

# Drugs, Leisure, Consumption and Harm

Tammy Ayres, *University of Leicester*

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Using the new Deviant Leisure perspective allows us to understand the consumption of substances in the context of consumer capitalism and its inherent harms, which according to Žižek (2008), is where the real trouble lies. A fundamental theme sustained throughout the ensuing discussion illustrates the harms arising from global capitalism in relation to substance use. The aim is to illustrate how the contradictions inherent in neoliberal capitalism are not only responsible for some of the harms discussed, but also the ambiguities and paradoxes inherent in the realities of substance use in contemporary society, which contribute to pervasive feelings of objectless anxiety and insecurity (Hall and Winlow, 2015) as our 'unquestioning commitment to consumer capitalism' contributes to a range of socially corrosive and subjective harms (Smith and Raymen, 2016: 2).

Drug use traditionally falls within the category of illegal leisure, - 'behaviour that violates criminal and noncriminal moral norms' (Williams, 2009: 208). However, the diversification of substances from traditional licit (caffeine, sugar, alcohol, collagen, prescription medications) and illicit constituents (heroin, cannabis, cocaine) to newer Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS), Performance and Image Enhancing Drugs (PIEDs), Human Enhancement Drugs (HEDs) and vaping has seen people's substance use diversify as part of everyday life. The consumption of intoxicating substances not only offers a release from the mundane banality of daily life, but an escape from the uncertainties, hazards and confusion intrinsic to contemporary society (Bauman, 2001) and the ethico-social constraints of the pseudo-pacified social order (Hall and Winlow, 2005). Whether drug use is normalised or remains a deviant activity in the twenty-first Century remains heavily contested, but what is known is the array of substances being consumed has expanded to include a range

of licit and illicit products that have become an integral part of surviving, and excelling, in contemporary society. From a glass of wine to relax after a hard day's work to injecting the poison Botox into the face or consuming toxic mercury to whiten the skin, the consumption of substances purports to fulfil our every desire and address the sense of lack (Winlow and Hall, 2016) embedded in neoliberal capitalism where traditional foundations of identity, status, community and friendships have been eroded. As ultra-realists suggest, crime and deviance are symptoms of the intrinsic drives, structures and processes inherent in global neoliberal consumer culture (Hall and Winlow, 2015), and substance use is no different. Consuming substances has become functional and integral to surviving in contemporary society; a society characterised by hyper-consumption, competitive narcissistic individualism, inequality, cynicism, objectless anxiety and insecurity. Thus substance use and the current system of substance regulation and prohibition can only be understood in the historical context and the development of capitalism.

Historically, substances like opium and cocaine were once a normal and integral part of everyday life, sold in grocery shops and used to enhance productivity, alleviate the pains of physical labour and as a 'cure all' (Berridge, 1999). The initial control and regulation of substances in the mid-nineteenth century, which were becoming lucrative global commodities, was premised on the notion of harmfulness and the social and economic costs attributable to their consumption (e.g. high infant mortality rates from overdoses, poor production, addiction, crime, accidents and foreignness). The official discourse framing substance use was, and still is, one of harm; specifically, drugs-danger-death and immorality, emphasising the power of certain drugs to create undeserving, unproductive and immoral citizens, which rationalised their prohibition (see Taylor et al. 2016). While there is no denying that all drugs/substances have the potential to cause harm, and the consumption of some substances is more harmful than others, the evidence base underpinning the harmfulness of substances is not only unscientific (Nutt et al. 2010), but is distorted by the structures and economic exchange mechanisms underpinning capitalism and its drive for profit; something that can be seen throughout history from the Opium Wars to the contemporary Pharmaceutical Industry (Courtwright, 2001; Paley, 2014; Singer and Baer, 2009). This unscientific and mythical demarcation of substances

predicated on harm has created what Julian Buchanan (2015: 63) calls a 'global drug apartheid' where some drugs are privileged (pharmaceuticals, alcohol and tobacco) while others are excluded and criminalised. What is clear, is that drug prohibition is not about protecting people from harm or harmful substances – instead it prioritises the expansion of the capitalist system – with prohibition itself described as intrinsically harmful; more harmful to society than the drugs it purports to control as 'governmental regulatory bodies...seem at times more concerned with protecting corporate profits than public health' (Singer and Baer, 2009: 26). Many licit substances are marketed and sold on their often erroneous benefit to consumers, from mineral water sold as an 'aquaceutical' (Petrie and Wessely, 2004 cited in Brisman and South, 2016) to the health benefits of tobacco (even after its harms were revealed in the mid-1950s) (Singer and Baer, 2009).

The diverse array of pills, potions, creams and tinctures available to satisfy our every whim and rectify every component of our lives, by addressing our imperfections, improve our wellbeing and increase our competitiveness (see Evans-Brown et al. 2012); an array of products that sell the illusion of freedom and choice (Baudrillard, 1998). There are now substances that make the skin browner, whiter, or smoother; bodies slimmer or more muscular; enhance cognition and improve sexual performance (see Evans-Brown et al. 2012). New products are constantly being created as the dialectic of innovation-competition-innovation required by capitalism continues (O'Hara, 2004). From the ingestion of innocuous substances (e.g. smart water, vitamins and herbs) to more harmful, often banned, substances (e.g. DNP, Fentanyl, Sibutramine) symbolism is used to seduce the consumer in a society where representation has overtaken reality (Baudrillard, 1994) and an economy of deception operates (Bauman, 2007). Regardless of the product (licit or illicit) it is branded and the same marketing strategies are implemented, often falsely promoting the health benefits while disavowing the harmfulness of these commodities as corporate hegemony is reinforced (Singer and Baer, 2009). However, satisfaction is fleeting and the consumer eternally disappointed as the products 'never quite manage to deliver' and 'dissatisfaction becomes permanent and active' (Winlow and Hall, 2016: 4). The plethora of pharmacological products now available has not only been attributed to 'neoliberalism's ideology of

deregulation, free international trade agreements and the opening up of markets' but it has also resulted in a burgeoning market in both illicit and counterfeit products/substances, as people are unable to afford or obtain the 'real thing' (see Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016: 83 and Paley, 2014).

It is not just counterfeit and illicit substances that dupe consumers by not always containing the advertised active ingredient or substance (Ayres and Bond, 2012; Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016), patterns of deception operate in the legitimate and regulated market, particularly when it comes to licit substances (e.g. tobacco, smart water, alcohol, pharmaceuticals) (see Brisman and South, 2016; Singer and Baer, 2009). This deception is compounded by clever advertising and the privileged position of legal but harmful drugs, as substance use is either commercialised or criminalised in capitalism's utilisation of divide and rule. Drug prohibition and the war on drugs not only allows drugs and their use to act as a scapegoat for many of society's problems (see Taylor et al. 2016), but it also acts as distraction; 'a permanent opium war waged to make it impossible to distinguish goods from commodities, or true satisfaction from a survival that increases according to its own logic' as every aspect of life is commodified and dominated as political economy (Debord, 1994: 13). In fact, Dawn Paley (2014) argues prohibition and the expanding war on drugs is linked to the expansion of transnational corporate control over markets, labour and natural resources. Privileged substances have been prioritised due to their defining role in the construction of capitalism as well as its expansion (see Courtwright, 2001; Paley, 2014) to create a global 'drug apartheid' where some drugs are privileged and legal, while others are excluded and criminalised.

The criminalisation and punishment of excluded drugs usually falls along the fault lines of race, gender and class (Buchanan, 2015; Wacquant, 2009), and incorporates many of the contradictions inherent in capitalism. Substances and their consumption are prohibited unless they occupy a privileged position or are being used to promote and market desirable consumer products. Illicit drug-referenced marketing strategies have become the norm, promoting the consumption of products and services despite being at odds with prohibition; in contemporary society, there are signs of chaos and confusion everywhere, which also feeds into and exacerbates

widespread cynicism and anxiety. Nowhere are these contradictions more evident than in the 'heroin screws you up' campaign and the use of heroin chic to promote a certain look characteristic of problematic substance use promoted by designer brand Calvin Klein. Even privileged drugs like alcohol are surrounded by these contradictory messages, particularly in the night-time economy where the consumption of substances is integral to a good night out; two-for-one promotional offers and Happy Hours are rife, encouraging you to drink more (see Smith, 2014). However, make sure you do not exceed the recommended number of units and partake in binge drinking, and only consume alcohol in the permissible alcohol zones or licensed leisure venues otherwise you might get fined for antisocial behaviour or arrested for alcohol-related crime. These contradictions pervade society and are integral to the dynamics of capitalism (O'Hara, 2004). These mixed and contradictory messages are used to promote legitimate lifestyles, images, identities, behaviours, products and consumption patterns that prioritise the exigencies of capitalism, but also cause harm; harm to individuals, communities, countries and the environment.

Consequently, the consumption of substances is not just about leisure, pleasure and functionality, but also about aesthetics; constructing the perfect body image and the perfect lifestyle that illustrates health, wealth and success as products are sold on their investment value (Bauman, 2007). People consume products and substances that promise to appease their imperfections and insecurities, while also offering them social status and the perfect lifestyle, thus purporting to fulfil their every want and desire as people competitively search for happiness and success. Consumer products, particularly substances like HEDS/PIEDS, are thus 'tiles in the Lacanian mirror in which the subject identifies itself' (Hall et al. 2008:94). Therefore, people are not using substances as a form of rebellion in contemporary society, but to conform to the demands placed on them by consumer capitalism in an endeavour to construct an individual identity that proffers happiness and contentment, alongside status and envy. Substances have been commodified, commercialised and branded in line with the standardisation and corporatisation of culture, which are all symptomatic of global capitalism. Products and substances are consumed to satisfy the 'cultural injunction to enjoy' in a society where enjoyment has been made obligatory and capitalism has deployed the 'pleasure principle for its own

perpetuation' (Bauman, 2001; Hall and Winlow, 2015; Zizek, 2002). Therefore, consumption of substances not only proffers a release from the torments of moral responsibility and an escape from the pressures and perfectionism advocated by contemporary consumer society, but they also offer the solution to harmful subjectivities, imperfections and pressures, making them a popular commodity in high demand.

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