1993). The marketing of Ecstasy has evolved to encompass a plethora of brand names and drugs manufactured in an assortment of shapes and colors with the choice of powder or pressed tablets with varying ingredients that are sold under the name Ecstasy. There is scant research in the area of Ecstasy branding, particularly from the perspective of the distributor. In this study, the authors explore the importance and role of pill brands and preferences for powder or pressed pills from the perspectives of a sample of San Francisco Bay Area Ecstasy sellers.

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## THE PHARMACOLOGY AND HISTORY OF ECSTASY

MDMA, popularly known as “Ecstasy,” “E,” “X” or “XTC,” is a psychoactive substance which resembles both amphetamine and mescaline in its chemical makeup and effects. While labeled as a psychedelic drug, it also possesses stimulant properties (Rosenbaum, Morgan & Beck 1995; Beck & Morgan 1986; Seymour 1986; Shulgin 1985). Although the term Ecstasy is used to refer to MDMA, other amphetamine analogues, including MDA, MDE (or MDEA) and MBDB, are sometimes used as substitutes. They all belong to a group of drugs termed phenethylamines and are more specifically referred to as “entactogens,” (literally meaning “touching within”) because of their similar effects (Kalant 2001; Milroy 1999; Nichols & Oberlender 1990; Nichols 1986).

The positive reputation of Ecstasy among users use can be largely attributed to MDMA’s unique empathogenic qualities, or the elevated feelings of empathy and intimacy the drug produces (DanceSafe 2008; Morton 2005; Beck & Rosenbaum 1994; Saunders 1993). While there is no physical hangover analogous to an alcohol hangover, some research has shown that users experience depressed mood in the days following use, although this effect seems to be reversible (Morton 2005). According to Ecstasy users, the positive attributes far outweigh any of the adverse side effects (Levy et al. 2005; Morton 2005; Beck & Rosenbaum 1994).

Although Ecstasy became classified as a Schedule I drug in the US in 1985, recreational Ecstasy use spread worldwide, beginning on the holiday island of Ibiza, Spain. From there its popularity surfaced in Great Britain, where Ecstasy became the drug of choice for young people in the rave and club scenes (Hammersley, Kahn & Ditton 2002; Hammersley et al. 1999; Measham, Parker & Aldridge 1998; Thornton 1996). Ecstasy use did not achieve mainstream status in the United States until a decade later, concurrent with the emergence of a domestic rave scene (Sloan 2002). In these earlier times users would ingest the drug orally in the form of small, white or light-colored pressed tablets; various pill colors and types of Ecstasy had barely surfaced. The branding phenomenon arose as Ecstasy’s popularity increased. In the late 1990s and into the turn of this century, a wide variety of Ecstasy brands appeared with distinctive pressings, shapes and colors.

### WHAT IS ECSTASY EXACTLY?

What is Ecstasy? A review of Ecstasy use research indicates that what is sold as Ecstasy is often more than just MDMA, if it is MDMA at all (Cole & Sumnall 2003; McElrath & McEvoy 2002; Sherlock et al. 1999; Forsyth 1995). Saunders (1993) referred to Ecstasy as a term used for MDMA, MDA, MDEA, a combination of these substances, or one or more of these substances combined with other substances. These included both licit and illicit substances, such as caffeine, ephedrine, DXM, and LSD. Ecstasy is distinctive as it refers to not necessarily one drug but possibly to several substances; and for the purposes of this article, we will use the term Ecstasy to denote a potentially multiple substance drug.

Some have considered Ecstasy to be a “designer drug” (Reneman 2003; Christophersen 2000; Calafat et al. 1998). Henderson (1988) coined this term and defined it as “substances where the psychoactive properties of a drug are retained, but the molecular structure has been altered to avoid prosecution.” Ecstasy as MDMA does not fit this definition, as it has been federally scheduled, but combinations of substances sold as Ecstasy could be deemed designer drugs according to Henderson’s definition. Forsyth (1995) felt that Ecstasy was more aptly a “concept drug” in that over time it became a product rather than a single pharmacology. He suggested that Ecstasy might be a nickname for MDMA. In Forsyth’s research on pill brands in the United Kingdom, he found that the marketing of Ecstasy encompassed a lifestyle and not just a drug. Whether Ecstasy can be considered a designer drug or a concept drug, there appears to be marketing of Ecstasy through brand names.

## BRANDING IN THE DRUG MARKET

In order to discuss branding in the context of the Ecstasy market, it is necessary to look at the definition of brand. Dictionary.com's (2009) first definition for brand was "a kind, grade, or make, as indicated by a stamp, trademark, or the like: the best brand of coffee." Wikipedia (2009) defines a brand as "...a collection of symbols, experiences and associations connected with a product, a service, a person or any other artifact or entity." Ecstasy distributors may choose specific brands for their pills to convey messages to consumers about their product. According to consumer research on brands, individuals form relationships with particular brands depending on their experiences with them over time, which may lead to brand loyalty (Fournier 1998; Fournier & Yao 1997). A drug distributor understandably might want to utilize branding to create and maintain a connection with his or her customers. A question emerges as to which relationship is stronger in Ecstasy markets—the relationship between sellers and Ecstasy brand names or the relationship between sellers and their buyer/supplier network.

According to Van de Wijngaart and colleagues (1999), most Ecstasy users obtain their pills via friends or acquaintances and many are not sure of the composition of these pills. While the aforementioned research did not delve into the specifics of Ecstasy brands, it would appear that friendships between buyers and sellers yielded trust in the purity and quality of the Ecstasy exchanged regardless of brand. The present study will further explore the importance of Ecstasy brand reputation versus the social bonds between buyers and sellers of Ecstasy.

Ecstasy is not the first illicit drug to be distinguished by brand names. Drugs like lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) and heroin have been stamped with various symbols over time, often spawned by popular culture and recognizable icons. McCormick (2003) notes that LSD has the longest history of imagery in its marketing. The early designs used for LSD were reminiscent of childhood fantasies and inspired by popular cartoons of the time, including Mickey Mouse in Fantasia, Snoopy, Mr. Natural, and Alice in Wonderland. Oftentimes these images referenced the purported surreal, psychedelic experience produced by the drug also known as acid. As production techniques evolved along with technological advances over the years, blotter acid prints began to carry images of the prevailing culture as a sort of mockery, ranging from national monuments to the official FBI emblem (McCormick 2003).

Wendel and Curtis' (2000) work on heroin stamps in New York City reveals an important cultural artifact in the world of drug marketing. Heroin stamping appeared to occur mainly in New York City from the mid-1970s through the mid-1990s where powder heroin was sold in small glassine bags for \$10. These were known as "dime bags." As the heroin selling business changed from sellers and buyers who knew each other intimately to more anonymous markets, distributors attempted to distinguish themselves from each other by creating brand names that would gain a reputation for their drugs being the best on the streets. Stamps became associated with locations of dealers or dealing crews and included names like "Laundromat." More common names referred to the dark side of heroin use, such as "No Way Out" and "Poison," while others advertised the quality of heroin with names like "The Choice" and "No Joke." A number of brands were borrowed from the consumer culture of movies and designer labels. At the time of Wendel and Curtis' writing, stamping had begun to fade as law enforcement caught on to the trend. Cell phones and beepers increased in popularity for dealers, diminishing the role of drug stamps. The researchers suggest that heroin stamps functioned as a chronicling, not only of the heroin market at the time, but also of inner city life and possibly subconscious responses to what distributors saw in the world around them.

Ecstasy labeling can be viewed in a similar way to heroin stamps and acid blotter sheets; however, findings from analyses of our interview data and reviews of Ecstasy-related websites indicate that Ecstasy branding is somewhat distinctive compared to labeling in other drug

markets. According to the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA 2003), major distributors package Ecstasy with appealing logos in hopes of building brand loyalty, instilling confidence in the product, and ultimately promoting use of the drug as fun and harmless. Media and law enforcement reports have claimed that Ecstasy sellers market the drug to children by creating candy-colored pills with kid-friendly logos (DenverDA.org 2004; DEA 1999). Although the majority of sellers interviewed for this study were not major distributors or manufacturers, we wanted to determine what our sample thought about the purpose and effects of Ecstasy brands and how important they were in a business sense. Did buyers prefer one brand to another and, if so, why?

Unlike heroin stamps, Ecstasy branding has occurred worldwide as Ecstasy use evolved from underground parties to mainstream use. And while LSD iconography was steeped in hippie-inspired emblems like peace signs and rainbows, the commercial logos of Ecstasy brands reveal a different ideology altogether (McCormick 2003). While not every Ecstasy brand is based on corporate identifiers, the essence of consumer culture is apparent in the marketing of this drug with pill brands like Motorola and Mitsubishi. These labels also seem to reflect the current state of society in which Ecstasy pills could be seen as cultural artifacts of middle class, drug-using social worlds. We enquired about our participants' perceptions concerning what various Ecstasy labels represented.

## ECSTASY ONLINE

We found the Internet to be a useful resource in discovering details about Ecstasy. From DEA operations to harm reduction guides, online Ecstasy information is plentiful. Schifano and colleagues (2003) assert that the scope of the MDMA market can be easily assessed in cyberspace. Another group of researchers examined young adult Ecstasy users' opinions about the accuracy and importance of sources of information for MDMA. They found that nongovernment websites ranked second to friends in importance and perceived accuracy, followed by information obtained in drug treatment and from physicians. (Falck et al. 2004). Evidently, young people today see the Internet as an important tool for gathering information on Ecstasy.

An examination of Ecstasy-related websites reveals that Ecstasy users from all over the world access various websites and online bulletin boards to share information, particularly about specific brands. One such site is Pillreports.com. This daughter site of the Australian Bluelight.nu promotes a harm reduction ideology where users can post images of pills they have used and rate them on a scale from one to ten. At the time of this writing, pills could only be rated above an eight if their purity had been tested using a kit available for purchase online; testing kits consist of a chemical reagent that reacts to the presence of specific drugs by changing colors. One can find reviews on pills from their own region by clicking on a link; for example, we clicked onto the "Northwest" of North America section to find information on brands for the San Francisco Bay Area. This site proved helpful in gathering information about various pill brands. Unfortunately, few of our participants were familiar with this website. The websites they accessed more often, such as DanceSafe.org and Erowid.org, focused on harm reduction issues for a number of different drugs. At the time of our research DanceSafe also provided a list of recent Ecstasy pill brand laboratory test results.

The phenomenon of brands in Ecstasy markets necessitated further investigation into their significance to sellers and buyers. With minimal available information on this subject, it was unclear how important brands were to individuals who both sold and used Ecstasy. Past work in other drug markets, such as the aforementioned Wendel and Curtis (2000) study of heroin stamps, suggest that any sort of drug imagery may serve as subcultural text. We decided to

study how the labeling of Ecstasy related to the social world of this drug from the perspective of those entrenched in these markets.

## THE ECSTASY SELLER STUDY

### Methods

From 2002 to 2004 we conducted an exploratory study of Ecstasy sellers in the San Francisco Bay Area funded by the National Institute of Justice (2002-IJ-CX-0018). In order to investigate a full range of sales practices, we extended the study to relatively low-level sellers in hopes of garnering information from both initiates and experienced distributors. Participants had to have sold five or more doses of Ecstasy five or more times in the six months preceding the interview. We recruited 80 qualified individuals using snowball or chain referral sampling (Watters & Biernacki 1989; Biernacki & Waldorf 1981). We scheduled interviews either in the interviewee's home, at another location of their choice or at our field offices. After acquainting the participant with the nature of the study and completing informed consent procedures, the interview proceeded with the tape-recorded, depth interview portion followed by the questionnaire.

The questionnaire items included basic demographics, family of origin information, living situation, schooling, employment, drug sales and drug use histories, current and past Ecstasy acquisition processes, quantities purchased and sold, relationships to other distributors, sales practices, personal Ecstasy use histories, customer demographics, testing/adulteration practices, attempts to discontinue use and/or sales, and the affect of criminal justice pressures on sales patterns and practices. All of the study's instruments and protocols were subject to the approval and oversight of the Institute for Scientific Analysis Internal Review Board.

### Description of the Sample

We interviewed 80 Ecstasy sellers, 56 (70%) men, 23 (29%) women, and one (1%) transgender between the ages of 19 and 60 years old with a median age of 26. Fifty (63%) of the interviewees were White, eight (10%) African-American, seven (9%) Latino, seven (9%) of mixed ethnicity, five (6%) Asian, one (1%) Native American, one (1%) Arab and one (1%) refused to be categorized. Sixty-two (77%) were single, 12 (15%) were living with a partner, and four (11%) were married, and two (3%) were divorced or separated. Only 10 (13%) interviewees had children.

Seventy-eight (98%) of the Ecstasy sellers interviewed had at least a high school diploma. Thirty-six (45%) had some college education, 11 (14%) had an associate degree, 21 (26%) had a bachelor's degree, and two (3%) had graduate degrees. Twenty-nine (36%) of the interviewees were in school at the time of the interview. Of those, 14 were attending full-time, and 15 were attending part-time.

During the 12 months prior to the interview, 70 (88%) were employed. Of those, 50 were employed full-time and 20 were employed part-time. Employment-based earnings ranged from \$280 to \$8,000 per month with a median monthly income of \$1,600. Income generated by drug sales ranged from \$15 to \$12,550 per month, with a median drug sales income of \$315 per month. Interviewees' total annual income for the 12 months prior to the interview ranged from \$3,500 to \$212,592 per year, with a median yearly income of \$28,400.

All but one interviewee were housed, with half of them living in an apartment or studio and 39 (49%) living in a house. Study participants were predominantly White, male, middle to upper-middle class, and in their twenties.

## Analysis

We analyzed findings from both our depth interview and questionnaire data. The depth interviews were transcribed and manually coded using a list of common themes that emerged from initial data analysis. Afterwards, codes were entered into Ethnograph 5.0, a qualitative data analysis program. We then conducted searches for relevant coded segments. Questionnaire data were entered into SPSS 11.5, a quantitative analysis program. We ran frequencies to find which brand names were most commonly reported by our interviewees, and conducted analyses of questions regarding to whom our participants sold as well as Ecstasy testing practices and perceptions regarding purity.

We utilized the grounded theory method to discover emerging themes, beginning with the construction of a code list (Kuzel 1992; Strauss & Corbin 1990; Charmaz 1983; Glaser & Strauss 1967). In the early phases of our study, data emerged from depth interviews indicating the relevance of the branding phenomenon to our participants. The data collection process revealed that Ecstasy brands and labels could reveal a great deal about particular drug markets. Ecstasy brands and types may influence purchasing choices among customers, and suppliers may distribute specific brands to appeal to these customers. The choice of logos may reflect aspects of various Ecstasy-using social worlds. Interviews with study participants revealed the ways in which sellers chose to utilize or not utilize Ecstasy labels. The topic of Ecstasy branding could be found in several codes including “Ecstasy History,” “Ecstasy Use,” “Initiation,” “Progression,” and “Ecstasy Sales.” These codes all referred to timeframes of Ecstasy use and sales practices. After conducting searches of the aforementioned codes, we realized that we needed to gather more specific information on Ecstasy branding from the data. Therefore, we did word searches in the transcribed interview documents for words such as “brands,” “labels,” “types” and “names.” We were then able to locate portions of the interview containing discussions about such topics as the roles of pill brands in Ecstasy distribution.

We surveyed the Internet to track the pill brands mentioned by our participants to observe images of specific pills, their contents (if available), reviews of the pills given by users, and their ratings. Weekly checks were conducted of DanceSafe.org and PillReports.com to see if any of the mentioned brands had been tested or reviewed. At the time of our Internet research (2002 to 2004), DanceSafe.org had a program in which individuals could anonymously send in pills to be tested by a laboratory (through EcstasyData.org) for a donation of \$30. While we checked this website weekly, updates on pill test results occurred less frequently, closer to monthly but not with any standard regularity. We made notes of brand names and descriptive characteristics of each pill that came from the Bay Area. PillReports.com allowed users to upload images of pills, rate them and give their reviews based on experiences with that brand. Typically, there were new pill ratings entered at least on a weekly basis. The majority of the popular pill brands mentioned by our participants were observable on both websites. Various batches were noted to be within each of the popular brands, and therefore testing results and ratings differed greatly. Then we compared the pill brand ratings observed online to our sample’s reports about the quality and purity of the Ecstasy brands with which they were familiar.

## FINDINGS

### The Role and Significance of Ecstasy Brands

The majority of this sample characterized themselves as low- to mid-level sellers. They knew little about manufacturing Ecstasy and how the names of pills were chosen. Not one of them had chosen an insignia with which to stamp pills or had pressed tablets themselves. Still, their perceptions about the meaning and function of pill brands in Ecstasy markets were valuable since these participants were often both sellers and users. When asked their thoughts about the

purposes of Ecstasy branding, participants' responses varied. One 30-year-old White female seller had experience with several brands and thought they functioned as identifiers of particular "flavors."

Probably just like quality assurance. You know like I'm sure it also backfires, and then other people can copy the logo and then sort of—but it is nice because a lot of times you'll get like a certain mixture of a pressed pill, and you're like, "Wow. I don't know what they have in here, but I really like it." And it's nice to then be able to look out for that.

An interviewee who distributed powder MDMA in capsules at the peak of her sales also felt that brand names referenced quality as a marketing strategy. This 29-year-old White female seller made the connection between "designer" drugs and the use of high-end designer labels for Ecstasy.

Ours was called "Molly" just because it was pure molecular Ecstasy. All the other ones had names, and that was in relationship to whatever emblem or logo was stamped on the top of them. And they usually had like—I don't think a lot of people know it, but like it would be like a designer something because it was a designer drug, you know? So, it's like a Louis Vuitton or a Mercedes or a Mitsubishi, even though that's not too designer. But even like the alligators, I think, are supposed to be Lacoste. You know what I mean? Just like something that's more like higher end than normal.

With a similar notion of designer appeal, a 26-year-old White man who only sold powder or capsule Ecstasy understood the use of brand names for Ecstasy. After telling us that he would never distribute press tabs, he expressed his thoughts on the purpose of Ecstasy labels and the relevance of brand loyalty.

Just for marketing. For marketing I think like if a certain pill is good and popular and people like that combination like cocktails, then people look for that name again and test that brand name. People are used to looking for brand names probably, so it's just kind of like replicating the same commodity ... I think it's just an argument towards profit.

A number of participants spoke about not depending heavily on the brand names of Ecstasy pills. It was clear to them that multiple batches of a pill could be made with a specific stamp and that copies containing other substances could also be marketed. Research confirms this belief; for example, Sherlock and colleagues (1999) studied the makeup of Ecstasy tablets in the United Kingdom and found that the amount of active ingredients in pills with the same brand name often varied. Some of our interviewees were cognizant of this fact based on their own experiences. An interview with a 24-year-old male who sold 250 to 500 pills per month provided an example of variations in batches:

The blue ones, there are dolphins printed on 'em. They got websites that you could like go to. I mean but you might get like a blue one that, say, has a dolphin on it. You have that for about a month or, you know, you have yours till you sold out. And then you get something else, and it has like a crown on it. It's like pinkish with a king's crown on it. And then two months later you end up getting Blue Dolphins again, but those Blue Dolphins aren't the same Blue Dolphins ... because it's manmade, a different batch. You never know, the guy who's cooking it might look at it and say, 'Oh, I'm gonna add- or I'm gonna accidentally spill three liters of this or seven liters of this accidentally into it too much ... but that's why some are more speedy, some of them are more heroin in it ... it has nothing to do with the names. You know, who cares? They could call it whatever you want. Some people get pills and name it whatever they want ... so you really can't tell. You just hope that person that you're in with is, you know what I'm sayin, not gonna [sic] give you bad shit ... this is a

business. It's trust. It's trust, but like doing any manmade drug, you better be ready for consequences.

One 19-year-old Arab man distributed a variety of pill brands, so many that he could not “even keep track” of those he had sold. He postulated that brands and logos helped distinguish the source of each batch but felt that it was unwise to rely solely on brand names.

**INT:** Do you think the logos are important?

**R:** I don't really think so just 'cause you know I feel they're so easy to I guess duplicate, so you know you can't really trust it through the logo or anything. You gotta [sic] trust it through, um you know, the people that [sell it to you].

Some participants felt that brand names were not important and tainted the reputation of Ecstasy, as reflected in this seller's statement:

I—I actually have never been really into—into that. I realized I would hear all the time people go, “Hey do you have the Blue Dolphins or the green whatever?” And it really means nothing in my mind (laughs) but in their mind it-it-it's sort of again that sort of drug related frenzy that's the party drug aspect versus more of the pure sense of what MDMA is.

For the most part, interviewees viewed Ecstasy brands as identifiers that referenced quality as a marketing strategy. However, they saw reliance on brands as risky because (1) a brand name potentially could identify the source of the supply and (2) the same brand actually could be different configurations of various drugs, not necessarily including MDMA. Ultimately, some sellers believed that brand names gave Ecstasy a bad reputation because of the possibility of the brand named pill not containing any MDMA.

### **Popular Brand Names: The Good, the Bad and the Indifferent**

From both our depth interviews and questionnaires, we found there were particular Ecstasy brands that were common for both personal use and sales. Interviewees reported selling a broad variety of Ecstasy pill brands, seventy different brands total. The most frequently cited brands included Mitsubishis and Alligators (n = 33 each), followed by Motorolas (n = 30), Christmas Trees, No Names, and Blue Dolphins (n = 25 each), Reds (n = 13), Chanel (n = 10), Hondas and Doves (n = 7 each). Some types, such as the Mitsubishis, were perceived as “good” or “strong” while others were rumored or experienced as “bad,” but our participants typically remembered those that were popular because of their perceived positive effects.

One interviewee talked about becoming exposed to various Ecstasy brand names when his use increased. This 29-year-old African-American man learned which pills he preferred from his personal experience.

I started, you know, really learning once I started finding the different names. Once I find a cool one, then I would ask for it by name. “Do you have, you know, Blue Dolphins? Do you have this, that, you know?” 'Cause I know how it made me feel ... I didn't want to learn, you know—have to expose myself to a different feeling.

Some participants also reported an increase in the assortment of pill brands over time. Those who had experience with Ecstasy in its earlier days described how pills had evolved over time. One male participant had been using and selling Ecstasy for several years at the time of the interview. He noted the changes he had witnessed:

No logos, none of that stuff. That, that started I think probably in the mid '90s because um, some of the chemicals were harder to come by to, to make. And this is my opinion but I believe that it—some of the chemicals were harder to make and so they had to



do something to market these pills. So there were dollar signs and Polos and Rolls Royce logos and all the different logos and they started giving names to them too. And then I even knew a lot of dealers that would use food coloring to make maybe more of an impact of marketability on the product. So, green, there'd be blue, there'd be purple, there'd be red, you'd have different colored so that you would actually be able ... to market it and it would be a specific color that, that people would know and become familiar with. And they'd know, "Oh, this is good."

Other interviewees also mentioned the color of tablets when talking about "good" and "bad" types of Ecstasy. For example, a 27-year-old White male seller listed some of the names of what he perceived to be good Ecstasy. Yet, he also pointed out that what was thought to be good or bad was often subjective.

Usually the bad ones are just white. I don't remember what they were called back then ... but a lot of times even when it's bad, people are still happy because it fucks them up even if it's not necessarily smooth or whatever. I mean not my friends or people that I deal with now, but in general Ecstasy. So, what's bad to me might still be all right to them ... in the general public a lot of people, as long as they're just like altered and if they're not real familiar with the experience, they'll be fine. They just want to escape.

Other investigators' findings demonstrate that some Ecstasy consumers are not highly concerned with exactly what is in Ecstasy (Calafat et al. 1998). If they repeatedly had positive experiences with a particular brand, this could lead them to believe that the brand was good (McElrath & McEvoy 2002). The majority of our participants were seasoned Ecstasy users and their sales experience gave them additional knowledge about brands. Unlike McElrath and McEvoy's respondents, who often failed to realize that there could be variations within and across batches of one brand, much of this sample recognized this possibility.

Several interviewees told us that they did not pay attention to which brands were popular, and sometimes their customers were not concerned with the names of pills either, as is evident in this quote from a 20-year-old White woman:

I never really could remember the names. They always seemed so trivial ... I mean I've never met anyone who had like a request for a specific kind or was like, "Oh never mind. I don't want that"

When asked to whom our participants sold, 72% of the sample said "friends." It became apparent that this friendship between buyers and sellers contributed to much of our sample's indifference regarding Ecstasy pill brands. They trusted their suppliers and had formed social bonds with them as well. Not only did they want to provide their customers with a good time, they wanted to ensure there was a relatively safe source of Ecstasy for both their own use and their friends' consumption. For many of the interviewees, the label on the pill was secondary to the source of the pill.

### Types of Ecstasy

A smaller but substantial number of our participants sold powder Ecstasy or Ecstasy in capsules. At the time of interview 54 (67%) sold in pressed tablet form, 20 (25%) sold capsules, and six (8%) sold in powder form. Most of these individuals said that powder Ecstasy usually did not have a name, but a handful of participants called their powder Ecstasy "Molly" which was short for "pure, molecular MDMA." Also, the name "sassafras", or "sass" for short, emerged from a few interviews. This moniker for powder Ecstasy was novel, yet we heard different definitions for sassafras from two participants. A 23-year-old White male interviewee was the first to reveal this name to us.

**R:** MDMA is a little different than MDA which is what people call sass. People call MDMA Molly, if you ever heard that. And it's ah, sass is a little more—it's a lot more psychedelic so it appeals to that crowd and usually that's what I would, what I'd work with.

**INT:** So why is MDA called sass?

**R:** I don't know, a lot of people thinks—thought it came from a sassafras root which I don't think is true. So it's like people started calling it that and ... I'm not really sure but it's a name that people recognize so they're sellin' it. That's pretty important to have that, you know, 'cause people know the difference it's basically like two concepts. Molly is the concept of hugging everyone and being happy and just like that, that rave Ecstasy feel and sass is more the, you know, going to a concert type—it's everybody has different—sass, MDA is a little more upsetting to the stomach where as MDMA is not. So a lot of girls don't like MDA where as a lot of guys don't like MDMA because it's not as strong.

Among this seller's network, it was clear that sassafras was a nickname for MDA as he distinguished it from Molly or MDMA, yet he talked about it in the context of his Ecstasy sales. It is notable that he talked about the differences between these two substances yet referred to them under an Ecstasy umbrella, similar to previous research referring to the differential content of what is deemed Ecstasy (Cole & Sumnall 2003; McElrath & McEvoy 2002; Sherlock et al. 1999; Forsyth 1995; Saunders 1993). This participant also later said that the cost and sales prices were about the same for MDA and MDMA.

Another interviewee, a 26-year-old White male, who was one of our highest level dealers also talked about sassafras. He gave us a different definition and an in depth explanation. He seemed to have more knowledge about the manufacturing processes for Ecstasy than most of the sample.

**R:** They called it Molly. Molly was the only name because it was supposedly from molecule. It was created molecule by molecule or whatever the process is. Looking back on it I highly doubt it was Molly. My bet was that it was sassafras, that it came from sass-sassafras oil, that method of making Ecstasy was my bet. Um, from my limited understanding, you can make Ecstasy by putting all the chemicals together and making Ecstasy or sassafras is two or three molecule, sassafras oil is two or three molecules off of what Ecstasy is the, the compound. And by removing and adding chemicals you can change sassafras oil into Ecstasy. It'll have a different high than Molly supposedly. Um, and was a lot cheaper and it—the chemicals were easier to purchase in the United States um, so.

**INT:** And what do you think the differences are like, feeling—like use wise between Molly and the sassafras?

**R:** Um, sassafras from my understanding is a little more dopey, uh, a little more like heroin, a little more laid back like you take it, it kicks you on your butt and you're lying on the floor drooling and smiling and rubbing yourself. Whereas like Molly and um, molecule is more upbeat, dance-y [sic], club, keep energy boost, grind your teeth all night type high.

Both of these sellers dealt with hippie-type subcultures in which the customers seemed interested in the possible natural roots of Ecstasy. The interviewees' suppliers also were described as hippies. While these participants had distinct explanations for sassafras, both definitions seemed tailored to the market in which they were selling. Further research should explore the socioeconomic aspects of labeling in which, for example, corporate and high status brands may appeal to those in the upscale club scene.

## Ecstasy Preferences

Since the aforementioned sassafras sellers sold a particular type of Ecstasy to appeal to the fondness for “natural products” among their networks, we wondered what motivated the rest of our sample to sell specific brands. In general participants did not feel brand names were of primary importance in their Ecstasy sales. When we asked a 34-year-old woman of mixed ethnicity about the brands of Ecstasy she sold, her answer was similar to many of our other interviewees’ feelings on the matter:

... I’m not into the whole like drug slang. ‘Cause nobody—people that I’m getting it for, they trust already, they’re not like, “Hey what kind is it?” You know? They just want to know if it’s clean, like what the comedown is like, that kind of thing. Like if they’re going to feel crappy the next day or are they going to feel all speedy, that kind of thing.

A 28-year-old Filipina seller reported picking up Ecstasy brands she was familiar with, both for her own consumption and to sell to buyers accordingly. This practice exemplified that of the majority; they were users as well as sellers who often put aside pills for their own use from a batch they sold. This participant tailored her sales of particular brands to the customer.

**R:** It’s like there’s different variations of it. And it’s like Blue Dolphins. It’s like White Fin, Ruby whatever. I can’t stand when it’s speedy. So, I’ve got to make sure. Like, I know I like Blue Dolphins. And I know that the White Fins are very, very mild. Or if I’m taking like the Blue Dolphin, I can only take half. But the next day you don’t feel as bad. So, it’s like now there are really different classes of it, and I’m not really as up on it as I’ve been in the past just ‘cause it’s not my drug of choice.

**INT:** And so, when you do hook other people up, you try and hook them up with the kind that they like?

**R:** When I try to hook—well, yeah. I know Blue Dolphins most people would like, but with this one guy, I always try to get him mild stuff because, you know, I’m not there. And they’re like 50-year-old dermatologists, so I’m like, okay, I don’t want to give them some hardcore thing. So, I always give them something mild because they’re gonna [sic] like it anyway. You know what I mean? I don’t want them ever afraid to come back because, you know, they had some crazy experience one night.

Another participant also spoke about purchasing batches to sell that he and his selling partner preferred to use themselves. While the particular Ecstasy he described did not have a brand name per se, he believed this specific type contained heroin. It is also notable that the previously quoted female seller talked about not liking “speedy” Ecstasy. Both interviewees provided examples of how Ecstasy was perceived to be more than just MDMA.

We used to get stuff that would have like brown dots in it, and everyone would be like, “Oh, brown dots. That means that heroin’s in there.” And to this day I don’t know if they did or didn’t use heroin, but we were like, “We don’t care if it’s heroin or not. We love that stuff. Give it to us.” Because it was a great high. And that was the only one we recognized was the brown dots. But I had another discussion with a guy that actually sold heroin amongst other things, and he was like, “There’s no way in hell that they would put heroin in E. It’s too expensive. They wouldn’t cut it with it. It’s too expensive to use.” So, I don’t know.

Study participants discussed their sales of types of Ecstasy, especially powder/capsules or pressed tablets, more often than they spoke about brand names. Interviewees and their customers varied in their preferences for powder Ecstasy versus pressed pills. As one 25-year-old, mixed Indian and Russian female participant stated, “... like I said, the pills tend to have

speed in 'em, keep you up. Just from selling it, people always want the capsules, it seems to me.”

A 22-year-old, white interviewee talked about his concern for his customers and their preference for powder or capsule Ecstasy. He chose to distribute powder Ecstasy primarily because he disliked the brand market.

I never got into the brand names, but I just knew that that was generally, you know, a pretty backwards market to go into. It was fairly obvious that the brand competition shit around that seems just, I don't know, control mechanism in the methodology of distribution. And I didn't want to remain susceptible to that at any point. So as soon as I could find just pure powder MDMA, then that's all I would really want to deal with.

Alternatively, some felt that pressed pills were higher quality and more likely to be pure since it seemed easier to adulterate powder. A 25-year-old White man believed that labeled pills sold better than capsule Ecstasy. In the following he describes what his customers preferred:

People will buy out pink, shaped heart with some kind of cool logo on it quicker than they'll buy a clear capsule with white powder that could be aspirin. It's white capsules, you know? Anyone could make those capsules, where pills are definitely manufactured. And people feel safer about not getting ripped off if they buy manufactured E ... I'm just imagining if I was in a club, buying Ecstasy, buying the pill with the cool logo, then, you know, that people wearing t-shirts of that logo or some white capsule someone could've made in their basement. So I definitely think it makes a difference.

It should be noted that the majority of the sample did not test their Ecstasy regularly. When asked if they tested the Ecstasy they sold, only 26 (32%) said they always tested it. Twenty-two (28%) said they never tested their Ecstasy, 16 (20%) said they rarely tested their Ecstasy, 11 (14%) said sometimes, and five (6%) said they tested it most of the time. When they did test it, they more often took the Ecstasy themselves ( $n = 54$ ) instead of using a testing kit ( $n = 14$ ), and any notions of their Ecstasy being “speedy” or otherwise came from their own or their customers' subjective evaluations. We asked participants to estimate the purity of the Ecstasy they were selling; their guesses ranged from 40% pure to 100% pure with a median reported purity of 83%. These were only estimations as available kits did not test for purity levels. The Ecstasy sellers in this sample often relied on their own judgment and trust in their suppliers to obtain and distribute what they believed to be quality Ecstasy.

### The Internet and Ecstasy Brands

Our online tracking of Ecstasy pill brands uncovered some crossover between what we heard from interviewees and what we saw on the websites. While a small number of participants talked about checking specific pills online, the common mentions of brand names from both our interviews and from online research revealed the widespread nature of this branding phenomenon.

Forty-two (53%) interviewees said they browsed Ecstasy websites. The most visited website was Dancesafe.org ( $n = 28$ ), followed by both Ecstasy.org ( $n = 18$ ) and Erowid.org ( $n = 18$ ), and then Pillreports.com ( $n = 5$ ). Other websites mentioned were Bluelight.nu, Lycaeum, MSN health site, Midwesttraves.org, and High Times. The most frequently cited reason for visiting those websites was for information regarding purity ( $n = 32$ ), followed by information about the effects of Ecstasy ( $n = 31$ ), information about health risks ( $n = 30$ ), information about dosage ( $n = 25$ ), images of pills ( $n = 24$ ), to find a rave ( $n = 5$ ), and to order test kits ( $n = 4$ ). Other reasons mentioned were: for current news, what is going on in the scene, molecular

makeup/manufacturing, out of boredom, to find out about laws, to read about people's experiences, and for pill ratings.

We were not able to fully review the exhaustive amount of information on even one website (Pillreports.com), but we paid special attention to names of Ecstasy brands mentioned in the interviews. We found there were different batches of the same brand with various ratings. It should be noted that the ratings on Pillreports.com are subjective since those reviewing the pills are experts only insofar as they are experienced users.

As previously mentioned, 24 of our participants accessed the Internet to look at images of particular pills. Dancesafe.org and Pillreports.com are both websites that provide pictures of various pills from different regions around the country and the world. Most interviewees went online to find information about the purity and quality of specific pills, but many times interviewees could not recall the name of the website they had looked at because they had conducted a search on major search engines (e.g., Google.com). When asked about researching pills on the Internet, this 24-year-old White man said his friend first told him about the pill websites:

**R:** I had a friend that did it actually. We started doing that after a while ... like people will post if there's a pill that comes out ... people will go and like post things about their high, about what happened, if it's a shitty pill ... they'll rate it.

**INT:** So that's what you look for when you go on there?

**R:** Well, if there's like a pill and say like someone—we bought a whole bunch and someone calls and goes, "Tell everyone," you know, me or my friends. Then they'll be like—if we don't know what to do about it, we'll look it up on the Internet. Or someone has a pill like that they found or something, you know, we can just look it up. Go on the Internet and see what it is.

Another participant, a 27-year-old White man, talked about using Ecstasy websites not only to research pills he planned to sell but also to educate himself on the health risks of using Ecstasy. He liked Bluelight.nu a great deal, which is the site linked to Pillreports.com.

I look at various sites. I like Bluelight. That just talks about the pills and rates the quality. I just did it out of curiosity. I was just looking at DanceSafe the other night and that just kind of keeps—I don't know—keeps the public abreast on health issues and sometimes gives warnings for bad shit going around ... I mean I guess it's kind of a work resource, but I do it because of curiosity as well.

## DISCUSSION

Our findings provide a glimpse into San Francisco Bay Area Ecstasy sellers' perceptions of the function and meaning of Ecstasy labeling. Understanding the branding of Ecstasy has the power to relay messages not only about this particular drug market and its subculture but also about our consumer-conscious society as a whole. Are Ecstasy sellers predicting that particular brand names will tap into this material culture's ultimate desires, or are these sellers simply products of the society themselves, utilizing the recognizable names by which they are surrounded? Clearly more research is needed in this area. We were not able to interview any sellers who had branded Ecstasy themselves. Future research should attempt to gain entrée into networks of Ecstasy manufacturers.

San Francisco Bay Area Ecstasy distributors seem to be in a unique position. According to many of these participants who had lived in other parts of the country, San Francisco has a reputation for high quality, less expensive drugs, particularly Ecstasy. It is possible that

perception had something to do with some distributors' lack of trust in Ecstasy brand names. Perhaps they assumed the available drugs in San Francisco would be enjoyable regardless of brand name. Since some referred to powder Ecstasy as "pure MDMA" (often from what they were told by suppliers), tablets pressed with symbols were not necessarily more appealing. These participants were less trusting of colorful pressed tablets because they were mass-produced in unknown locations and allegedly less organic than powdered Ecstasy. The desire for drugs to be more "natural" is not surprising coming from sellers and users located in a city where the marketing of natural and organic products is commonplace. There were also interviewees who felt that powder would be easiest to adulterate, and therefore they preferred to sell pressed pills. The majority of the sample sold pressed tablets at the time of interview either due to availability or preference. Both those who sold powder/capsule Ecstasy and those who sold pressed tablet Ecstasy hoped to distribute a drug with the least amount of harmful adulterants

After comparing our findings to what we researched on websites such as Pillreports.com, we realized that our participants were a different group. Generally, this sample appeared to have passed their peak usage of Ecstasy, while those who posted on these websites seemed to be either initiates or individuals fully immersed in an Ecstasy-using social world. The majority of our sellers did not utilize these websites on a consistent basis. Study participants had less faith in brand names observed online and relied more on trusting their sources for Ecstasy. Since the majority of the sample had friends for customers, this trust extended from the participants' suppliers to their buyers who believed that they could obtain good quality Ecstasy through their friends. The difference between the present sample and those who post on Ecstasy-related websites could be a function of age or membership in a specific subculture, but it is difficult to disentangle since there is not much information about the people posting on these websites aside from the region where they reside.

A major limitation of this study is that we were not able to ask enough questions about Ecstasy pill brands and their function in the market. Since the study was exploratory in nature with the hopes of obtaining data about all aspects of Ecstasy sales practices, we did not originally include questions regarding this emergent theme. We probed for information on Ecstasy branding once the theme emerged, but we did not obtain as much data on this phenomenon as we would have liked. Unlike the in depth investigation conducted by Wendel and Curtis (2000) on the similar topic of heroin stamps, we have simply skimmed the surface of Ecstasy brands research. The way branding is employed in the Ecstasy market seemingly distinguishes it from other drug markets. There is much to be discovered in this area.

While the emergent theme of Ecstasy pill brands is just one fraction of the larger study, this piece revealed important information linked to our main research aims. In particular, the lack of pill brands' significance highlighted the relevance of buyer-seller relationships. Since the majority of sellers sold to friends, they felt compelled to cater to their friends' desires for a particular brand or type of Ecstasy. At the same time, pill brands became less meaningful for many participants when there was an established bond between buyer and seller. In addition, our participants did not brand Ecstasy tablets and only had a vague idea of the drug's chain of distribution. Most interviewees guessed the number of hands that the Ecstasy went through before it reached them, making it a challenge for them to assess how and why labels were chosen for particular pills. It is notable that some interviewees had very little knowledge of the origins of the Ecstasy they were selling. Furthermore, this sample had sold at least some of the time in private settings, such as their own home and others' homes, which may have made contributed to the belief that Ecstasy branding came second to having a safe and secure connection with their customers. Future research should compare individuals who sell Ecstasy in private settings to those who sell Ecstasy on the street and in public venues to ascertain the

role of pill brands in various Ecstasy markets. Furthering an understanding of how Ecstasy sellers utilize brands may help in better understanding how Ecstasy in general is sold.

## CONCLUSION

We repeatedly heard that trust in our interviewees' suppliers was a priority in obtaining quality Ecstasy, and the sellers in our study often expressed concern for their customers. This trusting, empathetic relationship between Ecstasy sellers and buyers may be an artifact of the drug's unique psychopharmacology. For most participants brand names were, at best, a tool for giving their customers a positive experience with a minimum of health risks. The majority of sellers in this sample distributed to friends and sometimes used with them, which also explains, in part, their concern for customers. Although some study participants felt that certain types of Ecstasy were reputable, they trusted their relationships with suppliers more than they trusted a particular brand name or type. This faith in their suppliers to distribute high-quality Ecstasy often outweighed any need to test the drug. While more extensive research is required, it appears that Ecstasy labels hold complex functions in a drug market that greatly depends on a moral contract between buyer and seller.

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