



**PEOPLE AND DANCEFLOORS
MALTA**

**RESEARCH BRIEFING
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About Us

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Dr Giulia Federica Zampini is Associate Professor in Criminology and Social Policy at the University of Greenwich, London. Dr Zampini leads the ongoing project, 'People and Dancefloors: narratives of drug-taking', currently spanning three countries, which involves team-based participatory action research. Before coming to academia, Dr Zampini was a volunteer in harm reduction services and drug policy reform advocacy.

Karen Mamo presently works as a policy, research and harm reduction manager with the Authority for the Responsible Use of Cannabis. In 2019 she set up the first Maltese social media page about harm reduction (Harm Reduction Malta) and is one of the co-authors of the civil society policy document A social equity approach for cooperative and environmentally sustainable practices within Maltese Cannabis Associations.

CONTEXT

Dancefloors in Malta embody a cultural space of dedicated artists and loyal clubbers. Dancefloors change, innovate and adapt over time, whilst directly contributing to an estimated 7.9% of Malta's GDP. Being a small European country, Malta has largely been ignored as a site for club and drug studies (except for Micallef, 2019 and Mifsud, 2013). However, Malta sports a thriving local dance music scene, with its associated drug cultures and use patterns.

Given its prime location, its cultural connections with the UK, and its European cultural imprint, Malta has become a tourist destination for electronic dance music events in Europe, particularly for British-owned *Lost and Found* festival, and Maltese techno festival *Glitch*. These larger festivals have existed alongside local outfits such as *Earth Garden* and *Boomerang*. Meanwhile, clubs in Malta have continued to evolve. Some clubs, such as *Liquid*, have survived for over 20 years, which is testament to the dedication of a community of DJs, clubbers, and promoters.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Fifteen Maltese individuals participated to the People and Dancefloors study in 2021 through interviews and one focus group. The sample of participants was made up clubbers, DJs, producers, and event organisers.

Location: MALTA

Number of Participants: 15

Age: Late 20's to early 50's

Gender: 10 Male & 5 Female participants



FINDINGS

WHAT DO DANCEFLOORS MEAN TO PARTICIPANTS?

Belonging, community, familiarity, connection, sharing, forming important social bonds, freedom of expression, livelihood

WHO ARE THE PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS IN DANCEFLOOR CONTEXTS?

Professionals, students, parents, and caregivers. Professions include teaching, nursing, civil service, engineering, as well as jobs within the electronic dance music industry.

WHAT DO DRUGS IN DANCEFLOOR CONTEXTS MEAN TO PARTICIPANTS?

Fun, adventure, experimentation, socialising. Freedom of movement, extroversion, introspection, sensory enhancement.




NEEDS IDENTIFIED BY PARTICIPANTS

Collaborative relationships with law enforcement

Electronic dance music industry workers felt that the growth of the sector was stifled by local authorities, law enforcement, and negative public perceptions. At the same time, they understood that authorities have a vested interest in electronic dance music events because they attract tourism. Maltese DJs discussed the frustration of not being able to make a living from DJing in Malta. This stemmed from the intersecting issues of lack of interest in investing in electronic dance music as an art form, and lack of willingness to recognise it as a worthy cultural endeavour. Electronic dance music carries the stigma of drug-taking, and therefore it is subjected to distinct scrutiny by licensing authorities, law enforcement and public opinions.

Festival organisers described a rather antagonistic relationship with local authorities and law enforcement because of being singled out as problematic events. Accordingly, local authorities were reticent to provide prime sites for electronic dance music festivals, while law enforcement imposed quite draconian background checks on artists, specifically seeking to root out any artist with a criminal record or drug-related offence to prevent them from playing. Festival organisers claimed that law enforcement is 'unfairly targeting our industry' through background checks and the high costs incurred by festival organisers to cover policing on site. Festival organisers also reported that policing on site can be heavy-handed, with purposeful targeting of tourists to levy administrative fines for drug possession.



Education about drugs to make informed decisions

Participants expressed frustration at the lack of education they received about drugs, exposing an important paradox: what happens when authorities, be they educational, parental, or political, provide inaccurate, non-evidence-based information about drugs to young people? In some cases, to be told not to try drugs because they are bad for your health or because it is against the law works to deter young people. In other cases, however, it does not. Young people will try drugs and often have positive experiences. This disconnect between what they were told by authority figures and what they have experienced will result in two problems:

1. Distrust in authorities, and
2. Self-experimentation with drugs, through trial and error.

Through self-experimentation, young people may expose themselves to harmful and risky practices, up until the point where they become more responsible through ageing and experience, if indeed they get there. For many, risky experimentation with drugs, including taking too much and engaging in dangerous mixing of substances, is a rite of passage. While this is not life threatening for most, it can contribute to life threatening situations for some, and can indeed set the scene for a much greater acute and/or chronic burden on people's physical and mental health. At its worst, this burden can result in accidental death by overdose.



Harm Reduction on dancefloors in Malta

Collectively, participants paint a picture of a thriving cultural community that is muted by stigma emerging from the association between electronic dance music and drugs. Such stigma and negative perceptions are described as common among Maltese authorities and publics, preventing meaningful discussions about the cultural, social, and economic value and significance of dancing and drug-taking in society.

While Malta has become a European leader in drug policy through ground-breaking reform around Cannabis, when it comes to other drugs, particularly in dancefloors contexts, Malta is seen as behind the rest of Europe. In multiple discussions ranging from harm reduction provision to the harnessing of local talent, participants expressed frustration when comparing festivals and clubs abroad (e.g. in the Netherlands, the UK, Portugal and Germany) to Malta. They expressed a desire for integrating harm reduction into club and festival approaches on the island, from simple offerings like free drinking water to more radical interventions as drug checking. Participants brought up the frustration they experienced because of the stigma around drugs and noted the hypocrisy, prevalent in Maltese and other societies, around the cultural accommodation of alcohol compared to other drugs.

In response to these problems, participants identified a need for better drug education based on harm reduction principles as informed by scientific research and available evidence, targeting schools, communities, clubs, and festivals. In festival contexts, a harm reduction approach could lay the foundations for different agencies and stakeholders, including the police, emergency services, festival organisers and welfare volunteers, to work together to ensure the wellbeing and safety of attendees. Harm reduction interventions are a prime opportunity to educate and inform people about drugs in places where drug taking happens, involving affected communities and encouraging them to make smarter choices.



Summary of Recommendations

Participants in the People and Dancefloors Malta project identified the following needs:

- The promotion of a collaborative relationship between law enforcement, festival organisers, emergency services and the public to prioritise people's safety and wellbeing.
- The development of drug education programmes in schools and communities that move beyond a zero tolerance, just-say-no approach and include useful, evidence-based information about substances
- The provision of harm reduction services and interventions to mitigate risks and promote informed decisions and behavioural change within clubs and festival environments

FURTHER RESOURCES

HARM REDUCTION MALTA

HARM REDUCTION MALTA GUIDELINES

PEOPLE AND DANCEFLOORS- VOICES FROM THE ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC SCENE IN MALTA

PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON THE NATIONAL DRUG POLICY FOR MALTA

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