

# The Power of PLUR: EDMC as a Reflection of a New Generation

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By

Nichole Lorenz

Dr. Jnan Blau

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Senior Project Advisor

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Signature

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Date

Dr. Bernard K. Duffy

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Department Chair

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Signature

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Date

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## **My First Massive**

I was seventeen when I attended my first “massive,” the term ravers have coined for large festivals of over 30,000 people. It was called ETD POP and took place at the Cow Palace in San Francisco. Even though I had listened to dance music before, and had been to a few warehouse parties, I had no idea what to expect from my first rave. My “rave father,” slang used for a person who got you into EDM, had been prepping me all week. It was our last week of high school and everyday after classes got out we would go back to his place and prepare for the big night. We made “kandi,” which are personalized beaded bracelets that ravers trade, and practiced “shuffling,” a token dance move that every raver is required to know.

I was all ready and excited to go. I crafted a shirt, which I cut up and tied in different, twisty ways. I strategically placed all the kandi I was prepared to trade on my arm. On the ride there my stomach was churning in a mixture of feelings: nervous, and excited, a literal whirlwind of emotions. We waited in line while the massive base line rumbled at our feet, meeting new friends and smoking countless cigarettes. We could feel the bass getting heavier and heavier as we got closer. And then we entered.

I had never experienced anything like it before in my life—the lights, the people, the heavy hitting bass! I was all-consumed in music and powerful vibrations. As the night progressed, we danced away, literally losing ourselves to the music and the DJ’s performance. But as time went on, I noticed there was something going on here much, much more powerful than amazing light shows and wild dance music. There was something there that I had never experienced before in my lifetime—a harmony among people.

There was an unspoken connection and camaraderie among the festival attendees. Everyone was friendly and genuinely interested in getting to know one another. There is

something extremely powerful, spiritual, and almost healing about being able to bond with a complete stranger. I remember when I traded my first piece of kandi and I received one back that said "Mystery." The boy who gave it to me gave me a hug and said "Mystery" was his rave name. I still have this piece of kandi and wear it to festivals today. Everyone introduced themselves by their rave names. It was like I had stepped into a dream world, a fantasy world: one where everyone was not themselves, but perhaps their "true" inner self. It was a world where everyone got along and the music and positive vibes seemed infinite.

Of course, the night did come to an end however. I made it back home with all of my friends. We chatted about the stories of the evening, our favorite DJ's and the remixes of songs that were played. I had never had more fun in my life. I remember turning to my friend and saying, "that literally was the best night of my life."

From that point on, EDM and the culture that embodies it has become a huge part of my life. It has even become a value system for how I chose to live. For me, EDM is not just a genre of music I listen to. It is a life motto, my inspiration to get up in the morning: it is an infinite possibility for friendships and community, and an escape from any negativity there is in the world. I have been to countless shows- massive festivals, clubs, and underground parties. They are all completely different and exciting, but there is something that unites them all, which is what keeps me coming back: the culture of peace, harmony, and respect among fellow human beings, all united by a single beat of music.

Electronic Dance Music has given me so much on an individual level, but I seek to understand it on an even deeper level, for a wider community of ravers. With the rising popularity of EDM and massive festivals, it seems that there is no question that EDM has affected others in the same kinds of ways that it has affected me. However, I cannot speak for

everyone who listens to EDM or goes to festivals. EDM encompasses such a wide range of musicality and culture that it is difficult to place a pin on one specific thing that has made it so culturally interesting to my generation. Nevertheless, with my knowledge of the scene as well as my interests in culture and communication, I hope to gain more insight on the subject.

### **Intro to EDM and the Questions at Hand**

Electronic Dance Music, known as “EDM,” encompasses a huge umbrella of music genres, including Trance, Electronic, House, Deep House, Dubstep, and Hardstyle- just to name a few. Along with these more common genres, there is an abundance of sub-genres, or slightly altered versions of each style. Each genre has its own distinct sound, a history, and a culture surrounding it, however they have all been placed together to form a large web of what is widely thought of as “EDM.” Even though every genre is unique there seems to be one unifier that holds together what we now consider “Electronic Dance Music”: culture.

With such a broad amount of musical expression and cultural appeal, EDM has quickly become a captivating phenomenon in the United States in recent years. According to the blog site *Your EDM*, in 2012 Dance Music was the highest growing mainstream genre in terms of digital track sales in the USA (*Sachs*). In addition, according to an article from *Forbes*, the two largest EDM festivals in the United States increased greatly in revenue and attendance in the last decade. Since 2005, Ultra Music Festival in Miami has grown almost 750% in attendance. Its rival, the Electric Daisy Carnival in Las Vegas, has sold out the past two years with close to 300,000 in attendance (*Lawrence*).

Music is a strong source of power and identification for young people. In their article, *Mixed Messages: Resistance and Reappropriation in Rave Culture*, Brian Ott and Bill Herman

note that “music is among the most central and significant ways that youth articulate style and hence a sense of self” (250). EDMC, Electronic Dance Music Culture, is thus a relatively new culture catering to a younger generation. The overall motto or cultural dogma of EDM is the acronym “PLUR,” which stands for peace, love, unity, and respect. The music, the people, the “good vibes,” virtually everything at an EDM festival, connects to the underlying element of “PLUR.” I believe it is no coincidence that my generation has so quickly adopted and incorporated EDM culture into their lives. “PLUR,” and everything it encompasses speaks truth to our younger generation, who are indeed seeking to create a new world of peace, love, unity, and respect. EDM is also an international phenomenon, and there is something very valuable going on with the connectedness “ravers” feel all around the world.

I believe EDM is a significant cultural phenomenon, much like that of the “Woodstock Generation” in the late sixties, except EDM is much broader and indirect in its attempt to unite a younger generation all around the world. Quoted in *EDM Music Junkies*, Spin Magazine reported in 2011 “that the American dance music scene had finally reached critical mass with a ‘new rave generation’ of mainstream consumers having emerged” (Qtd. in EDM Music Junkies). Also quoted in that blog, Time Out Chicago claimed that EDM has “become the driving beat behind pop music and product sales, the soundtrack of choice for a new generation” (Qtd. in EDM Music Junkies).

The sheer expansion and popularity of EDM over the past few years shows that there is a significant trend going on with EDM culture and what it represents for youth. For this reason, I want to dig further into the growing phenomenon of EDMC in the United States for this senior project. I want to better understand what is going on beneath the surface façade of costumes and drug use. Why does this culture appeal to so many young people? In his article, *Timeshards*:

*Repetition, Timbre, and Identity in Dance Music*, sociological scholar, Peter Jowers states, “Dance music is but part of a deeper inner cultural logic of our age” (Jowers 93). Music has always been a part of the shared cultural values and understanding of human beings, especially for younger people. Every generation has a significant counterculture, such as the Hippy movement in the 60’s or the “Grunge” movement of the 90’s. A new generation comes along and another culture shifts or takes form. In many ways, there is nothing new going on with respect to EDMC in America, however there are also a lot of important aspects to be looked at closer. I would like to use this approach, as well as my own understanding as an EDM fan, to dive further into my understanding of this cultural phenomenon. I want to focus on what specific aspects of the culture and music make EDM so valuable to its followers. In order to do this, I will focus on the following two research questions:

1- What makes the act of “raving” culturally significant/valuable?

2- Do the values embedded within EDMC relate to, or in some way shape/affect the values of my generation?

I believe this is an important topic of study, especially as a Communication Studies Major, because in our discipline we seek to better understand communicative acts and their relationship with culture. As an EDM festival attendee, I have found this topic to spark much interest for me, especially within the realm of human interaction and the culture forming around it. I believe this topic is also very applicable to many other students my age, who are either inspired by EDM or are fascinated by the cultural nature of it. EDM is growing more and more across the United States, and as a Communication Studies Major, it is important to understand the cultural meaning and communicative processes behind it.

## **Method in the Music**

The method I will use in order to answer these questions will be a cross between a literature review, and a case study. First, I will provide a brief overview of the history of EDM and a description of the culture today, specifically within the United States. I will then discuss research from previous bodies of literature surrounding music and culture, and more specifically the cultural aspects of EDM, in order to reveal what is going on for ravers on a deeper level. I will organize this review into four broad aspects: The Musicality of EDM, Dance Drugs, A Sense of Escape, A Cultivation of Belonging and Identity, and the Spirituality of Raving. Through this, I intend to layout the groundwork on what previous authors have said about the culture of clubbing/raving, specifically how and why it is culturally significant.

The second part of my paper will include a work with interviews I have conducted with various people I know who are highly involved in the culture. They have a wide range of EDM interests and differing thoughts about and experiences of raving. Through this, I intend to get a qualitative analysis of what current ravers think about EDM and its respective culture. My questions aim to get a better understanding of what ravers today think about “PLUR,” as well as whether or not they believe this set of cultural values relates to our generation. I already know how I feel about EDM and the impact it has made on my own life, but I would like to gain a comprehensive understanding about how others feel and allow their voices to be heard on the subject.

Through this method, I hope to paint a better picture of what EDM means to my generation. I believe research, along with new input from ravers will give me better insight into the growing cultural phenomenon of EDM. I hope to shed light on the importance of this shared cultural value among a generation of young people. I want to determine just how much the



values of “PLUR” and EDM culture reflect, copy, or even shape the values of those who participate in the culture. Only time will tell just how much the cultural values of EDM will play out in the lives of my generation, but I believe there is something very valuable and interesting going on that deserves our attention and research in the Communication Studies discipline and beyond.

### **From Discodogs to Kandi Kids: The Evolution of EDM in the U.S.**

#### *A Brief History*

The history and evolution of Electronic Dance Music is difficult to describe as it stems from a number of places at various points in time. The beginning cannot really be attributed to a specific moment, place, or person. EDM is a shape-shifting grouping of musical genres, which might not even be fairly categorized within the same superficial umbrella, known as “EDM.” Peter Jowers points out, “I use the generic terms *dance culture* and *electronic dance music* to describe a specific popular musical *aesthetic*. Rave embodied a specific combination of electronic musical forms, technological development, the drug ecstasy and dancing spaces” (Jowers 381-382). What EDM genres hold in common are the use of turntables by the “DJ,” or Disk Jockey, and the use of technological sounds such as synthesizers, drum machines, and voice manipulators. It is important to point this out in the discussion of the history of EDM because the music genres vary greatly and embody a history too large for a complete discussion in this paper. In addition, it is important to distinguish the birth of “rave culture” as a separate entity from the music alone. I am discussing the history of the music, even more specifically focusing on its history in America, but not technically the history of “raving.” In many ways EDMC is one with

the music itself, and would not even exist if it weren't for the music, but it is also important to separate the term "rave" from EDM, as there can still be music separate from raving.

The roots of EDM can be dated back to the Disco era of the late 60's and 70's and the use of the turntable. European clubs called "discotheques" are most closely associated with this. In the United States clubs were the result of racial and sexual prejudice- a place where homosexuals, mostly of African American or Latino decent could gain a sense of community outside of the hate surrounding them. Jowers wrote, "Club culture and gay militancy interlocked in a world of astonishing drug and dance-fuelled excess in the innocent days before AIDS" (Jowers 383-384). It became a safe haven for the gay community and a place where a sense of self could be regained. Well known author on dance music, Hillegonda Rietveld, mentioned in his article, *This is our House: House Music, Cultural Spaces and Technologies*, that born from this rebellion, house music "started as an effect of the positive power of community... it was also the effect of the negative power of racial and sexual segregation" (Rietveld 25). Much like many other genres of years previous, and years to come, Disco was quickly adopted into the mainstream culture with the help of the media and movies such as "Saturday Night Fever."

A new stigma surrounded Disco as it gained popularity, leading many to say disco was "dead," but really it took on a new underground form called "house music." Named after its origins at the Chicago Warehouse Club, house music stemmed from Disco DJ's who wanted to "heighten the euphoria" of the dancers (Jowers 384). A Disco Jockey called DJ Knuckles emerged and played a large role in shaping the sound of the music. DJ Knuckles blurred the boundary between Disc Jockey and producer as he started to create his own music. According to music scholar Kembrew McLeod, in his article, *Genres, Subgenres, Sub-subgenres and more: Musical and Social Differentiation within Slectronic/Dance Music Communities*, the "Disco- and

its accompanying playback format of choice, the 12-inch single- propelled the DJ into the position of producing music” (McLeod 63). The birth of the extended remix was created when mixes were pressed onto vinyl.

House music moved over to Ibiza by the 1980’s and then quickly disseminated through Britain from visiting tourists. There, it took on a different form called “acid house.” Although the origins of acid house remain unclear, the name reflects the adoption and adaptation of the Chicago house scene. Worlds apart from the homosexual/minority culture surrounding the Chicago scene, acid house embodied large gatherings called “raves.” This is when the term “raving,” as we know it today was originated. The attendees were primarily young, white, teenagers, who were “partially fueled by the euphoria-inducing drug ecstasy” (McLeod 63). Acid house had a much more upbeat and synthesized sound than previous electronic music and Chicago house names became identified with the sound as well. In his article, *Electronic Dance Music Culture and Religion: An Overview I*, Graham St. John wrote, “With acid house, dance became a ‘seductive absence’, it had lost its use value.” (2). Many consider this as death of the rave scene, although EDM continued to develop in new ways.

In 1988 “techno” emerged as the name a record company created for a new style of music in the Detroit rave scene. Although techno is commonly believed to have started in Detroit, its roots can be traced back to a music group called Kraftwerk in Dusseldorf, Germany (Reynolds). Kraftwerk had huge influence on the New York rave scene, but took a much stronger hold for young African Americans in Detroit. When the acid house rave scene became “tabloid” with over-exposure, a number of different names were used, before “techno” was finally settled on. According to Sara Thornton, in her article, *Club Cultures: Media, Music and Subcultural Capital*, “The term had at least two advantages: it was free from the overt drug reference of acid

house, and it sounded like what it described- a high-tech predominantly instrumental music” (75). Detroit techno became a popular genre because of its indirect contact with Chicago house (Reynolds). Although techno artists still exist, the genre has been mostly brushed aside and reformed as more genres of EDM have been created, but traces of it still exist in many genres today.

As the initial euphoria of the scene and recreational drug use began to wear off, a darker side of Electronic Dance Music developed. Genres such as “hardcore”, a fast-paced heavy-hitting bass genre, and “dark side,” a “dense” and “poly-rhythmic” sound formed when new mentalities of “going too far” or “no turning back,” were included in the scene (McLeod 64; Reynolds 107). Soon after, another upbeat genre called Jungle developed. Heavily influenced by hip-hop, it was the roots of what is known today as “drum and bass.” Hip-hop has influenced EDM in many ways throughout its evolution, and in turn has been affected by it as well.

During the development of dance music, other genres under the EDM umbrella also developed which were originally not meant for dancing. For example, raves would have “chill-out rooms” which incorporated ambient and more relaxed music without the heavy, repetitive basslines of other genres. Although these genres were not created for dancing, “this does not exclude these subgenres from inclusion in the electronic/dance metagenre,” (McLeod 64). Ambient and chillout genres were still created in relation to the purposes of dancing, and are thus still very much included in the development of EDM.

The process of developing new sounds, of revolutionizing and mixing old ones, as well as of the re-appropriation of genre names has been an ongoing aspect of Electronic Dance Music, which still continues today. The development of EDM, due to its very nature, is very much tied to technological advancement. After the development of MIDI interfaces, EDM producers can

use personal computers to make music, and large recording equipment has become outdated and unneeded. This has allowed for EDM to flourish and find new sounds, shapes, forms, and genres. Advancing technology has also made it much easier to become an EDM producer. Indeed, as McLeod states, “Without lapsing into hyperbole, I can confidently claim that the continuous and rapid introduction of new subgenre names into electronic/ dance music communities is equaled by no other type of music” (McLeod 60). The music is constantly redesigning, with a “new” genre or sub-genre, always a re- “re-mastered” version of another one. This is what keeps EDM so innovative and exciting. However, some might argue this has had an impact on the purity of the music. Many genres die as quickly as they started or morph with other genres until they lose their original sound. This nature of EDM plays out/has implications in the culture as well. The culture is also constantly shifting, developing, and changing in relation to the music, and also in relation to its fans.

### *The Existing Rave Scene*

Currently in the U.S. “rave” scene, thousands flock to large festivals, such as Ultra Music Festival in Miami, or the Electric Daisy Carnival in Las Vegas. EDM has been in many ways commercialized and commodified by large corporations, such as Insomniac, who put on massive rave parties. As the scene has grown, so have discrepancies on the “honesty” of EDM and rave culture in America (Ott and Herman). People question the authenticity of “ravers” today and the musical talent of DJ’s who could be simply pressing play on a computer. The commercialization of the scene has allowed the EDM business to grow to enormous proportions by unfairly charging devoted fans. A recent SNL short called *When Will the Bass Drop* makes fun of this element of EDM business. The DJ, acted by Andy Sandberg, plays a song that “never drops,”

while he tantalizes a crowd of screaming crying fans by taking their credit cards and playing video games behind his set table. His name is “Davincii” made in reference to the famous DJ Avicii, who is questioned by many to be an example of a “sell out” in EDM.

I have only been involved in the scene over the last five years, and even I have noticed a huge shift in the authenticity of EDM and rave culture in the U.S. All of these allegations have some truth to them, and unfortunately the same has happened to other youth countercultures and music scenes, when they inevitably hit “the mainstream.” However, there is definitely still value to the cultural aspects of “raving.” Even though a lot of the original culture of the scene may have become lost, remnants and pieces remain alive within the community of ravers today, which allows for more people to become involved as well.

Rave culture continues to embody the term “PLUR” standing for peace, love, unity, and respect. This is the cultural foundation and philosophy for all interactions at raves. Ravers create beaded bracelets called “kandi,” which are traded at shows. They can be single bracelets or large cuffs. Some people even make elaborate masks or tops with kandi. Originally, kandi were used to store ecstasy pills or “E” to trade with others, but now they are traded as a more or less friendly exchange among the community.

There is something extremely powerful about the exchanging of kandi. It is an exchange of a part of yourself, usually given to a fellow raver that you bond with. Trading kandi is more than just being friendly, it is a way to affirm another human being. When a bracelet is passed from one hand to the other, four gestures are done to represent peace, love, unity, and respect. Usually kandi is crafted and specifically traded with a purpose or some meaning behind it. Although many people do not have “rave names” anymore, a lot of kandi used to have a rave name on it, which would be traded so the other person could remember, and have a piece of you

with them. Other common kandis are the names of DJ's or shows that you trade with someone when you are there.

Authentic or "old school" ravers will never trade a piece of kandi that they did not make themselves. This way, kandi trading is very personalized and also a way to show how long you have been raving. It is acceptable to where all your kandi to festivals, and the ravers with a lot of kandi are well respected and looked up to within the culture. By physically wearing all of the bracelets they have received from past shows, EDM fans form an important symbolic community or bond. Surrounding the philosophy of "PLUR," this cultural exchange of information and identity allows a spiritual connection to be formed among a community. A website devoted to PLUR and rave culture called *Peace and Loveism* describes the importance of kandi:

It may seem as a silly idea to those who do not understand the PLUR philosophy, or for those who have never experienced a rave or a kandi trade themselves, but trading kandi is something that strengthens peoples' understanding that interconnectedness and oneness are fundamental aspects of reality and have to be realized by all, if we truly wish to have an global evolution of consciousness. (Peace and Loveism)

This process, I argue, is the single most significant aspect of EDMC. It "strengthens" and unites ravers within the shared belief of PLUR, and is a performance that seeks to spread its values to the outside world as well.

Following the idea of "PLUR," all interactions among ravers are friendly and generous. Everything is shared and no one intentionally hurts another human being. Although this can never actually be true, especially with the commercialization and growing popularity of EDM, this is the overall theme and value embedded in the rave scene today. Rave scholar Scott R.

Hutson, describes the significance of the “pillars” of raving in his article, *Technoshamanism: Spiritual Healing in the Rave Subculture*. He says:

Nondifferentiation, unity, and solidarity figure prominently in my source material. Explaining...the rave motto PLUR (Peace Love Unity Respect), ravers state that ‘[rave] has the ability and power of transcending all of the minor details, no matter what race, creed, or religion.’ ‘We rave because boundaries must be broken’...Openness and inclusion are part of the official attitude of a rave. (66)

PLUR is what allows the rave to become a place without judgment. It is a fantasy world in which ravers can explore new possibilities of how to be, act, and relate to the world.

Although simple in its motto, “PLUR” has real, potent, and deep power in the lives of people who are involved in the culture. There are many bodies of research devoted to the discussion of EDMC. In my review of past literature, I have noticed five main aspects of rave culture, which give it cultural significance. Therefore, I have parsed my discussion into the separate sections: The Musicality of EDM, Dance Drugs, A Sense of Escape, A Cultivation of Belonging and Identity, and the Spirituality of Raving. I would like to point out that although I am categorizing them in this manner, this is not exhaustive of *all* the feelings of *all* ravers. There are certainly cultural aspects which cannot be fully explained, and which are experienced differently by everyone. Also, these categories are all interdependent. That is, each part interacts to form the overall “essence” and significance of rave culture.

Before I delve into the literature, I would also like to point out that an overwhelming majority of rave scholarship was developed in the latter half of the 1990’s. There seems to be a resurgence of interest in EDM cultural studies post 2006, as well. The rave scene, as well as EDM in general, has changed immensely especially within the past few years. Therefore, I



would like to acknowledge that there could be some discrepancies as to how accurate the literature describes, or applies to, rave culture today. However, it is also just as important to realize that these elements are still underlying and deeply rooted within EDMC, and traces can still be seen in testimonials of ravers as well as some scholars today, and are hence still deserving of attention.

## **The Factions of EDMC**

### *The Musicality of EDM*

As stated above, Electronic Dance Music encompasses such a wide range of sounds and styles that it may be unreasonable to use the term EDM to describe all of them. However, there is one unifying quality that can serve to justify the term EDM. According to music scholar Ben Neill, in his article, *Pleasure Beats: Rhythm and the Aesthetics of Current Electronic Music*, EDM's "aesthetic approaches are most clearly defined in terms of the presence or absence of repetitive beats" (3). Although most scholarship on EDM has been focused on the cultural aspects of raving, some music scholars have taken a different approach, describing the aesthetic value and "mind-body" connection with the music. Famous rave scholar Poschardt Ulf notes in his book *DJ-Culture*, that EDM "Communicates directly with the body ...and lets its life and experiences flow into [an] ecstasy of perception. The body as a material satellite of the physical system actually brings with it its own memories and stories" (Qtd. in Jowers 385; Poschardt 414).

Much of the literature on dance music focuses on this ability of the music to draw the listener into a different kind of world. Simon Reynolds, for his part, discusses this in his book *Energy flash: A journey through rave music and dance culture*. He notes, "Dance music

dramatically intensifies the *trompe l'oreille* side of psychedelia: its fictitious psycho-acoustic space, its timbres and textures and sound- shapes to which no real world referents attach themselves. [The music] lures the listener into a sound world honeycombed with chambers that each have their own acoustics” (Reynolds 386). The use of “timbre,” the term music scholars use for “noise” within sound waves, allows for this ‘fictitious psycho-acoustic space’ to form. They are the “grain, character or quality of any sound understood as distinct from its pitch or intensity, and referred to as ‘the expressive basis of music’” (Jowers 392). Timbre greatly affects our mental and physical memories of the music. In EDM the absence of or repetitive nature of beats and timbres offers a sort of “rediscovery.” As a result, “we experience the thrill of the unexpected when we re-hear specific timbres from uncanny zone between memory and forgetfulness...Dance DJs trigger euphoric re-recognition *and* repeat the bliss ‘re-membering’ creates for as long as the crowd can take it” (Jowers 392). Instead of creating new distinct memories, listening to EDM recreates and relives past ones. EDM becomes a dynamic cognitive process between the dancer and the music.

Another central key notion to understanding the foundation of EDM’s aesthetic value is “sampling,” in which the DJ has the ability to cut up the music and insert it wherever he or she pleases, often turning samples into “loops,” or repetitions. Sampling allows for the music to become a dynamic “soundscape,” in which “music is increasingly appreciated ‘out of order’ and consumed in fragments or ‘semiotic particles’” (Jowers 390). Jowers also comments on the ability of the music to warp time, “Sampling enables sound to reappear in strange juxtapositions, where we move within a particular complex of re-membered worlds. Electronic music experienced in real time, assembled elsewhere, evokes a virtuality of forgotten experiences reawakened, evanescent and often unplaceable...Time is warped” (Jowers 393). EDM creates for

the listener an altered state of time where past memories are reflected upon. This is a satisfying experience because the music is somehow new, but always recognizable.

In addition to this sense of ‘time warp,’ sampling allows EDM producers to “explore and experiment with the sonic interplay of different rhythms pushing technologies, their tools, to the limits. Aesthetic dynamism and change are inherent to ‘DJ culture’” (Jowers 393). This ‘aesthetic dynamism’ has a huge affect on the cognitive experience of EDM fans. A tension becomes apparent within the music- a contrast between the consistent repetitive nature of the beat, loop, or timbre, and the unexpected samples incorporated into the tracks. As Jowers claims, “It is in this space that electronic dance music finds its most demanding aesthetic” (Jowers 394).

Author and music scholar Mark J. Butler, worked in depth with these same aspects of EDM in his book *Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Musical Design in Electronic Dance Music*. His main thesis is that EDM, and more specifically techno music, allows for the flexing of time and meaningful interpretations of and within the music. Butler describes how ambiguity in EDM creates a social experience among listeners:

The consequences of ambiguity in this music, therefore, are both formal and aesthetic. Moreover, they hail the listener in a way that is also social: metrically ambiguous sections encourage the listener to construe the meter actively rather than absorb metrical information passively. On the dance floor, this construction occurs in and between bodies as well as in minds. In so doing, dancers and listeners challenge the oft-expressed contention that rhythm in dance music (in general, not just in EDM) must be simple and obvious—a view that hinges upon a conception of the dancers as passive recipients of the rhythms they are given. Rather, EDM is consistently written in a way that promotes

active participation in the construction of musical experience, generating interpretations that are both individual and multiple. (Butler 137)

As Butler described, although in the past there has been a “less than thrilled attitude” about the use of repetition and steady beats in EDM, more scholars with exposure to EDM have found the intrinsic value to the nature of this type of music. Through the literature, it can be seen that EDM has a lot of musical value, more specifically with its ability to manipulate time and allow for a cognitive and active participatory interaction with listeners. According to musician and pop culture scholar Ben Neill, “Shifts of tempo, subdivision, sonic manipulation and complex quantization structures are making beat science the new jazz of the 21st century” (Neill 4). This can be seen with the progression, development, as well as growing popularity and interest in Electronic Dance Music.

### *Dance Drugs*

In my discussion of EDMC, it is important to note a key player to the structure and attitude of rave culture- MDMA. Although certainly not all ravers use “club drugs,” also known as MDMA, Ecstasy, or “E,” it is an important topic of study for EDMC scholarship because it is very much alive and popular within the scene, and contributes to the overall culture of EDM in many aspects. It is important to note that although ravers do not necessarily “need” club drugs to feel a sense of euphoria or trance-like states, this is part of what makes EDMC unique and therefore must be touched on in this discussion.

MDMA, or chemical 3, 4 Methylenedioxymethamphetamine, is the popular, man-made, mind-altering drug of choice at raves or clubs. The drug works in the brain by enhancing three main neurotransmitters: serotonin, dopamine, and nor epinephrine (MDMA (Ecstasy) Abuse).

Studies of the effects of MDMA have shown that the “drug breaks down individual inhibitions and subdues the dominance of the ego” (Hutson 57). The stimulant effects have been testified to produce a kind of truthful or spiritual feeling of clarity. According to Jane Maxwell, in her article, *Party drugs: Properties, Prevalence, Patterns, and Problems*, studies reveal that people describe feeling relaxed, empathetic or “intensely emotional and... creating the perception that one can experience the emotions of others” (1205). A testimonial from Fritz’s work, *Rave Culture: An insider’s Overview*, describes the sensations of MDMA for one user: “The MDMA experience makes you perceive by a kind of intuition, the real essence of your being. It’s not something elaborated by your conscious or unconscious mind; it’s something you suddenly realize you know without any doubt. You know the truth because you have experienced it. Now that you know that you, me, everything is one, or God as you wish to call it” (Qtd. in Fritz 188). This quote demonstrates the immense effects users, especially within heightened situations such as raves, feel when on MDMA. It can be considered a spiritual revelation and a way to achieve a connection to something greater than one’s self.

Nicholas Saunders has been a leading researcher in the study of the development and effects of MDMA, especially in 1990’s Britain during the height of the “acid house” rave scene. He described the history of MDMA in his work, *Ecstasy and the Dance Culture*, beginning with its patency in 1913 by a German company called E. Merck Pharmaceuticals. It was rumored that the U.S. Army tested it as a “truth” drug, but there is no firm evidence of this (Saunders 8). The “grandfather” of MDMA was Alexander Shogun, a biochemist from University of California Berkeley who tested the drugs for many years in the 70’s. Experimenting with the drug himself and with his friends, Shogun began the use of MDMA by experimental therapists, especially within the realm of psychotherapy (Saunders 8). Eventually ecstasy found its way into the

mainstream in the 1980's, propelled by the development of House Music, and became illegal at this time (Saunders 10).

MDMA, and many of its “party drug” relatives couple with the “rave experience” to create a heightened, euphoric state. It is no coincidence, then, that MDMA is the drug of choice at rave festivals since its properties produce a feeling of what researcher Drew Hemment calls “ekstasis.”

Ekstasis as ‘a difference or standing out from the surface of life’s contingencies...[enabling] a more profound contemplation of being.’ In this expansion, ekstasis denotes ‘a life affirming experience fundamental to one’s orientation to the world’, an experience far removed from that which ‘ecstasy’ commonly signifies: ‘a mixture of intense pleasure and loss of control... a casual and inconsequential psychological state.’ (Qtd. in St. John 7; Hemment 24)

Ekstasis creates an out-of-body, out-of-mind orientation. Its effects correlate with those feelings associated with the notion of PLUR and dance culture in that PLUR exemplifies feelings of honesty, kindness, and harmony among humanity. Hemment provides a poetic analysis for the interaction between dance drugs and EDMC.

This moment [the ecstatic dance] is that of the dancer confronting the limit of pure possibility; the point of indiscernibility at which intensity reaches a vanishing point amongst its background conditions. The disappearance into the singular field of the music is articulated within a general becoming-unlimited, by which the identities and hierarchies of the ego are abandoned. At this point both self and others disappear together. Indeed, the categorical distinction between Self and Other itself disappears, releasing a profound sense of unity. (Hemment 5)

Many researchers have found ecstasy to be the “fuel” of the rave scene and its culture (Hemment; Hutson). The drug is the perfect spouse to the rave culture paradigm of PLUR. However, it is also important to note that the drug, after extended use, has diminishing effects, and can cross over into “the dark side.” Reynolds describes, “There seems to be a moment, intrinsic to any drug culture, when the scene crosses over into ‘the dark side.’ In ecstasy subcultures, there tends to be a point where the MDMA honeymoon phase comes to an abrupt end” (Reynolds, 188-90). It is important to note in this discussion that ecstasy, although it allows a certain type of narrative to play out within rave culture, is also a drug of concern among scholars and the public (Hutson; Reynolds).

Regardless of one’s orientation toward MDMA and Ecstasy, it is an important aspect of EDMC. It provides participants with an experience very much rooted within the values of PLUR, and allows for the cultivation of senses of escape, feelings of belonging and unity, and spiritual enlightenment. It is important to understand, again, that MDMA is not the causation of these aspects of EDMC, but the correlation, which I will now move on to discussing.

### *A Sense of Escape*

Much of the academic literature on clubbing and rave culture, especially older discourse, focuses on the ability for raves to transcend reality. When a raver steps out on the dance floor, they enter a fantasy world, in which space and time, facilitated by the atmosphere, repetitive music, club drugs, and intense lighting, fades away. Hutson provides a description of this: “By holding raves in secretive, out- of- the- way places at times when the rest of the population is usually asleep, ravers slip into an existential void where the gaze of authority and the public do not penetrate. In sum, through music, dance, and drugs, ravers create a seductive void and experience great joy in erasing their subjectivity” (Hutson 57). It can be said, then, that the rave

floor becomes a space for experimentation, in which ravers can play with “fantasy identities...[in which] oppressive identities could be cast aside, released from the rigidities of rationalized time” (Jowers 384). Ravers can step out of their day-to-day personas, and can enter new ones, shedding any sort of constrained or previously established subjectivity. In *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, Simon Frith describes how participatory music “gives us a real experience of what the ideal could be” (274). The theoretical basis in the pillars of PLUR allows for this. The morals of the rave— peace, love, unity, and respect—allow for a new “utopian” space to develop. This “utopian” space is one of equality in which desires of democracy and sexual and social acceptance ring true, and in which participation is enabled (Jowers 386; Firth).

Many ravers describe this as a feeling of becoming “lost within the music,” an idea generally associated with the idea of “trance,” or “trance dance.” The loud beats, along with mind-altering drugs can induce a state of “dance-coma,” in which all reality fades away. In this sense, Huston notes that “raves are similar to the trance dances of the Dobe Ju/’hoansi of Botswana....in [which] both cases, trance states are reached by a combination of music...exhaustive all-night dancing and flickering light” (Hutson 63). Throughout history this kind of mind-altering space through trance dance has been used for rituals by tribes in order to achieve some sort of spiritual affirmation. In the rave scene the same ritualistic effects have been seen.

The ritualistic aspect of raving, then, provides the ability to “get out” of oneself, and to “transcend previous limits of daily routine, domination and restraint” (Frith 275). Some scholars, in fact, have argued there is a human desire to return to more primitive notions and experiences. For example, Mircea Eliade believes raving demonstrates “The Myth of the Eternal Return,” in which there is a “nostalgic desire to return to an original, primordial, timeless land of perfect and



total joy; a presexual age of innocence in which there is no social discord, no differentiation between self and other” (cited in Hutson 65; Eliade). For many scholars, and most certainly for active ravers, EDMC could be seen as a sort of reversion to more “simple,” “powerful,” and even “more real” times. This sense of escaped reality is crucial to debunking the myth that raving is a “decayed, empty superficial and meaningless world” (St. John 10). The act of raving, then, is a very powerful experience because it alters dimensions of time and participants’ beliefs/outlooks about the world.

### *A Cultivation of Belonging and Identity*

In addition to creating a “utopian” space, in which reality is escaped, and in which there is a reverting back to more primitive, less subjective times, EDMC also creates a sense of belonging and identity for those who participate. Established in the previous literature relating to “escaping reality,” raves can be seen in a sort of “neo-tribal” ritualistic manner (Sylvan; Malbon; Frith). All of them have noted raves as “matters of ritual.” Looking at raves through a lens of “ritual,” scholars have shown how this can cultivate a sense of identity. Jowers stated, “Identity, always relational, can never be fully autonomous. Rituals- dance culture contains many of them- dramatize relationships. Opening up potentialities, throwing into question our sense of self, music draws attention to the fact that ‘our social circumstances are not immutable” (Jowers 386). The ritual of raving, therefore, draws the participant into a dramatized sense of who they are and where they belong.

Music, especially EDM, is a shared experience that can never be fully separated from the individual or the crowd. We see, then, that music has the ability to facilitate new identities and understandings of one’s self by “experiences it offers the body, time, and social ability” (Frith

275). At raves, individuals “pragmatically present themselves to themselves” and to their fellow ravers by creating and reinforcing a “thread of self-identity” (Frith 275). Everything from what they wear to their interactions with other ravers, especially during the communicative and cultural performance of trading kandi, creates a new sense or development of “self.” At festivals, I have seen others, and experienced firsthand, the feeling and sense of freedom to be who I truly am and also who I want to be. Surrounding the embodiment of PLUR, at a rave you are allowed to be yourself without being judged by anyone. In this manner, “music is used to spin a tale of who we have been and will become” (Jowers 390). Music is a form that we can identify with, and also become identified by.

What is interesting about the nature of EDMC, as well as of some other music sub-cultures, is the unique ability for the rave to create a personal sense of identity as well as a collective and communal identity. According to cultural theorist Zygmunt Bauman, and other scholars, this is a “state of in-betweenness”- the “flux between identity and identification [with the crowd]” (Qtd. in Malbon 46-50). In his book *Clubbing: Dancing, Ecstasy, and Vitality*, Ben Malbon elaborates on this concept. He adds that while ravers are bonded through their shared love of the music, they can also carve their own individual paths through dance and the “clubbing experience,” asserting themselves therefore as unique individuals (Malbon 74). Malbon believes that the “social constitution of the crowd,” embodied in the acronym PLUR, as well as the raver’s individual connection, understanding, and approach to PLUR are central to the “in-betweenness” that they feel between individuality and identification with a larger cultural understanding (Malbon 74). Inherently, and perhaps indirectly, the motto PLUR both affirms the idea of a collective consciousness of “peace” and “unity,” as well as of “love” and “respect” for individuality.

Other scholars agree with the ability of music, and more uniquely of EDM, to both consolidate one's notion of his or her personal self, as well as identify with a larger cultural experience. Eyerman and Jaimison note, in *Music and Social Movements* that, "The construction of meaning through music and song is...a powerful force in social movements and social life generally...[and] a central aspect of collective identity formation" (Eyerman and Jaimison 161). As Frith notes "fans (and musicians), just as much as academics, know that music both marks out their individuality and places them in social groups..." (Qtd. in Jowers 385; Frith 128). Examples of these kinds of testimonials from ravers establish this shared understanding (Sylvan; Malbon).

The flux between finding one's own individuality while also identifying with a large crowd, combined with the "utopian" sense of escape from reality allows the raver to have a full embodied and fantastical experience. St. John describes the "experience of dissolution and inclusiveness" as a way to open the possibility for individuals to share a collective ecstatic experience, which alleviates feelings of isolation associated with modern times (St. John 10). Therefore, raving provides its participants with something very important that is not easily found in other communities. In her essay, *Music as a technology of the self*, Tia DeNora describes that raving "can be used individually and collectively both *projectively* and *retrospectively*" to assemble one's overall identity (De Nora). This has a powerful sub-conscious and conscious effect on the identity of ravers. They can feel apart of something greater than themselves while also cultivating a deeper understanding of themselves as individuals. Cleverly stated by De Nora, "We are all our own DJ's, using music in complex ways" (De Nora). This is also crucial to understanding the "religio-spiritual" experience of raving, which I will discuss further in the next section.

## *The Spirituality of Raving*

I have chosen to focus on EDMC as a spiritual experience at the end of my discussion of the literature because it is the accumulation of all other processes and interactions at raves. The musicality of EDM, the club drugs, the ability to feel as if one is escaping from reality, and the cultivation of a self-identity, as well as a collective one, all merge together to form the overall experience of a “spiritual” journey. For some young people, “raves are a form of entertainment not taken as seriously as a religious experience,” however, “this does not eliminate the fact that for many people, the rave is spiritual and highly meaningful” (Hutson 46). There have been numerous testimonials from ravers that exemplify how “raves increase self esteem, release fears and anxieties, bring inner peace, and improve consciousness, among other things” (Hutson 46). Scholarship has also increasingly realized the immense "religio-spiritual" nature of raves. St. John reports that ravers “expressed a commitment to a nascent planetary spirituality, or conveyed a sensation of awakening, renewal or rebirth via libratory and sometimes millenarian narratives of ascension and re-enchantment” (St. John 3). He also notes that “EDMC regard[s] the dance music experience as...experimental, transcendent, transformative; a source of ‘spiritual healing’ equivalent to conversion experience” (St. John 4). There is an overwhelming amount of testimonials and literature to qualify raving as a spiritual experience.

One of the key ideas to come out of rave scholarship is the notion that the rave is a performance; even more so, that the lines between the DJ and the raver are completely “erased and redefined” (Neill 4). At a rave, the artist is no longer the focal point, but the social interactions of the crowd becomes the performance in and of itself (Neill 4; Hutson 57). The participants become a part of something larger than themselves, united in a crowd through the

interactions in and among themselves. In this sense, the rave is ritualized, and becomes a sort of religious experience for many.

In many ways, raves even reference “tribalistic” or “ritualistic” narratives. In his book *Trance Formation*, Robin Sylvan compares raves to shamanistic cultures and pre-civilized rituals (97-127). He describes many similarities between the two, including the achievement of trance-like states, the use of the DJ as a sort of “ceremonial leader,” recognizable religious symbols such as modern altars, as well as the description of spiritual words and notions at festivals. Terms such as “alchemy,” “rights of spring,” and notions of the “cosmic” have existed and still exist within EDMC today. (Sylvan 97-127). Many EDM festivals and events celebrate seasonal transitions and celestial events (St. John 3). Hutson has also compared EDMC to that of “evangelical healing” and conversion, describing the rave as an ascendance into a more enlightened state of mind (Hutson 62). In this sense, EDMC can be valued as a “techno tribal church” (Sylvan).

EDMC, therefore, functions as a culture of spirituality, and indeed could be seen as religious in nature. Hutson is careful to point out, however, that despite the similarities between raves and religious ceremonies, many ravers distance themselves from organized religion. He quotes one who said, “Raves should influence people metaphysically outside of the religious sphere...[a] religion without theological foundation or unified expression” (Hutson 60). St. John notes, because “a context for truth, authenticity, and self realization [is] sought outside of traditional religious frameworks” raving has a very unique, spiritual perspective (St. John 17). EDMC allows for spirituality without adherence to an organized religious perspective. He calls this instead a “spirituality of life” (St. John 17).

In this way, raves are not only spiritual for participants, but also therapeutic. Hutson describes the ability for the rave as a cultural performance to have great power for the raver's "spirit," as well as a way to position themselves politically, religiously, and philosophically.

The important point... is that by crossing over in a *communitas* state, ravers feed their spirit. This feeding of the spirit is what makes the rave so therapeutic. Rave culture dissipates the tension of entering a world of underemployment and shrinking opportunity. By manipulating symbols of tribalism, ravers are able to reaffirm what they say the world ought to be- liberation, freedom, union, communion, harmony, warmth, peace, love, euphoria, bliss, happiness, godliness, and health- and confront with renewed vigor what they say the world actually is- violence, fear, hatred, racism, injustice, greed, competition, division, differentiation, isolation, impotence and alienation. In other words, the rave, like the most properly functioning rituals, successfully unifies the "ought" and the "is" through symbols. (Hutson 67)

Therefore, raves become a spiritual construction, and also a projection of how ravers want to see and to be in the world around them. Each element I have discussed previously—Musicality, Dance Drugs, A Sense of Escape, and A Cultivation of Belonging and Identity—is part of the raves ascendance to the "religio-spiritual" level. The musical elements of EDM paired with the use of dance drugs such as Ecstasy or MDMA provide an out of body "trance", placing the dancer in a space of "escaped" reality. This sense of escape allows for a "utopian" existence to form, in which the ravers feel an important connectedness among one another, while also affirming their own individually identity. Coming full circle, the rave thus becomes a spiritual ritual and performance in which EDMC participants construct a type of existence they want for themselves.

I have now identified and answered what makes EDM and raving culturally valuable. Now, I want to inquire further into my second research question about EDMC as a reflection of my generation's values using the testimonials of ravers today.

### **Our Current State of Mind: Testimonials from Ravers Today**

In an attempt to gain a better understanding of what “modern” ravers think, feel, and experience within EDMC, I interviewed ten friends of mine who I know are highly involved in the culture. I would like to point out that as much as I tried to get answers from people with differing interests and insight into the scene, I cannot give a complete overview of what all ravers in my generation think and feel. This is only a small, selective case study and will not fully encapsulate how everyone feels about EDM today. In what follows, however, I do hope to facilitate a better awareness of what people think about EDM in America today. I also hope to answer the question of whether the values of EDM reflect our generation as a whole.

For the purposes of my discussion, I will focus on the participants' answers to the following interview questions:

1. Describe what “PLUR” and EDM culture means to you.
2. Do you believe in this motto?
3. Rave culture is quickly becoming a global phenomenon within a younger generation.  
Why do you think this is?
4. Do you think the values embedded in EDM culture reflect those of our generation?

In response to what the motto, “PLUR” means to them, and whether or not they identify with its meaning, all of the interviewees answered something along the lines of, “going to a rave and fully immersing yourself in the experience, while maintaining peace, fellowship, and erasing

predisposed judgment toward others.” One described it as a “kind of mutual agreement among ravers that everyone is going to share an amazing experience together while treating everyone with the utmost respect and kindness” (Blossom). Another described PLUR in terms of “breaking down social barriers.” He said, “PLUR instills in people to be genuine and present with people and encourages people to check their social baggage at the door” (Rinehart). All discussions of PLUR between the interviewers were about “connectedness to others” and “unity.” Although not all of the testimonials identified with PLUR in spiritual terms, they see it as a relational mechanism, one from which all communication occurs. My favorite passage reads:

PLUR is what makes EDM what it is. It is the golden rule of dance music. It's what allows people to feel free when they attend EDM shows. Because of PLUR you can dress however you want, dance however you want, listen to whatever you like and it allows you to share beautiful moments that will last forever in your mind with the people you love and the people you may meet. When you attend a show everyone there is your friend because of PLUR. PLUR gives you a sip of water when you're thirsty or takes a picture of you and your friends. PLUR is that friend that always gives and never asks for anything in return. (Weir)

Another raver noted that, “Plur is kind of like feminism,” in the sense that it differs within each crowd and show (Patterson).

Among the different genres of EDM, there seemed to be an agreement that the less popular genres were the ones that still hold the original values of PLUR the most. For example, one raver described how hardstyle has not gained much popularity in the U.S. yet. He says, “The people who really love and respect the EDM community live their lives through PLUR.” He



calls them “true ravers” and believes that “you will never meet a hardstyle lover that doesn’t feel the same way” (Weir). Another raver described this with the genre trance, saying that the reason he believes trance has not fully reached the mainstream yet is because it calls for a more “sophisticated listener,” because it is not “instantly gratifying” as some other genres. He concludes that trance music follows the values of PLUR and instills within fans a sense of “family” (Rinehart). Another interviewee found that the values of PLUR were not as relevant “if a genre is getting a lot of exposure, like trap is right now.” He says that it brings people to the events that are only there to party “but hey, they make the festivals a huge experience, so it is what’s to be expected” (Patterson). Overall, PLUR can still be seen within the hearts and minds of ravers, but to different extents.

Many of the respondents had different reasons for the growing popularity of EDM, although one underlying factor was concluded among them: “attention in the media” and “commercialization.” One described EDM’s growing popularity because it has “given a large amount of people from all over the world [the chance] to connect with each other...[and] been built into this unspoken community due to the fact that so many people share the same love and interest in EDM, music, and raving in general” (Blossom). Another raver agreed that popularity is gained for social reasons. She ventured that EDM is getting more popular “because raves are an integrated social experience and a way to make new friends, dance to dope music, and dress up in fun clothes” (Roth). One argued that drug prevalence in the scene draws teenagers and young adults to it because “raves...provide a place where users can ‘safely’ do [drugs] with their friends, have a good time, and be in a somewhat controlled setting” (Anonymous). Another admitted that it’s simply because “it’s what’s popular right now,” in the sense that we are always influenced by the generations before us (Tucker). And finally, one last interviewee concluded

EDM is “exploding because there is an endless supply of new talent to promote, all coming with their own version of each of their sounds. It is as individual as the person who made it” (Patterson). In addition, comments were made about the commercialization of the rave scene, which can be seen in expensive tickets and large companies buying out festival events, as well as “pop” radio friendly songs (Saldana, Weir, Snell, Rinehart).

And finally, in answer to my last question, I got a lot of interesting reviews. Although some perceived EDM culture as directly reflective of our generation, it wasn't so much necessarily based on the “values” of our generation, as it was more of a “definition” of our generation. More or less, everyone gave answers reflecting that although the values of rave culture *should* reflect those of our generation, and *wish* them too, they do not necessarily believe this is the case.

One voiced that, “The values that are embedded in the EDM culture are what everyone should teach but, I'm afraid as it becomes more popular, PLUR will be forgotten and will only be something that was once followed” (Weir). In agreement another said, “I think that many values embedded within EDM are certainly ones that should be promoted amongst our youth, however I think it's slightly far-fetched to claim they are reflective of our generation as a whole” (Tucker). In addition, another expressed, “I'm not so sure that the values embedded in EDM culture (PLUR) reflect our generation because outside of raving, we still have acts of hatred and violence” (Blossom). Although in agreement the motto of PLUR and EDMC is valuable, there were mixed reviews on how our generation feels as a whole.

Also, respondents noted that for some people raving is just about getting drunk and partying, which is not reflective of the values of PLUR. Obviously, as EDM gains more popularity, there is a tension between “true” ravers who really embody the values EDM

represents, and people who are there to get “fucked up.” Ironically, one raver found this to be the possible reason that our generational values *are* reflective of rave culture today:

On one hand the music creates a sense of unity unique to other genres but on the other hand you have individuals who go to these shows just looking to get as high or as drunk as possible looking for that peak experience. I think both aspects are reflected in modern U.S. culture in that we are very motivated by instant gratification and new stimulus. In contrast, I think rave culture teaches people to be more caring and respectful which also can be reflected in modern society. (Rinehart)

Perhaps commercialization and increasing popularity of the rave scene in America today reduces its ability to become a defining ethical structure for our generation. Or, perhaps that is the very reason it is. In youth cultures, there always seems to be a tension that is cultivated between growing popularity and keeping the originality. In the rave scene, my generation seems to feel conflicted by this, a few mentioning that in the relatively small time they have been involved in EDMC, they have seen it change immensely (Saldana, Rinehart, Blumer). One mentioned, “to a certain extent, I feel like the original ‘rave culture’ has become diluted as it has gained popularity. On the other hand, young people seem very willing to jump into the culture instead of change the culture” (Blumer). Another noted that, “right now EDM could not get any bigger... and I feel like it's at its peak, but will soon plateau... and the more ‘mainstream’ a culture becomes, the more the younger generation will search for a new genre of music that has less hype” (Saldana). There seems to be a concern for the validity and duration of the scene today among EDM fans.

Regardless of these feelings, current ravers still feel sensations of “escape,” “belonging” and “religious” expression as the literature discusses. For example, one shared, “raves and music

festivals are unique in their ability to allow people to escape or take a vacation from normal life” (Rinehart). Another said, “attending a rave is kind of this escape into a fantasy world where the troubles of reality remain out of sight, and out of mind, and everyone treats each other benevolently” (Blossom). In agreement, one interviewer described the ability of the music to connect everyone. He said, “At any random show the person standing next to you can become your new best friend. The music has the power to bring a common love to everyone around you and that energy is felt and loved by everyone. Everyone is happy to be there and wants to share the moment with as many people as possible” (Weir). In addition, two noted their favorite genres as a religious experience. “I see trance events as a religious experience more than just a concert so I think it's one of the most influential electronic genres” (Saldana). Another said, “drum and bass is literally a religious experience for me when it's performed in a festival environment” (Patterson). Feelings of religiosity and spirituality are still prevalent at raves.

From the testimonials I was given, it might be fair to say that some of the more “intense” spiritual journeys, and notions of collective and individual awareness have diminished over time, because the scene has become “diluted” with ravers who do not necessarily adhere to the motto of PLUR. Although there seems to be a growing tension between the commercialization of raving in America and the honesty of the rave scene, these interviews reveal that the same feelings of escaping reality, a sense of belonging, and spiritual experiences can and still do exist. Current ravers seem to have the same concepts, emotions, and feelings as EDMC followers always have, but perhaps on a more subdued level. Regardless, raving is still a significant trend going on in America and is creating special and culturally significant experiences for those who participate. I think one response sums up this attitude quite well:

It's just fun to take some clothes off and dance around to amazing music. The culture is not judgmental. It is all-accepting and embraces the moment. It has an undertone of enjoying the little things in life to the fullest because life is worth grasping in that sense. It's just a party. It's just a night. But, the atmosphere could create memories that one could treasure for the rest of their life. (Patterson)

### **The Power of PLUR: Concluding Remarks and Analysis**

Throughout the course of this study, I feel like I have gained new insight into the value of EDMC and its ability to affect my generation. Raving is a spiritual and enlightening experience for many who participate. It has healing effects and is based on a motto that is culturally appealing to generation, both previous and current. However, with the commercialization and political economics emerging behind the current rave scene in America, it might be fair to suggest that raving is also losing some of its religious, spiritual, and moralistic value. It is hard to say whether or not the growing popularity of EDM is attributed to its commercialization or that there actually is a want, need, or desire by young people to live by the ideals demonstrated in PLUR. Through my discussion and review of previous literature, as well as my interviews, I would confidently argue that there are elements of both.

Although all of the EDM participants I interviewed believed that the motto PLUR should be respected, and taught to younger generations, most of them believe it is not fully demonstrated in the scene anymore, nor do they find it reflecting of our generation's overall values. However, the testimonials they gave me, the fact they still keep going to raves, and the unanimous agreement among them that PLUR is still a value system that we should all adhere to, gives me reason to believe that rave culture, in some manner, is still shaping or being shaped by

the collective consciousness of my generation. There is something there that still continues to draw youth into a “utopian” dream of how life should be.

The rave has been operationalized as a ritual or performance in which participants, through raving, can create and evaluate the way they would like to see the world. As Jowers notes, “Young people imagine their temporary liminality in utopian terms, wishing evangelically to spread their emerging cultural form to the culture as whole” (Jowers 386). Youth countercultures have a desire to spread their cultural values out amongst a larger culture. Ravers are no exception to this. Through the “ritualistic” process of raving they can both project and reflect those values. I believe that the capability of raving to do this, allows for the possibility of mutually forming morals- EDMC can shape my generation’s values as well as my generation can shape the values of EDMC. As a devout raver, and lover of the motto PLUR, I do hope that the true values of rave culture will reach a larger audience.

I hope to see a recurrence of the religious nature of rave culture. To me, this is what gives the culture value and depth. Sylvan describes testimonials of ravers who have adopted EDMC into their own spiritual path. They described such things as “profound illumination” and “making internal changes.” Some expressed the desire to no longer use drugs, but still be able to achieve the same sense of spiritual healing at raves (Sylvan 136- 37). This is my hope for my generation. I believe that there is something changing in our collective consciousness, something that might allow for a cultural shift to take place. It is just whether or not we choose to follow it, to endeavor to make PLUR’s human potential come to fuller fruition.

Neill notes that pop music and EDM will “ultimately consume what we know as art music and we will see a period in which art is consumed and enjoyed by a much wider public than at any tie in recent history” (Neill 4). He also describes this as “part of a larger cultural

change (Neill 4). I believe this to be true as well. Just like other youth cultures, such as the Hippy movement, one can see the drive in the EDM scene to seek a more harmonious world and spiritual growth. I believe EDMC and the act of raving provides a space for the facilitation of this change. It is merely a catalyst for a larger social/cultural movement. I can only hope that growing popularity of EDM and raving in the U.S. is to be my generation's way of adopting a new cultural paradigm, one in which the values of unity and respect among individuals is deeply embedded within us.

### **Tying it all Together: Communication, Performance, and Culture**

It is important to touch back with EDMC and its relationship to communication. Ironically, although EDM festivals and raves are *full* of communicative acts, there has been little discussion of this in the communication studies discipline. I wish to make connections between these topics of study, for which more analysis can, and should be done in the future.

Through my research for this project, it has come to my attention that three important links should be made: the interdependent relationships between communication, performance, and culture. These seemingly "separate" entities have important and necessary relationships, which can be seen more clearly at cultural focal points, such as raves. Jim Carey describes in his book *Communication as Culture, Revised Edition: Essays on Media and Society* how communication creates culture:

In order to understand the sources and character of the social order it is necessary to start by reflecting on the capacity of human beings to fabricate symbols and thus to construct a shared symbolic order. It's as if the world is first and foremost a world of words. Human beings create symbols to frame and communicate their thoughts and intentions and they

use such symbols to design practices, things, and institutions. In other words, they use symbols to construct a culture in which they can live together. (x)

The relationship here verifies that communication *is*, in fact, culture. Through the performance of communicative acts, such as trading kandi at raves, participants are exchanging cultural pieces of information. This act has symbolic meaning behind it, designated by the notion of PLUR, which are then transmitted to construct a culture that can be shared. By the “performance” element of physically trading the kandi they are both creating and reinforcing that motto. This tiny bit of communication becomes a symbol for and also a creation of the culture.

The rave, then, becomes an important cultural space, a focal point, or center of communication and culture. A cultural space is defined as the particular configuration of the communication that constructs meanings of places. The rave is defined by the communicative acts participants do, again such as trading kandi, or shuffling, or dressing up in costumes. Each aspect of the rave, the communication between the music and the raver, the DJ and the audience, as well as the interactions among ravers, contributes to the construction of cultural meaning. The communicative process occurring at raves, thus, becomes a performance.

The notion of performance is crucial to understanding the connection between communication and culture. Again, with the example of trading kandi, the raver is performing a communicative act in which information is exchanged. The values of PLUR are instilled through the performance of hand motions, and the raver’s identity is confirmed through the performance as well. Understanding these acts as a “performance” illustrates, then, how the values of PLUR are cultivated and reinforced. With bits and pieces of communication adding up, the rave develops into a performance to the outer world. When participants perform such acts, they are proclaiming and instilling the values of PLUR in themselves and to others; PLUR becomes a



reality. PLUR, then as a shared reality, develops into a culture. Hence, the relationship between communication, performance, and culture comes full circle.

Studying EDMC, as a focal point of culture, and thus communication, has allowed me to further render the power of communication. As a student, we are taught that communication is everywhere and everything, and therefore culture is as well. I enjoy Edward T. Hall's quote, in his book *Beyond Culture*, "Culture is man's medium; there is not one aspect of human life that is not touched and altered by culture" (16). Studying the rave as a cultural space more in depth has allowed me to further my understanding of the relationship and process of communication as a performance to create EDMC. This communicative process allows participants to experience something very powerful and possibly life-changing. Even the smallest communicative process of trading kandi has immense importance to it because its cultural meaning bubbles out as a larger communicative process to the outer world. This process is one that enacts change and calls for a better future. Yes, communication occurs everywhere, but it is in spaces like these where it does something crucial: it enables new experiences, possibilities, and hope for what the real world could be like. Thus, the rave becomes a communicative act for a more desirable, altruistic world.

This senior project has been especially important to me because it has given me insight into how EDM has affected my life. I truly believe that the communicative processes I have performed over many years of raving have changed my perceptions of the world. I have become one with the culture and the notions of PLUR, as a result of performing the necessary communicative acts at raves, such as dancing with strangers, dressing up, and most importantly the trading of kandi. EDMC has shaped, formed, and molded my values around the notion of PLUR, and in turn, formed the lens from which I view the world. In his book, *Cultural*

*Misunderstandings*, Carroll describes culture similarly as “the logic by which I give order to the world” (3). I can honestly say that EDMC is that logic for me. It is amazing to me how the communicative processes that occur at raves are so powerful that they can venture to change lives outside of their defined culture spaces. Although I step into a fantasy world, I do indeed take some part of that world back out into reality with me. This senior project is near and dear to my heart as both a communication studies student and a devout raver. It has deepened my knowledge of culture and the communication process, which has made me value my participation in the EDM community and appreciate the impact EDMC has had on my own life even greater.

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