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From Niche to Stigma – Headshops to Prison: exploring the rise and fall of synthetic cannabinoid use amongst young adults

Shane Blackman and Rick Bradley

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.

Key words

NPS, Legal Highs, Headshops, Prison, Stigma, Young People, Ethnography

Highlights

* Analysis presents a shift away from the recreational use of NPS by niche groups

* Focus on increased use of synthetic cannabinoids associated with stigmatised groups of young people and prison populations.

* Detail local media campaign focused on the harm of NPS and coverage of Trading Standards and Kent Police Operation Lantern to regulate Headshops.

* Identification of two types of Headshop: Alternative and Commercial with different operating rationales towards 'drug normalisation, sharing information with drug services and the profit motive.

* Contradictorily, groups of stigmatised young adults in prison warn against Spice but at the same time may consider it an option.

* Identified limitations of current policy regarding drug and alcohol education for young adults.

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 (Measham 2011, Blackman 2016). 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 to 24. Around 1 in 40 (2.8%) young adults aged 16 to 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.

Method

The data was collected from a range of settings through the application of a mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2009), 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 minutes and 2 hours. 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 minutes. 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, SCRAs are man made chemicals, bonded to inert plant matter using products such as acetone, the active ingredient in nail polish remover. SCRAs 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 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 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) 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 and 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 and 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 key concern within these studies is the inherent risk of acute toxicity.

The UK national media attention on legal highs has also focused on death and tragedy, for example, The Sun (26.11. 2009): ‘Legal drug teen ripped his scrotum off’; The Mirror (17.3.2010): ‘Arrests over Meow Meow drug teen deaths’; Mail Online (10.5.2013) ‘Amazon drugs row: Fury as deadly 'legal highs' which can trigger psychotic episodes on sale online’; The Mail Online (8.12. 2014) writes: ‘Surge in death from Legal Highs’; The Guardian (12.2.2014) ‘Legal High drug deaths Soar in UK,’ this is affirmed by the BBC News headline (23.5.2015): that legal highs are a ‘Potential Death Sentence.’ In 2015, The Daily Record (30.9.2015) stated: ‘Deaths involving legal highs rise to 114 last year from just four in 2009.’ However, there has been disagreement about the extent of the danger of NPS. King and Nutt (2014: 952) suggest that deaths from legal highs are overestimated and

relate to a problem of definition. The Office for National Statistics on deaths related to drug poisoning in 2012 asserted that there were 52 death associated with NPS, but following a freedom of information request 13 of these deaths were found to be associated with gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB): a substance previously added to the Misuse of Drugs Act and not a NPS. Thus King and Nutt argue that there is “no simple answer to how many deaths were associated, let alone caused by new psychoactive substances.”

One of the roles of the local drugs services in Canterbury is to engage with Headshops across the county to provide harm reduction information for owners and customers. We continued to offer drug information at the same time that the Kent Police identified Headshops as a source of supply for NPS and sought to close them down or restrict their operations. At local level, one town in Mid Kent moved from no Headshops in 2009 to three by 2012. We found that the rise of mephedrone demonstrated that there was more out there than traditional illegal drugs such as cannabis and ecstasy. From the drug service perspective, we found that when mephedrone was banned in 2010, consumers turned to naphyrone, often sold under the name ‘NRG-1’, to fill the gap. It had a short shelf life, as reports about NRG-1 were largely negative. M-DEX was able to hold its own for slightly longer but none of the successors seemed able to compete with the apparently positive effects of mephedrone. There was interest in methoxetamine, initially spoken about in some groups of service users as a legal and safer alternative to ketamine.

We found that these initial users tended to be more middle class and conformed to Russell Newcombe’s (1999) definition of being psychonauts. Drug service contact with experimental users suggested that young people were more prepared to try NPS but their responses tended to be inconsistent in that some were less afraid of the consequences while

others were unaware of the risks. Before the ban (by the local Kent Police) we found brands such as 'Pandora's Box' and 'Psyclone' were accessible and used within certain specific cohorts. For the first time, we began to see some crossover with substances that might have been more associated with adult service users; in one cohort of grammar school and college students in East Kent, the group (males and females aged between fifteen and seventeen years) were experimenting with a range of substances including diazepam, gabapentin and trihexyphenidil. Elsewhere, variations around 25i-NBOMe and alpha-methyltryptamine (AMT) were increasingly being reported to our drug service workers. These had become the niche substances for socially advantaged groups of young people. By that time, mephedrone and SCRA's had become well known through the media. These NPS drugs held little of the intrigue that they had done a year or two earlier. NPS were no longer used as a bohemian curiosity, it had been tried and had fallen down the hierarchy of drug acceptability. One student, Amanda sums this up: "I think the people that are using illegal drugs know that legal highs are dangerous," while another Steve states: "Legal highs are really crap, it is the illegal drugs that work, it's changed, people now know that legal highs are dangerous."

Thus at a local level legal highs, it would appear, were no longer niche. This was confirmed at a macro level by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2014) warning that "new NPS, or designer drugs had gained popularity and were no longer restricted to niche markets." Although, our data is limited, it would appear that the young adults with a more middle class background were using Headshops less at the same time as the local police campaign against NPS intensified. For example, one student David said: "Well, the thing about legal highs now is they are so less appealing!" The drug service team identified a number of key factors which shaped local practical interventions; these were as follows: firstly, the increased use of NPS is legal; secondly, there has been ease of access

through online and local Headshops in Kent; thirdly, certain NPS were not detectable through drug testing; fourthly, an apparent decline in the purity of cannabis and ecstasy, led to disillusionment with traditional illegal drugs and finally, drug service evidence suggested that NPS use is moving away from niche groups.

Local media focus on legal highs and Operation Lantern

From the drug services perspective we found that the local media developed a high profile moral campaign centered on blaming Headshops in Kent for the deaths and harm experienced by young people as a result of buying NPS. Alongside media coverage of Police interventions, this made our role of supplying drug information to Headshops and customers difficult and seen as suspicious, on a number of occasions we were asked: “Are you the police?” The following details capture the tone of the local media campaign against the perceived harms caused by legal highs. For example, the coverage includes the death of two young men in Canterbury, Hugo Wenn and Daniel Lloyd: Kent Online (15.3.2012) ‘Grieving parents of Hugo Wenn call for 'legal highs ban.’ On (10.10.2013) Kent Online focused on Matt Ford, aged 17, who had a heart attack after smoking ‘Exodus Damnation.’ In (21.10.2013) Kent Online reported on the grieving mother of Jimmy Guichard who had his life support machine turned off as a result of using legal highs. On (9.1.2014) Kent Online described how: “Three teenage girls from Ashford needed hospital treatment after taking legal highs.” In (12.3.2015) Kent Online reported that in Sittingbourne a head teacher launched a plea and warning against ‘synthetic cannabis called ‘Spice’ as pupils become violently ill.’ on (28.5.2015) Kent Online described how Nathan Winter was sentenced at Maidstone Magistrates’ Court to a 12-month community order for harassment

as a result of using synthetic cannabis, known as Spice. On (10.8.2015) Kent Online reported that a teenager in Maidstone: ‘collapses after smoking a form of synthetic cannabis.’

The above selections of front-page headlines were supported by local press coverage of the police raids on Kent Headshops. On (7.7.2014) Kent Online, reported the details of Operation Lantern where Trading Standards officers and Kent Police raided 14 Headshops across Kent, removing 424 sample packets for testing. The raids took place at shops in Gravesend, Sheerness, Herne Bay, Margate, Rochester, Ashford, and Folkestone and also at two shops in Canterbury, Chatham and three shops in Maidstone. Although a 6-month ban was placed on the products seized under General Product Safety Regulations, the Headshops continued to sell products that were not prohibited at the time. The drug service was not directly involved in the actual operation itself but was asked to give a statement to Trading Standards, which specified the potential risks of NPS products. The information provided was based on reports received from some drug service users, as well as from the increasing evidence within the sector as a whole. Trading Standards reported that this evidence was key in the Magistrates Courts’ rulings to uphold the seizures. Kent Online (7.7.2014) details that Headshops had been served with letters from Trading Standards and have been subject to previous raids by the Police. Kent Online (2.12.2014) further reported: Headshops in Canterbury, Margate and Folkestone were subject to another Trading Standards and Police raid. On (7.1.2015) Kent Online states: ‘UK Skunkworks in Gravesend, Maidstone, Canterbury, Ashford and Sheerness prevented from selling legal highs.’ In terms of local drug policy we can identify that the actions of Trading Standards, Kent Police, local media and the drug service’s interventions focusing on the potential risk of NPS have contributed to a reduction of access and subsequent decline in NPS use. The newspaper, Kent Online

(1.8.2015) announced a “fall in number of shops selling legal highs, latest raids results show.” This local media report about the reduced availability of NPS is accurate due to the closure of Headshops in Kent however; our drugs service workers note that NPS seems to be moving to an illicit market like traditional illegal drugs.

Ethnography of Headshops in Kent

We found that the police intervention against Headshops on the basis of making NPS less available in the region and its subsequent coverage within the local media were mutually reinforcing. Two findings emerged quickly from the ethnography firstly, the contemporary literature on Headshops lacked an historical understanding of the development and origin of Headshop culture, and secondly in Kent the local media coverage of Operation Lantern treated Headshops as homogenous.

Headshops are not a recent invention, having emerged in the late 1960s in San Francisco’s Haight Street (Lewis 1972:86); neither is the term ‘Head’ which had gained prominence by the early 1930s with reference to cannabis users described as ‘weed-heads’ (Abel 1980: 49). During the early 1970s the Headshop became a symbol of resistance associated with the counter culture and the anti-war movement alongside ‘hip capitalists’ or entrepreneurs who Davis (2015: 42) states “were not opposed to turning a profit.” From the beginning of Headshops in the 1960s, we can identify the dual function, on the one hand to support the notion of ‘drug normalisation’ and on the other hand to identify drug merchandise as a profitable source of income.

The format to the ethnography on Headshops was to greet owners and stay if permitted. It was found that not all customers bought legal highs, some purchased jewellery, clothes, T-shirts, records, posters, boots, drug paraphernalia, crystal ornaments or art objects. Although, not in Kent, Clarkson (2015: 256) argues: “the town centres where the legal-high shops really flourish are the rundown ones.” Furthermore, one of Clarkson’s informants argues, “The typical head shop is not an impressive place by any means. It usually consists of a counter and a load of sloppy-looking displays containing various of the softer legal highs” (268). In contrast, the Headshops, which formed part of the ethnography, were not in run down areas nor presented their commodities in an untidy style.

Certain Headshops contained a more restricted range of items; such as the Skunkworks shops; here the focus was primarily on intoxication. Skunkworks as a chain store, with standardised business methods and practices, followed a set pattern of product layout. There were neat rows and stacks of colourful sachets, scales and drug related equipment including pipes, bongs, lighters and stench proof plastic bags. Inside the shop from the floor to the wall was covered with fake ‘green grocer grass.’ This can also be found on the website www.ukskunkworks.co.uk. This gives Skunkworks a distinctive feel relating to the products sold. There was also a tendency within the Skunkworks shop for staff to present themselves as a “Dream Shop” where ‘sometime in the futures drug use will be legalised.’ Staff also consistently referred to legal highs by the term “research chemicals” especially if they thought students were inside the Headshop. Skunkworks in Canterbury had been singled out by the Kent Online (27.7.2012) ‘Parents of Simon Day hit out at Canterbury legal high shop’ and on BBC News headline (17.10.2013): ‘Criticised Canterbury store defends ‘legal highs’ trade.’ A local Headshop retailer stated:

I've been arrested on a number of occasions, even been handcuffed while customers have been in the shop. Totally insensitive. I feel that we have been set up, hounded by the local press. Our shops in both Canterbury and Maidstone, the police have overreacted and we have suffered from the police being under pressure.

It was found that a number of Headshop owners asserted a differentiation between the style and approach towards consumers with regard to offering an 'alternative culture.' One Headshop owner states:

There's a different expectation the moment you enter my shop, we sell legal highs to ordinary people, not junkies. We don't draw attention to it and we don't sell illegal drugs out the back either.

Three drug service workers reported that they had heard anecdotal evidence on selling illegal drugs at a particular Headshop. It was found that at Skunkworks shops staff were under different sorts of pressures. One member of Skunkworks staff states:

Since the drug deaths we have been blamed. Really bad. But it was nothing to do with us. We've had police here, been in the papers, parents blaming us, been subject to a large amount of hostility and aggression.

Protesting against the Skunkworks Headshop, parent Mike Sole was reported in Canterbury Times, (7.7.2012) the headline stated: "Canterbury legal highs shop must be closed down, says father.' Ryall and Butler (2011:303) make use of Stan Cohen's (1972) theory of moral

panic when discussing Headshops by arguing that “Media portrayals greatly exaggerated the ill effects of head shop products in the process stoking public anger rather than encouraging rational debate.” At another Skunkworks shop, a customer and the shop manager were having an argument about the safety of NPS. They began shouting at one another resulting in the comment: “I’ll take you round the back and kick your head in if you come out with that sort of shit.” This impacted on four students who were standing near, one stated: “You don’t get this sort of thing with cannabis.” Early in the ethnographic fieldwork it became apparent that students were a sizable clientele within the more alternative Headshops, whereas, less socially advantageous groups tended to frequent the more commercial Headshops looking for brands including ‘spice’.

In terms of developing local drug policy and practice it was possible to identify that an intensified media campaign against NPS, led by Kent Online, with support from the parents of victims, alongside raids on Headshop premises by the Police and Trading Standards, had established pressure on working conditions and the viability of selected Headshops. In Folkestone, one Headshop owner argued:

We have no real relationship with the other Headshop in town. In the region, we have had a dip in profits since Skunkworks arrived, but our income is only ¼ based on legal highs. The key thing in our shop is diversity of products, from clothes to jewellery; our profit is different from that of Skunkworks who only draws attention to legal highs.

At Headshops in Canterbury and Folkestone, legal highs were only one product amongst others, which were sold. These shops were not dependent on legal highs and marketed a

diverse range of youth cultural and subcultural items. The aim of these shops was ‘selling a lifestyle.’ Here there was an increased tendency for staff to offer personal information about the nature of legal highs within a context of drug related experience and knowledge with contemporary music playing. For example, one owner stated: “I’ve been running the shop for over 30 years.” One of the customers at this shop whispered to me: “here it’s like being sold drugs by your uncle. I’m a regular customer.” These Headshops possessed an ‘old hippy ethos’ derived from the 1970s Home Grown magazine; this meant that an aura of relaxation existed when you entered the shop. Other Headshops were more focused on the contemporary subcultural scene and employed ex-students, who gave a youthful feel to the shop. Initially employment of ex-students as staff served as a portal to attract more socially advanced groups, but a range of negative experiences at Headshops and coverage of police raids within the local media slowly severed this connection with students. For example, outside a Headshop one student Steve states: “Legal highs are consistently in the news, it’s always a bad story relating to death, crime.” This is supported by his a friend who said: “Legal highs, all in the media, all about death. I’m scared.” Such comments affirm that idea that middle class users of NPS no longer see the drugs as niche. Thus, the research identified two styles of Headshops with different operating rationales; those defined as ‘old school’ or ‘alternative’, based on sharing information with drug services who promoted drug normalisation as part of a life style choice; and those Headshops defined as ‘neo-liberal’ or ‘commercial’, based on shifting units to customers focused on the profit motive where little consideration was given to the nature of the legal high or the user.

Niche to Stigma: Synthetic Cannabinoid Receptor Agonists (SCRAs)

During 2014 the national news media consistently reported NPS use as a danger to health. At the same time in Kent the police began their interventions to close down Headshops. This part of the article explores further the idea that use of synthetic cannabis use amongst young adults can be described as a movement from niche, to stigmatised use. Firstly, at a national level, we shall look at two contrasting documentary films on NPS, and secondly we shall look at the macro argument put forward by the United Nations and the UK Government to support this argument, alongside micro evidence from our data sets of vulnerable young people and young adults in prison.

Two films about SCRAs and the niche

The movement of synthetic cannabis use from niche groups to stigmatised groups is identified in two contrasting documentaries; firstly, the BBC, *Can I Get High Legally*, broadcast 2nd July 2009 and secondly, the *Hard Lives of Britain's Synthetic Marijuana Addicts*, produced by Vice Media 25th July 2015. The documentary, *Can I Get High Legally*, sets out to discover who is taking, making and selling legal highs. It is filmed in 2009 in the early stages of NPS usage and explores recreational users who are searching for new hallucinogenic pleasures as niche individuals or groups. The programme is focused on the emergent use of legal highs including SCRAs where primarily middle/lower middle class groups of young people are engaged in poly drug use. Some individuals are self-titled: 'psychonauts.' This film is similar to Bafta-winning director Dan Reed's Channel 4 documentary *Legally High* (2013), where there is a focus on the "more civilised and middle class psychonauts" who are "well spoken students" (Rees, Daily Telegraph 8th August

2013). The young adults in these films seem intent on exploring legal highs as another form of recreational intoxication.

In contrast, the documentary produced by Vice Media in (2015) directed by Lucy Kane, explores legal highs, specifically ‘Spice’ amongst vulnerable young adults in Manchester, who are characterised as experiencing poverty and stigma. The film *Hard Lives of Britain’s Synthetic Marijuana Addicts*, portrays NPS users as people who are primarily homeless and unemployed, projecting low self-esteem and regarded ‘Spice’ instrumentally as a means to an end “to reduce pain.” They perceive prison as a possible destination but claim: “Spice is rife in prison and more expensive.” In the documentary, we see vulnerable young adults being given support by the Manchester drug charity LifeShare, where ‘Spice’ is perceived as accessible, legal and cheap, within their limited resources. This drug service has approximately 100 clients and both specialist workers and drug users speak of ‘Spice’ in comparison with crack cocaine and heroin. The Vice Media film is similar to the BBC documentary *Drugs Map of Britain: exploring a legal high epidemic in Wolverhampton* 4th April (2016). Where SCRAAs are recognised as dangerous; consequently the narrative is concerned with stories about hardship, withdrawal and addiction rather than recreational use (Sarpong and Jones 2014: 37).

The idea that NPS were initially a niche intoxicant as represented in the film *Can I get High Legally* was supported nationally with data on emergent use of legal highs is identified in The Home Office report: *New Psychoactive Substances in England*. (2014: 16) This states, “There is evidence that within certain niche subgroups NPS are being used.” According to the Report (11): “The subgroups covered are: participants in the night-time economy, clubbers, men who have sex with men, school children, young adults, and psychonauts.”

The term 'psychonauts' has previously been used to describe leading intellectual drug experimenters such as Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) and Timothy Leary (1920–1996). Jeavans BBC News (18.7.2005) reports 'psychonauts' are elite members of a club who are "probing the doors of perception as part of hippie drug culture." The Mail Online (27.12.2012) states: "Middle –class professional are turning to legal highs to avoid being classed as illegal drug users." In the context of our fieldwork we have found that some young people considered themselves to be 'psychonauts', interested in exploring a range of substances beyond those more routinely available. During the early phase of the Headshop fieldwork positive responses from students were gained: Steve states: "They make you feel good, making you feel really happy, excited, chatty." William a fellow student states: "At least with legal highs you won't have a criminal record." Clare (another student) comments: "At the time I was too scared to try illegal substances and I thought if this is sold over the counter then it must be safe." It was clear from the discussions we had with experimental users that they had been prepared to try these licit substances and were less afraid of the consequences. Another student Dave ponders: "Well, curiosity, as it is labelled legal should have no consequences." However, towards the end of the fieldwork students put more negative experiences forward during conversations such as "I feel that I'm getting addicted, it has to stop," "It makes my body feel weak, tired and I feel thin!" and "It started as a weekend thing, but it's made me depressed lethargic." It may be that the type of intoxication produced by synthetic cannabis was no longer compatible with student duties and some mentioned it could have a damaging impact on their "future." Although, this represent a small amount of evidence collected inside and outside Headshops it points to a movement away from niche use.

Socially vulnerable young adults and use of NPS

The DrugScope Street Drugs survey (2014), *Down a Stony Road*, highlighted concerns of the rapid rise in the use of SCRAAs beyond the niche group to opiate users, the street homeless, socially excluded teenagers, and by people in prison. At local level in our recent survey of over 600 young people who are part of the drug service's early intervention projects, the participants fall into different 'vulnerability' groups such as looked after children, those involved in or at risk of offending, as well as those excluded or at risk of exclusion from mainstream education. The most commonly used NPS amongst this cohort were SCRAAs (25% of respondents). Our data is similar to DrugScope Street Drugs survey, showing a pattern of increased synthetic cannabinoid consumption amongst socially disadvantaged groups.

In Kent the picture is quite complex; the numbers of those using NPS in some specific cohorts has increased, although the positive regard in which many of them had been held began conversely to diminish (Bilgre 2016). In terms of SCRAAs, the drug service found that although more people tried these products they just did not like them. The drug service team were told of a wide range of negative effects being experienced; young users reported extreme pains in their chest with a number of separate reports that it felt like their heart was going to burst out of their body. A group of young male Spice users, from a deprived area in East Kent who were excluded from mainstream education, reported suffering from severe stomach cramps and painful constipation, but continued to use. This set of socially disadvantaged young people using Spice, were not only mistrustful of authority but currently in 2016 both youth and drug service staff are facing difficulties trying to engage them in support. Neither of these groups of less advantaged young people used NPS on a recreational basis, their usage although problematic seemed to be driven by cheap prices or

low social expectations. One young person commented: “The thing is, if it’s something which is cheaper then we’ll pay for that instead.” This data has to be treated cautiously but they may be more indicative of the attitudes and behaviours of hard to reach young people elsewhere in the country. Young people accessing drug service sessions regularly make it clear to the workers that they know the newer breed of substances can be high risk, with SCRAAs being described as “dirty”.

The young people in the survey were asked whether they thought 'legal highs' were more dangerous than illegal drugs (having been given clear explanation of these terms) and, of those answering this question, nearly three times as many said 'yes' (293) than 'no' (100). Of further relevance was the result that 172 participant stated they did not know which were more dangerous; this highlights the confusion that still dominates discussions around NPS. With those that stated legal highs were more dangerous than illegal drugs, this was particularly noticeable in the 16 and over age group. This age bracket felt that legal highs presented a higher risk than traditional illegal drugs; discussions held with some of those completing the surveys indicated that this older cohort were often more directly experienced in relation to substances such as SCRAAs.

The picture of NPS being identified is socially complex, in that less advantaged young people were drawn to Spice as it was cheap and available, but as confirmed by young people at Foyers NPS was also understood to be dangerous. Young people made the following comments including: “Spice is the type of high that is shit, Spice is nasty, it is cannabis that is more chilled,” and “Spice will kill you.” There is a parallel here between the university students and young people at Foyers, it is apparent that both sets of young adults are making subjective comparisons between perceptions of different states of intoxication related to

separate drugs (Becker 1953). The quantitative data collected after the media campaign and the police interventions in Headshops suggest certain young people were beginning to see NPS as a problem rather than a recreational drug. In general, the findings from the drug service data highlighted that, before their involvement with the service, many young people had found a lack of opportunity for them to talk openly about the issues of drug use. The introduction of mandatory Personal and Social Health Education (PSHE) provision, led by skilled and knowledgeable educators, would offer an excellent stepping-stone to address this. However, in spite of the recent increase in NPS use, the drug service reports that young people's substance use still revolves around the traditional substances of cannabis, alcohol and MDMA. As such, it is key that young persons' support services do not become too fixated on NPS but instead focus on safer decision-making around substances as a whole. It would appear that our findings have some resemblance to that of Vento et al (2014:4) which suggests that the more middle class recreational drug scene is perhaps different from that of NPS usage associated with more stigmatised groups. This suggests that drug policy could be responsive to different types of drug scenes.

Stigma, Prison and 'Spice'

Alongside socially disadvantaged young people in Kent the drug service also identified prison populations as being vulnerable to NPS use. In the UK BBC News (24.11.2015) reported that both, Mike Trace, chief executive of RAPt (the Rehabilitation for Addicted Prisoners Trust), and Nick Hardwick, the Chief Inspector of Prisons, warned: "Legal high use in prison is getting worse by the day." Scott (2015: 9) states: "NPS use, specifically Spice, is endemic in prisons and causes significant problems for prisoners, staff and the

running of the prisons.” The application of Goffman’s (1963) theory of stigma to interpret prisoner behaviour was found to be useful in understanding the complex social and individual motivation to use SCRA. Neale, Nettleton and Pickering (2011: 5) point out “an attribute that may be stigmatising in one situation or to one audience may not be stigmatising in another situation or in front of others.” From the data with prisoners some expressed shame for their crime and being in prison, relating to Goffman’s notion of a ‘spoiled identity’ i.e. disapproval from society, but this did not stop prisoners from either wanting or consuming drugs in prison. Goffman (1963: 19) argues that stigmatised people strive to adjust their perceived spoiled identity to gain a new social identity, which offers normal “acceptance.” During the study we encountered prisoners who took an oppositional stance against Spice, although some were still drawn to it due to the pressures of being inside. Our limited data from one prison confirms this assessment, but we also discovered a more complex picture from prisoners themselves, who offer degrees of prohibition, (or new identity) warning other prisoners about the danger of ‘Spice’, but opportunistically they would still use synthetics themselves.

Speaking to staff at one institution, concerns were raised about the prevalence of SCRA and the risks that may accompany their use. Unable to access smoking paraphernalia easily, we were told that inmates might use a page from a Bible as a makeshift cigarette paper and smoke it without tobacco, using the wiring from an appliance such as a kettle to spark it alight. However, one prison officer stated: "if cannabis was allowed in the prison no one would smoke legal highs." This was confirmed by a range of young adult prisoners who stated: “Cannabis helps me chill,” and “Cannabis, it’s relaxing and good stress relief, helps me focus”.

Data from inmates highlighted that the potential risks of NPS are well known. For example, three young prisoners state: "I don't do Spice"; "Spice is more harmful" and "Spice is for Nittys!" [a low status person]. In conversation with prison staff, it was noted that both staff and prisoners have witnessed an increasing number of hospitalisations from SCRA use, with some inmates collapsing after they had smoked it. One individual suffered seizures after initially losing consciousness when they smoked an SCRA product. This same person was unable to recognise family members when they visited him in hospital. As one prisoner concludes: "I fancied a try, but Spice is much stronger, it messed up your head."

We discussed SCRA use with one particular inmate who described the effect that it had on the other inmates who had witnessed him collapsing. "There was nothing like it. Everyone what had seen it [sic.] was just really shocked. It was like a warning." Whilst some of this particular prison group may now be reticent to use Spice, this is not the case with others. In prison, staff attempts to address this issue with work around specific substances and potential risks; there is a focus on developing consequential thinking. Yet NPS use still happens. BBC News (28.2.2014) reported: "An increase in violence at resettlement prison in Kent has been linked to the illicit supply of a synthetic drugs." Scott's (2015: 5) research on NPS indicates the highest-level harm appears to be among the prison population, stating: "prevalence was estimated to be significantly higher in prisons (40%-50%)." One of the substance misuse practitioners at a prison said: "The biggest worry are the reckless users, the real risk takers. Yes, there is some naivety around dosage but they are definitely aware [of the risks]."

In the study, one critical difference between the vulnerable young people and young adults in prison is that prisoners have a limit to their choice in terms of how they spend their days

and how they can generate different experiences. For prisoners the attraction to use ‘Spice’ is greater than the choice to tick off another day serving their sentence. In this sense it might be possible to talk about NPS as a recreational drug on the basis as ‘a bird killer’ in that it deadens time, in contrast to illicit recreational drugs such as cannabis or LSD which extend time (Newcombe and Christensen 2016). The majority of those prisoners with whom we spoke are aware of the higher risk potential of NPS; indeed, those who more regularly use traditional cannabis talked disparagingly about NPS products in terms of them being “dangerous” and “unnatural.” However, for others who perhaps have less disposable income, SCRAAs can present a more cost-effective way of producing the escapism that they might be looking for. Those most vulnerable young adults may feel like they have less to lose from taking them and it is no coincidence that we found use amongst disenfranchised populations, yet contradictorily also discovered voices of prohibition in prison against ‘synthetic cannabis.’

Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the changing nature of the drug scene from 2009 using selective data at international, national and local levels we have identified the rise and fall of synthetic cannabis initially perceived as a recreational drug linked to young adults of a more privileged background to its subsequent take up amongst more socially vulnerable young people and young adults in prison in Kent.

We identified a range of factors that may have resulted in changes in the usage patterns of SCRAAs and NPS in general. In term of drug policy, identifying the cause of this is complex; at regional level we identified an intense campaign and high-level coverage by the local

media in Kent towards the harm and tragedy of NPS alongside coverage of the Trading Standards and Kent Police interventions. Through the ethnographic fieldwork on Headshops we found that the drug literature, local media and Operation Lantern presented an undifferentiated and to some extent, stereotypical understanding of Headshops. We have found little evidence of continued experimental and recreational use of NPS from niche groups. The experiences in Kent show that more vulnerable populations may be at risk and even if the dangers of these products are known and understood, some will make the decision to use them.

The problem of potential usage is perhaps more stark amongst young people in socially stigmatised groups and the prison populations; here we have individuals often low in self esteem who believe they have few life opportunities and positive options. In these circumstances, the choice to use SCRAAs can be viewed as an informed and rational choice, if it provides release from problems they cannot otherwise deal with. Thus data on young adult's usage of NPS, although limited, suggests that drug policy needs to be more responsive towards the new challenges faced by the drug service under pressure to deliver interventions and education. We recommend that effective drug education and prevention strategy should combine NPS information and be an integral part of drug and alcohol education.

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