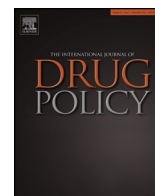




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## Research paper

## From niche to stigma—Headshops to prison: Exploring the rise and fall of synthetic cannabinoid use among young adults

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper will be to consider the rise and subsequent fall in NPS use at national and local level with a focus on synthetic cannabinoid products in Kent. We will examine the local practice and policy responses by Kent's Young Persons' Drug and Alcohol Service towards a possible change in patterns of NPS drug consumption. The county has seen an expansion in the number of Headshops and we present local media coverage on NPS, and the Trading Standards and Kent Police intervention *Operation Lantern* to regulate Headshops. Through quantitative and qualitative data sets on socially vulnerable young people and prison populations we explore young adults' perception of pleasure and harm in the use of NPS. Emergent data suggests young adults are now assessing the differences between NPS and more traditional illicit drugs, with this impacting on decision-making about the substances being used. When 'legal highs' first appeared they were associated with a more niche middle class demographic, 'psychonauts' and experimental users interested in pursuing recreational drug diversity. We examine macro and micro data to suggest that populations most likely to become involved in NPS use are those with degrees of stigma linked to socially vulnerable young adults suggesting that Spice is no longer a feature of middle class recreational drug use.

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## Introduction

In 2016, the British government introduced the Psychoactive Substances Act to prohibit new psychoactive substances (NPS), also known as research chemicals, designer drugs and 'legal highs,' which imitate the feeling of intoxication brought on through use of illegal drugs and until recently have remained beyond the law (Blackman, 2017; Measham, 2011). According to the Crime Survey for England & Wales, (2015: 17) "Use of NPS in the last year appears to be concentrated among young adults aged 16–24. Around 1 in 40 (2.8%) young adults aged 16–24 took a NPS in the last year." They are commercially and globally marketed as pellets, powders, herbal incense and ethnobotanicals in highly attractive packaging aimed at a young adult audience. In Britain, the use of NPS has been identified as part of poly drug use where they are used as a substitute or alongside illegal drugs and alcohol (Lader, 2015). This change to patterns of recreational drug consumption has impacted upon how drug services have responded to this change.

This paper explores the increased concern shown by Government and media, focusing on the danger of synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists (SCRA) or the brands such as Spice through an examination of local practice and policy responses by the Young Persons' Drug and Alcohol Service (YPDAS), Canterbury, England. We examine data at a macro and micro level, to argue that there has been a shift away from the experimental and recreational use of NPS by niche groups of young adults, to problematic use of synthetic cannabinoids by those individuals with degrees of stigma linked to vulnerable groups of young people and prison populations. There is also an examination of the local media coverage of the raids on Headshops, undertaken by Trading Standards intervention, supported by Kent Police, titled *Operation Lantern*. The study offers an opportunity to research both the expansion of Headshops across Kent and the consequent concern shown by Kent County Council and assess the actions taken by the Kent Police against these retail outlets to prevent the supply of dangerous drugs to local people. We employ a mixed method approach, through the use of quantitative surveys with young adults from schools, foyers and prison alongside ethnographic research on Headshops owners and customers to address whether NPS usage is now more closely connected to stigmatised groups of young adults.

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## Method

The data was collected from a range of settings through the application of a mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2014), which included questionnaire surveys, interviewing, observation, ethnography and textual analysis of media representations of NPS. The quantitative data is based on 622 respondents but not all sections of the survey were always completed. The respondents were involved in early intervention projects with the YPDAS and completed the surveys anonymously at a range of schools, colleges and alternative curriculum projects in Kent. The early intervention team is commissioned to target young people deemed vulnerable to substance misuse issues. As such, those completing surveys were more likely to represent cohorts such as young people in the care of local authorities and/or in the criminal justice system as well as those excluded from mainstream education. 238 of the respondents were under 16 years old, 310 were aged between 16 and 21 and 74 respondents did not disclose their age, data also included: 15 young adults from Foyers, 12 Prisoners and 5 prison staff.

The ethnographic research on Headshops in Kent took place during January (2014) to March (2016), at the same time as the news media in the county focused on the dangers of 'legal highs' being sold in these stores and when *Operation Lantern* took place. For example, *Kent Online* (28.1.2014), headline states: 'Kent has more legal high shops than any county outside London, charity the Angelus Foundation reveals.' Thus, we thought it valuable to pursue our drug service work alongside the ethnography when visiting Headshops in Folkestone, Canterbury, Maidstone, Ashford, Sheerness and Gravesend. Fieldwork at these shops varied between 15 min and 2 h. The sample of Headshop owners and shop staff numbered 14. Each interview took place within the shop premises. The format to the observations was to greet and stay if permitted and to speak with customers. At certain visits no customers came into a shop, at other times there were approximately 8 young adults over the period of observation. Additional data was collected at the Headshops with 20 young adults who were customers; these conversations lasted between 5–15 min. The majority of these young people were students or young workers, who were accompanied by friends for "support" or "confidence."

The data was examined on a holistic basis, ensuring complete familiarisation of the different data sets. Examining the questionnaire, interview, textual and ethnographic data, we set out to apply a thematic analysis to identify common patterns in the responses received and generate a structure of emergent issues. Throughout the data collection it was possible to move back and forth between the method and the emergent data combining a local drug service perspective and to undertake a critical analysis of the international and national assessment of the issues associated with NPS. For example, when the police undertook raids on Headshops suspected of selling illegal NPS to local young people, we were able to interview staff after these police operations. Both Headshop staff and consumers were aware of the local media coverage against NPS and experienced police intervention.

## Introducing NPS: 'Spice' the synthetic cannabinoid

Synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists, popularly known as Spice or K2, have been sold under more than 500 names including Mojo, Clockwork Orange, Mary Joy, Devil's Weed, Scooby Snax, Hawaiian Haze, Amsterdam Gold, Black Mamba and Annihilation. The names of the products are deliberately evocative of marijuana connotations historically linked to cannabis, to encourage users to identify with the symbolic representation of cannabis (Booth, 2003). However, SCRA are man made chemicals, bonded to inert

plant matter using products such as acetone, the active ingredient in nail polish remover. SCRA were not designed to be smoked in a joint or bong, initially being developed for potential medicinal or pharmaceutical purposes. The chemicals in these products impact more fully on the body's cannabinoid receptors and can produce intense and often-negative outcomes for users (Newcombe & Christensen, 2016).

Amsterdam, Brunt, and Brink (2015: 254) argue: "Synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists (SCRAs) are full agonists and often more potent than THC. Moreover, in contrast to natural cannabis, SCRAs preparations contain no CBD so that these drugs may have a higher psychosis-inducing potential than cannabis." Their cost varies depending on quantity but it is typically £10.00 a gram, becoming cheaper the more someone purchases. Their greater intensity at lower dose levels ensure that, despite being clearly distinct from traditional cannabis, SCRA products have an appeal linked to their potency and affordability.

## NPS: a global and a national problem and a local issue in Kent

This section outlines at international, national and local levels the selective evidence put forward that NPS are dangerous drugs. In 2013, The United Nations (2013) World Drug report announced that NPS are diversified global products and through slight chemical modification they can evade international drug control; governments everywhere are struggling to cope with the increased number of new designer drugs. The European Monitoring Centre confirmed the growth in legal highs 'Drugs and Drug Addiction' (2014) ([emcdda.europa.eu](http://emcdda.europa.eu)) and in the UK by the 'New Psychoactive Substances review' (2014). Alan Travis (20.5.2014) in *the Guardian* suggested that more than 348 new types of synthetic drugs have appeared in over 90 countries. Power (2013: 106) and Clarkson (2015: 3) maintain that NPS have been linked to the development of Web 2.0, the Silk Road website (an anonymous online market) and online Headshops such as Iceheadshop, Global Weekend, Madcat and the Herbal Highs Company, whereby the internet has made legal highs more accessible (Jones, 2011; Schmidt, Sharma, Schifano, & Feinmann, 2011). Currently, although the Psychoactive Substances Act has been passed, many of the above websites remain active to purchase NPS.

According to Measham, Moore, Newcombe and Welch (2010: 17) legal highs have been around since before the 1980s, but it was the emergence of mephedrone for recreational users, which established the potential of a new drug market that became 'legal highs.' For them, it was the summer of 2009 that marked the popular emergence of mephedrone at a time when MDMA purity was low and consequently it was able to fill a gap in the market. After media attention and proclamations of increased government concern, the UK saw the introduction of Temporary Class Drug Orders from 15 November 2011 (Norman, Grace, & Lloyd, 2014). This method of control supplemented the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act and enabled the Home Secretary to place controls on NPS causing sufficient concern. This is confirmed by research: Vardakou, Pistos and Spiliopoulou (2010:157) highlight that 'Spice' products were generally used at the time by young people as a cannabis substitute, however they state that Spice is "stronger than natural cannabis" . . . and 'it is evident that producers purposely risk the health of consumers to skim high profits.' Fattore and Fratta (2011:1) see synthetic cannabinoids as "appealing to young and drug-naïve individuals seeking new experiences." They go on to argue, "Spice smokers are exposed to drugs that are extremely variable in composition and potency and are at risk of serious, if not lethal outcomes." Dargan, Hudson, Ramsey and Wood (2011: 275) conclude "from a public health perspective, continued availability of these products [synthetic cannabinoids] continues to put individuals using them at an unknown degree of risk." Thus the

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