



Research Paper

The long tail of a demon drug: The ‘bath salts’ risk environment

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ABSTRACT

Using the case of synthetic cathinones (commonly referred to as ‘bath salts’ in the US context), this paper analyses structural factors surrounding novel psychoactive substances (NPS) as contributing to the unique risk environment surrounding their use. Drawing on interviews with 39 people who use bath salts from four U.S. cities and analysis of the infrastructural, social, economic, and policy contexts, we document the unique harms related to changing contexts for illicit drug regulation, manufacture, and consumption. Findings suggest that NPS and designer drug markets, which are highly reliant upon the internet, share characteristics of the entertainment industry which has come to rely more heavily upon profits derived from the ‘long tail’ of myriad lesser-known products and the diminished centrality of ‘superstars’ and ‘hits’. Findings point toward increased theoretical and policy attention to changing drug market structures, more rigorous evaluations of drug ‘analogues’ legislation and greater involvement with NPS education and testing by harm reduction agencies.

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Introduction/background

Perrone has noted that most so-called novel psychoactive substances (NPS), are ‘neither new nor novel’ (2016, p. 150). Rather, they are substances either first synthesized decades ago and experiencing a resurgence in use or are drug ‘analogues’ representing minor chemical alterations to an existing drug molecule to rebrand a familiar substance or circumvent legal prohibition. Despite their dubious claims to novelty, however, NPS have drawn news media to sensational stories of violence and death, reportedly precipitated by the use of dangerous new synthetic compounds, and have found themselves at the heart of rapidly shifting legislation. ‘Drug analogue’ legislation has emerged across Europe and the U.S. and is designed to equip regulatory and legislative bodies with rapid, emergency-based authority to prohibit emergent substances deemed to hold chemically analogous relationships to other, already-illicit substances (Losoya, 2013; van Amsterdam, Nutt, & van den Brink, 2013). As a number of drug scholars have recently warned (Hammersley, 2010; Losoya, 2013), accelerated legislative enactment of prohibitions on NPS and blanket sanctions contained within various drug analogue acts supply much of the impetus for a ‘chemical arms race’ (Feng, Bridgewater, McIntire, & Enders, 2016) in which contemporary drug labs produce seemingly endless

iterations on an illicit molecule—a process most clearly evident in the more than 100 synthetic cannabinoids that have been identified and appear in various grey and black-market smoking blends (Feng et al., 2016; Langer et al., 2016). While this practice has been criticized for preempting pharmacological research into emergent substances, thus preventing assessment of a molecule’s potential for legitimate medical use and for leading to potential legal injustices (Losoya, 2013), the more immediate impact is to create an impetus for grey-market chemists to rapidly develop new substances as substitutes for those lost to expedited prohibition (Feng et al., 2016), resulting in potential confusion and harms for consumers who are poorly informed about the changing formulation of the generically marketed substances, bearing such monikers as Spice or Bath Salts, in the case of synthetic cannabinoid blends and synthetic cathinones, respectively. One public health implication of such rapid proliferation is that the banning of substances that *might* be harmful leads to the introduction of new analogues that genuinely are (Hammersley, 2010, p. 373).

Synthetic cathinones

In the past 10 years, claims of drug-related harms for NPS have become commonplace in the U.S., particularly in local news media. Accounts of violence, suicidality, seizures, hallucination and psychosis have been repeatedly linked to use of synthetic cannabinoids and cathinones—chemical analogues of psychoactive components in cannabis and *Catha edulis*, or Khat, a plant chewed

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for its stimulating properties throughout the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa (Al-Hebshi & Skaug, 2005; Brenneisen, Fisch, Koelbing, Geissshusler, & Kalix, 1990; Gatherings, 1976), respectively. While the first cathinone analogues were synthesized as early as 1928 (Kau, 2008; Perrone, 2016, Chap. 8), they remained relatively unknown to people who use illicit substances and the general public until reintroduced as over-the-counter drugs posing as shoe deodorizers, plant foods, or bath salts—the latter term eventually serving as a catchall for synthetic cathinones (SCs) being sold in U.S. gas stations, tobacconists, and head shops. In 2011, the U.S. Department of Justice issued a report indicating a growing concern with SCs, which had emerged in Europe as popular recreational substances around 2007 according to other sources (Shaller, 2013). Concurrently, reports indicating rising rates of emergency department visits related to SC use began to emerge (Carbone, Carbone, Carstairs, & Luzi, 2013; Prosser & Nelson, 2012; Sivagnanam, Chaudari, Lopez, Sutherland, & Ramu, 2013), as did a growing array of sensational news stories regarding the dangerous consequences of SC use. The U.S. Congress introduced a series of bills in 2011, including the *Combating Dangerous Synthetic Stimulants Act of 2011* (H.R. 1571, S. 409); the *Synthetic Drug Control Act of 2011* (H.R. 1254) and the *Dangerous Synthetic Drug Control Act of 2011* (S. 839), all of which provided more direct access to Schedule 1 of the Controlled Substances Act, a list of illicit substances defined by a stipulated lack of medical value (Sacco & Finklea, 2011). Quickly thereafter, the U.S. Department of Justice moved to schedule three SCs appearing in bath salt products—mephedrone, methylone, and MDPV—later adding another 10 to the list (U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, 2014).

SC's path to prohibition are undergirded by *Catha edulis's* status as a substance used among Muslim peoples and the rich history of yellow journalism related to drug topics in the U.S., (DeGrandpre, 2006; Denham, 2008; Forsyth, 2012; Glassner, 2010; Reinerman & Levine, 1997b). Its demonization is reminiscent of sensational narratives about PCP, cocaine, and even marijuana, all of which were granted a singular power to corrupt and transform their users at various points during the 20th century. Where PCP and cocaine had been alleged to grant (usually male, ethnic minority) users superhuman strength and marijuana to prompt sexual licentiousness and loose morals (Jenkins, 1999; Musto, 1999; Reinerman & Levine, 1997a), SCs were rapidly hailed by the U.S. news media as drugs causing radical breaks with sanity. High school revelers in Minnesota were discovered in random acts of violence and confusion; a 21-year-old in Louisiana attempted to cut his throat in front of his parents and finally succeeding in taking his life with a low-caliber child's rifle; and most gruesomely, a homeless man was disfigured by a purportedly bath-salts intoxicated 'cannibal' assailant who successfully removed large portions of the man's face with his teeth before being shot by police (Shaller, 2013). As the number of deaths attributed to SC use grew, so too did skepticism over the claims being made on internet news sites, and a number of the accounts were ultimately debunked or revealed to have involved unverified claims of SC involvement (Forsyth, 2012).

Serializing drug reportage aside, SCs are a clear exemplar of shifting drug marketplaces and dissemination processes. Purchased through 'dark web' venues in the mold of the now defunct Silk Road (Barratt, 2012; Van Buskirk, Roxburgh, Farrell, & Burns, 2014; Van Hout & Bingham, 2013a, 2013b), paid for with cryptocurrencies (like Bitcoin), 'mined' and transmitted across the internet (Barratt & Aldridge, 2016), and popularized by online drug journalism and education sites (e.g., Erowid and Lycaeum.org), SCs constitute a highly technologically mediated class of drug commodities and, as such, raise important questions about how risk and harm flow (or 'trickle down') through online and face-to-face commercial networks. In particular, how, we want to ask, are

SCs and their (perhaps overstated) risks encountered and negotiated by their end users—those far more likely to have purchased SCs from street-level dealers in traditional face-to-face transactions.

The risk environment framework

Rhodes and others have advanced the notion of a 'risk environment' (Rhodes & Simic, 2005; Rhodes et al., 2003; Strathdee et al., 2010) as a corrective to the individual-centric focus of much public health work on 'risk factors' for drug- and sex-related harms. Drawing on Foucaultian constructs like biopower and governmentality, risk environment analyses have sought to demonstrate the interface between micro and macro-level processes and between individuals and the social and economic structures in and through which they operate. While offering a simple heuristic by which a risk environment can be charted in terms of its component *physical, social, economic and policy* domains, more recent theorizations have focused on the overlapping and imbricated relationship between different environmental contexts and the complex place of human agency therein (Rhodes, 2009). In bringing the risk environment framework to bear on a qualitative inquiry into the sociocultural practices of people who use SCs, this paper seeks, in particular, to explore the interface between the macro-structure of NPS marketplaces as they have emerged and the microsociology of SC procurement and use. The following literature review elucidates each of the four environmental domains, which will be further explored in parallel in the paper's Results section.

Methods

The qualitative analyses presented below represent a hybrid of inductive and deductive approaches to in-depth interview data from a study of the SC marketplace in the U.S. The project was initially guided by a set of deductive, a priori analytic concerns—to identify the market structure surrounding SCs across 4 US cities; to understand the phenomenological dimensions of SC/bath salt use, and to illuminate the public health concerns related to continued use of SCs after they were scheduled, and effectively outlawed, by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and Drug Enforcement Agency.

To that end, project staff conducted 39 qualitative interviews lasting between 55 and 95 min with people using bath salts at time of enrollment in Houston, Galveston, New Orleans and New York City, cities where the study team had strong networks emerging from earlier research. Participants were recruited using a combination of venue-based and peer directed chain referral techniques. More than half of participants (21/39) identified as black/African-American, 8% as Hispanic/Latino, and 36% as white; 26 identified as male, 13 as female. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 57, with a mean age of 36 for the sample. Only 10 of the 39 were employed at the time of enrollment in the study, and the mean educational level for the sample was below that of a high school diploma. Interviews focused on personal experiences with SCs and the contexts for their use as well as issues related to dependence, social stigma, and the markets in which SCs are purchased.

Initially, interview transcripts were reviewed by all authors to generate a set of *a posteriori* themes of interest. One of the central topics emerging from team discussions concerned the ways in which SC-related harms were understood and articulated by participants and how risk was 'situated' in participant narratives—whether within individual factors, such as a predisposition to anxiety or psychosis, or environmental factors, such as the structure and characteristics of the SC street market. Given a

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