



## Research Paper

## The diverse reasons for using Novel Psychoactive Substances - A qualitative study of the users' own perspectives



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The increasing number of legally ambiguous and precarious Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS) constitutes a challenge for policy makers and public health. Scientific and more in-depth knowledge about the motivations for using NPS is scarce and often consist of predetermined, non-systematic, or poorly described reasons deduced from top-down approaches. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to explore and characterize the users' self-reported reasons for NPS use inductively and more comprehensively.

**Methods:** The self-reported reasons of a self-selected sample of 613 international NPS users were collected via an online survey promoted at the international drug discussion forum [bluelight.org](http://bluelight.org) and later analyzed qualitatively using inductive thematic analysis.

**Results:** The analysis showed that the participants used NPS because these compounds reportedly: 1) enabled safer and more convenient drug use, 2) satisfied a curiosity and interest about the effects, 3) facilitated a novel and exciting adventure, 4) promoted self-exploration and personal growth, 5) functioned as coping agents, 6) enhanced abilities and performance, 7) fostered social bonding and belonging, and 8) acted as a means for recreation and pleasure. The consumption of NPS was also driven by 9) problematic and unintentional use.

**Conclusion:** The present study contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the users' own and self-reported reasons for using NPS, which needs to be acknowledged not only in order to minimize drug related harm and drug user alienation but also to improve prevention efforts and reduce the potentially counter-intuitive effects of strictly prohibitive policies.

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## Background

The number of easily accessible and legally ambiguous Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS) is increasing, and the market for such drugs is assumed to keep growing. In 2015, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA, 2016) identified 98 novel compounds, which brought the total number of currently monitored NPS to more than 560. The speed at which the market for drugs evolves is a challenge not only for researchers and public health agencies but also for policy makers. Regulatory action has in some cases proved to be ineffective, and sometimes even counterproductive, since clandestine chemists and vendors continually adapt to current legislations by introducing abandoned medical research candidates or yet new and molecularly altered substances with more adverse effects than the ones they replace

(Johnson, Johnson, & Portier, 2013; Winstock & Ramsey, 2010). In addition to the ensuing challenges of this cat and mouse game, scientific knowledge about toxicology, addiction potential and possible side-effects is scarce or absent (Gibbons, 2012; Wood & Dargan, 2012). Moreover, the community of users is poorly investigated and the prevalence-of-use rates are somewhat contradictory. A Eurobarometer survey (2014) revealed that the lifetime experience, on average, was eight percent among youth in Europe, which differed greatly from the 65.8% among a targeted population of nightclub visitors (Wood, Hunter, Measham, & Dargan, 2012). Studies have showed that the use of NPS occurs in nearly all age groups although the majority of users are believed to be young males (Barratt, Cacic, & Lenton, 2013; Soussan & Kjellgren, 2016). A number of studies have also highlighted that many users are generally well-informed, knowledgeable, and experienced in the world of drugs (Soussan & Kjellgren, 2014; Werse & Morgenstern, 2012).

Previous research has pointed out that the limited amount of scientific knowledge about NPS and the community of users also pertains to their motivations for use (Moore, Dargan, Wood, &

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Measham, 2013; Soussan & Kjellgren, 2016). We argue that this needs to be addressed since a better understanding of why people use drugs is assumed to improve prevention efforts and enable a reduction of drug-related harms (Adams et al., 2003; Boys, Marsden, & Strang, 2001). For example, health promotion campaigns that neglect to acknowledge the pleasure incentive may be resisted and could paradoxically serve as motivation for engagement in drug use (Barratt, Allen, & Lenton, 2014). Hence, appreciating the intertwined relationship between the risks and the beneficial effects could make prevention messages more acceptable and credible (Pennay, 2015). A sophisticated understanding of the specific reasons for drug use is also believed to increase the ability to tailor messages relevant to the appropriate target groups (Boys et al., 2001; Sutherland et al., 2017). Motivation is, however, a vast and complex field of research including a range of human motivation models in general and drug use theories in particular. In addition, there is a branch of research focusing on the content of motivation by documenting the reasons for drug use. The literature on traditional drug use reasons lists several recurring incentives such as pleasure, enhancement, coping, self-assertion, habit and addiction, and self-exploration (e.g. Boys et al., 2001; Nicholson et al., 2002; Novacek, Raskin, & Hogan, 1991). The few available NPS-specific studies that take motivation into account focus exclusively on the content of motivation, and often emphasize external circumstances such as price, legal status, purity, availability or non-detectability in screening tests as crucial reasons for NPS use (Sutherland et al., 2017). A general view is that the users turn to NPS-substitutes when traditional drugs are prohibited or in other ways reduced in supply (Measham, Moore, Newcombe, & Welch, 2010). Studies surveying the users have also suggested that they are driven by curiosity, enhancement of social situations, the enjoyable effects, and a desire to “get high” (Corazza, Simonato, Corkery, Trincas, & Schifano, 2014; Johnson et al., 2013; Measham et al., 2010; Sande, 2016; Werse & Morgenstern, 2012; Winstock, Lawn, Deluca, & Borschmann, 2015).

Preceding investigations have revealed that the reasons for NPS use varied considerably between different types of NPS (Soussan & Kjellgren, 2016; Sutherland et al., 2017). For example, the use of novel hallucinogens was mainly motivated by self-exploration and insignificantly associated with dependency, while the use of novel opioids was motivated by coping and showed much higher levels of problematic use. Other studies support the notion of substance-specific motivations by associating certain motivations, such as the facilitation of social situations, euphoria, cognitive enhancement, and increased energy and motivation, with the use of novel stimulants in particular (Beharry & Gibbons, 2016; Zawilska, 2015). Furthermore, novel benzodiazepines are known for their sedative properties and addiction potential, and they attract users with the purpose to self-medicate or mitigate the “come down” effects of other drugs (Andersson & Kjellgren, 2017; Beharry & Gibbons, 2016). A drawback of the above mentioned studies is that they, in most cases, have a top-down methodology, and investigated the extent to which the users were motivated by predetermined incentives often appearing in a non-systematic manner. Considering that many drug use motivations found in the scientific literature are adopted from the body of alcohol research (Lee, Neighbors, & Woods, 2007), and that the reasons in many cases were arrived at by top-down approaches, it is important to investigate the users' self-reported reasons for NPS use inductively. Another expected benefit of analysing the users' experiences qualitatively in a bottom-up manner is the generation of richer and more in-depth knowledge about the reasons for using NPS.

The purpose of the present study was to explore and characterize the self-reported reasons for NPS use among a sample of international NPS users online.

## Methods

### Data collection

The data for the present study were extracted from a larger data set of NPS user characteristics which were collected through an online survey promoted at the international drug discussion forum [bluelight.org](http://bluelight.org). In addition to the already published survey results (see Soussan & Kjellgren, 2016), the 619 participants were asked to answer the following open-ended question: “What were your reasons for consuming novel psychoactive substances? Write as elaborately as you like”. Nearly all the participants (613) chose to reply by submitting their self-reported reasons for using NPS, which constituted the data for the present study. The open-ended question was presented before any other questions about motivation in the survey to ensure that the participants remained relatively unbiased. In total, the raw data amounted to 34 719 words of written text. The survey was online between November 2014 and February 2015.

### Participants

The sample consisted of 613 self-selected participants (512 males, 101 females) from 42 countries. The ten most frequently occurring countries were: USA (48.9%), United Kingdom (14.2%), Canada (7.3%), Sweden (5.5%), Holland (3.8%), Australia (3.4%), Germany (2.6%), Finland (1.0%), France (1.0%), and Poland (1.0%). It was required that the participants were 18 years or older, and that they had used at least one NPS within the last two years. The mean age among the males was 27.2 years ( $SD=9.3$ ,  $median=25$ ,  $range=18-75$ ) and the females were slightly older ( $mean=29.8$ ,  $SD=10.1$ ,  $median=27$ ,  $range=18-66$ ). The mean age for all the participants was 27.6 years ( $SD=9.5$ ) and the mode age for both genders was 18 years. The most frequently occurring types of NPS among the reported cases were hallucinogens (45%), stimulants (26%), dissociatives (11%), GABA (8%), synthetic cannabinoids (6%), and opioids (4%). Cases including use of clearly established drugs or combinations of drugs were excluded. However, novel does not necessarily mean new or legal but also includes long-existing substances “which have recently become popular in the drug market” (Corazza, Demetrovics, van den Brink, & Schifano, 2013).

### Analysis

The raw data were analyzed qualitatively using the protocol for inductive thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which seeks to identify recurring patterns of responses or meaning in the data. The analysis was data-driven, and undertaken with as much openness and bias-free attitude as possible to avoid potentially deleterious effects of the researchers' preconceptions. The concept of reflexivity was taken into consideration throughout the process, which meant to sustain an attitude of attending to the effects of the researcher and minimize bias by: 1) following the research protocol outlined below scrupulously, 2) including two additional researchers to verify the analysis, and 3) circularly and systematically reviewing and refining higher levels of abstraction (categories and themes) by repeatedly returning to the raw data for verification and support of the themes. Moreover, the data within themes were continuously examined for internal coherence while a clear and identifiable distinction between themes was preserved. The data were primarily approached at the explicit or semantic level of meaning although a few occasional interpretations at the implicit or latent level were needed in order to distinguish what the participants meant to say.

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