



## Research paper

# Motivations for new psychoactive substance use among regular psychostimulant users in Australia



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 5 September 2016

Received in revised form 22 December 2016

Accepted 31 December 2016

Available online xxx

## Keywords:

New psychoactive substances

Synthetic cannabinoids

Synthetic cathinones

2C-x

NBOMe

DMT

Motivations

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Examine the motivations for new psychoactive substance (NPS) use amongst a sample of regular psychostimulant users (RPU) in Australia, and determine whether motivations differ across substances.

**Method:** Data were obtained from 419 RPU interviewed for the 2014 Ecstasy and related Drugs Reporting System who reported lifetime NPS use. Based on the most recent NPS used, motivations for use were rated on an 11-point scale (0 'no influence'–10 'maximum influence').

**Results:** For NPS overall, value for money was found to be the most highly endorsed motivation for use, scoring a median of five out of ten. However, there was substantial variation in motivations for use across substance types. Availability (i.e. no other drug was available to me at the time; 6/10) was the most highly endorsed motivation for the use of synthetic cathinones, which was significantly higher than reported for DMT. Perceived legality and availability were the most highly endorsed motivations for synthetic cannabinoids (5/10); perceived legality scored higher for synthetic cannabinoids than for all the other NPS, whilst in regards to availability synthetic cannabinoids scored significantly higher than DMT only. Value for money was the most highly endorsed motivation for NBOMe (8/10) and 2C-family substances (5/10); in regards to NBOMe this scored significantly higher than all other NPS. Short effect duration was the most highly endorsed motivation for DMT (7/10), which was significantly higher than for all other NPS.

**Conclusion:** Synthetic cathinones and cannabinoids appear to be largely motivated by 'opportunistic' reasons (i.e. availability, legality), while NBOMe, 2C-family substances and DMT appear to be motivated by particular desirable qualities of a substance (i.e. value for money, short effect duration). Providing a nuanced understanding of why individuals use particular NPS improves our ability to understand the NPS phenomenon and to tailor harm reduction messages to the appropriate target groups.

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## Introduction

The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) has defined new psychoactive substances (NPS) as substances that are "not controlled by the 1961 Convention on Narcotic Drugs or the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, but which may pose a public health threat" (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2016b, p.6).

However, there is no universally accepted definition of NPS, and definitions vary across countries and jurisdictions. Indeed, it could be argued that the importance of 'older-new' drugs, such as those controlled by international legislation but not previously well-established in the recreational drug-using scene (e.g. dimethyl-tryptamine; DMT), must not be overlooked. In 2015 the European Union were monitoring over 560 different NPS, of which 70% were detected in the past five years (European Monitoring Centre for

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Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2016b). The rapid growth of the NPS market has been facilitated by a number of factors, including: the MDMA (ecstasy) shortage that occurred in the mid-2000s (resulting in pills with a low MDMA content, which often contained other drugs such as mephedrone, benzylpiperazine (BZP) and meta-chlorophenylpiperazine (mCPP); Brunt, Poortman, Niesink, & van den Brink, 2011; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2014; Vogels et al., 2009); improving technological capabilities in China and India; increased communication and trade via the internet; and the ability to produce new substances in small laboratories (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2016a; Reuter & Pardo, 2017).

In addition to understanding the broader global factors that facilitated the growth of the NPS market, it is also important to examine individual motivations for NPS use. Understanding what is driving market changes can inform evaluation of policy changes (Reuter & Pardo, 2017) and the development of effective harm reduction campaigns, and it may also provide some insight into which NPS are likely to become established in the recreational drug scene. For example, motivations such as legality and availability suggest more opportunistic reasons for use which may not be stable over the long-term (e.g. many countries have since moved to prohibit NPS). However, motivations based on preference or perceived 'superiority' over other drugs, may suggest sustained popularity for a given drug over the long-term.

It has been argued that NPS appeal to three distinct groups of people: those attracted to the legality (or perceived legality) of these substances, those looking to avoid detection in drug tests, and those seeking a new and attractive experience (Reuter & Pardo, 2017). This view is partly supported by previous research. Legal status was initially considered to be an important contributor to the uptake of NPS. In the UK it was found that once mephedrone was listed as a controlled substance, self-reported use fell (Lader, 2015); similarly, following the prohibition of BZP in New Zealand, there was a decline in self-reported use among the general population (Wilkins & Sweetsur, 2013). However, it is unclear if such declines were the result of reduced availability following the legislative changes or if they were the result of a general deterrent effect (or both). Indeed, a number of NPS have remained relatively common despite their subsequent prohibition, and in such cases legal status is considered to be a secondary driver for use, particularly among those who already use illicit drugs (Measham & Newcombe, 2016). In addition, whilst some studies have identified the avoidance of drug use detection as a motivating factor for NPS use (Barratt, Cakic, & Lenton, 2013; Bonar, Ashrafioun, & Ilgen, 2014; Gunderson, Haughey, Ait-Daoud, Joshi, & Hart, 2014), it has generally been found that, overall, this is less important than intrinsic motivations such as pleasure and thrill seeking (Barratt, Allen, & Lenton, 2014; Orsolini, Papanti, Francesconi, & Schifano, 2015; Soussan & Kjellgren, 2015, 2016), and curiosity (Barratt et al., 2013; Bonar et al., 2014; Cakic, Potkonyak, & Marshall, 2010). This finding may be because, to-date, only a relatively small proportion of the population is subjected to workplace or other (e.g. sporting or criminal justice) drug testing. The groupings put forward by Reuter and Pardo (2017) also fail to account for people who are attracted to NPS for reasons such as price, purity, availability and perceived safety (Barnard, Russell, McKegane, & Hamilton-Barclay, 2016; Barratt et al., 2013; Bonar et al., 2014; Lawn, Barratt, Williams, Horne, & Winstock, 2014; Soussan & Kjellgren, 2015, 2016; van Amsterdam, Nabben, Keiman, Haanschooten, & Korf, 2015; Winstock, Lawn, Deluca, & Borschmann, 2016).

Given the array of NPS available, it is likely that motivations for use vary across substances. Although a number of studies have examined the motivations for use of a specific NPS, to the best of our knowledge, there is only one existing published study which has explicitly compared motivations across NPS. Soussan and Kjellgren (2016) conducted an online survey of 619 international

NPS users and their findings support the hypothesis that there are likely to be distinct motivation profiles across different substances. Although 'pleasure and enjoyment' was a common motivation across all NPS groups, the use of hallucinogens and dissociatives was substantially more motivated by exploration and spiritual attainment, whilst stimulants were typically used to enhance mental and physical abilities. In contrast, the use of synthetic cannabinoids was more motivated by circumstances such as price, legal status, availability and non-detectability on screening tests (Soussan & Kjellgren, 2016).

Soussan and Kjellgren (2016) examined eight different motives, most of which were intrinsic in nature (e.g. pleasure and enjoyment; self-exploration or spiritual attainment) or related to the 'rewards' associated with use (e.g. enhanced mental or physical abilities; self-assertion or self-confidence); only one motive was related to external factors (i.e. 'circumstances such as price, legal status, availability or non-detectability in screening tests'). We would argue that a stronger focus on external factors is important for two reasons. Firstly, most NPS users also use traditional illicit drugs (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2014; Palamar, 2015; Palamar & Acosta, 2015) and many of the motivations for use of these substances are likely to overlap (e.g. the intrinsic motivations for using hallucinogenic NPS are likely the same for using 'traditional' hallucinogenic substances); as such it is more meaningful to determine what factors motivate one to use NPS over traditional illicit drugs. Secondly, external motivations are more amenable to change through policy and treatment.

As such, the objective of the current paper was to add to the work by Soussan and Kjellgren (2016) by giving greater emphasis to external motivations (and examining price, legal status and drug testing separately). Specifically, we aimed to:

- 1) Explore the motivations for using 'any' NPS among a sample of regular psychostimulant users (RPU) in Australia.
- 2) Determine whether there are differing motivations for use across the following NPS: synthetic cathinones, 2C-x, NBOME, DMT and synthetic cannabinoids.

## Method

### Study design

This paper uses data from the 2014 Ecstasy and related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) (for full study details, see Sindich & Burns, 2015). The EDRS is a national monitoring study aimed at detecting emerging trends in illicit drug markets and has been conducted annually within all Australian capital cities since 2003. The EDRS has received ethical approval from the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Human Research Ethics Committee (HC10071, HC15015), as well as from the relevant ethics committees in other Australian jurisdictions.

### Participants and procedure

EDRS participants (hereafter referred to as 'regular psychostimulant users' (RPU)) comprised a non-random self-selected sample recruited through street-press advertisements, online forums and peer referral. Eligibility criteria were: at least monthly use of ecstasy or other psychostimulants in the preceding six months, 16 years of age or older, and residence in the city of interview for at least 12 months prior to the interview. Face-to-face one-hour structured interviews were conducted by trained interviewers at a negotiated time and location, and participants were reimbursed AUD40.

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