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The Plymouth Law & Criminal Justice Review The Plymouth Law & Criminal Justice Review, Volume 08 - 2016

2016

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Allen, P. (2016) 'Legal High Use among Young Adults in the South-West Rave/Party Community: Implications for UK Drug Policy',Plymouth Law and Criminal Justice Review, 8, pp. 283-309. Available at: https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/handle/10026.1/9034
http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/9034

The Plymouth Law & Criminal Justice Review
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LEGAL HIGH USE AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN THE SOUTH-WEST RAVE/PARTY COMMUNITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR UK DRUG POLICY

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Abstract

The UK government has struggled with controlling the legal high problem since the emergence of mephedrone in 2009. Academic research has provided detailed knowledge on how people perceive these substances, mainly focusing on mephedrone, but has yet to identify a viable solution to escalating usage and availability. This research aimed to determine young adults' (18-26) current perceptions of legal highs and to assess how this might help government shape current proposed policy and future legislation more successfully. It also examined the under-researched moralistic interpretations of legal highs. Qualitative research was undertaken in the form of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 14 experienced drug users from the South-West rave/party community, an un-researched, highly active, but hidden community in England.

It found that although participants agreed with scientists on the dangers of drug use, they felt the un-researched nature of legal highs meant these posed the greater risk. They also believed that the risks associated with illegal drug use could be countered through contextual safety and moderation. The findings also revealed that participants felt drug use was a matter of personal choice, and only a moral issue if their use impacted others. This, they believed, could be countered through moderation. The legality of drug use only affected participants when considering legal highs, where their loyalty to illegal drugs effectively stigmatized the legal substances. Supply control policy was thought likely to deter the inexperienced, but increase interest in illegal alternatives amongst experienced users.

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The implications were that, although current proposed supply reduction legislation has been shown to be effective, it is unlikely to impact the drug habits of the South-West rave/party community. Having found that participants were moral individuals with their own measures in place to protect the community from their drug use, this research recommended a policy of decriminalization. However, it noted implementation difficulties in the politically charged atmosphere that dominates policy-making.

Keywords: Legal highs, new psychoactive substances, drug legislation, rave subculture, drug use morality.

Introduction

Seddon (2014: 1019) remarks on '…the repetitive and cyclical nature of drug problems, as supposedly "new" phenomena turn out to be recurrences of wearily familiar issues.' The emergence of a '"new" phenomena' in the form of new, untested psychoactive drugs sold legally on the open market marked the emergence of a problem that simultaneously evoked 'familiar issues', but also new dangers following the advent of globalization. These drugs, known as legal highs or new psychoactive substances (NPS), began with the sale of 1-benzylpiperazine (BZP), but only garnered wider public attention in the UK with the 4-methylmethcathinone (mephedrone) panic of 2009. These substances were specifically designed to exploit the inadequacies of existing controlled substance legislation, facilitated by the development of global web-based marketing and distribution networks (Winstock and Ramsey, 2010; Winstock *et al*, 2010a; Freeman and Curran, 2012; Johnson *et al*, 2013). These issues led to increased academic interest in perceptions of legal substances within the community. Research focused primarily on drug users' perceptions of mephedrone, studying reasons for its use, its perceived risks, and how legislative initiatives impacted perceptions of it. However, the UK government continues to struggle with addressing this challenge because of the infinitely adaptable nature of these substances, which has left '…scientific and legislative communities participating in a cat-and-mouse legislative and public health game that seems to have no foreseeable resolution.' (Johnson *et al*, 2013: 1108; Griffiths *et al*, 2013; Mazumdar, 2014)

In September 2014, the New Psychoactive Substances Review Expert Panel (2014) reported on how the UK could tackle the legal high challenge more effectively, recommending that the UK should adopt a supply reduction approach found successful in Ireland. There is currently no research into actual reactions to supply control

legislation. This study researched how current legal highs are perceived by young adults in the South-West rave/party community, an un-researched hidden community in the UK, in order to consider how effective this legislation might be. As this study is centred in the South-West of England, the recent closing of headshops in Taunton and Exeter under anti-social behaviour law (Avon and Somerset Constabulary, 2014; BBC News Devon, 2014) allows real reactions to supply control to be considered. This research has concentrated on the perceptions of young adults (18-26), who are the most common drug users (Home Office, 2014a), but who have lacked specific focus in the literature.

This study has primarily scrutinised notable gaps in the previous research, such as the morality of legal high use. Therefore, the participants' moral understanding of legal high use has been analysed, as compared to other legal and illegal substances. The apparent reasons for legal high use has also been analysed, paying special consideration to the impact illegal drugs have on this topic. It has also examined how people perceive the risks of legal highs, focusing on how they compare them to legal and illegal alternatives, in order to explore Norman *et al*'s (2014) assertion that legal highs may be considered of greater danger than their illegal alternatives. Additionally, it has analysed the importance of risk as a factor in determining whether people use legal highs.

In order to research these themes this study conducted in depth semi-structured interviews to better explore the experiences of the participants and how they understand them, while aiming to ensure a gender balanced approach (Rubin and Rubin, 1995 *in* Arksey and Knight, 1999; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). It achieved this using prepared generalised questions on the topic, which allowed for a deeper exploration of themes raised during the process of interviewing (Wengraf, 2001; Davies *et al*, 2011). As there was limited qualitative research on legal highs, this study focused on understanding and interpreting themes primarily lacking in the previous literature, using a constant comparative mapping technique founded in grounded theory to lay a foundation of theory in these limited areas (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Wengraf, 2001; Neuman, 2011: 175; Strauss and Corbin, 1998 *in* Bryman, 2012). Although all ethical considerations required by the University of Plymouth and the British Society of Criminology were adhered to in this study, as the research investigated deviant activities it fell under the definition of sensitive research (Renzetti and Lee, 1993) and therefore considerations

such as privacy and informed consent were of paramount importance (Sieber, 1993). Therefore, in order to protect privacy, the participants' details were anonymized and pseudonyms were used for the purpose of publishing (Seidman, 1991; Neuman, 2011; Bryman, 2012). For a more detailed explanation of the methods used in this study see Allen (2015).

By centring on understanding and comparing the South-West rave/party community perceptions of legal highs to those of illegal alternatives, including issues of availability, risk and morality, this study has assessed how these perceptions could help the government shape its drug control policy in the future in order to prevent another '…cat-and-mouse legislative ' game occurring, and to end '…the repetitive and cyclical nature of drug problems.' (Johnson *et al*, 2013: 1108; Seddon, 2014: 1019)

1 Literature Review

This literature review has examined the various existing academic research on this subject so as to provide a clear analysis of where the evidence is consistent or conflicting, while noting its limitations and suggesting areas for further research.

Reasons for Use

The two most common reasons argued for the emergence of legal high use relate to availability and legality (Measham *et al*, 2010). Academics have found evidence of external factors playing an important role in the emergence of these substances and that this is linked to the quality of illegal alternatives at the time.

Dargan *et al*'s (2010) research into the prevalence and frequency of mephedrone use among school and college kids found that the vast majority described it as easy, or very easy to obtain. Furthermore, Sheridan and Butler's (2010) study, which focused on what the legal status of BZP communicated to young users in New Zealand, reinforced this notion, concluding that the legality of BZP had allowed for easier accessibility to the substance. Winstock *et al* (2010b) and Measham *et al* (2010) inferred that improved online accessibility and the practicality of high-street headshops had factored into the increased availability of legal highs, leading to prolific use. McElrath and O'Neill's (2010) research into the use of mephedrone by polydrug users in the context of the transition of legal to illegal status also corroborated this theory, as they observed that the practicality

of mephedrone's legal status was only significant because it affected its availability. Intriguingly, McElrath and O'Neill (2010: 126) noticed that '…only a few respondents had purchased mephedrone from on-line suppliers … [or] headshops … with friends and dealers … [stated as] the main source of supply.' This evidence would conflict with Winstock *et al* (2010b) and Measham *et al*'s (2010) inference of a link between accessibility and the online availability and practicality of high-street headshops. However, because McElrath and O'Neill's (2010) study focused on experienced polydrug users, it can be surmised that they would be more likely to use traditional supply networks, such as dealers, than the inexperienced younger users of Sheridan and Butler's (2010) study.

Newcombe's (2009) study investigating mephedrone use in Middlesbrough found alternative reasons for legal high use, instead focusing on factors such as curiosity, preferable effects and boredom. Likewise, Norman *et al*'s (2014: 17) study, centred on legal highs and the role of the Internet, recognizing that for participants '…the three main reasons for deciding to use legal highs were for pleasure, curiosity or as an alternative to illegal drugs…' Van Hout and Brennan's (2011) study of legal psychoactive substance use in Ireland, prior to legislative control, expanded on this, explaining that certain users deemed the effects of legal highs to be comparable or greater than those of illegal alternatives. Nevertheless, many of them were still loyal to illegal street drugs, with the exception of mephedrone use which Griffiths *et al*'s (2013: 1701) infers as having '…made the cross-over from "legal high" to a drug of choice…' This notion is supported by evidence from Winstock *et al*'s (2010b) survey of dance drug users, which found that 54.6% of respondents felt mephedrone had a better high than cocaine. However, Carhart-Harris *et al*'s (2011) web based survey targeting mephedrone users found that 73% of users preferred the effects of MDMA (the active ingredient of ecstasy) to mephedrone. Therefore, further research into this subject is needed in order to challenge this inconsistency.

Measham *et al* (2010) expanded upon these conceptions by deducing that the emergence of legal high use was led by a growing disillusionment with the quality of illegal drugs throughout the 2000s. Newcombe (2009) supported this, having found evidence that most of his research participants mentioned previous cocaine and ecstasy use, but explained that they had reduced use because of a perceived reduction in quality

over the last few years. Likewise, Carhart-Harris *et al* (2011) and Van Hout and Brennan (2011) also recognized similar evidence in their research of dissatisfaction with the quality and cost of cocaine and ecstasy, which had increased interest in high purity legal alternatives. Although there is evidence to suggest that a reduction in the quality of cocaine and ecstasy led to an increased interest in legal alternatives, there is little research into whether it was a deciding factor. Therefore, as Winstock *et al*'s (2011) and Sievers' (2011) research indicated large numbers of mephedrone users had previous drug experience, it is important to research how much prior experience with illegal drugs factored into the use of legal alternatives.

Risks

Research on the perceived risks of legal highs focuses primarily on experienced drug users rather than inexperienced ones. This is explained by Carhart-Harris *et al* (2011: 21-22) as being because experienced drug users were '…better able to comment on the harms of mephedrone in relation to other drugs.' The research has demonstrated a clear correlation between the perceived risks of these substances and the amount of time since their introduction; from initially focusing on the implied safety offered by legality, to acknowledging their dangers and instead concentrating on the contextual construction of their risk.

Sheridan and Butler's (2010) research on BZP users in New Zealand offered insights into the perceived risk of legal highs by young, inexperienced drug users. Their research discovered a strong correlation between the legality of the substance and its perceived safety. Users felt that, when compared with its illicit counterparts, its legal status justified less cautious behaviour because they believed there was far less potential for harm (Sheridan and Butler, 2010). There is a clear similarity between the perception of risk by inexperienced users in Sheridan and Butler's (2010) study and Newcombe's (2009) research on experienced drug users' conceptions of mephedrone. Newcombe (2009: 11) found that participants believed that '…mephedrone had few or no harmful effects on health compared with other popular recreational drugs.' It is understood by Ramsey *et al* (2010) and Power (2010) that this perception was similarly caused by a perceived correlation between legality and safety.

Following the criminalization of cathinone compounds (including mephedrone) on the 16th April 2010 in the UK (Morris, 2010), research suggests that drug users' understanding of the risks of legal highs altered. McElrath and O'Neill's (2010: 123) study found that post-criminalization '…*none* of the respondents perceived that legal highs were necessarily safe…' and that they '…did *not* perceive that psychoactive substances were safe simply because they were legal.' (McElrath and O'Neill, 2010: 125) Furthermore, participants described specific adverse effects of mephedrone use, although these risks did not seem to deter users from consuming the substance (McElrath and O'Neill, 2010). Winstock *et al*'s (2010b: 157) research into mephedrone use in a dance context, did indicate a contextual perception of risk:

> …those who snorted the drug were significantly more likely to rate mephedrone as … carrying more risks … than cocaine compared to those taking the drug orally.

It can be inferred that participants in Winstock *et al*'s (2010b) study would have a better understanding of the effects of substances than those in McElrath and O'Neill's (2010), having been involved in a drug taking subculture. This could suggest that they would be biased towards drug utilization and therefore would overstate the importance of contextual safety in an effort to normalise their behaviour. Further research could be undertaken to determine the validity of this inference. A contextual perception can be seen most prominently in research by Van Hout and Brennan (2011) where respondents focused on their own judgements, based on personal experience with illegal substances, and held individuals responsible for their own recklessness. Respondents explained that, although drug use is not void of danger, it is the individual's perceptions of the substance and how it is used contextually that defines its conceivable risk (Van Hout and Brennan, 2011).

Though participants claimed to understand the mental and physical risks associated with legal high use, they would not discuss specifics, unlike in McElrath and O'Neill's (2010) research. This is likely because of the novelty of the substances discussed, which would have had left little time to conduct appropriate scientific research on the health consequences of use and therefore participants were less likely to be as knowledgeable on the actual effects (Reuter, 2012). Scientific knowledge appears to have an additional weighting on perception of risk as Morgan *et al* (2010 *in* Freeman *et al*, 2012) noted that drug users have been shown to agree with experts on the relative harms of better known

drugs. Furthermore, Norman *et al* (2014) noted in their research that some respondents perceived illegal alternatives as safer than legal highs which are often unknown and untested. This perception echoes that of Dr John Ramsey, a toxicologist of St George's Hospital, who, when considering the topic of legal highs said, he would '...rather that somebody takes MDMA…' (Can I Get High Legally?, 2010: 18.38-18.42). How much these perceptions impact participation in legal high use is an unknown, as widespread media coverage of the potential harms of mephedrone did not appear to deter its abuse (Dargan *et al*, 2010).

Although previous research on risk has attempted to encompass a broad range of consumers, it has lacked definable focus. The British Crime Survey for England and Wales found that '…Young adults were more likely to be frequent drug users than older people.' (Home Office, 2014a: 1) Only Newcombe's (2009) research specifically focused on younger users in determining perception of risk, but, as it was conducted at the start of the mephedrone panic, participants lacked long-term experience with the substance. Therefore, they would have struggled to accurately assess the perceived risks associated with its use. Additionally, much of the research is dominated primarily by the male perception, lacking emphasis on how women perceive the risk of legal high use. Consequently, these areas warrant further investigation together with a detailed examination of current perceptions and their impact on continued use.

Morality of Legal Highs

A less developed theme in the research on legal highs is the concept of morality. Although there have been studies into the morality of other legal substances compared to illegal alternatives, there is little research into the moralistic interpretations of legal highs; these having only been observed within current studies which evidence a lack of thorough exploration.

Drug use is typically defined as a moralistic problem, with the government terming its use as highly deviant, and the media focusing on an exaggerated threat which is defined by its immoral and dangerous participants (Murji, 1988; Goode, 2008; Norman *et al*, 2014). Although, there is limited research on the morality of drug taking, Killen *et al*'s (1991: 348) research found:

> …72% of adolescents said that individuals should not use legal drugs that have negative consequences, whereas … 52% said that it is all right … to use illegal drugs, if they are shown by research to have positive consequences…

This suggests that the morality of drug use is defined in terms of the risks posed. Menghrajani *et al*'s (2005) study on adolescent and adult perceptions of the use and misuse of cannabis explored this interpretation, discovering that many older adolescents considered cannabis less dangerous than alcohol or nicotine and therefore, that its use should not be considered morally wrong. Research by Amonini and Donovan (2006) on youth perceptions of the morality of alcohol and other drug use observed that the majority of respondents perceived the use of alcohol, tobacco and marijuana as morally wrong. However, they also noted that a participant's status as a user directly affected how they perceived the substances; where '…non-users were more likely to view substance use as morally wrong … and current users were more likely to view substance use as morally acceptable…' (Amonini and Donovan, 2006: 283) Although these studies provide contradictory evidence on the morality of drug use as compared to alcohol and tobacco, they highlight the need for further study into the "new phenomena" of legal highs and how they are perceived morally, especially in comparison to illegal and legal alternatives.

The only indication of a moralistic interpretation of legal high use is conflicting evidence of either the normalization or stigmatization of users. Sheridan and Butler (2010) found evidence of normalization, with respondents remarking that, unlike illegal drugs, they felt that they could discuss legal high use with their family and friends because it was seen to be far more acceptable within mainstream society. McElrath and O'Neill (2010) found that users felt legal high use was stigmatized within the community, despite it being defined as legal. It can be surmised that this contradiction is an example of the general population defining legal high use in moralistic terms which vary from person to person. It is therefore vital that further research into this subject is undertaken to expand upon the limited knowledge in the area.

The Impact of Legislation

A clear legislative approach, concentrated on deterrence, has been endorsed to tackle the legal high problem. The consequences of this approach have been disputed within

academic research, with conflicting evidence posing questions as to the effectiveness of current legislation given the dangers of the legal high market.

Measham *et al*'s (2011) study into the prevalence of legal and illegal drug use amongst gay club goers found that mephedrone was the second most commonly used substance by respondents, ten weeks after criminalization. Wood *et al* (2012) remarked on the limitations of this research, suggesting that, although it implied continued use, use was unlikely to have reduced significantly within the first few months of control. However, a follow up study undertaken by Wood *et al* (2012) discovered that even after 15 months of criminalization, mephedrone was the most frequently used substance by the respondents and curiously, when compared to the previous study, that its use had in fact increased (Measham *et al*, 2011). This further supports Griffiths *et al*'s (2013: 1701) conception of mephedrone having '…made the cross-over from "legal high" to a drug of choice'. That said, the research is limited by the nature of its participants, as drug trend setters within the community they will undoubtedly continue use even in the face of punitive sanctions (Measham *et al*, 2011).

Contrary to the research previously cited, Carhart-Harris *et al*'s (2011) survey on mephedrone, undertaken five months after its prohibition, found that the majority of UK-based respondents would use mephedrone less or not at all; due to its criminalization. Furthermore, Freeman *et al*'s (2012) investigation into mephedrone's acute cognitive and subjective effects discovered that since its criminalization users had reduced use, although not because of fear of arrest, but rather because of perceived changes in its purity. This is corroborated by McElrath and O'Neill's (2010) research where some respondents determined that criminalization would lead to reduced use, due to the possible risk of adulteration. This can be understood as a "familiar" problem, akin to the prohibition of previous drugs, where in response to illegalisation the substance transitions into the illicit market leading to reductions in purity and an increase in health harms (Fleming, 2010; Winstock *et al*, 2010c).

Research identified two other possible reactions to criminalization: displacement to legal, or to illegal alternatives. Dargan *et al*'s (2010) survey assumed that when users are unable to source mephedrone legally they would switch to classified recreational drugs. This perception is supported by Freeman *et al*'s (2012) research which showed a clear

increase in the use of illegal alternatives following the prohibition of mephedrone. Wilkins and Sweetsur (2013) observed a similar trend in their research on BZP use in New Zealand, noting that there was a significant increase in the use of cocaine immediately after BZP's illegalization. Intriguingly, Van Hout and Brennan (2011) found that even though respondents were expected to return to illegal drugs, there was also an interest in experimenting with new unsanctioned alternatives. Measham *et al*'s (2011) research observed a lack of displacement to second-generation legal highs following mephedrone's prohibition. This disparity could be explained as new legal highs taking longer than twelve months to establish themselves (Wilkins and Sweetsur, 2013). Therefore, with the survey taking place only two months after criminalization, any noticeable displacement was unlikely.

This interest in alternative legal highs poses a grave problem for legislators as the criminalization of a legal high could inadvertently direct users to more hazardous, untested chemicals (Norman *et al*, 2014). The UK has attempted to resolve this issue by introducing temporary class drug orders to allow law enforcers the power to seize legal highs while research on their harms is conducted over a twelve month period (Home Office, 2012). However, the unrestricted sale of substances online has increased pressure on government bodies to further address the current inadequacies of controlled substance legislation (Winstock and Ramsey, 2010; Johnson *et al*, 2013). Ireland passed the Criminal Justice (Psychoactive Substance) Act in 2010, making it a:

> …criminal offence to advertise, sell, supply, import or export a psychoactive substance (not otherwise excluded), knowing or being reckless that it is for human consumption.
> (Home Office, 2014b: 37)

This legislation has experienced some success in limiting legal high use as it has successfully closed all legal high outlets, also known as headshops, as well as prohibiting the supply of the substances via any Irish based websites; which led to the New Psychoactive Substances Review Expert Panel (2014) recommending the UK to adopt a similar supply reduction approach.

There is currently no research into how the passing of legislation designed to reduce supply would affect the use and perception of legal highs as, although Van Hout and Brennan's (2011) study was situated in Ireland, it was conducted prior to the prohibition and only provides limited evidence of possible reactions to the legislation. It is important

to assess accurately the impact and effectiveness of such legislation as it is difficult to predict how users will react when unable to procure a substance legally (Vardakou *et al*, 2011). At present there is limited research into the perceptions of current legal highs and whether these perceptions change in comparison to illegal alternatives, therefore these areas requires further examination.

2 Research Findings and Discussion

To determine how legal highs are perceived when compared to illegal alternatives by young adults in the South-West rave/party community, this study has concentrated on the emerging themes revealed from a constant comparative analysis of the participants' interview transcripts. This analysis is presented according to the four main areas in the literature review, while also examining emergent themes to propose solutions to the current limitations of literature on the subject.

Reasons for Use

The reasons why people choose to use legal highs is heavily researched in the literature. Therefore, this study has attempted to evaluate these reasons in line with those given for illegal drug use and evidence was found that legal high use is still bound by the classical explanations for drug use. When the participants were asked why they initially started using illegal drugs they all explained they either had a curiosity about the substances or found themselves in a friendship group affording them the opportunity:

> '…a really good friend … had done them before so I … trusted his judgement and [gave] it a go…' (M6)

> 'I think … it's kind of escaping and trying new things … it's quite sociable.' (F6)

Participants also noted these reasons as their main motives for using legal highs. It can be suggested that this is an example of group theory in sociology which explains that drug use primarily develops in friendships groups (Dull, 1983 *in* Coomber *et al*, 2013). The two most common factors participants described alongside these motives were their legality and availability:

> '…it's all sort of a social thing, but … the difference is that … the legals are more readily available and … it's [a] more legitimate [product]…' (F4)

Although legitimisation of the substances due to their legal status was mentioned by participants, their reasons fixated on availability. It can be surmised that legality was only important to participants because it made the substances more available, as most experienced drug users '…have little regard for the illicit and licit distinction established by the law' (Boys *et* al, 2001: 457-458). A similar conclusion was found in McElrath and O'Neill (2010) and Measham *et al's* (2010) research on mephedrone, where legal status was not deemed an incentive to use, but only made it more convenient to obtain. The increased availability of the substances through legal channels could be considered an important factor in their frequency of use, with the majority of participants who had used frequently sourcing their products from headshops and the Internet:

> '…you could order on the Internet … but due to the availability of having it at a headshop [it wasn't necessary]…' (M3)

Conversely, almost all participants who had only used legal highs a few times had only acquired it from friends:

> '…I think I have only ever done … legal highs four times … [and] I never bought [them] … it was always other people.' (M8)

Therefore, the evidence suggests that availability of the substances would only factor into participants' reasons for use when they had moved on from the initial encounter with friends to personal sourcing for more frequent use.

Although this inference is consistent with Winstock *et al* (2010b) and Measham *et al's* (2010) research, it is contradicted by McElrath and O'Neill's (2010) study on experienced poly-drug users who were found to source from friends and dealers rather than legal outlets. This could be due to current literature overstating the impact of illegal drugs on legal high use, with numerous studies having found that poly-drug users only used legal highs because of the low-quality, or lack of, illegal alternatives (Newcombe, 2009; Measham *et al*, 2010; Carhart-Harris *et al*, 2011; Van Hout and Brennan, 2011). In this study, although two participants did mention a lack of illegal drugs factoring into use, it was not prevalent. Nevertheless, when asking if participants felt their illegal experiences had factored into the reasons why they had chosen to use legal highs, just over half of participants felt that they had not.

Although the evidence is inconclusive, it is contradictory to the established research which overstates the importance of illegal substances and assumes it unlikely that non-drug users would choose to use legal highs of their own accord (Sievers, 2011). Therefore, this research suggests that although availability does factor into continued use of legal highs, the initial reasons for both legal and illegal use are still defined in the classical sociological explanation of group theory.

Risks

The literature has shown a clear development in how the risks of legal highs are perceived by users. This study has attempted to develop this further by comparing these risks to those of legal and illegal alternatives, and judging the impact of this on use. It has found that users agree with scientists on the risks inherent in drug use, but that the impact of these risks on use remains a confusing topic.

Morgan *et al* (2010 *in* Freeman *et al*, 2012) conclude that drug users agree with experts on the relative harms of well-known drugs. This perception is verified by the participants in this study who felt that all drugs, including alcohol and tobacco, are dangerous. Participants were quick to highlight that risks associated with drug use could be countered through a contextual understanding of them, and by moderation of use:

> '…if you are doing them every day you are going to be at risk. If you're doing them once in a blue moon … then I don't see the harm in it.' (F6)

> '…there is just so much more information out there for the ones that have actually been illegalised … [and that] gives you a chance to kinda counter those risks…' (F2)

Similarly, Winstock *et al* (2010b) and Van Hout and Brennan (2011) found evidence of a focus on the contextual aspect of risk in their studies, explaining that drug use was not void of danger, but, if used correctly, the danger could be neutralized. Nevertheless, as these studies focused principally on the perceptions of experienced drug users, it could be inferred that they would be biased towards drug utilization and would therefore overstate the importance of contextual safety in an effort to normalise their behaviour. However, this appears unlikely in this study, as almost three quarters of participants went on to state that legal highs were more dangerous than other substances due to their unresearched nature:

> '…I think the legal ones … are even worse [than illegal alternatives] because no one know what's in them …' (F5)

This indicates that Norman *et al*'s (2014) assertion that illegal alternatives are perceived as safer is at least corroborated by the participants in this study, who agree with the thoughts of Professor David Nutt and Dr John Ramsey that the unresearched nature of legal highs means they pose a higher risk than their illegal alternatives (Saner, 2009; Can I Get High Legally?, 2010). It could, however, be argued that this perception is distorted, because there was some indication that participants were primarily loyal to illegal drugs:

> '…I dunno if it is being biased [but] I prefer illegal drugs. I think legal highs are a last resort…' (F3)

This inference is backed by Van Hout and Brennan's research which also found evidence of a loyalty to illegal drugs. Having already proposed that previous illegal experience is unlikely to impact the choice to use legal highs, it can be surmised that such experience also would not greatly affect the participant's judgement on their perceived harms.

The previous literature could not answer how far these risk factors determine whether users will continue or reduce use. This study aimed to expand on this limitation and found a clear difference between risk perceptions in the different genders, with four of the six females stating that they would/had continued use despite the risks:

> '…I don't think [the risks] … would deter me at all…' (F6)

Whereas, almost two-thirds of male respondents maintained that they would/had reduced their use because of these risks:

> 'Yeah, I don't [use] anymore at all … [as I had] a catastrophically bad panic attack on them.' (M8)

The majority of male respondents explained that they were deterred from continuing use by experiencing specific risks to themselves or others. This evidence conflicts with McElrath and O'Neill (2010) and Dargan *et al* (2010), who found that users were unlikely to be deterred by the potential risks associated with substance use. A separate explanation was that some participants felt that the risks, combined with the fact they had started to grow out of substance use and the culture, had led to reduced use. It

could be suggested this was because they had developed a '…risk-adversity…' and grown out of what they perceive as risky practices (Coomber *et al*, 2013: 15). Although the impact of risk on continued use remains a confounding topic, it can be suggested that users agree with scientists on both the risks of drug use, and that legal highs pose a greater danger because of their unresearched nature. They also believe that the risks of illegal drugs can be countered by contextual safety and moderation.

Morality of Legal Highs

How people perceive the morality of legal highs is subject to extremely limited analysis in the current literature. Therefore, this study has attempted to determine how experienced users understand the morality of their use alongside legal and illegal alternatives. It found that although users separated morality and legality when assessing general drug use, the two were inexorably linked when evaluating legal highs.

Rengger (2005) reasoned that morality and legality are inexorably linked and that generally, people believe there is a moral requirement to obey the law. However, as discussed already, experienced drug users have little regard for the distinction between legal and illegal. The majority of respondents perceived morality and legality to be separate issues, seeing all drug use as their own personal choice which only became immoral if it impacted others negatively:

> '…most drug users aren't particularly fussed about the legality or not of [their actions]…' (F1)

> '…I would only consider my use … a moral issue if it started affecting the world … [or] people around me…' (M6)

If it is understood firstly, that the morality of drug use is defined by the risks posed, as suggested in the research by Killen *et al* (1991) and Menghrajani *et al* (2005) on moral reasoning, and secondly, that the literature is unsure whether participants would continue or reduce use in the face of risk to themselves as discussed already; then the data would suggest that experienced users only define morality by the risk of their behaviour affecting others. This would further highlight the importance of contextual safety and moderation to them, with experienced users applying it to prevent their use affecting others. For a few of the respondents, the legality of drug taking did seem to impact their moral view on use:

> '…I mean it should be … a black area really, but because I am a user, then it's a grey area for me…' (M1)

Consequently, it can be suggested that these respondents felt morally conflicted between their perception as a user, and general moral conceptualizations of drug use. Therefore, the evidence would suggest that having experience in substance use directly affects moral judgements. Amonini and Donovan (2006: 283) also observed this in their research where '…non-users were more likely to view substance use as morally wrong under any circumstances, and current users were more likely to view substance use as morally acceptable under any circumstances.' This effect is understood by Moore (2004: 460) as being due to an inherent commitment by ravers to a '...idealised and idealistic "alternative" way of life.' Therefore, their moralistic perceptions of legal highs would be affected by their loyalty to illegal drugs and, although many of the participants described drug use as a personal choice, many felt legal highs were viewed negatively in the rave/party community:

> '…they get it as an alternative, but it would never be a first choice. ... I don't really see why they would be taking legal highs when you can take illegal drugs...' (F3)

This effect was mirrored by the participants' perception that the general community allowed the legality of a substance to affect their moral judgement:

> '…I think in the general community legal highs are seen as better than illegal ones.' (F1)

However, this evidence conflicts with previous literature on the subject indicating that both the drug taking community and the general public were not affected by these conceptions (Sheridan and Butler (2010); McElrath and O'Neill, 2010).

Given the scarcity of literature on this subject, it is important to value the evidence of this study which has suggested that participants separated ideas of morality and legality by defining drug use as a personal choice and it only became a moralistic issue when it directly affected others. When interpreting legal high use, participants' loyalty to illegal drugs affected their moral reasoning and effectively stigmatized use due to its legal status; the exact opposite of how they believe the general public perceive it.

The Impact of Legislation

The consequences of legislation are disputed in the literature. Therefore, this study intended to assess the impact of both current and supply reduction legislation on experienced users. It has discussed actual and predicted reactions, so as to assess the impact of criminalization on drug use, and evaluate the positive and negative paradox created by it.

To assess how effective the government's policy on deterrence has been on legal high use, participants were asked what the current legislation prohibiting it was, and how it had affected them. The majority of participants declared that they did not know the legislation, or that it had not affected them. However, two participants did know what the current legislation was, but they explained they felt it was ineffective at preventing use due to a lack of deterrence, and the speed at which new alternatives were created:

> 'Aren't they all temporarily illegal? ... I don't think it is very effective … [as a] lot of people still think they are legal and [therefore] a lot less risky…' (F2)
> 'They had like three turning up to everyone that they banned, so … they weren't [really] winning the legal high battle…' (M3)

As discussed already, the legality of the substance has little bearing on experienced drug users' reasons for use. Therefore, legislation focusing on deterrence is unlikely to impact participants use as shown in Measham *et al* (2011) and Wood *et al's* (2012) research which found that mephedrone's criminalization had little impact on its use by the gay community in London (also a well-established drug culture similar to that of the South-West rave/party community). Therefore, this evidence would suggest that it is more likely to be the inexperienced users within the general public who associate morality with legality, as discussed above, and who would consider these legal penalties to be a major deterrent (Wilkins and Sweetsur, 2013).

The temporary closing of headshops in Taunton and Exeter provide this study with a unique opportunity to assess the effectiveness of supply control measures. As revealed from this research, legal highs are primarily perceived negatively in the South-West rave/party community, with only one respondent remarking on the actual effects of the legislation noting the increased difficulty in availability:

> 'The biggest change potentially has been in Taunton. There has been a … headshop, that has been closed down temporarily … That's had the biggest effect … cause it's harder for people to … get hold of them, but people have been using the Internet more…' (M6)

Although the participant mentioned an increased use of the Internet, the supply legislation being mooted would effectively shut down this avenue of supply as well. The majority of participants felt that the legislation would be effective, with some explaining that people would likely lose interest in the substances when they were no longer so easily available.

However, the previous literature instead concentrated on the possible risk of adulteration as the principle reason for reduced use (McElrath and O'Neill, 2010; Freeman *et al*, 2012). This contradiction could be explained by understanding that mephedrone, the focus of their study, had '…made the cross-over from "legal high" to a drug of choice…' (Griffiths *et al*, 2013: 1701), unlike the short-lived copycat legal highs that are used today, and that adulteration would therefore be of greater importance when using mephedrone.

Selected participants felt that supply reduction would not be effective, as people would still procure substances through the already well-established illegal channels:

> 'Yeah, well it won't be effective will it? They just plan to make them all illegal like most drugs that everyone still gets hold of all of the [time]...' (M4)

Whether the respondents felt that it would be an effective or ineffective strategy, they almost unanimously stated that it would likely increase an interest in illegal alternatives:

> '…I reckon if they cut [off] supply [so] people can't get hold of legal ones, it might push them more towards illegal ones.' (M1)

This prediction is legitimised by the research of Freeman *et al* (2012) and Wilkins and Sweetsur (2013) which found that there was a clear increase in the use of illegal alternatives following the criminalization of mephedrone and BZP respectively. Therefore, it is unlikely that legislation will significantly impact the use of drugs by the South-West rave/party community. A supply reduction strategy in Taunton has been described as having a negative effect on the availability of the substances, which could deter the inexperienced. On the other hand, evidence from the literature and study would suggest that it could also increase interest in and use of illegal alternatives, which would nullify the government's goal, thus creating a challenging paradox.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study set out to determine current perceptions on legal highs and assess how they could help government shape legislation in order to prevent another '…cat-and-mouse legislative…' game from occurring, and to end '…the repetitive and cyclical nature of drug problems.' (Johnson *et al*, 2013: 1108; Seddon, 2014: 1019)

In determining how participants perceived legal highs, some of this study's findings conflicted with those of the literature. For example, whereas availability was judged a major influence in reasons for legal high use in previous literature, this study revealed that it only impacted the continued use of legal highs, and that the initial reasons still remain defined by the concept of group theory (Dull, 1983 *in* Coomber *et al*, 2013). It has also suggested that the previous literature overstated the importance of illegal drug use, although the evidence for this was not conclusive and requires further research. The findings of this study support the hypothesis that experienced users understand the risks of drug use and believe they can counter them through contextual safety and moderation. It revealed that legal highs were perceived to be more dangerous than illegal alternatives, because of their unresearched nature, expanding on the suggestions of Norman *et al*'s (2014) study. This study could not provide conclusive evidence on how far risk impacts participants' continued use of legal highs, although it did note a thought-provoking gender difference, with females more likely to continue use than males. Further research into this concept might answer these findings.

The morality of legal high use was an under researched subject in the literature. Therefore, this study attempted to lay a foundation of theory in this area. It found that participants defined the morality of drug use by the risks posed, rather than its legality, as suggested in previous research. The findings expanded on this theory, suggesting that experienced users define morality by the risk of their behaviour affecting others. This study also found that having experience with substance use directly affected moral judgements, with some participants remarking on their conflicted opinion on drug use. The data would further suggest that this affected how participants perceived legal highs, effectively stigmatizing their use specifically due to their legal status, because of a perceived loyalty to illegal drugs. However, this evidence is not conclusive and does conflict with the limited previous literature on the subject. Therefore, further research is needed to address this.

It was found that although participants noted a supply reduction strategy could be effective, with one person stating that it has been effective in Taunton, because legal highs are believed to pose a greater risk and are stigmatized within the culture, supply reduction is unlikely to have an impact on the drug taking habits of the South-West rave/party community. However, the reverse of this could be suggested when considering inexperienced users, who tend to associate legality with safety (Newcombe, 2009; Sheridan and Butler, 2010). Consequently, a supply reduction strategy preventing their legal sale could deter them from use. That said, evidence from the literature and study would suggest that this could lead to an increased interest in and use of illegal alternatives. Further research would therefore have to be undertaken to assess how supply reduction might impact the inexperienced. Therefore, this study implies that a supply reduction strategy would prevent use and in turn stop the '…cat-and-mouse legislative…' game of legal highs (Johnson *et al*, 2013: 1108). However, because the study suggested that the reasons people first use drugs are still defined by sociological explanation of group theory, it is unlikely to end '…the repetitive and cyclical nature of drug problems.' (Seddon, 2014: 1019)

Reinarman *et al* (2004: 841) argued '…that most experienced users organize their use according to their own [subculture] … and less to laws or policies…' This conception is mirrored by evidence from this study where participants focused on contextual safety and moderation to prevent them breaking their own moral ideals which were based on the perceived risk of their use affecting others, rather than on legality. It could be suggested that, if formal legislation was based upon the policies that experienced users already practice, drug legislation might achieve greater relevance and break the cycle discussed above (Reinarman *et al*, 2004; Seddon, 2014).

This research would therefore recommend a legislative framework concentrated on decriminalization, which is defined as '…the removal of sanctions under the criminal law, with optional use of administrative sanctions…' (Hughes and Stevens, 2010: 999) Decriminalization would allow for the possession of a small amount of a drug for personal use, and would only criminalize those associated with supply (Coomber *et al*, 2013). This has proven to be an effective strategy in Portugal, where, although small increases in drug use were reported, major reductions in drug related deaths, addiction and costs to the criminal justice system were achieved (Greenwald, 2009; Hughes and

Stevens, 2010). Although decriminalization would not resolve every issue related to drug problems, it would mark a step towards a '…less punitive, more integrated and effective … [response] to drug use.' (Hughes and Stevens, 2010: 1018) By continuing to make drug use morally unacceptable and liable to administrative sanctions, the deterrent to first time users might remain. Removing punitive sanctions on personal drug usage could also allow for enhanced communication between the government and drug users, a concept raised by participants in the study, many of whom felt that they didn't have a voice.

However, as Hughes and Stevens (2010: 1018) declared '…ultimately, the choice to decriminalize is not simply a question of the research … It is also an ethical and political choice of how the state should respond to drug use.' Members of the UK government have produced reports extolling the benefits of decriminalisation, as well as recognising the failures of harsh punitive sanctions in dealing with drug problems (Barrett, 2014; BBC News Politics, 2014). The problem is that drug policy is made in a politically charged atmosphere, where the media plays an integral role in the formation of policy by inciting moral panics and demonising users; grounded in misinformation (Murji, 1998; Lancaster *et al*, 2011; Monaghan, 2014). This in turn leads to a fear of the tabloids, where politicians are forced, or choose, to ignore scientific advice, even if it hinders effective prevention, to the cost of users (Coomber *et al*, 2000; BBC News Politics, 2014). Therefore, there are considerable barriers to decriminalization, which would be deemed as controversial, even if the decision was based on credible research.

This study has raised new insights into areas where legal highs research was limited, as well as expanding upon current notions. It has also delivered strong evidence that legislation focused on supply reduction would be an effective way of dealing with the '…cat-and-mouse legislative…' game that has hindered the government's capacity to deal with legal highs (Johnson *et al*, 2013: 1108). Although this study has put forward evidence that experienced users are moral and intelligent individuals, and that a different approach to drug policy might contribute to putting an end to '…the repetitive and cyclical nature of drug problems…' (Seddon, 2014: 1019), the politically charged atmosphere that dominates policy making will continue to stand in its way.

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