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Something for everyone? Changes and choices in the ethno-party scene in urban nightlife

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Chapter 5 Clubbing context

In the early 1980s, dance music came to the public's attention under the term 'rave' and immediately attracted controversy due to the perceived excessive use of the drug ecstasy and the hard, grinding beat. Over the passing years, dance music has come of age and split into a number of new styles. What was once considered to be a niche market has diversified into a multitude of sub-genre specializations, such as jungle house, hardcore house, mellow house and garage. New styles of music like RnB and hip-hop have also become popular, and all of these different musical genres have found their way into nightlife.

This chapter contains a brief review of the state, scope and scale of clubbing in the first decade of the 21st century in the Netherlands. The first fieldwork data, dealing with recent developments in Dutch urban nightlife, are also presented. This data primarily addresses the recent changes in the available night-time activities in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, and is drawn from interviews with owners of popular and established clubs in the inner city nightlife scene. The urban nightlife in each of these locations is representative of how it is organized in other large towns and cities in the Netherlands. By drawing attention to the variety of parties that are now being organized, the first two paragraphs contain a description of the changes that have taken place in Dutch clubs and with clubbers. In the third paragraph, an overview of the rules and regulations governing Dutch nightlife is provided. In order to paint a detailed picture of this, I will compare Dutch legislation to that in existence internationally. Finally, in the fourth paragraph, the three fieldwork chapters are introduced.

5.1 General trends of nightlife

Nightlife in the Netherlands is well developed. As well as many restaurants and local bars, every city, large or small, has its own disco. Indeed, in the larger cities in the country, urban nightlife is comprised of several clubs and discos e.g. Amsterdam has 13, Rotterdam 16, The Hague nine and Utrecht six. As well as these official clubs, every city also has several so-called dancing bars,

which are simply bars with a small dance floor. Nightlife in the Netherlands has not, however, always been this extensive. Nonetheless, unlike countries such as Italy, Spain and France, where the majority of young people meet at restaurants and bars, many of their Dutch counterparts now visit clubs. According to the Dutch branch of the organization Horeca and Catering, 45% of people between the ages of 16 and 24 and 37% of those aged between 25 and 34 visit clubs and bars on a regular basis. These numbers are comparable to the clubbing scene in the UK, where 43% of 15-24 year-olds visit a club once a month or more (Mintel 1996: 5 cited in Malbon 1999: 8).

Increasing demands of clubbers

Due to the large numbers of clubs in existence, there is keen competition for visitors. In recent years, there have been some changes in how Dutch urban nightlife is organized. During every interview with prominent club owners in Rotterdam and Amsterdam, the increased demands and preferences of contemporary clubbers were brought up. These club owners all shared the opinion that clubbers now demand much more from a night out, and are no longer content to be charged 10-15 Euros to be allowed to dance. They have come up with several reasons for the growing expectations of the contemporary clubber. According to most of these producers, international clubbing experienced on holiday, and the growing popularity of music channels such as MTV or TMF and the internet, inform and shape the latest trends, leading to today's clubbers being much more demanding.

Another reason why the contemporary clubber demands more from a night out is related to the fact that young people no longer go clubbing every week, with the economic recession being named as a major cause of this reduced participation in club nights. According to the creative director of a club in Rotterdam, the clubber today has less to spend and, therefore, saves up his or her money and selects the party of choice much more carefully.

The number of clubs in existence has also increased over the past two decades, not only in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, but also in other towns and cities in other parts of the country. As a result, young people now have a choice between more clubs and in

different places. Other cities also now offer a variety of club nights and parties, meaning that young people no longer have to travel to the nearest large city to their favourite music.

The increased critical demands of the contemporary clubber on the one hand and the growing competition between clubs on the other have led to changes in the programming of nightlife. Clubs no longer play the same sort of music every night. Instead, a diverse range of styles of music and parties are organized in a club. This so-called 'broad programming' is being put in place in order to retain popularity and attract different groups of young people with different musical preferences.

The increase in the cultural and ethnic variety of contemporary urban clubbers was also named as a reason for the need for a new sort of programming. In Amsterdam, for example, 45% of the city's inhabitants belong to the so-called ethnic minorities, with the main ethnic groups being the Surinamese, Moroccans, Turks and immigrants from the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba². According to the club owners, ethnic minority young people in general prefer different styles of music in comparison of their native Dutch peers.

There is also an increase in variety in terms of cultural and musical orientation. Gothic, hardcore house, hard rock, trance, hip-hop, RnB, and grunge are just a few of the many contemporary popular styles that are lived through clothing and music. These days, all of these styles of music are being brought into nightlife.

Broad programming

As none of the club owners want to limit their clientele to a single group, they all put on different styles of parties in their clubs. According to some of them, the previous 'urban music trend', which became popular in the early years of the 21st century, paved the way for this broad programming. Urban music bridged the gap between a white house music crowd and the predominantly 'black' audiences listening to hip-hop and RnB. As a result, both groups of young people came together and danced to the same music. This music, which is a mix of hip-hop, RnB and house, was soon picked up and commercialized into an 'urban lifestyle', with branded clothing and

² See, www.os.amsterdam.nl for more detailed information

leisure activities such as skating, street soccer and BMX-biking. The young people who adopted this lifestyle mixed urban music and clothing in with their own ethnic background. This soon also became popular with large groups of ethnic minorities as well as native Dutch youngsters, and was appreciated for its ethnic diversity. The urban lifestyle became even more widespread when FunX, the new music station I referred to in the Introduction, was launched.

Local governments and the media soon picked up on this trend, which was viewed as a positive step towards multicultural acceptance among young people. As a result, the urban lifestyle was commercialized, and ‘urban events’ with hip-hop battles, street-soccer and demonstrations of street dance were organized by commercial radio stations and cultural bodies. In the summer of 2004 in particular, urban events were being organized in Amsterdam on an almost a weekly basis. However, due to the commercialization and explosion of urban events, and the strong media attention initially paid to it, the hype surrounding urban music and lifestyles soon faded. Clubs were the first to abandon the concept of urban parties, which were regarded as ‘too commercial and too mainstream’ according to an employee of Club Paradiso in Amsterdam.

In response to the urban music trend, the notion of ethnicity as exotic and trendy was promoted in the Dutch urban nightlife. With slogans like: ‘breaking the boundaries between cultures’ and ‘stimulate intercultural understanding through music’, clubs started to advertize so-called multicultural parties on their websites. As well as club or classic dance nights, new theme parties with a focus on the exotic elements of ethnic diversity sprung up. Club Paradiso in Amsterdam, for instance, started to organize *¿Que Pasa?*, a salsa night in which diverse musical styles were mixed with Latino beats. Another example is a party called *Mystic Grooves*, which began in Utrecht in 2003 as a monthly dance night in which a musical mix of Indian banghra, Pakistani break beat and Arabic house and hip-hop was programmed. Both the music played and the promotion of these parties was aimed at a multicultural audience. During my fieldwork in 2005, I visited both of these parties several times and did indeed

come across an ethnically diverse crowd. *¿Que Pasa?* was predominantly attended by native Dutch clubbers and young people with Surinamese, Antillean, African and Latin American backgrounds, while the audience at *Mystic Grooves* consisted mainly of second generation immigrants from India and Pakistan, as well as Surinamese and native Dutch youngsters. The popularity of these parties led to a whole raft of clubs organizing parties with different styles and different forms of organization.

5.2 Nightlife adapting to diversity

The broad programming put on by clubs has changed the way they are organized these days. Instead of arranging all of the parties themselves, clubs now increasingly rent their venues out to external companies or DJ collectives. According to many club owners, such organizations and collectives add value because they have specific knowledge and the right connections and network to make a new style of party a success. An Asian party organization, for example, not only knows who are the best DJs, but also has links to a wide network of clubbers who are interested in such an event. In this section, I make clear how clubs, DJ collectives, party planners and ethnic party organizations make a contribution to the broad programming of nightlife.

Clubs

Many owners of clubs have deployed new strategies with which to incorporate new and diverse programming. In order to safeguard the profile and the popularity of their venues, club owners are carefully selecting the party organizations to which they are prepared to rent their establishments out. The creative director of a club in Rotterdam, for example, compared the broad programming in his venue to the menus of quality restaurants, where all of the dishes have separate ingredients but are nevertheless cohesive. He stated that he carefully examines whether the party concept or organization corresponds with the club's image and ideology. To illustrate what he meant, he gave me an example of how his venue works with a particular Turkish party organization. Of the three such companies that were arranging Turkish parties in Rotterdam at that time, he only rented his club out to one of them, because its audience

matched his target crowd of trendy and creative clubbers. The two other organizations attracted a more mainstream (Turkish) audience, which did not fit the profile of the club. Most of the club owners shared this vision. Another one, for example, told me that a party organization which wanted to arrange a vulgar and sexually orientated party would not get permission to rent his premises because it would harm the reputation of his club.

During the interviews with the club owners, other selection procedures were also brought up. One important criterion was that every party in a particular club should be a safe event. This meant that the organization in question must hand over a detailed party concept, including an audience profile and an estimation of the number of visitors expected. Aggressive outbursts or violence during a party harms the reputation of a club and should, therefore, be avoided at all costs. Furthermore, an organization must hand over information about previous experiences, including recent references and an up to date certificate of registration with the Chamber of Commerce. The club owners all said that they check references and contact their colleagues to ask for more information on a company.

As well as renting their venues out to external organizations, clubs also arrange their own parties. These so-called club nights are unique and recognizable to visitors, and are events which help to maintain the unique image and profile of the club.

If a party organization wants to rent a club, they also hire its personnel. For example, a club's bouncers continue to be responsible for deciding who will be allowed into a venue during the parties arranged by external organizations. Companies can appoint a so-called door bitch, who selects from the people who are queuing up those who fit the profile they are aiming for, but the venue's bouncer always has the final say on who is allowed in.

It is also important for club owners that the parties arranged by external organizations are attended by a large crowd. If the party is not a success, and the audience stays away, this not only damages the image of the club, but club owners also lose out financially; a venue not only charges rent, but also receives the money spent on drinks. Party organizations on the other hand earn their money by the selling of entrance tickets, which again means that it is crucial for all of the parties involved that the event is well-attended.

All of these measures are drawn up to safeguard the image of a club and to control the types of parties that are organized in a venue. Once a year, a club's board of directors considers all of the requests from external party organizations and, after making a careful selection, plans which events will take place over the course of the next year. By planning a year ahead, club owners control the programming in their venues and provide clubbers with a wide variety of parties to attend.

Critique of broad programming

Ted Langenbach, a prominent figure in Rotterdam's nightlife, is critical of clubs' growing tendency to rent their venues out, believing that it damages their creativity and image. Instead of encouraging sectarianism, he also argues that clubs should try to organize parties which attract clubbers with diverse musical tastes and styles, so that different groups of young people dance together. According to Langenbach, contemporary clubbers need to be challenged to mix on the dance floor and learn from each other, instead of dancing in their own safe, small environments. Club owners disagree with him, however, and are of the opinion that a party where different people with different musical styles dance together is only attractive to a very small, creative elite. Mainstream clubbers just want to dance to their favourite music with people they can identify with.

DJ collectives

Before the introduction of broad programming, most DJs were hired directly by clubs. Many venues worked with so-called resident DJs, who were committed to a single club and had to get permission to occasionally work at other places. Today, however, many DJs are no longer affiliated to a single venue. Instead, a party organization hires a DJ, and takes on the role of booking agency for those who are under contract. DJs who are not contractually bound to a club or an organization arrange their own bookings. Indeed, the popular and trendy DJs have a greater say in their own agendas and demand the privilege of being able to play at diverse parties and venues.

A DJ is no longer just a person who plays records created by others, but is seen as an artist in his or her own right, and has a huge

impact on the success, or otherwise, of a party. Many DJs not only play records, but also produce their own dance tracks. The world famous Dutch DJ, Tiësto, for example, who has won many international prizes and played at the opening ceremony of the Olympic games in Athens in 2004, has released a succession of dance records.

As well as producing dance tracks, many DJs are now also involved in organizing dance parties. As the true experts in music and clubbing trends, DJs are more than capable of arranging innovative events. The *Mystic Grooves* party that I mentioned in the previous section, for example, is arranged by a collective consisting of the resident DJs from a club in Utrecht. At these events, as well as working at their own parties, these organizers also invite different guest DJs and acts such as belly dancers and live bands to perform. These parties were a huge success, and their scope was consequently expanded in 2004, with a *Mystic Grooves* party being arranged in a club in Amsterdam. In the years that followed, the collective also began to organize *Mystic Grooves* parties at festivals and other venues and clubs all over the country.

Another example of a DJ collective organizing a party is *Sutra Funk*, an event that was first organized in 2004 in a club in Amsterdam. It is an Asian underground party which is advertised online as: ‘A night where music and culture interact. This is the sound of multicultural Europe, 2nd generation[s] expressing their own culture mix through music.’ This concept is inspired by Asian underground parties in the UK, where DJs and musicians of Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani descent were ‘twisting and cutting up traditional sounds from their own backgrounds and mixing it with digital dance music, sounds of tabla fused perfectly with the high bpm of drum’n’bass and break beat and Sitar, vocals with more electronic, funky, trip-hop sort of sound’.³ DJ collectives promote their events on the internet, their own websites and the websites of the clubs where the parties are being held. Just like any other party organization, the DJs rent a club out for a night.

³ See www.sutrafunk.com for more information.

Party organizations

As well as DJ collectives, which have developed and arranged vibrant ethnic parties, commercial party organizations or companies have also developed a wide range of parties which they sell to clubs all over the Netherlands. These events are not necessarily intended to attract a multicultural audience, but revolve around themes and DJ performances. Most of the time, the first party takes place in a popular club in Rotterdam or Amsterdam and, when it is a success, it is taken all over the Netherlands. For instance, the parties *Nope is Dope* and *GirlsLove DJs*⁴ started off in Amsterdam and are now organized all over the country. Famous resident DJs play at every party and ever-changing guest DJs and other acts are booked to keep the model new and trendy. Both of these party concepts have their own websites to promote their events. Indeed, a website is an important tool in the promotion of a party. It tells potential clubbers what is on the agenda and also provides the opportunity for visitors to a virtual community to communicate. In order to strengthen the identification of a clubber with a party concept, special merchandise is designed with the event's logo on t-shirts, caps and badges. Clubbers buy these items on the internet and I have certainly witnessed a couple of students wearing these shirts in classes. The photo galleries on these sites are looked at frequently by clubbers, not only to check whether they are on any of the pictures, but to also see how people are dressed and what they look like.

Ethnic party organizations

Ethnic party organizations have also sprung up and arrange so-called ethno-parties. Ethno-parties are events organized for a specific ethnic group. Previously, these parties were arranged within the ethnic community and located in community centres or rented halls outside the city centre. The broad programming of nightlife, and the new trend of hiring parties arranged by creative companies and renting a club to DJ collectives, have paved the way for the incorporation of ethnic parties into popular venues. Just like the DJ collectives, the ethnic party organizations hire a club for a night to arrange their own event. These days, Asian, Turkish, and Moroccan parties are arranged on a regular basis in clubs all over the

⁴ See www.GirlsLoveDjs.com and www.nopeisdope.eu for more information

Netherlands. Due to their incorporation in popular venues, the ethno-parties are accessible to a wider audience and have become part of mainstream nightlife. These organizations followed the example of the creative companies by setting up websites to promote their events and booking professional resident DJs as well as guest DJs and stage acts.

Due to their broad programming, clubs attract young people with different musical preferences. By renting out their venues, diverse parties are able to be organized in a single club. Another consequence is that the same party concepts take place in different clubs. As a result, clubbers select their favourite event and travel to a variety of venues in different towns and cities to dance to their favourite music played by their favourite DJs.

5.3 Regulating nightlife in clubs

By opening up to diverse styles of music and parties, clubs are catering to a wider range of consumers. However positive this may sound, it does not automatically mean that all young people have access to or feel welcome in clubs, or that all styles of music are catered for. In this section, the rules and regulations of clubbing are explained. These are drawn up at different levels, namely nationally, locally and in clubs. I will first provide an overview of the national rules of clubbing, and will then shed light on the influence of local government. Finally, I will consider how clubs are involved in the processes of access and selection.

National rules

Like in most European countries, the legal drinking age in the Netherlands is 16 for beer and wine and 18 for spirits. This automatically means that young people in the country have to be at least 18 to get into a club, since spirits are served there. Compared to the United States, where the legal drinking age is set at 21, Dutch youngsters can get involved in clubbing fairly early on in life. Most clubs are very strict about the minimum entrance age, not only because they prefer adult clubbers (who are more likely to spend money on drinks), but also because venues are fined or even forced to close down for a period of time if this rule is broken. Accordingly, many bouncers ask for identification at the door of a club.

Another national rule is that the possession of drugs is prohibited inside a club. If this rule is violated, the venues are fined or closed down by the local government for an extended period of time. The local government is also authorized by its national counterpart to close down a club when aggressive incidents, such as massive fights, or the use of weapons, repeatedly occur. Clubs cannot put the blame on the (aggressive) visitors as they are held responsible for enforcing the policy on their premises.

Local rules

Although the rules regarding opening and closing hours are not set by the national government, the local policies in many cities are similar. Most clubs open their doors at 11pm, and in general clubbers start arriving shortly after midnight. A local policy in most cities is that guests have to be in the venue before 2am, with the aim being to control all of the young people who are on the streets because all of the bars have closed at the same time. The people who visit a bar before going to a club, therefore, have to leave it before 2am and, as a result, do not dwell on the streets in large numbers.

Lately, there has been a call for the deregulation of the closing hours of clubs. Until recently, every city set its own closing times, which varied between 2 and 5am. However, because all of the clubs in a city shut at the same time, those living nearby were disturbed by large groups of clubbers flooding onto the streets. Accordingly, many club owners and local residents have called for

the abolition of closing hours, proposing instead a so-called cool down hour. During this period, which is the last hour before closing, no alcohol would be served, meaning that crowds would leave clubs in a more orderly fashion. At the time of writing (spring 2009), this request is being considered in many cities.

Catering intervention team

Lately, there has been an increase in the number of complaints about the increasing police and (local) government intervention in clubs. According to those with a grievance, the enforcement of strict rules is getting in the way of a free, creative, hedonistic and vibrant nightlife. These club owners argue that many young urban professionals, who work hard during the week, seek pleasure and excitement (on many occasions in the form of party drugs) and do not want to be restricted too much.

It is true that in the last couple of years urban nightlife has become increasingly regulated and controlled by local governments. For example, most cities have drawn up a *convent door policy*, and have also put in place so-called HIT teams (Catering Intervention Team), which ensure that the rules and regulations are being adhered to. Initially, these teams, which are part of the police department, were set up as separate units to deal with catering crime. Their main duties were the fight against drug crime and the control of illegal workers in the catering industries. In recent years, however, the units have extended their scope to clubs, controlling, for example, the licences of the club owners, party organizations and bouncers, and the work permits of employees. They also monitor opening and closing hours and intervene in clubs to control the possession of drugs. The local government and the police departments highlight the fight against illegal practices in nightlife as the main reason for the establishment of these special teams, although many club owners and party organizations point to the financial benefits for the local government as a reason for this increased control. The ethno-party market is growing so quickly that according to one of the organizers of Surinamese Good-Time Parties, ‘the tax authorities have established a new team for the ethno-party organizations. These organizations are under severe pressure because the tax authorities are aware of the amount of money that is going around in this

circuit'. During my visits to the ethno-party scene, I witnessed the intervention of these special HIT teams on several occasions. They mainly focused on the licences of the party organizations and whether the personnel were certified and in the possession of a work permit. I never saw any large-scale control of drugs, and nor did the police bring any drug dogs into the clubs, which is something they do at other large scale parties and venues.

Door policy

The second important form of government intervention concerns the door policies of clubs. In order to prevent suspicion and feelings of racial discrimination at the door, club owners in many cities have been asked to draw up transparent rules. These deal with formal regulations, such as those related to the minimum age, the possession of drugs or weapons, and opening and closing hours, as well as more informal rules about dress code, group size and the make-up of a crowd. These informal rules can change according to the theme and popularity of the party and the composition of the dance crowd already inside the venue. For instance, many clubs don't allow people in who are wearing trainers, but at a hip-hop or urban party, these are usually permitted when worn as part of an appropriate outfit. Another example is the rule that bouncers do not generally let in large groups of people as they are more difficult to control. However, at an ethno-party, the bouncers do not control group size as the presence of large numbers of friends is characteristic of this type of event.

The Panel Deurbeleid (Panel Door policy) was the first organization to actively invite club owners to take action against discrimination. This body was established by the Rotterdam Anti Discrimination Council (RADAR), with the goal of defining and standardizing the door policies of the city's clubs. Young people work with club owners, the local government, the police, justice departments and a discrimination officer to draw up transparent nightlife rules. As well as transparency, young people who think they are being discriminated against can report their suspicions. The Panel deals with individual complaints and collects all them together ready to involve the local government if a particular club is mentioned often. Many local governments have followed

Rotterdam's example and established their own local Panel Deurbeleid. Many club owners voluntarily get involved because they want to restore their damaged reputations, since they are often accused of being discriminatory towards ethnic minority young people by the media.

Regulation by clubs

Right from the very beginning, the owners of dance halls and discos have realized that controlling the people who enter their premises is an important tool when it comes to creating the desired ambiance inside a venue. Apart from the formal rules regarding, age, drugs and the number of young people allowed in, the bouncers or door staff also devise informal strategies forged through experience (Hobbs 2003). It is easier to refuse an expected trouble maker entry than to later try to control or throw someone out.

Refusing people entry on the basis of a dress code, or even discrimination, is not a new phenomenon in clubs, with it beginning almost at the same time as the first disco opened its doors. Shortly after the introduction of disco music in the 1950s, young people came together in so-called dance-halls to dance to their favourite music. At the door, these young consumers had to pay an entrance fee and get past a burly looking man who controlled the excited and dressed up crowd (Triesscheijn and Maris, 2005).

In 1961, race riots broke out in a small town called Oldenzaal. At that time, there was a great deal of tension between 'single' Italian and Spanish guest workers and the autochthonous youth. All of these groups competed with each other for women on the dance floor, which led to many small incidents. When the catholic dance establishment followed the example of other discothèques and started to refuse the young Italian and Spanish clubbers entry, massive riots broke out (Groenendijk 1990).

In the 1980s it was the hooligans, English tourists and members of stag or hen parties who were seen as undesirable visitors to the Amsterdam nightlife scene. At that time, club owners also began to reject ethnic minority young people. As they were seen as the forerunners of fashion and dance (Sansone 1992), Surinamese and Antillean youngsters were waved inside clubs enthusiastically by the door staff, but many Moroccan and Turkish

youths were refused entry.

As I have mentioned earlier in this book, many young men of Turkish and Moroccan descent still don't feel welcome in many clubs in the Netherlands. Indeed, a great number of these young men have actually been refused entry by door staff, while others only know people to whom this has happened. The alleged discrimination at the doors of clubs attracted national interest, and was even discussed at length by the national government. Even the huge attention paid to the transparency of the door policies in most large cities does not necessarily mean that ethnic minority young people are no longer discriminated against at the doors of clubs. It is very difficult to measure this, since several factors play a role in the decisions the bouncers make. However, even when discrimination at the door no longer takes place, this does not necessarily mean that ethnic minority youngsters *feel* more welcome in clubs. These feelings of being unwelcome, or even being discriminated against, have an impact on the nightlife choices that many young people from ethnic minorities make.

5.4 The ethno-party scene

Now that I have discussed the incorporation of ethno-parties into the regular club scene from the perspective of the club owners, it is time to learn more about the ethno-party scene in detail. The club owners share the opinion that the ethno-parties organized in popular venues were a first opportunity for many (female) ethnic minority youngsters to become more acquainted with the scene. Some even stated that going to ethno-parties was a very important phase, which would soon become redundant when the consumers of these events got more familiar with clubbing. Others viewed the ethno-party scene as a growing niche market in the overall nightlife that was available. In general, many viewed the incorporation of ethno-parties as a positive trend and a way to cater to the growing number of ethnic minority young people in the Netherlands. These opinions played an important role in their motivation to open up their venue to ethnic party organizations that led to the creation of the ethno-party scene in the Dutch urban nightlife.

In the following three chapters I will provide detailed information on how this scene is organized and experienced. I will

describe the Asian party scene, the Turkish clubbing scene and the Moroccan leisure scene in that order. Each chapter starts with a general description of the specific ethno scene by paying attention to the size, popularity and general characteristics thereof. From a more general perspective, I will narrow the scope down to sketch out the strategies that some of the party organizations use to attract visitors. Finally, the focus shifts to the consumers by addressing how personal factors influence the choices made in the ethno-party scene.