

An Empirical Investigation of Illicit Drug Use and Its Influences on Hospitality Sales Productivity: A Phenomenological Approach

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of illicit drug use on productivity measures of hospitality sales employees. While hospitality employees have been identified as using illicit drugs at twice the rate of the U.S. workforce, limited research has been conducted on how illicit drug use impacts workplace productivity, with the research resulting in mixed findings. These inconsistent findings combined with recent legislation on marijuana legalization makes the topic ripe for investigation. Reinforcement sensitivity theory is the underlying theoretical foundation used in this study to explore how employee illicit drug use impacts sales performance in the hospitality industry.

Phenomenology, a rigorous qualitative research approach, is used to delve into employee experiences with illicit drug use. In-depth interviews result in over 250 significant statements, which are further reduced to 11 meaning clusters. Two themes emerge: a wide spectrum of viewpoints on employee illicit drug use and the use of illicit drugs as a sales performance enhancement. Next, structural and textural descriptions explain how and what the participants experienced in the workplace. The study's phenomenological essence, the final step in the analysis process, is a deconstruction of the participants' experiences of how illicit drug use impacts their performance measures.

This study is a starting point for understanding employee illicit drug use and its impact on employee sales performance in the hospitality industry. The findings can guide future research on investigating illicit drug use to examine the potential causes and effects in those occupations vulnerable to substance use.

Keywords: Employee performance; Hospitality sales; Illicit drug use; Marijuana; Sales productivity; Workforce drug use

JEL Classifications: I12, J24, L83, M14, M31

1. Introduction

Illicit drug use by employees is an important yet understudied area for scholars who focus on the hospitality industry, particularly since hospitality has been identified as the top industry in the United States (U.S.) in the use of illicit substances (Bush and Lipari, 2015). Illicit drugs are defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health and Services Administration (SAMHSA) as marijuana, cocaine, crack, inhalants, hallucinogens, heroin, and prescription drugs used non-medically (SAMHSA, 2013). An estimated one out of every five full-time working adults in the hospitality industry has reported using illicit drugs within the past month, according to the Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality (Bush and Lipari, 2015).

A number of factors call for rigorous research to investigate the relationship between drug use and work performance. First, a comprehensive review of the existing body of literature yields conflicting results on this relationship, with some findings identifying negative workplace behaviors from illicit drug use and other findings observing no differences between employees who use illicit drugs and those who do not (Dreher, 1982; Hoffman *et al.*, 1997; Kagel, *et al.*, 1980; Kaestner, 1994; Macdonald *et al.*, 1993; Normand *et al.*, 1994; Parish, 1989; Register and Williams, 1992; Zwerling *et al.*, 1990). Second, despite the reported higher level of illicit drug use in the hospitality industry, there are limited academic studies on the subject (Belhassen and Shani, 2012; Kitterlin, *et al.*, 2015; Kitterlin and Erdem, 2009; Pidd *et al.*, 2014; Thomas *et al.*, 2014). A comprehensive review of the business literature identified one academic study investigating managers' perceptions of sales employees' illicit drug use (Patton, 1988), with no studies conducted on attempting to determine illicit drug use's impact on sales employees' productivity levels. Finally, the rapidly changing U.S. and global landscape on the legalization of medicinal and/or recreational marijuana use (Barcott, 2015; Gupta, 2013; Swift, 2016) makes an investigation of workplace drug use and its relationship with work performance imperative for business practitioners, particularly organizations with employees located in multiple states or countries with different regulations (Deschenaux, 2014; Hickox, 2012).

The theoretical foundation for investigating this study's research questions is Gray's (1970; Pickering and Gray, 1999) prominent neuropsychology reinforcement sensitivity theory. When reinforcement sensitivity theory is applied to the workplace, the theory provides a core understanding as to why some employees are motivated to use an illicit drug and why others are inhibited (Frone, 2013). Reinforcement sensitivity theory is based upon an employee's reactions to the reward and punishment stimuli in a given situation. Previous studies have indicated that employee drug use is often attributed to job stress, such as the physical and psychosocial aspects of the work environment (Frone, 2013; Kitterlin, *et al.*, 2015). Due to reasons such as attempting to reach tight work deadlines or the fear of job failure, some employees reportedly take illicit drugs to decrease pain, reduce depression, or improve alertness (Bardhi, *et al.*, 2007; White, 2003).

Therefore, this phenomenological study is designed to better understand why some sales employees are motivated to use an illicit drug while others are inhibited. This study is a starting point to create a foundation for understanding employee illicit drug use and its impact on employee sales performance in the hospitality industry. The findings can guide future research on investigating illicit drug use to examine the potential causes and effects in those occupations vulnerable to substance use.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Employee drug use and productivity levels

Several decades of U.S. reports have presented data on the prevalence of illicit drug use, abuse, and dependence among employed adults using data from the annual National Survey on Drug Use and Health (Bush and Lipari, 2015; Hoffmann, *et al.*, 1997; Normand, *et al.*, 1994; SAMHSA, 2013). For most U.S. employers, illicit drug use is not a major concern (Frone, 2013) as illicit drug use by the overall U.S. workforce is reported at a rate of 8.6%, with prescription painkillers and marijuana identified as the leading illicit drugs used (Bush and Lipari, 2015). However, hospitality employees are estimated to use illicit drugs at a rate of 19.1%, the highest percentage for any industry, over double that of the U.S. workforce. The next highest illicit drug usage was detected in the arts, entertainment, and recreation industry category at 13.7%, and the management of companies category at a rate of 12.1%.

A major justification for the efforts to eliminate illicit drug use in the workforce is to decrease workplace injuries and accidents, an important employee productivity measure. While one study pointed to higher job-related accident rates by illicit drug-using employees (Zwerling *et al.*, 1990), two similar studies did not detect significant associations between employee illicit drug-test results and their corresponding workplace injury rates (Hoffman and Larison, 1999; Normand, *et al.*, 1994). The impact of illicit drug use on employee absenteeism is a second productivity measure that has been studied, also with conflicting results. Zwerling *et al.* (1990) concluded that U.S. employees who used illicit drugs had higher absenteeism rates than nondrug users. However, an Australian nationwide study identified that illicit drug users had a lower employee absenteeism rate than tobacco and alcohol users (Collins and Lapsley, 2008).

The impact of illicit drug use on worker task productivity is a third employee-performance measure that has been studied. While the National Institute on Drug Abuse (2016) website states that illicit drug using employees are more likely to be less productive employees, no study is cited to back-up this claim. Some studies observed no productivity differences between drug using and non-drug using employees (Murphy, *et al.*, 1990; Parish, 1989) while other studies encountered increased productivity levels with marijuana use (Dreher, 1982; Kaestner, 1994; Kagel, *et al.*, 1980; Register and Williams, 1992).

Only one academic study was found that attempted to understand the impact of illicit drug use in the sales environment (Patton, 1988). U.S. sales managers were surveyed to determine their perceptions and policies on their sales employees' illicit drug use. The majority of the sales managers responded that drug use was a problem in the industry, but not with their own sales force. Most managers realized that they had little understanding of what to do and they simply wanted to eliminate the problem (Patton, 1988).

Researchers suggest that workplace factors such as increased workloads, tense employee competition, and rigid deadlines may influence tendencies towards employee illicit drug (Bardhi *et al.*, 2007; White, 2003). Employees may take drugs (i.e., over-the-counter, prescribed, or illicit) to improve alertness, sleep quality, or weight loss. Drugs are also taken to decrease anxiety, chronic pain, depression, headaches, or stress. A study of Ivy League college-educated, fully employed, upper middle-class women in their twenties suggested that no clear line exists between appropriate medical use and misuse of drugs (Bardhi *et al.*, 2007).

2.2 Studies on illicit drug use and productivity levels of hospitality employees

As previously noted, hospitality employees have been reported as the highest risk industry for illicit drug use, with a usage rate of 19.1%, over twice that of the overall U.S. working population (8.6%) (Bush and Lipari, 2015). Illicit drug use has been identified as both an industry concern and

a general public health issue (Bush and Lipari, 2015). However, methodological obstacles related to studying employee drug use make it a difficult topic to conduct rigorous research, especially when it involves the study of illegal and perceived undesirable behaviors, such as drug use (Frone, 2013; Roman and Blum, 1995). Inviting researchers into the workplace causes concerns of possible workplace disruption and unwanted public impressions if negative results are associated with the organization or industry (Frone, 2013).

Due to these challenges, only a handful of academic studies have attempted to study the impact of illicit drug use in the hospitality industry. Focus groups of chef trainees at an Australian technical college reported high levels of alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drug use, with respondents attributing their substance use to personal and workplace factors such as social norms and work stress (Pidd *et al.*, 2014). This was similar to findings from Israeli hotel workers (Belhassen and Shani, 2012). Two studies on foodservice employee point to the possibility that individuals who use illicit substances may self-select into the industry because drug use is considered normal behavior in the work environments (Kitterlin, *et al.*, 2015). Studies on the value of preemployment drug testing (Kitterlin and Erdem, 2009; Thomas *et al.*, 2014) concluded that the costly drug screening process was a waste of company funds, as the screening did not result in hiring only drug-free employees nor decrease illicit drug use by employees. Instead, employees simply abstained from drug use prior to the testing and then resumed once the test was passed.

2.3 Theoretical foundation

To better understand why employees use illicit drugs, reinforcement sensitivity theory, a well-established neuropsychology theory (Gray, 1970; Pickering and Gray, 1999), is the underlying theoretical foundation for this study. Reinforcement sensitivity theory can be applied to the workplace to provide a core understanding of why some people are motivated to use an illicit substance and others are inhibited (Frone, 2013). This theory is based upon a person's reactions to a given situation's reward and punishment stimuli. In other words, employees who anticipate that their illicit drug use will increase their positive emotions and/or decrease negative emotions are more inclined to use illicit substances in an attempt to improve their job performance. Conversely, employees who anticipate that substance use will increase negative emotions and/or decrease positive emotions will choose not to use illicit substances (Frone, 2013).

2.4 Research questions

This study is a starting point to better understand the impact of illicit drug use on job performance by hospitality sales employees. Because there are no previous academic studies to use as a reference, an exploratory qualitative approach was chosen in an attempt to grasp the complexity of the topic. Using reinforcement sensitivity theory as the guiding theoretical premise for the study, two research questions frame the study:

1. What are the reward and punishment stimuli that hospitality sales employees experience with illicit drug use that impact their own and coworkers' job performance?
2. What are the positive and negative emotions that hospitality sales employees perceive impact their own and coworkers' job performance?

3. Methodology

3.1 Phenomenological research

Qualitative research methodologies have been used to gain firsthand knowledge about cause and effect, to study special populations, and/or to develop sound quantitative research instruments in the hospitality segment of business (Morosan *et al.*, 2014; Pidd *et al.*, 2014). A qualitative approach assumes that reality is best observed by looking from within an individual or organization, specifically by collecting data from people who have experienced a certain phenomenon. Often the best qualitative studies explore topics not openly discussed, with findings accurately reflecting real life's complexities (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology is an interpretive process of reducing individuals' experiences to a description that consists of "what" they experienced and "how" they experienced a certain phenomenon as a means to provide insight for improving understanding. The rigorous data analysis steps result in the phenomenon's description based on the individuals' lived experiences (Creswell, 2013) as shown in Figure 1.

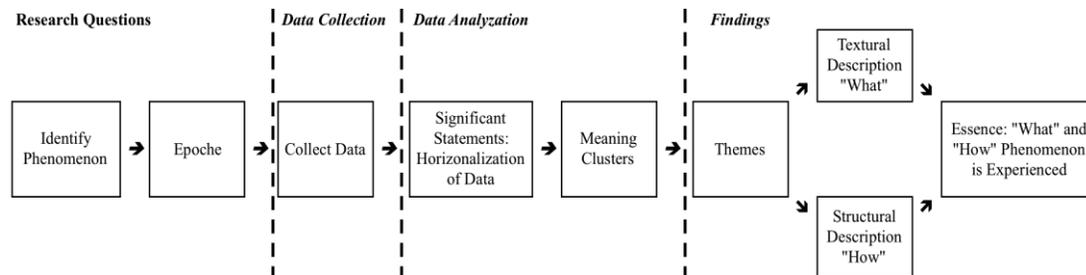


Figure 1. Phenomenological methodology steps

Qualitative research is used when quantitative statistical analysis may not accurately address the research questions, primarily because leveling all individuals' experiences to a statistical mean overlooks each individual's uniqueness in the study (Creswell, 2013). Quantitative methodologies have not been able to provide answers for many of today's emerging workplace challenges; therefore, research has evolved via qualitative methodology, especially for business industry issues that are not well understood (Morosan *et al.*, 2014), such as the impact of employees' illicit drug use on productivity measures. For these reasons, a phenomenological approach was chosen for this study.

3.2 Epoche

After the phenomenon has been identified, the next step in a phenomenological research study is to conduct an epoche. Also known as bracketing, the researchers set aside their experiences and attempted to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon examined with the goal of increasing the effectiveness of the research investigation (Creswell, 2013). For this study, each researcher had different experiences with the research topic due to their generational differences (a Baby Boomer versus a Gen X-er) and industry experiences (lodging marketing and sales versus restaurant and lodging operations). Both began the research process by writing down their personal insights and experiences with the phenomenon in research notes and then made a conscious effort to put these experiences aside before they began to collect the data.

3.3 Data collection

This study arose after multiple discussions with hospitality industry managers on the impact of employee drug use on productivity levels. One resort director was interested in better understanding how the employees' illicit drug use may affect the resort's sales productivity levels. Follow-up

meetings were conducted to ensure that neither the resort nor the employees would suffer unfavorable repercussions. The sales director then invited the researchers to interview sales employees who were interested in participating in the study. The organization studied was a global vacation company. At this U.S. sales location, there were between 50 and 75 sales employees and 7 to 10 sales managers. Confidentiality agreements do not allow for additional information to be released on the individual participants or the organization studied.

Purposive sampling is typically conducted by carefully choosing between 3 and 10 individuals who have experienced a certain phenomenon differently (Creswell, 2013). Because of the sensitive topic of illegal substance use, many potential participants refused participation in the study. No females chose to be interviewed, even though there were several employees who would have fit into each category. Most of the women employees expressed that they were cautious about sharing this type of confidential information. From the male participants who volunteered, the researchers specifically selected participants from four groups based on drug use levels: (1) employees who did not take illicit drugs, (2) employees who were in a 12-step drug recovery program (i.e. former drug users), (3) employees who used illicit drugs after work or on the weekends, and (4) employees who took illicit drugs during work hours. A phenomenological study does not put emphasis on a representative sample (Creswell, 2013) and instead is confined to a small purposive sample of participants who are a part of the phenomenon studied.

All individual interviews were conducted in the same neutral location during convenient times for the participants by the same interviewer. Each interview began by the same researcher explaining that the goal was to learn from the participant's knowledge and experiences. The researcher actively cultivated a relationship of trust during the one-hour interview.

The main interview questions were:

- What are your experiences with drug use?
- What are your experiences and emotions relating to other employees' drug use in your workplace?
- How do you think illicit drug use affects your work performance?
- How do you think drug use impacts your coworkers' job performance?

While these were the guiding questions, qualitative data collection encourages frank topic discussion for the participant to explore areas that researchers might not have anticipated, which results in obtaining a deeper, richer body of information (Creswell, 2013). Accordingly, in many instances, the researcher was able to engage in candid discussions with the participants. Participants were reassured of confidentiality when sensitive information emerged.

Each individual interview session was electronically recorded, then transcribed verbatim into a text file for pure, complete data collection. From the transcribed texts, each participant's illicit drug use was summarized and classified as a "non-user," "current user," or "heavy user" based on the measures used by SAMHSA (2013). According to the SAMHSA three-tiered system, (1) a "non-user" has not used illicit drugs within the past 30 days, (2) a "current user" has used illicit drugs within the past 30 days, and (3) a "heavy user" has used marijuana almost daily during the past year or other illicit drugs at least 50 days in the past year. Of the seven participants, two reported no illicit drug-use history; two reported using prescription medication obtained illegally once or twice within the past 30 days, which classified each as a "current user"; and three reported almost daily marijuana use or weekly illicit drug use, classifying each as a "heavy user". Of note were the two participants who were classified as a "current user" by the SAMHSA guidelines. They were each in a twelve-step recovery program and did not see their twice-monthly use of a controlled medication not prescribed to them as categorizing them as a current illicit drug user.

Next, each participant’s interview was matched with individual sales performance data extracted from annual sales reports and performance evaluations provided by the resort director. A review of the employee performance evaluations revealed that all participants had satisfactory reports for workplace attendance, professional conduct, and customer feedback. The annual sales report classified those sales employees with an annual average sales volume per client above \$1,000 per client as “satisfactory” and below \$1,000 as an “unsatisfactory” sales level. Table 1 presents a summary of each participant, including annual average sales numbers and job performance from company documents, in addition to disclosed drug-use behaviors from the interview.

Table 1. Participant sales performance and illicit drug use summary

SAMHSA Drug Use Category	Self-reported Workplace Drug Use	Self-reported Drug Use	Age	Years of Sales Experience	Performance Evaluation: Attendance and Conduct	Average Sales Volume Per Client	Sales Performance Report Results
Nonuser	Nonuser	Never used drugs	43	2	Satisfactory	\$1,500	Satisfactory
Nonuser	Nonuser	Never used drugs	62	2	Satisfactory	\$938	Unsatisfactory
Current user	Nonworkplace user	Prescription pills used for back pain and headaches; past heavy drug use	45	3	Satisfactory	\$1,514	Satisfactory
Current user	Nonworkplace user	Prescription pills used for headaches; recovering heroin addict	58	7	Satisfactory	\$1,752	Satisfactory
Current user	Nonworkplace user	Marijuana used for headaches and stress relief	37	17	Satisfactory	\$1,461	Satisfactory
Heavy user	Workplace user	Marijuana used for stress relief and improved job performance	36	16	Satisfactory	\$1,521	Satisfactory
Heavy user	Workplace user	Prescription pills and cocaine used for stress relief and improved job performance	48	4	Satisfactory	\$1,560	Satisfactory

4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed according to Creswell’s (2013) recommendations for a phenomenological study. Each researcher independently analyzed the verbatim interview transcripts, with an estimated 80 hours spent in independent review, including reading the text, making margin notes, and organizing participants’ individual statements.

Afterwards, the researchers discussed their individual findings. They started the process of phenomenological reduction by reviewing the 250+ individual *significant statements* and removing repetitive, overlapping statements to create a horizontalization of the data. This process allowed *meaning clusters* to emerge. The researchers further aligned the data by forming *themes*, to develop a detailed sketch of the phenomenon.

Two themes emerged from the data. The first theme was a wide spectrum of viewpoints on employee illicit-drug use. The spectrum ranged from statements expressing the more conventional perception that illicit drug users have unfavorable work behaviors to the typically unspoken belief

that illicit drug users are satisfactory employees. The second emerging theme was illicit drug use as a workplace performance enhancement, with some employees articulating the rewards while others warning of the dangers. Table 2 identifies examples of the significant statements, the corresponding meaning cluster, and the resulting theme.

Table 2. Sample significant statements, meaning clusters, and themes

Significant Statements	Meaning Clusters	Theme
“Addicts tend to be very resourceful and have a lot of perseverance and loyalty, which are all good qualities that human resources should look for.”	Illicit drug users are resourceful and loyal employees	Wide spectrum of viewpoints on employee illicit drug use
“I don't think my use of marijuana during my off time negatively impacts my ability to do the job or makes me a bad employee. If I smoke tonight, it won't affect my sales tomorrow. My success is based on my sales skill, motivation, and achievements.”	Illicit drug use after hours does not impact on-the-job sales performance	Wide spectrum of viewpoints on employee illicit drug use
“I think that sometimes we are the most motivated people in the world. Do you know how much motivation it takes to hide it from your boss and family? It takes a lot. It's a double-edged sword. There's an honest answer from a guy who takes drugs.”	Illicit drug users are motivated people	Wide spectrum of viewpoints on employee illicit drug use
“Individuals who regularly use drugs are prone to absenteeism and accidents.”	Illicit drug users have higher rates of absenteeism and accidents	Wide spectrum of viewpoints on employee illicit drug use
“If it isn't prescribed by a doctor then you don't need it.”	Drugs should only used if prescribed by doctor	Wide spectrum of viewpoints on employee illicit drug use
“Performance enhancing drugs may improve sales performance in the short term, but in the long-term because it destroys the drug user's life.”	Using drugs to improve sales will destroy life	Illicit drugs used as sales performance enhancement
“There should be a line drawn between making the sale and the right thing to do. Making a sale is not as important if you have to use drugs to do it.”	Employees should not use drugs to improve sales.	Illicit drugs used as sales performance enhancement
“Someone's behavior on drugs is subjective to the individual. Some people cannot function on drugs at all. I know people who do really well at sales even though they're high. It takes the edge off and leads to better sales. You can just zone out and listen to people.”	Improved sales depends on employee's ability to function while using drugs	Illicit drugs used as sales performance enhancement
“Marijuana helps ease stress and improves my personality to be better at sales. Good salespeople are extroverts.”	Illicit drug use improves job performance	Illicit drugs used as sales performance enhancement
“Due to the nature of sales, it attracts charismatic and extraverted people. Extraverted people tend do drugs or have personalities attracted to drugs.”	Illicit drug use improves personality for sales job	Illicit drugs used as sales performance enhancement
“Managers ignore workplace drug use because it helps employees sell. It doesn't matter if salespeople do drugs; companies need to have the best players on their team; it's all about winning.”	Managers only care about sales numbers, not drug use	Illicit drugs used as sales performance enhancement

5. Findings

5.1 Themes

Two core themes emerged from the phenomenological reduction of the participants' *significant statements* and corresponding *meaning clusters*: a wide spectrum of viewpoints on employee illicit drug use and the practice of illicit drugs used as a sales performance enhancement.

5.1.1 Theme: wide spectrum of viewpoints on employee illicit drug use

All participants, regardless of their own illicit drug use, agreed that not all substances were viewed equally, noting that their viewpoint depended on the drug used, for example all had a different view for marijuana use than for heroin use. Although the topic was not part of the interview protocol, many participants pointed to alcohol use as being as harmful to employees' health and job performance as illicit drug use.

The participants who identified themselves as non-illicit drug users reiterated the common perception reinforced by material from U.S. governmental agencies that point to illicit drug-using employees are lower performing employees with "increased absenteeism and accidents" and/or "lower motivation" levels. These participants felt illicit drug use was a "short-term gain" that would eventually catch up and punish users, affecting their "long-term health" or "work productivity." These participants also believed that someone should only take a drug if a doctor prescribes it.

Employees who currently used illicit drugs felt that their drug use during nonworking hours "did not have a negative impact" on their "job success, motivation, or achievements." Instead, their viewpoint was just the opposite; they saw themselves as "resourceful employees with high levels of motivation, perseverance, and loyalty." Their drug use helped "reduce stress after hours" without negatively influencing work performance the next day.

5.1.2 Theme: illicit drugs used as a sales performance enhancement

All study participants seemed ambivalent about low-level drug use of marijuana or prescription pills for stress or pain during off-hours. Participants also agreed that some users were unable to successfully function at work with their drug (or alcohol) use and, therefore, "should not be in this condition" at the workplace. Regardless of the participant's own illicit drug use, many revealed that management took a blind eye to illicit drug use when it was perceived as helping the employee's sales. A team of high performing sales employees was more important because "it's all about winning."

For some non-drug using salespeople, workplace drug use to improve sales performance was unacceptable. Non-users, including those employees who occasionally used illegally obtained prescription drugs to reduce pain levels, felt that they were "following company rules" but their drug-using coworkers were "cheating to achieve sales goals." In contrast, those employees who used illicit drugs perceived it as a tactic to improve their "sales performance." Some felt that using drugs "enhanced" their personality, while others believed that their drug use "decreased the stress of sales," either by "silencing the inner critic" or "just zoning out and listening to customers."

5.2 Structural description

The next analysis step in a phenomenological study is to provide structural description of "how" the participants experienced the phenomenon, which is constructed from the previous analysis steps of significant statements and meaning clusters (Creswell, 2013). The structural description involves a reflection on the setting, the factors that contribute to the situation, and the phenomenon's context as the participants experienced it. In this study, the setting is how illicit drug use impacts the employees' sales performance and how it is framed by employees' perceptions of their peers' drug use both during and after work hours.

Structural description: How employee illicit drug use influences negative and positive perceptions of self and fellow sales employees' performance.

Self-identified non-drug using employees view illicit drug-using employees as unprofessional and disrespectful with high absenteeism rates. The employee annual performance reviews, however, did not indicate that there were absenteeism or behavioral problems with the self-identified illicit drug-using sales employees. Some of the self-identified non-drug users did not see themselves as current illicit drug users, even though SAMHSA classifies them as such due to their use of illicit drugs not prescribed to them for pain relief.

Employees who use illicit drugs after work hours feel that their drug use reduces stress, which, in turn, increases their work motivation levels. In the workplace, non-drug users, including self-proclaimed non-drug using employees (who occasionally use illicit drugs that are not prescribed to them), disliked drug-using coworkers because they felt their coworkers' drug use was not only harmful to their long-term health but also was a form of workplace cheating. In comparison, illicit drug-using employees perceived their drug use as a way to improve their sales performance by either decreasing anxiety or increasing their charisma. Most participants (regardless of their drug-use status) disclosed that, due to the emphasis of sales performance, management ignored employees' drug use when they had high sales closure rates.

5.3 Textural description

In a phenomenological study, a textural description is the next step based on "what" the participants experienced with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). This provides readers with a description of the meaning of the participants' experiences and the multiple factors involved.

Textural description: Factors that contribute to employees taking illicit drugs to impact their sales performance.

Both non-drug users and drug users view illicit-drug use on a wide spectrum, on which marijuana use is inconsequential but heroin use is objectionable. Additionally, employees who used illicit drugs after work hours or in the workplace did not display behavior that was obvious to fellow employees. Discussions during the interviews revealed that many participants did not know which employees currently or previously used illicit drugs.

Some illicit drug-using employees felt that their off-hours drug use decreased stress levels that they experienced from the pressure for high sales volumes. Others felt that after-hours drug use was not any worse than other employees' after-hours alcohol use. Nevertheless, some employees expressed that drug and/or alcohol use in the workplace had a negative impact on sales performance for some employees, either through reduced health repercussions or being fired due to low performance levels. While other employees felt that their own or other employees' illicit drug use improved personality traits and presentation skills with customers, resulting in higher sales.

5.4 Essence

The essence is a culmination of the study's findings into a final summary that comprises a combination of "what" and "how" the phenomenon is experienced by integrating both the textural and structural descriptions (Creswell, 2013). It is a deconstruction of the stories from participants' voices that culminates in a complex description of the phenomenon.

The reality of producing consistently high sales is ever-present in the minds of hospitality salespeople. How they prepare for a successful workday and reduce the related workplace stress depends on a combination of their life history, values, beliefs, and work goals. Whether a hospitality salesperson chooses to use drugs is influenced by the employee's belief in the reward and/or punishment of using illicit drugs. If the employee believes illicit drug use will increase positive workplace behaviors that will directly or indirectly help increase sales performance rates,

then an employee is more likely to use illicit drugs in an attempt to achieve the sales goals. If the employee believes illicit-drug use will increase negative workplace behaviors and its use will directly or indirectly decrease sales levels, then an employee is less likely to use illicit drugs. For the employee who has both reward and punishment beliefs about drug use, the more dominant belief on any specific day will influence the employee's behavior to use or not use drugs in order to achieve an optimum sales performance level.

The hospitality sales workforce experiences a wide spectrum of drug use.

- *At one end of the spectrum are non-drug users, those employees who do not use illicit drugs and who may (or may not) use alcohol for the positive emotions of relaxing and decreasing workplace stress after hours. Employees who self-identify as “non-drug users” often view their drug-using coworkers as unprofessional; however, annual performance reports of the drug-using employees do not back up their claims. The non-drug using employees appear frustrated that their drug-using coworkers are not punished with low sales numbers and instead are rewarded with praise by management for their high sales volumes.*
- *Next are the former illicit drug users, who through their life experiences have negative experiences of how drug use was damaging to their health or lifestyle. However, in the research sample, these former users may occasionally take medication not prescribed to them to obtain the positive emotions of reduced pain or stress. Paradoxically, these employees are vehement in pointing out the dangers of illicit drug use to others and the punishment the drug-using employees will eventually experience.*
- *Following on the workforce drug-use spectrum is that of off-hours marijuana users. They feel that their after-work marijuana use reduces stress or relieves painful medical conditions, which, in turn, increases their job motivation. These may be valid claims, as these salespeople successfully meet their annual sales quotas.*
- *At the other end of the spectrum are salespeople who use either marijuana or other illicit drugs periodically or frequently during work hours. These employees perceive that their drug use pulls them into the sales flow by helping them listen intently to customers, allows their personality to blossom, and dissolves the stress of the sales position's frequent rejection. These employees' individual sales and performance reports suggest that their workplace drug use did not negatively affect their work performance.*

The workplace mantra of “it's all about the sales” is rewarded by management, which allows different levels of drug use to exist throughout the workforce due to the perception that each employee is doing what it takes to reach the required sales goals.

6. Discussion

The problem that framed the study was illicit drug use and its impact on employee sales performance in the hospitality industry, particularly why some sales employees are motivated to use an illicit drug while others are inhibited. An examination of the actual workplace experiences and emotions of these employees followed. Because the voices of illicit drug-using employees are often muted due to the illegal nature of their behavior, a phenomenological approach was used to fully explore the experiences of these employees and their fellow non-drug using employees. In the process of developing the essence, two core themes emerged from this phenomenological study on the perceptions of illicit drug use by employees.

First, a wide spectrum of employee drug use exists for the hospitality sales organization studied, including non-drug users, self-identified former drug users (both of whom use drugs not prescribed to them), after-work drug users, and workplace drug users, which is similar to other studies that have pointed to various degrees of drug use in the workplace (Bardhi *et al.*, 2007; Bush and Lipari, 2015; Frone, 2013; Kitterlin, *et al.*, 2015; Pidd *et al.*, 2014). Marijuana and prescription painkillers were identified as the primary illicit drugs used by the participants and were used as a coping strategy for reducing stress or pain, aligning with results from recent U.S. employee illicit drug use studies (Bush and Lipari, 2015; Frone, 2013; Pidd *et al.*, 2014).

This study's second theme was the paradox of illicit drug use as a workplace performance enhancement. This theme is similar to that of Bardhi *et al.* (2007) and Kitterlin, *et al.* (2015) where there is not a clear line that employees differentiate between appropriate medical use and misuse of drugs. A similar blurred line was identified in this study between self-proclaimed non-drug users and illicit drug-users. Specifically, some participants viewed themselves as non-drug users but in fact their behaviors classified them by SAMHSA as drug users because they used prescription drugs that they obtained illegally. Their justifications for using painkillers were to resolve what they perceived as legitimized medical reasons versus the employees who used illicit drugs to improve their sales. Non-drug users and self-proclaimed non-drug users felt these illicit drug users should be punished for their behavior. Yet, illicit drug users felt their behavior was necessary to overcome job competition and stress, reflecting previous findings (Bardhi *et al.*, 2007; Pidd *et al.*, 2014; White, 2003).

This study, unlike previous studies, compared each employee's illicit drug use with the sales performance. A review of each participant's average sales performance indicated that there was not a substantial relationship between the sales performance levels and employee drug-use levels. The participant with the highest annual sales volume per client was the former heroin user. He saw himself as someone who did not currently use drugs but who periodically used pain-relief medication not prescribed to him, which therefore made him an illicit drug user as defined by SAMHSA. The next two highest-volume salespeople frequently used drugs during work hours. The participant with the lowest sales average was one of two participants who had never used drugs. These findings are similar to previous studies where illicit drug users did not have lower performance rates than nondrug users (Dreher, 1982; Kaestner, 1994; Kagel, *et al.*, 1980; Murphy, *et al.*, 1990; Parish, 1989; Register and Williams, 1992). It should be clear that this finding does not imply that failure to use drugs results in poor performance; however, this may indicate that drug use may not necessarily equate to poor sales performance.

An aspect of the "paradox of employee illicit drug use as a workplace performance enhancement" was that sales management rewarded employees with high sales levels and, at least in this sample, continued to employ individuals who used illicit drugs to succeed. If, in fact, management was aware of this illicit drug use, then this finding is similar to the results from a study of sales managers who concluded that they had little understanding of how to resolve their sales employees' illicit drug use and therefore did not take steps to remedy it (Patton, 1988).

By reviewing the existing literature and developing a framework of the phenomenon's key themes, this study increases understanding of the various aspects of workforce illicit drug use for practitioners and academics to address this important management issue. This study makes several contributions to the existing literature on the relatively under-researched topic of employee drug use and its impact on workplace sales productivity. First, it provides an understanding of the wide spectrum of viewpoints on employee illicit drug use. Second, it was unable to find a relationship between self-reported illicit drug use and low sales performance measures, demonstrating a need to further understand workplace drug use on productivity outcomes.

Finally, reinforcement sensitivity theory (Gray, 1970; Pickering and Gray, 1999) as the study's foundation was a good fit to better understand why some employees were more inhibited to use an illicit substance and why others were more motivated to do so. Employees who anticipated that their illicit drug use would increase positive emotions and/or decrease negative emotions were more inclined to use illicit substances in an attempt to improve their sales job performance. Those employees who anticipated that illicit substance use would increase negative emotions and/or punishment thoughts chose not to use illicit substances (Frone, 2013). For those employees who had conflicting punishment and reward beliefs about illicit drug use, the more dominant belief on that day seemed to influence the employee's behavior to use or not use drugs to achieve their optimum performance level.

7. Conclusions

7.1 Industry and academic implications

A call for action is the concluding goal of a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013). Job characteristics, such as presence of stress, employer expectations, and social norms, have all been suggested as factors related to workplace illicit drug use (Bardhi, *et al.*, 2007; Frone, 2013; Patton, 1988; White, 2003). Competing against coworkers who use illicit drugs to decrease stress or improve their personality creates an incentive for some to use them (Bardhi *et al.*, 2007). For most employers, illicit drug use by the workforce and in the workplace should not be a major concern (Frone, 2013). But for those segments of the workforce whose employees have been identified as having a high percentage of illicit drug users, such as the hospitality industry, this topic should be of concern for these employers. Their current policies are not reducing illicit drug use. In addition, management's decision to ignore the illicit drug use may not be an effective or appropriate solution.

Most employers are reluctant to participate in research, especially when it involves the study of undesirable and/or illegal behaviors, such as employee illicit drug use, because of concerns about financial costs, potential workplace disruption, and public impressions if negative results are associated with their organization or industry (Frone, 2013). However, research can be designed to decrease workplace disruptions and costs, and the reporting of findings in scientific publications can be conducted in a manner in which the identities of participating employees and organizations are not publicly disclosed. For employers interested in the causes and outcomes of employee illicit drug use with the goal of determining effective workplace interventions and policies, employers are encouraged to partner with researchers while accepting the inconvenience that may come with conducting rigorous research.

7.2 Limitations and suggestions for future studies

This study's primary limitation is its small sample, as is common in qualitative research, and it is not possible to generalize findings beyond this sample of individuals. The validity of this study's analysis was achieved by closely following the phenomenological method, which included conducting a thorough literature review, bracketing the researchers' experiences with the phenomenon throughout the data analysis process, and keeping field notes throughout the process (Creswell, 2013). It also should be noted that participants' workplace drug-use behaviors were based on self-reported data, which may be subject to error and bias, especially given the sensitive nature of the topic. Despite the potential limitations of self-reports, they may be the best source of detailed data on employee illicit drug use (Frone, 2013). An additional limitation may stem from the use of an all-male group of participants.

The factors that may limit the generalizability of this study's findings suggest opportunities for future research. Future research may benefit from using measures that are less subject to

respondents' perceptual biases. Future studies could incorporate experimental design using a larger employee sample. In addition, studying other organizations and business industry segments would be helpful. This may help identify policies and management techniques that can reduce employees' illicit drug use.

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