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# High Times: An Ethnography of Young Adult Drug Use

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## **HIGH TIMES: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF YOUNG ADULT DRUG USE**

*Ben Coombes<sup>1</sup>*

### **Abstract**

This research explores the phenomenon of ‘legal highs’ or Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS), directing substantial focus towards the exploration of user attraction. Whilst legal high research is expanding, the topic of legal highs still remains a relatively under-researched topic. In particular, research concerning the user is in short supply, as policy makers remain detached from the importance of understanding the attraction for users (Winstock and Ramsey, 2010). Therefore, this paper attempts to capitalise in the expansion of this knowledge and discover what reasons users attribute for the use of these psychoactive substances. A comprehensive review of the current literature has attributed the rise in use to predominantly two significant factors, ‘legality’ and ‘availability’. Although existing literature identifies legality as a secondary motivating factor, this paper questions whether its impact is somewhat underplayed throughout previous research.

**Keywords:** Novel Psychoactive Substances, Legal highs, User attraction, Prohibition

### **Introduction**

In the United Kingdom, legislators have adopted the term ‘legal highs’ as shorthand for emerging psychoactive substances that are not controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act (MDA) 1971, but, in their opinion, cause similar harms to those that are (Evans and Brown, 2011). These unknown and untested chemicals (Birdwell et al, 2011) are readily available in cyberspace and beyond (Norman et al, 2014), failing to provide accurate information of the contents of the drugs (Schmidt et al, 2011; Vardakou et al, 2011) and identifying a real cause for concern for policy makers and

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practitioners attempting to manage a new and ever-changing population of drugs and drug users (Norman et al, 2014).

The speed at which the market has developed (McKeganey, 2010; EMCDDA, 2012), the wide availability and accessibility of NPS (Home Office, 2013a) and fears surrounding increased use (Wood et al, 2012) has turned up the 'heat of concern' in all sectors of society; politicians and legislators, law enforcement, social movement activists, and the public at large (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2010: 90). 'Newspapers and legislators were shocked' (Power, 2013: 1938) as, prior to the rapid growth in the consumption of mephedrone in 2009, NPS were not a widely recognised issue within drugs policy (House of Commons, 2013). However, the intense media attention that mephedrone attracted (Barton, 2011), and the ensuing moral panic (Petley et al, 2013) rewarded the new 'chemical craze' of legal highs with media dominance in a matter of weeks (Power, 2013: 1938). Unfortunately, however, the overwhelming force of the media has failed to inspire the wealth of academic literature this topic so desperately requires. Even research that has been conducted has tended to focus primarily on the exploration of substance as opposed to the exploration of the user, directing very little focus towards the extent of usage or user preferences.

Policy makers remain idle to the importance of understanding user attraction (Winstock and Ramsey, 2010), commanding very little budget to the exploration of these substances (House of Commons, 2013), and meaning that NPS remain rarely monitored by drug enforcement agencies (Gaia, 2006). Chief constables and other areas of law enforcement are failing to understand the impact these substances can have (House of Commons, 2013). Inevitably, these failures to include legal highs in crime statistics raise numerous concerns surrounding the insufficient knowledge of these substances, and make it all the more important for criminologists to explore these under-researched areas and utilize research findings to improve the somewhat 'sluggish response' of government bodies (House of Commons, 2013: 14).

The clandestine nature of drug use coupled with the unique twist of the legal high debacle has generated a stimulating research area. The rapid emergence of myriad substances has shell-shocked policy makers (Power, 2013), presenting governments with a difficult dilemma (Hughes and Winstock, 2011; Norman et al, 2014) and identifying the need for greater exploration in to both the motivational factors for users (Measham et al, 2010), and, the adverse effects of these substances (Hughes and Winstock, 2011). Surprisingly, whilst researching the topic of legal highs, it was clear that there was a severe lack of research regarding the motivational factors for

users, despite Measham et al (2010) proposing the benefits associated with this knowledge. Given the limited existing literature in this area, I saw fit to capitalise in the expansion of this knowledge and utilise my dissertation to explore the motivational factors associated with the use of legal highs.

Understanding motivations for drug use can be imperative when attempting to reduce harms or create an effective legislative response. However, to achieve this, one must understand and explore the settings that facilitate drug use (Sanders, 2006). With this in mind, I explored the diverse locations in which use was most prevalent, and questioned consumption choices among users, attempting to distinguish the variations in use between settings.

The clandestine nature of many drug use behaviours and subcultures provides ideal terrain for the development of ethnographic depictions of drug use, deviance and normality (Becker, 1953; Agar, 1973; Jackson, 1978). These qualitative methods can be used to understand complex social processes (Curry et al, 2009), capture a direct experience of the phenomenon of interest (Pope and May, 1995), and uncover beliefs, values, and motivations that underlie individual behaviour (Crabtree, 1999). This 'richness and detail to the data' (Denscombe, 2010: 304) is crucial to my area of interest, and, represents a factor that is, by nature, absent in quantitative data.

Given the nature of the study and what I was looking to discover, my qualitative approach to data collection was adopted in the form of semi-structured interviews. The study consisted of 12 semi-structured interviews, constituting 2 pilot studies and 10 final interviews. This interview type is ideal for my research topic as its 'adaptability' (Bell, 1999: 135) allows the conversations to flow and take its course (Wilkinson and Birmingham, 2003). Typically, qualitative research studies most commonly adopt convenience sampling methods (Russell and Gregory, 2003). Given this, and my longstanding relationships with a number of suitable participants, I decided to adopt this sampling method. As the participants of this study were all either acquaintances of mine, or participated through methods of snowball sampling, I was already certain of their knowledge on the subject matter, ensuring suitable and interesting interviews. In order to familiarise myself with the respondents, I attended a house party which was, to them, a reoccurring event. My observation of drug use in this setting detailed the varying patterns of participant drug use and allowed me to grasp a better understanding of why this group consumes psychoactive substances.

The data presented over the coming pages has been collected as part of a small-scale local research project examining the experiences of legal highs users in both

the night-time economy and other prevalent settings. This work represents an important addition to the literature around the consumption of novel psychoactive substances, perhaps building upon the work of Measham et al (2010) who have attempted to discover the motivations for the use of legal highs for users in the night time leisure zone.

## **1 Literature Review**

Novel psychoactive substances (NPS) are an ever-increasing group of synthetic, semi-synthetic or natural compounds (EMCDDA, 2013) that mimic the effects of their illegal counterparts (Gibbons and Zloh, 2010; Johnson et al, 2013), and endanger users through the creation of inaccurate perceptions of safety (Power, 2013). Unfortunately, there is a common, but mistaken perception of safety regarding 'legal highs', which arise in the absence of legal bans or control measures (ACMD, 2011; UNODC, 2013). The globalisation of these products has resulted in a growing range of aggressively marketed and internationally traded 'legal highs' (EMCDDA, 2010; UNODC, 2013), readily available to any internet user with access to a credit card (Gibbons and Zloh, 2010; Schmidt et al, 2011). This international distribution service produces worldwide problems (Kikura-Hanajiri et al, 2011), straining traditional drug control systems and resulting in disproportionate responses (Hughes and Winstock, 2012) that merely prioritise harms and overlook potential benefits (Moore and Measham, 2011). When control measures are introduced, vendors rapidly react by promoting alternative new compounds and products (ECMDDA, 2013) that are potentially more harmful than those they replace (Hughes and Winstock, 2012; Winstock and Ramsey, 2010). A handful of researchers, such as Measham et al (2010) have sought to discover the causes for this increased appeal in 'legal highs', with considerable concentration directed towards the influences of 'legality' and 'availability'. Despite these contributions, user motivations for the use of legal highs still remain vague and under-researched. Inevitably, more must be done to shed light in an otherwise dark area, and generate reliable research findings to develop tailored and well-thought approaches to reduce both the supply and demand of these products.

Despite suggestions from the general media that the use of legal highs is widespread and increasing, there is limited data to determine whether this is the case (Wood et al, 2012). In general, experimentation of illicit drugs is very high among customers of the night time economy (NTE) (Paylor et al, 2012), as two thirds of bar customers and

nearly all club customers report trying a drug at least once (Measham and Moore, 2009). In order to capture data on adult drug use, a key source used tends to be the British Crime Survey (BCS) (Measham et al, 2011a). However, surveys such as this underestimate drug use, particularly in young people (Newcombe, 2007; Reuter and Stevens, 2007). Instead, it has been argued that surveys targeted at adults active in the NTE are more adept to capturing emergent drug trends (Measham et al, 2011b), as they are quicker to adapt to the new psychoactive substances that appear on the leisure scene (Duff et al, 2009). For example, the 2009/2010 BCS failed to incorporate mephedrone or other synthetic cathinones (Hoare and Moon, 2010), despite its widespread use throughout that period (Dargan and Wood, 2013). These failures to include legal highs in crime statistics means that, for the most part, law enforcement, policy makers, and the public at large develop understandings of this phenomenon from hysterical media representations (Barton, 2011), as opposed to reliable scientific research studies.

Increased appeal in NPS has been mainly attributed to the impact of two factors, relating to both the legal status of NPS and the increased availability of the products. First, regarding legality, Hammersley (2010) argues that the displacement that occurs is not from one legal high to another, instead, it is displaced back to their illicit counterpart following legislative change. Hammersley (2010) has concentrated research primarily on smoking mixtures containing synthetic cannabinoids, such as 'Spice'. It was noted that their primary appeal over cannabis was their legality, and, now that their legal status has changed, most users have switched back to cannabis. Evidentially, it would seem that the synthetic cannabinoid merely served as a temporary displacement from cannabis, with some of the users preferring legal alternatives when available, then switching back to an illegal drug when the alternative is withdrawn (Measham et al, 2010).

Within a little longer than two years, mephedrone developed from a unknown and rarely used substance to the fourth most widely used drug on the club scene (McKeganey, 2010). The initial findings provided by Measham et al (2010), Newcombe (2010) and Mixmag (2010), a British electronic dance and clubbing magazine, have suggested that, unlike the synthetic cannabinoids, legality was not the primary motivating factor for mephedrone use (Measham et al, 2010). Instead, the appeal of mephedrone appears to relate more intimately to the convenient availability of this product that resulted from its legal status (Measham et al, 2010). Further attributing factors relate to perceptions of higher purity (Measham et al, 2010; Dargan and Wood, 2013), easier access, and the avoidance of the street trade in

illegal drugs (Measham et al, 2010; Winstock et al, 2010), suggesting that legal status is not totally irrelevant to drug taking decisions, just more of a secondary factor. Throughout interviews, users portrayed the added appeal of purchasing legal drugs online (Measham et al, 2010), withdrawing the need to leave the house or interact with street dealers. The evidence provided throughout this paragraph details the limited effect that legality had on the use of mephedrone, highlighting other factors which generate increasing appeal in the use of legal highs. This paper will attempt to explore all possible motivations for the use of legal highs and distinguish whether issues of legality are more significant among alternative substances.

Other factors that must not be overlooked, relate to the availability or cost of these substances. If drugs are freely available and cheap, the incentive to use them is much greater, drugs like cannabis, ecstasy pills (Cohen, 2000) and a wide range of legal highs become much more attractive as these teenage drugs 'become cheaper than the average pint' (Telegraph, 2013: 1).

Distinct forms of leisure experience have emerged from gradual declines in industrialised labour production (Winlow and Hall, 2006), fragmenting the traditional and sacred fundamentals of the 'carnival' and littering its debris throughout everyday life (Presdee, 2000). Presdee (2000) uses the term 'carnival' to describe infrequent popular, participatory, and indulgent festivities throughout variant cultures which sooth the pains of daylight frustration, providing a functional respite where participants express legitimised behaviours typically considered outside the norm. The explosion of the NTE and the obsession for young people to self-invest in our consumer-driven society has shattered the concepts of the 'carnival', as leisure no longer fulfils the mere function of periodic refreshment, instead, it has assumed crucial roles in the delivery of profits for the consumer capitalist machine (Winlow and Hall, 2006), and in the manifestation of self-identities (Hobbs, 2003). Behaviours typically considered criminal, or deviant seem to have been somewhat normalised as a result of societal changes (Presdee, 2000), as friendships grounded in mutual knowledge of night-time leisure culture (Winlow and Hall, 2006) arguably expand and adapt definitions of what is considered normal.

Social networks (Lindsey et al, 2010), enhancement of social activities (Johnston and O'Malley, 1986; Orcutt and Rudy, 2003), and the desire to experiment are all factors that are typically associated as motivators for adolescent drug use (Cohen, 2000). However, historically and culturally, it has been the impact of peer pressure which has received vast exploration, and resulted in gratuitous amounts of literature. It is

argued that social networks, particularly friends, play a critical role in the development of adolescent drug use (Lindsey et al, 2010), as literature consistently reveals that having friends who use either legal or illegal substances is an important determinant of drug use (Kandel, 1985; Farrell and White, 1998). The theme of friends will interplay throughout this paper, however, given the vast quantity of existing literature in this area, I will dedicate limited focus towards the topic.

Numerous deaths in the UK have been attributed to the use of legal highs, and, due to little chemical and biological literature on these substances (Gibbons, 2012) or any certified standards on these products (Gibbons and Zloh, 2010), both media and bureaucratic reactions to NPS have tended to involve the immediate banning of these products (Coomber et al, 2013). These knee-jerk bans (Gaia, 2006) indicate political tendencies to ignore the potential benefits of these substances (Moore and Measham, 2011; Stevens and Measham, 2014), and, to underestimate the harms related to prohibition (Stevens and Measham, 2014). Figures provided by the Office for National Statistics (2013) suggest that prohibition is failing to prevent danger, as fatalities relating to psychoactive substances rose from 29 in 2011 to 52 in 2012.

The remarkable speeds at which these drugs are developed and marketed (McKeganey, 2010; EMCDDA, 2012), coupled with rapid growths in popularity (Coomber et al, 2013), has strained traditional drug control systems (Hughes and Winstock, 2012) and resulted in policy responses that have a tendency to use existing prohibition frameworks to make both supply and possession illegal (Coomber et al, 2013). Across the globe, governments struggle with concepts of harm minimisation (MacAvoy and Mackenzie, 2005) as media sensationalism continues to exacerbate public and political fears (Coomber et al, 2013). Rash and ill thought prohibition policies only prompt the promotion of alternatives which are still legal, yet highly effective (Winstock and Wilkins, 2011), and, given the thousands of potentially marketable psychoactive compounds that are available, numerous questions arise regarding our continuance on the path of prohibition (Acton, 2013). Further concerns regarding prohibition have been identified by Measham et al (2010) who has discovered that the policy enforced criminal sanctions merely push demand further underground and out of reach of authorities, creating closed user networks as opposed to commercial websites. In light of this evidence, Measham proposes alternative methods to hasty prohibition, identifying the need for increased control of unregulated online trading.



To conclude, it has become clear that more insight is required into the numerous avenues of NPS; increased knowledge on the effects of legislation could help government bodies implement effective strategies to reduce supply, further intelligence regarding the user appeal of NPS could help reduce demand, and continued exploration in to medical consequences of legal highs could help to develop a safe alternative to illicit drugs, whereby supply is regulated and users remain safe and free of persecution. Although all avenues need further exploration, this research seeks to explore user attraction for the use of legal highs in society, an area severely lacking at present. In particular, qualitative research has been very scarce in this area, resulting in a lack of rich data that can be utilised for its ability to inform and enlighten. This paper seeks to fill this gap, with the goal of prompting further academic insight in to this vague and undervalued research area.

## **2 Research findings and discussion**

The night kicked off at about 8 o'clock, it took a while to fully set up the DJ decks and speakers properly. When the music started, the detached barn house in Banwell began to rumble as the bass filled the air. Birthday banners and balloons pulsed as the music blared, awaiting full capacity so the real party could start. As the house began to fill, it became increasingly evident that everyone at the party was eager to fulfil their overdue desires to bomb, sniff, smoke and release themselves from normality and the pressures of everyday life. References such as 'let's get on it' and 'let's get fucking twisted' consumed the airspace as the populace yearned for an altered state of mind. Myriad substances darted across the room, leaving no mind unaltered as the consumption virus became airborne. The usual suspects appeared in the form of MDMA, synthacaine, NOS, cannabis, and a range of herbal highs. Before long, everyone at the party was on drugs and diverse groups began to form. People were spaced throughout the house in different locations, some were upstairs in the bedroom away from the noise so they could talk amongst themselves, others were dancing in the living room, but for the most part the kitchen was the place to be and where all the drugs were consumed.

The familiarity of the friends attending, and the fact that it was George's birthday party had ensued a policy of admissibility, whereby everybody at the party could consume any substance going without being judged. The judgement, often prevalent in bars and clubs, was absent here, there were no bouncers, no surveillance and no peer prejudice. As a result, an anything goes motto took precedence as a variety of substances assumed control of their nervous systems. The subtle sniffs and smokes

that occur in the night-time economy did not exist here, no one escaped to the toilets for a cheeky line. Instead, the kitchen counter was littered with remnants of powders, pills and puffs, quickly identifying itself as the drug diner, where customers conversed, consumed and lost control.

The correlation between drug use, parties and raves is not a recent phenomenon (Wilson, 2006). A few participants of the study repeatedly cited the enjoyment available at a party filled with like-minded, non-judgemental people. In particular, Charlie, a student in his early twenties, seems to fear the marginalisation associated with mind-altering substances and turn to the group for support to enjoy the collective experiences they share:

Yeah I fear like getting a name for yourself cause there is a stigma attached an that's why I love house parties cause we have a good group of mates an no one judges you an that's kinda what makes it so good like.

Indeed, even as far back as the 1950s, Becker (1963: 85) studied the formation of these groups and their importance among members; offering a refuge for users to reinforce, support and hide their drug use from 'the squares' of mainstream society. From this perspective, the house parties Charlie and his friends host provide fellow drug users with a secure environment, absent of prejudice, where hedonistic beliefs assume dominance. The enjoyment brought by his social circle and their close knit, pro-drug attitudes provide Charlie with a support group and a means of pleasure without risk of being ostracised. These beliefs were shared among a number of the respondents who seemed to predominantly use psychoactive substances in their home or at a party. Indeed, as Huw, a twenty year old Marks and Spencer employee details:

I usually have em at parties now to be honest cause when I go into town i bate right out and not sure if im going to get in anywhere eyes like dinner plates and dry mouth like a mother fucker [laughs] an I jus hate being fucked on something an surrounded by pissed people like gets me paranoid, end up leaving within about half hour just cant do it [laughs], plus we do funny shit when we get back so I find it better like.

The extracts above detail how the fear of arrest or bad reputation results in users actively making decisions over the setting of the use of legal highs. The well-known symptoms associated with amphetamine use seem to result in feelings of paranoia and like they are out of place in a sea of drunkenness. The fear of being rejected by bouncers or identified by the police is enough for these users to avoid the night-time economy when under the influence of mind-altering drugs.

On the other side of the spectrum, twenty-two year old cashier Chrissy relishes in the ability to be legally off her head and out in town:

out in town, like I love goin out but I hate getting too pissed that I cant remember shit and puke up and stuff like that [laughs] so if I use like a stimulant type drug or like a legal powder then it works as like a regulator [laughs], an that's why legals are so good, like yeah there nowhere near as good as proper drugs buh I can take em out an not feel paranoid im gonna get arrested or anything.

The extract above exemplifies the hedonistic principles underlying Chrissy's use of psychoactive substances. Her desire to indulge in the festivities of the night-time economy and the complementary effects of drugs like cocaine on alcohol (Petry, 2001; Sumnall et al, 2004) seem to have contributed to her use of both illicit drugs and novel psychoactive substances. In particular, she notes how the fear of arrest has resulted in her favouring the use of legal highs on a night out, despite the less than desirable potency of the products. There is relatively little research in this area, however, contradictory to these findings, Measham et al (2010) noted how, in the case of mephedrone, use appeared to relate less to fear of arrest and more to the convenience arising from its legal status. Conversely, with Chrissy, it may be that her motivations for the use of these substances change with setting. For example, it is possible that when she is out it town her fear of arrest is much greater than when she is at home, so she utilises the use of legal highs in the night-time economy.

I fear arrest as much as the next person yeah, but that doesn't stop me usin illegal drugs, ideally id like to avoid getting arrested cause no one wants a criminal record but its not like im gonna get arrested in my home, so I tend to have like md and ketamine at home cause I just prefer bein in one room an just enjoying peoples company an just seein what funny things people do

Evidentially, these quotations signify that Chrissy's fear of arrest merely reduces her use of illicit substances outside her home, which, in turn, increase her use of NPS in the night-time economy. It is possible that the popularity for some users sprouts from the provision of intoxication that fulfils the benefits of illicit drugs, yet, hold the added advantage of being legally sanctioned like alcohol. Therefore, their very presence in society may, for some users, actively decrease the popularity of the use of illicit drugs in the night-time economy through the provision of an alternative. This substitution of one psychoactive substance for another with the goal of reducing negative outcomes is becoming somewhat of a phenomenon (Reiman, 2009; Brandt et al, 2010). Indeed, for Jo, a BT engineer in her early twenties, the lack of desire to indulge in the festivities of drunkenness generates, to some degree, a craving for a variety of mind-altering substances:

umm, I used to use mcats out in town and that all the time cause I don't like getting pissed, jus makes me feel sick and the feelin aint really that great like, then when that was made illegal it became shit really, like less pure and more expensive so I moved on to md and coke, like I never used to give a shit back then but now I have a job and actually have shit to lose so now I tend to use these new legal highs out in town, maybe have like a bomb or a line of md before then like top it up with legal shit when in town cause if I get caught they cant do shit cause it legal.

The extract above illustrates how for some users in society, legal highs, and, drug use in general, provide a sound and viable alternative to the consumption of alcohol, allowing users to actively engage in the night-time economy without buying in to the drunkenness that has become so prevalent in these settings. The maturity Jo shows regarding the protection of her job has been found in other studies on legal highs, for example, in Measham et al (2010), a small number of participants cited the substitution of illicit drugs for legal highs on the premise of employment protection. Evidentially, the risk of losing her job is, for Jo, reason enough to exercise the use of legal highs when in town, and, reduce her use of illicit drugs.

Moreover, when on the topic of mephedrone, participants enthusiastically described the changes that occurred post-ban and how it impacted their use. Although a number of participants expressed similar, Charlie was unequivocal in his belief that:

yeah cause you couldn't get it off the internet, you couldn't get it off the shops when it became illegal and then people started seeing the side effects of it more and it became really addictive and like doubled in price cause it wasn't like as widely available.

The excerpt above illustrates the impacts prohibition had on the use of mephedrone. This sudden drop in the availability of mephedrone was mirrored by 47 per cent of participants in the Carhart-Harris et al (2011) study of mephedrone, whom stated that mephedrone was notably less available after the ban. These reductions in the availability post-ban, meant that Charlie and his friends witnessed huge increases in price, an impact consistently identified throughout existing literature (Birdwell et al, 2011; McElrath and O'Neill, 2011). Inevitably, for these habitual users, availability, legality, price and purity were significant motivators for the use of mephedrone, as identified by Measham et al (2010), among others. Without these benefits, many users were displaced back to traditional stimulants (Winstock and Wilkins, 2011), as identified by Ali, a twenty-one year old chemist employee:

Yeah it was a number of things like, cause it didn't have the advantage of bein legal anymore and it was getting weaker, dirtier and more expensive like, I went back to md cause although it more expensive I know thats pure cause its crystal

This displacement back to illegal drugs after the subsequent banning of NPS has been identifiable across the majority of existing literature as it seems that changes in purity, price and prominence of substance in society have considerable impacts on attraction of substance for the user, as many users, such as Ali, turn back to reliable and traditional stimulants when prohibition rears its ugly head.

### **3 Motivations**

As new drugs appear on the scene almost daily (Morris, 2013; Stevens and Measham, 2014) it has become increasingly important to explore the changing patterns of weekend poly-drug use. Indeed, Measham et al (2010: 16) note the importance of understanding how user preferences interact with issues of availability, purity, price and legality. Over recent decades, we have witnessed a substantial body of literature on the reasons or motivations that people cite for using alcohol, particularly amongst adult populations (Boys et al, 2001). However, the recent rises in the prevalence and use of other licit substances has not yet been met with a sufficient body of literature. This research study has sought to identify the motives for the use of legal highs among users, considering variations between different substances and also addressing whether user motivations for use have changed throughout their drug-taking career.

Over recent years, considerable attention has been directed towards the motivational factors of both the legality and availability of legal highs in society. Indeed, Measham et al (2010) discovered how, in the case of mephedrone, the legality was a secondary rather than primary motivating factor for use. Instead, it was found that the easy accessibility and availability of mephedrone was a more significant contributor to use. Despite these suggestions put forward by Measham et al (2010), references to the benefits of legality were littered throughout the research interviews as numerous participants cited the most appealing factor of legal highs as their legal status. Indeed, when asked what he thought the most appealing factor of legal highs were, George proposed:

umm, well you get similar, well there not really similar but relatively similar experience to illegal drugs but they legal so you can use em out like an they cant do shit

Similarly, Chrissy suggests:

err, the most appealing factor of legal highs I think is that they quite often do give you the buzz of illegal drugs but the fact there legal means they can't really do much about it from a law point of view.

For Chrissy and George, the bonus of a legal means of getting high without potential intervention from the law provides these users with a sound and viable option of intoxication. This avoidance of criminal sanctions, as identified by Brandt et al (2010), allows these users to exercise the use of mind-altering substances in a number of settings without risk of apprehension. Indeed, George cites that the benefits of their legal status are substantially heightened when out in town, or other areas where law enforcement have greater ability to stop, search and seize anyone they deem to have broken the law.

Surprisingly, this attraction of legality was rarely noted throughout Measham et al (2010) study of mephedrone, however, it is possible that the highly popular potency of mephedrone was the attraction for users, resembling a similar chemical structure to existing and favourable amphetamines, such as ecstasy and cocaine (Randall et al, 2012; Gossop, 2013). Therefore, once established as a popular and potent party drug, mephedrone users arguably became more concerned with where, and how easily they could get their hands on some, as 'the legality of mephedrone just gave it an added appeal' (Measham et al, 2010: 17).

Although most participants cited legality as the most appealing factor of legal highs, a few participants were keen to identify low price and ease of accessibility as contributory factors to their use. Chris, an IT technician in his mid-twenties explains:

I dunno, I guess for most people it is the fact there legal like but for me I aint really bothered cause I do illegal drugs all the time, that's part of the fun that there illegal like so id have to say for me the only quality thing about em is that I can get em delivered to my house an I don't even have to leave like, don't av to go anywhere [laughs] can be lazy as fuck an still get high [laughs].

The benefits of the globalised markets are, for Chris, a keen incentive for the use of legal highs. The international distribution service (Kikura-Hanajiri et al, 2011) provides users like Chris with an effortless means of getting high. This drugs delivery service is just a simple click away for any cyber consumer with access to a credit card; a service with no minimum age requirements, no limitations on quantity purchased and no required proof of identification (Hillebrand et al, 2010; Measham et al, 2010). With record levels of online shopping in the UK (Interactive Media in Retail Group, 2010) and the emergence of increasingly competitively priced markets (Dargan and Wood, 2013), many users are buying in to the desirably discrete and effortless online drugs market.

Given the diverse effects that different drugs have on the user, it might be proposed that reasons for use will closely mirror these differences (Boys et al, 2001). The pick and mix attitudes of contemporary poly-drug users (Brain et al, 2000; Measham et al, 2013) were easily identifiable among participants, as transcripts were littered with references to mixing and selecting particular substances for the well-known and enthusiastically desired effects. Although a number of the respondents expressed similar beliefs, George was unequivocal in his belief that:

you get different outcomes from each drugs, I mean legals jus mimic illegal drugs really like synthacaine is like Coke, well it not as good but it gives you a good buzz and makes you chattier and everything feels more sped up and intense like so when theres a big group of us going out or at a party that would be what I would take and so would everyone else because when everyone there is onit funnier stuff happens and it makes you want to dance so much like, music and drugs go hand in hand so l'd always use drugs at a rave or party cause it makes the whole experience ten times better cause the drugs an music make it euphoric an like when all your mates there aswel, its fuckin amazing [laughs].

George's desire to indulge in hedonistic activities and the provision of pleasure these substances provide, unite his social group together in the festivities of drug consumption. For George, the combination of music, mates and mind-altering substances fulfils every aspect of pleasure imaginable, as the connectivity drug use provides him with enhances all other aspects. Indeed, from this perspective, each aspect is as important as the next, as, in the absence of one, pleasure may be reduced. Later on, George expands:

its weird in sayin buh its like your almost one with the music and can hear everything more finely and the music goes through your body and drugs enhance that experience so much like, I dunno they just amazin an I cant see myself stopping takin em, especially weed like [laughs] I smoke it everyday after I finish work as it's a massive social thing with my mates, we go round ants an smoke the good shit in nice spliffs and do herbal cheapy shit in shottys cause it get you fucked to combine em [laughs], just makes me feel so chilled out once ive had a smoke like, aint gonna stop that shit anytime soon

These poly-drug attitudes shared by George and his friends resemble somewhat of a unified group. The pleasure extracted from their shared experiences of drug use and the daily process of intoxicated social encounters provide these users with somewhat of a release, a means of relieving stress and chilling out as George put it. The pleasure George receives from his hedonistic drug use provides him with reassurance for continuing on the path he follows, as the need for a release from the pressures of everyday life permit George the carnivalistic indulgent he so frequently

desires. Like many youngsters these days, George lives for the weekend and utilises a myriad of substances to relieve the stresses of the working week:

I dunno, just weve had such good times on them just getting smashed, like 20 of us in someones house that like we don't wanna stop, everyone just goes mad at parties sharing loads of different shit an makin cocktails [laughs], you get so ruined an it just so much fun you just wanna do it all the time like, so we still do it most weekends like at least once, like everyone just waits for the weekend so we can just get on it, I mean it was quality when we were all at college an didn't work cause we could just do it whenever in the week an that but everyone has jobs now an in some ways it make it better for that cause you go all out cause you only have that one night so it always crazy

The excerpt above exemplifies the sentiment of 'working to live', and to some extent it appears that it is the promise of the big night out at the end of the week, that makes the rest of the working week bearable. Elsewhere, George is keen to distance himself from pathological drug use, from the forms of addiction more frequently associated with the socially marginalised:

Like its not like im addicted to the substances, I can take em an leave em, it's the nights we have im addicted to an I don't wanna stop havin em, the parties are jus so sick, everyone loves it an it makes you feel so much better bout going back to work like cause you need it to keep doin this every weekend

In this sense, the consumption of drugs is counter to the rules and regulations that govern the working week, with the weekend serving the purpose of the Carnival, as identified by Presdee (2000). The sharing of the drugs, and the sharing of the resultant experiences offer George and his friends the opportunity to forge shared identities that may otherwise be unattainable in what Bauman (2000) refers to as 'liquid' society. This excitement, in an otherwise dull life (Cohen, 2000) has proved imperative to these habitual users as, for some; drug use is exercised as a coping mechanism, repeatedly utilised for their mood-enhancing effects and to combat episodes of boredom. The overwhelming desire to indulge in the carnivalistic festivities of contemporary society, live life to the max and pro-long adolescence has been identifiable among most participants, utilising psychoactive substances for a number of applications and remedies needed for a pleasurable existence.

## **Conclusion**

For the most part, existing literature on novel psychoactive substances has almost been exclusively concerned with the exploration of substance, failing to consider the benefits of user examination. This paper has attempted to shed light on an otherwise dark area, providing viable and applicable evidence which generates innovative hypothesis and, on the whole, supports existing claims provided by Measham et al



(2010), among others. This assignment has given an account of, and the reasons for the increased use of legal highs in contemporary society, outlining significant motivators for use and discussing their importance among users.

For many respondents, the fear of arrest was significantly amplified when occupying the night time leisure zone. The presence of bouncers and police on the streets of the NTE was enough for these habitual users to avoid these settings when under the influence of mind-altering substances. The paranoia experienced by users when drowning in a sea of drunkenness can, for some, reduce the mood-enhancing effects of these drugs. Resultantly, participants repeatedly cited how they made rational decisions regarding the setting of the use of mind-altering substances, stating the benefits of intoxication in a safe, secure and familiar environment with like-minded, non-judgemental people.

The pick and mix attitudes of these poly-drug users (Measham et al, 2013) became apparent when examining participant variation in use between settings. For instance, a number of respondents identified how they would utilise legal highs when in the NTE or another high risk area, then, once they were in a safe secure environment, would use the more potent and favourable illicit substances. These rational choices about what drugs in which settings, identify how issues of legality interact with some users' fear of arrest. Indeed, for these users, the legal status of NPS may cease to be attractive when in a low risk setting, or in any environment where they feel comfortable to use illicit substances of higher potency and preference.

Although the current study is based on a small sample of participants, the findings suggest that the legality of NPS may have a greater impact on use than existing literature has suggested. For instance, over half of the respondents of this study repeatedly cited the benefits of a legal means of getting high when out, whereby episodes of paranoia were absent and subtlety was no longer necessary. Unusually, however, throughout existing literature, this attraction of legality was rarely noted, as attraction for legal highs has been generally dominated by the availability and easy accessibility of these products. Explanations for the disparity in findings may arise from the slight variations in the aims of the study. For instance, many studies conducted, such as Measham et al (2010), have concentrated primarily on the club drug mephedrone, whereas, my study focuses on no specific substance, more the category of legal highs more generally. With this in mind, it is possible that the vast popularity of mephedrone (Coomber et al, 2013), coupled with the similar chemical

structure it held to ecstasy (Randall et al, 2012; Gossip, 2013) was reason enough for concerns over legality to lessen, and issues surrounding availability increase.

The relevance of the availability and ease of accessibility was clearly supported by a number of participants, whom outlined the advantages of the global distribution service. The ease at which these substances can be obtained provides users with an effortless means of getting high, rendering the street market redundant for those wishing to avoid discomforting drug deals. This appeal was identified repeatedly throughout existing literature. Evidentially, it would seem that, for some users at least, the ability to have mind-altering substances delivered to your door provides reason enough to choose these products over their illicit counterparts.

Another major finding identified throughout this study demonstrates how, for a number of respondents, drug use offers a functional respite, whereby, these habitual users can 'sooth the pains of daylight frustration', as Presdee (2000) so eloquently put it, investing meaning in each other through the sharing of drugs and the sharing of the resultant experiences. The pleasure extracted from their shared experiences unites their social group together in the festivities of drug consumption, making the rest of working week bearable and exemplifying the sentiment of 'working to live'. For these users, work proves unimportant aside from its provision of the funds needed for other, more pleasurable spheres of activity. This excitement, in an otherwise dull life (Cohen, 2000) provides these users with a sense of fulfilment which proves unattainable in the tedious ritual of menial work.

To conclude, I believe that the findings displayed throughout these pages have matched those in the existing literature, however, I believe that, to some degree, existing literature underplays the role of legality as a motivator for the use of legal highs, with particular reference to those settings where risk of apprehension is high when consuming illicit substances, such as the NTE.

Meanwhile, future British research should attempt to develop an in-depth understanding of legal highs and their users, as, without criminologist input, the untailored, ill-suited and sluggish response that is continually regurgitated by the government shall remain.

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