

Lifestyle › ES Magazine

# How London developed a 'woke coke' problem

First it was eradicating single-use plastics and carbon-neutralising avocados on middle-class people's minds. Now it's the promise of 'ethical' recreational drugs.

Madeleine Pollard investigates

MADELEINE POLLARD ||



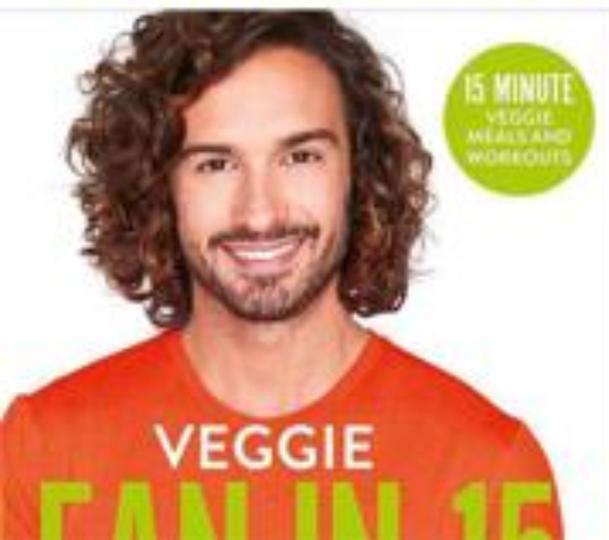
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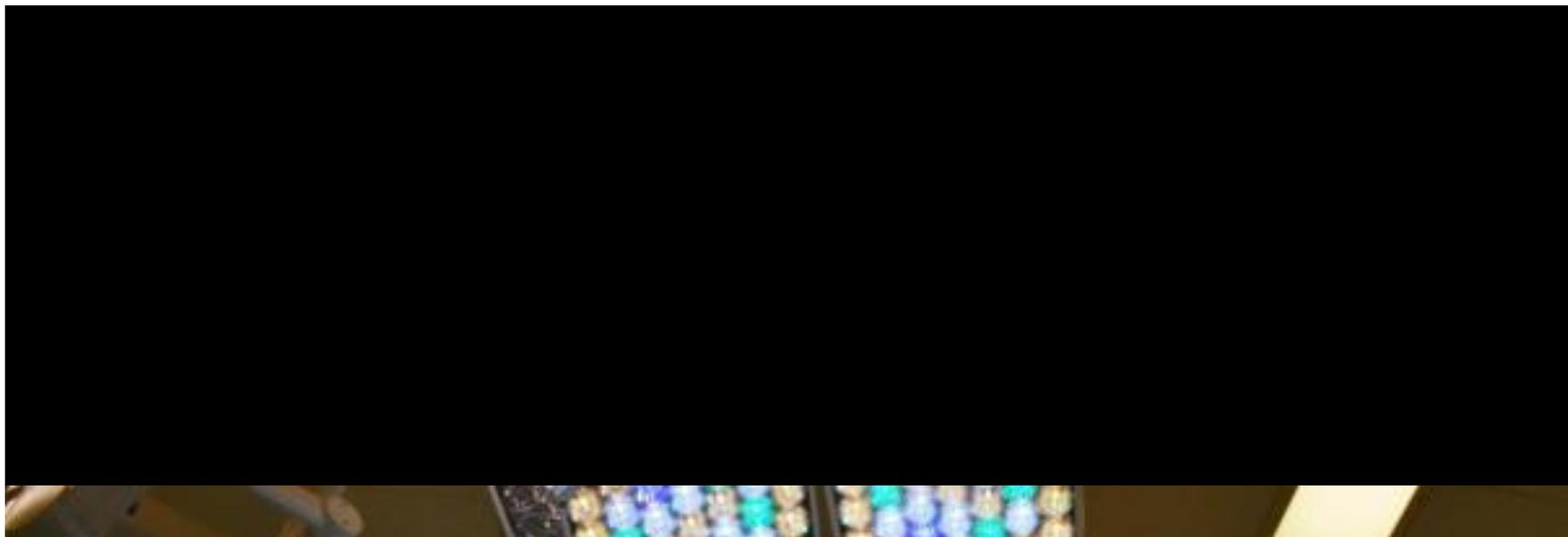


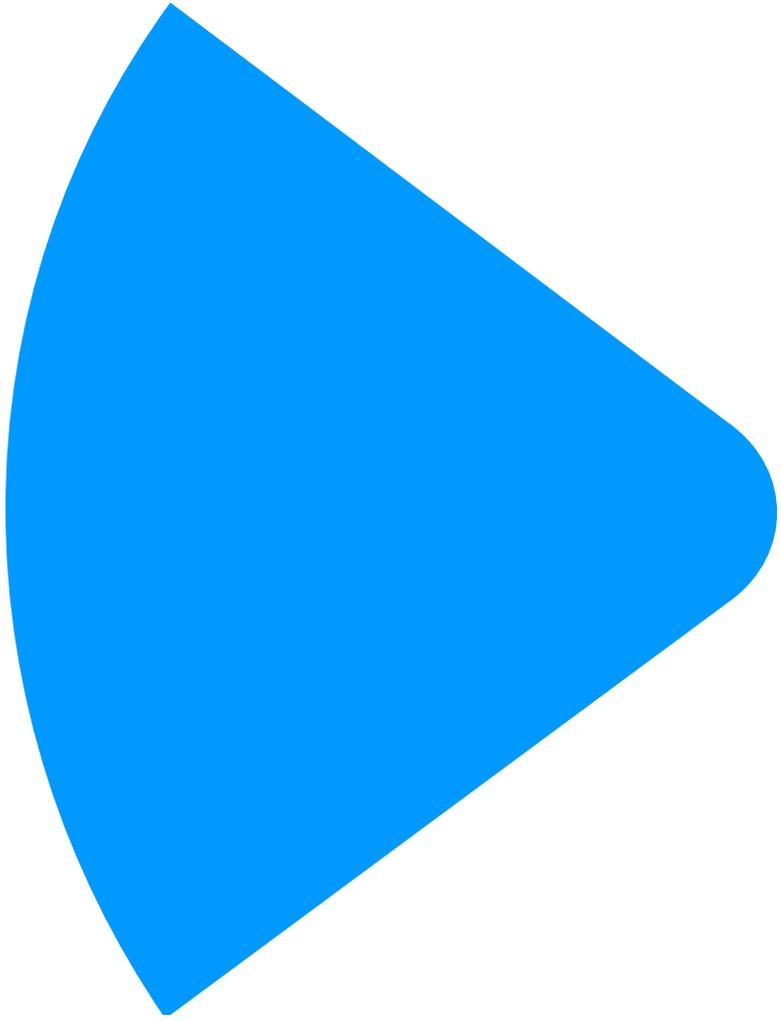
sourced' **cocaine**— or, as it's come to be known, 'woke **coke**'. Selling through the dark web, part of the internet not indexed by search engines, dealers are amping up their 'ethical' credentials, even using descriptions like 'fair trade' and 'conflict-free', to sell the class A drug to those with a social conscience.

## Londoners snort twice as much cocaine as any other European city

Because coke is anything but woke. Last year in Colombia, where an estimated 60 per cent of the cocaine consumed in central and western Europe originates from, illegal armed groups forced around 40,000 people to flee their homes as they fought for control of drug trafficking routes along the border with Venezuela. Closer to home, Sadiq Khan released figures last year which reveal that more than 4,000 vulnerable young people in London are being coerced or groomed into county lines drug-trafficking activity, spread across 41 counties in the UK. Aside from the human cost, a few lines leave a huge environmental footprint. The National Crime Agency (NCA) reports that every kilogram of cocaine requires the destruction of one acre of rainforest, while the chemicals in the production process leak into the water supply and poison the surrounding wildlife.

And yet cocaine consumption in the capital is booming, with the middle classes fuelling the rise. An analysis of waste water by King's College London in 2019 found that national cocaine use has more than doubled in five years, with the purity of the drug reaching record highs. London is one of Europe's top five cities with the highest cocaine. Analysis suggests that one in every 50 Londoners take the drug every single day of the week. Which is troubling because, aside from being a class A drug which, if found in your possession, can land you seven years in prison, it's an ethical quagmire with negative implications for the lives of everyone in its supply chain. So it's hardly surprising the average middle class recreational user is keen to separate their Saturday night line of cocaine with human misery on a large scale.





Metropolitan Police Commissioner **Cressida Dick** famously weighed in on the contradiction in a now famous indictment: 'There are groups of middle-class people who will sit round and happily think about global warming and fair trade, and environmental protection and all sorts of things, organic food, but think there is no harm in taking a bit of cocaine.'



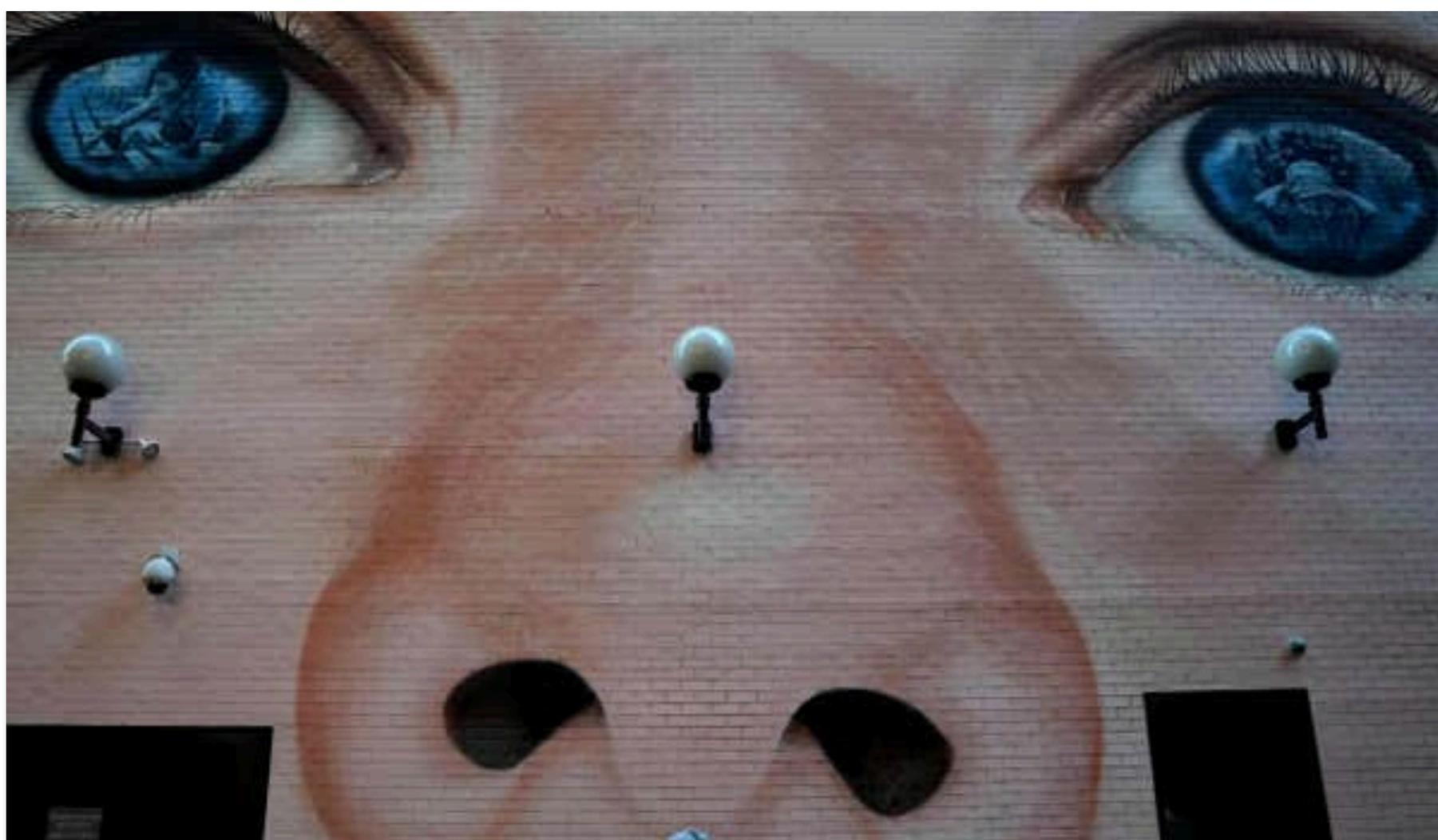
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‘Two to three years ago “organic, fair trade cocaine” first started appearing,’ says investigative journalist and dark net specialist Jamie Bartlett. ‘It completely mirrors a normal market – if you see Subway advertising vegan rolls, there’s no reason at all dark net vendors won’t mirror those trends if they think it’s something people care about. There are hundreds of vendors who want to show possible buyers what’s different about them compared to everyone else.’

So what would ethically sourced cocaine actually look like? Antony Loewenstein, whose new book *Pills, Powder And Smoke* explores the violent repercussions of the war on **drugs**, argues: ‘Ethically sourced coke means oversight and transparency at every stage of the supply chain, with everyone from the farmers in Colombia to the suppliers in Europe being treated fairly and given an adequate wage.’

Loewenstein confirms that it’s impossible to verify the claims of dark web dealers promoting ‘fair trade’ cocaine online. He believes that it is simply a marketing ploy, but says that it speaks to a wider school of thought surrounding the legalisation and regulation of cocaine. ‘There’s a number of people in Central and Latin America advocating for a legalised and regulated system, including politicians, because they know the absolutely devastating effect the current drug trade is having’, he explains.





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Josh, 22, from Manchester, who claims to be an 'occasional dark web dabbler', has seen 'ethically sourced' coke being advertised but doubts its authenticity. 'You often see "premium" coke which is sold at a much higher price, and you can quite easily verify its quality by reading the reviews of other users – but you can't do that with "ethical" stuff; there's no way of knowing how its sourced,' he says.

According to Bartlett, dark net vendors argue that their trade is more ethical on the grounds that supplying drugs by post cuts out violence at a local level. 'A lot of drugs crime is turf war over street corners or postcode areas, and that results in a lot of young people in the UK getting into trouble. With the dark net you're essentially buying wholesale and cutting all that out.'

Londoners seem willing to pay a premium for a clean conscience. In 2019's Global Drug Survey, 85 per cent of respondents said they would be willing to pay more for ethically sourced cocaine. In England, where the average price per gram is £30-40 according to DrugWise, respondents were willing to pay 25 per cent more.

Nevertheless, as Bartlett notes, even if buying from the dark web does eliminate local criminality, it is still only cleaning up less than half of the supply

chain.'Buying on the dark web doesn't stop the Central and Latin American drug wars at the borders,' he admits.

So, while your oat-milk cappuccinos may be fair trade, your fruit and veg organic and your coat faux fur, it seems the white stuff will continue to elude your commitment to clean living.

*For help and support with cocaine addiction, click [here](#).* ■

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