The interest in eight new psychoactive substances before and after scheduling

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

Background: In recent years the recreational use of new psychoactive substances (NPS) has increased. NPS are considered a threat to public health and the main response to this threat is to make the selling and buying of these substances illegal. In Sweden, during the last 5 years, 62 new substances have been classified as narcotics but little is known of the effects of making a particular substance illegal. The aim of this work is to study how legal status influences the interest in NPS in Sweden.

Methods: Forty-five thousand posts made in a Swedish Internet discussion forum (Flashback Forum) related to eight NPS (MDPV, Methylone, 4-MEC, 4-HO-MET, MXE, 6-APB, AH-7921, and 3-MMC) were used to derive time-dependent measures of interest in these substances. Intervention analyses were used to investigate the effects of legal status on the forum interest.

Results: For all eight substances the activity on the forum (measured as number of posts per day) showed a drastic decrease around the time of classification. The statistical analysis showed that in seven of eight cases, the drop in activity could be accounted for by the legal status of the substances.

Conclusions: The legal status of the substances was shown to have a substantial effect on the interest in the substances. The novel measure used to trace the interest in particular NPS could be a useful tool to follow trends in substance use in almost real-time.

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1. Introduction

The number of new psychoactive substances (NPS) available on the drug markets has increased substantially during the last years (e.g. UNODC, 2013). NPS are substances that are often not controlled by national or international law and which have putative psychoactive properties. They constitute a heterogeneous group, are often synthesized in labs (Collins, 2011), and often sold openly through websites on the Internet (Schifano et al., 2006; EMCDDA, 2009; Schmidt et al., 2011; Bruno et al., 2013).

The scientific knowledge of pharmaceutical and medical effects of NPS is limited. Consequently users of NPS often have to rely on other users to learn about dosage, ways of administration, and possible interactions with other substances (e.g. Schmidt et al., 2011; Corazza et al., 2012). Moreover, the labeling on purchased NPS might not always agree with the content (Brandt et al., 2010), further increasing the difficulty of safe usage. Indeed, there is a growing fear that the usage of NPS might constitute a serious concern to public health (EMCDDA, 2011; UNODC, 2013) and there are several case-reports where use of NPS are claimed to be causally involved in fatal intoxications (Wikström et al., 2010; Kronstrand et al., 2011).

When introduced on the drug markets, NPS are typically not controlled by international treaties and are often legal to sell and buy according to national legislations. New substances are regularly evaluated by the WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence (e.g. WHO, 2012) and might be appended to the list of controlled substances according to the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971 (United Nations, 1971). In many countries the national regulation of psychoactive substances follows the same route: individual substances are identified, evaluated, and classified as illegal. This implies that relatively minor changes of the chemical structure might, from a legal point of view, turn an illegal substance into an unregulated one, legal to sell and buy. Given the large number of NPS detected every year (73 new substances reported within the European Union (EU) in the year 2012 (EMCDDA, 2013)) this route presents a substantial challenge. Indeed, when a substance becomes illegal, new unscheduled substances might be introduced as a replacement (Shanks et al., 2012; Jebadurai et al., 2013). An investigation of the effects of making a certain substance illegal should therefore include an analysis of interest and use of other related substances.
Which are the effects of making a psychoactive substance illegal to sell and possess? For the more “traditional” psychoactive drugs it is clear that punitive legislation does not necessarily quench the supply. Indeed, even if controlled by international treaties since a long time (United Nations, 1961, 1971) cannabis, amphetamines, cocaine and opiates are still used extensively throughout the world (UNODC, 2010). In the case of NPS much less is known about the effects of scheduling, but it is possible that the “legal” marketing of these substances (i.e. that they are sold openly on the web) will make classification have a more direct effect on the supply. There are some indications that this is indeed so (Anderson et al., 2010; Advisory, 2011; Carhart-Harris et al., 2011; Stogner et al., 2012; Loeffler and Craig, 2013) but there are also reports of users whose use seem to be relatively unaffected by the legal status (Winstock et al., 2010; Wood et al., 2012). Interestingly, a few reports support the notion that scheduling removes the substance from the web, at least from websites on the ‘surface web’, but might remain available via more ‘traditional’ routes such as street dealers (Winstock et al., 2010; Advisory, 2011) and possibly from “dark net” websites as well.

To accurately follow trends in NPS usage it is important to analyze information available on the Internet (Schifano et al., 2006). Indeed, in the 2010 report from the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) it is recommended that governments should monitor Internet forums to identify the substances that might replace mephedrone as a result of that substance being placed under national control in a growing number of countries (INCB, 2011, p. 44).

Internet fora focusing on drug use have been used in previous research: to detect new NPS entering the market (Deluca et al., 2012); to recruit subjects for web-based surveys and interviews (Bagott et al., 2010; Carhart-Harris et al., 2011; Van Hout and Bingham, 2013); and to describe users’ experiences with NPS (Kjellgren and Jonsson, 2013). In the work presented here, a novel measure of the activity on a Swedish Internet forum is used to follow the interest in eight NPS before and after they were made illegal.

As a measure of NPS-related activity the number of posts related to a particular substance was followed as a function of time. This study used Flashback Forum (FB), which is the largest Swedish Internet discussion forum, and eight NPS were followed for a time period that included the scheduling of the substances. More than 45,000 posts made by approximately 3700 users were used to derive time-dependent activity profiles for the substances. A detailed analysis of the content of the posts of 200 users showed that approximately half of the users explicitly claim to have tried the substance under discussion. The main question addressed is if the interest in a particular substance (on FB) depends on its legal status.

2. Methods

In this section the Internet forum is described, the selection of the substances investigated is motivated, and the extraction and analysis of data is explained. First, however, a brief description of the Swedish legal regulations of NPS is given.

2.1. The Swedish legal regulation of psychoactive substances

In Sweden substances of misuse are controlled according to three different laws. Substances classified as narcotics are regulated by two laws SFS 1968:64 (1968), and SFS 1992:860 (1992), and the controlled substances are listed in the Narcotic Drug Control Ordinance (SFS 1992:1554,1992). Narcotic substances are illegal to trade, possess, and use. Substances can also be classified under the law Prohibition of Certain Goods Dangerous to Health (SFS 1999:42, 1999). This makes it illegal to sell and possess the substance but not to use it.

There is also a recent law according to which police and customs can destroy substances of misuse that are likely to be scheduled in the future (SFS 2011:111, 2011).

2.2. Flashback Forum

Flashback Forum (http://www.flashback.org, henceforth FB) is an online discussion forum that covers a wide range of topics (most not related to drugs). The site is hierarchically organized around “topics”, for example a particular substance. Only members can post messages and membership is anonymous and free of charge. The website is open for anyone to read. Each post has a time-stamp and may refer to other posts. The posts belonging to a particular topic will be referred to as a “thread”. There are strict rules that forbid posts aiming at trading (selling, buying, changing, providing information of where to buy, etc.) narcotics. Flashback Forum is by far the biggest internet forum in Swedish and has more than 850,000 members (March 2014). It is perhaps important to notice that a member does not necessarily correspond to a unique physical person, but that misuse of multiple memberships is prohibited.

2.3. The substances

The intended focus of the study was on substances that changed status from legal to illegal during the last 5 years in Sweden. Of the more than 60 such substances a further selection was made to include only those that were discussed with some frequency in a dedicated thread on FB (else the measure used here is not applicable). Many of the NPS that have been scheduled are so-called synthetic cannabinoids and these seem to be marketed and used in combination with smokable herbal mixtures. The particular cannabinoids in the mix are often not declared, e.g. products labeled 'Spice' has been found to contain a number of different synthetic cannabinoids (EMCDDA, 2009). Consequently, few synthetic cannabinoids were discussed in dedicated FB-threads and synthetic cannabinoids were therefore not included in this work. This should not be taken as an indication that these substances are not discussed or used in Sweden. For example, the main thread on FB discussing 'Spice' had more than 11,000 posts made by 1710 unique members and a recent study of hospital emergency admission indicate that synthetic cannabinoids are among the more used NPS in Sweden (Helander et al., 2013). These considerations lead to the following selection of NPS to be included in the study: MDPV, Methyline, 4-MEC, 4-HO-MET, MXE, 6-APB, AH-7921, and 3-MMC (see Table 1).

2.4. Data analysis

For each of the eight substances the major thread on FB was identified and the corresponding pages were downloaded. These downloaded html files were parsed using the Beautiful Soup module (http://www.crummy.com/software/) for the programming language Python (http://www.python.org). For each thread the number of unique members were identified and the dates of each post was used to form a time series of number of posts per day.

2.4.1. Statistical analysis. To test if there was a change in mean activity in a particular thread around the date a substance became illegal the following procedure was used. Data from N = 180 days preceding and following the scheduling date were extracted and the square root of the counts on each day was used as the dependent measure (except for 3-MMC, where data from 90 days before...
Table 1
Substances investigated. The long names are according to Swedish conventions and are the ones given in the legal documents. All the substances were classified as narcotics (SFS 1992:1554) except 6-APB that was classified as dangerous to health (SFS 1999:42).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substance</th>
<th>First date</th>
<th># Pages</th>
<th># Posts</th>
<th># Unique members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MDPV</td>
<td>September 2006</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>2475</td>
<td>578</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methylone</td>
<td>July 2005</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>5893</td>
<td>814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-MEC</td>
<td>July 2010</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>4732</td>
<td>555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-HO-MET</td>
<td>April 2006</td>
<td>979</td>
<td>11,734</td>
<td>1455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MXE</td>
<td>September 2010</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>5651</td>
<td>585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-APB</td>
<td>July 2010</td>
<td>603</td>
<td>7199</td>
<td>687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AH-7921</td>
<td>August 2012</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>1831</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-MMC</td>
<td>May 2012</td>
<td>514</td>
<td>6146</td>
<td>597</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Total activity of the threads investigated.
MXE, scheduling did not have a significant effect on mean activity in the best fitting model. However, extending the observation interval to 360 days before and after made the drop in activity significant.

3.2. Activity on other drug-related threads

An important question is if the decrease in posting activity on a particular thread implies that the related members reduce their drug interest in general, or if it is diverted to other related substances. To investigate this, the members posting on the threads related to the five stimulant substances were followed also in all other threads related to stimulants (see Section 2). The posting activity in this extensive reference set, 180 days before and after scheduling of a particular substance, was investigated. For three out of these five substances (3-MMC, 4-MEC, and Methylone) the posting activity in the reference set, of the corresponding members, actually increased after scheduling. For the two other substances (MDPV and 6-APB) it decreased.

4. Discussion

The amount of online discussions about eight so-called NPS were investigated with a particular focus on the impact of the legal status of the substances. A clear pattern emerged from these data: the intensity of the discussions (number of posts per day) were much lower after scheduling compared to before. These results are discussed below.

The main measure used here was the number of posts per day related to a given substance made on an Internet discussion forum. In previous work similar Internet fora have been used (Schifano et al., 2006; Carhart-Harris et al., 2011; Deluca et al., 2012; Kjellgren and Jonsson, 2013; Van Hout and Bingham, 2013) but the approach taken here is novel in that a time-dependent measure of the activity was extracted. This measure is similar in spirit to the search-history intensity obtained from web-based search-engines (Deluca et al., 2012; Forsyth, 2012) but it has advantages compared to such measures:

(i) The content of the posts can be analyzed to get a more precise characterization of the interest in the drug. For example, in this work the fraction of members stating that they have used the substances were investigated.

(ii) The algorithms behind many of the commercial search-engine-providers’ products are not publicly available and the data are not produced primarily for scientific purposes.

From reading a random selection of posts it became clear that about half of the members explicitly state that they have used the drug, but the true fraction of users might be even higher. This shows that the data sampled has high relevance for the main question investigated. Moreover, one of the most common topics of discussion is dosage: how much, through which route,

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substance</th>
<th>Average posts per day</th>
<th>Model parameters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>After</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDPV</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methylone</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-MEC</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-HO-MET</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MXE</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-APB</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AH-7921</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-MMC</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(ii) From reading a random selection of posts it became clear that about half of the members explicitly state that they have used the drug, but the true fraction of users might be even higher. This shows that the data sampled has high relevance for the main question investigated. Moreover, one of the most common topics of discussion is dosage: how much, through which route,
and in which combinations should the substances be taken. Furthermore, descriptions of subjective experiences when taking the substances are quite common. It is therefore likely that substance usage (among the persons active on FB) is positively correlated with the measure of activity used here.

The forum discussions were ‘passively’ observed, i.e. the investigator did in no way interact with the discussants. The data analyzed therefore represent actual interactions among FB members. Given the large number of members on FB it is a valuable and accessible source of information on attitudes and interest towards drugs in general and NPS in particular (c.f. Schifano et al., 2006; Deluca et al., 2012). Approximately 3700 members were followed on the eight threads and this is, in Swedish contexts, quite a large number (for comparison: there are approximately 600,000 persons between 19 and 24 in Sweden).

For seven of eight substances there was a strong statistical association between legal status of the substance and activity on the internet forum. This does not necessarily imply that there is a causal connection between the two, but other considerations make this seem likely. A factor that is crucial in NPS use is availability. While legal, the drugs can be purchased from online vendors and delivered to a desired address. Indeed, the ‘best’ vendor is a topic frequently discussed in the threads and the recommendation is often to buy from domestic dealers (to avoid that the goods are confiscated by the customs). When a substance is scheduled, on the other hand, selling from within Sweden is a serious crime which could lead to several years of imprisonment. It is therefore likely that once it becomes known that a particular substance will be scheduled (this typically is known at least one month in advance of the date when it comes into force) the particular site selling the drug will remove it from its stock (c.f. Shanks et al., 2012). Thus the following causal chain seems likely, X is up for scheduling → X is removed from the market → interest in X decreases. This would presumably hold for substances where there already are ‘competitive’ alternatives on the illegal market. Perhaps MXE (where the decrease was less strong) is a case where there are few alternatives and the interest therefore prevails. This seem to be what happened in some circles when Mephedrone was banned in the UK (Wood et al., 2012).

The data analyzed in this work do not speak directly to the interest and use among other groups of users. To the extent that the decrease in activity on FB reflects a decrease in availability on the drug markets, it seems likely that the use in other groups will go down as well. However, the dynamics of NPS usage in the general population is not well understood and need to be better studied in order to properly evaluate the effects of scheduling.

From the data presented in Figs. 1 and 2 one could perhaps argue that making a substance illegal essentially removes it from parts of the Swedish drug market, and that scheduling therefore is the right thing to do. However, as shown here, even if the prohibition of a particular substance can make the interest in this substance drop dramatically, the general interest in drugs might not be dampened. Indeed, for three of the five stimulant substances, posting activity dramatically, the general interest in drugs might not be dampened. However, as shown here, even if the prohibition of a particular substance can make the interest in this substance drop dramatically, the general interest in drugs might not be dampened. Indeed, for three of the five stimulant substances, posting activity significantly decreased. This would presumably hold for substances where there already are ‘competitive’ alternatives on the illegal market. Perhaps MXE (where the decrease was less strong) is a case where there are few alternatives and the interest therefore prevails. This seem to be what happened in some circles when Mephedrone was banned in the UK (Wood et al., 2012).

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Conflict of interest

None declared.

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