

SHORT REPORT

Topic	Online survey on the topic of “legal highs”
Key terms	Drugs, consumption, new synthetic substances, research chemicals, spice, herbal blends
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Client	Centre for Drug Research, Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main
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Description of the project, goals of the work

The structures and more specific characteristics of ‘legal high’ users were researched in the study to which the application related. The survey focussed on: consumption experience and consumption patterns of various ‘legal highs’, consumption experience and consumption patterns of other legal and illegal drugs, consumption motivations, places of consumption, sources of supply, sources of information and users’ sociodemographic backgrounds.

It was possible to carry out group comparisons with regard to these information objectives in which differences were identified between various groups of legal high users, gender, educational and income groups, geographical details, previous experience with drugs, etc. This made it possible for the first time to collect information on the users of these substances, on whom no social science research whatsoever had previously been carried out. It is possible to draw conclusions for effective approaches to prevention from the results of the study. Synergy effects were used in designing and analysing this survey in connection with the Spice Study (Werse/Müller 2010) carried out for the Federal Ministry of Health in the previous year and with the ongoing EU project entitled “Spice and Synthetic Cannabinoids”, in which the Centre for Drug Research and the Federal Ministry of Health are involved.

Implementation, methodology

It appeared to make sense for pragmatic and financial reasons to implement a non-representative study directly addressing those with experience of consumption. It was thus possible for the survey to take place within a relatively short period whilst achieving a large sample with which it is possible to make statistically meaningful comparisons.

The specific approach taken was as follows: Users of legal highs were actively invited on topically-relevant websites to take part in the questionnaire. The target group was easy to reach via social networks, Internet shops containing offers of legal highs, online fora on drug-related topics and prevention websites.

The objectives of the study were operationalised as follows in the online questionnaire:

Users’ sociodemographic backgrounds: questions related to age, gender, level of schooling, employment situation, income, town size, Federal *Land*/region and relationship status.

Consumption experience and consumption pattern: questions on lifetime prevalence, 30-day prevalence and frequency of consumption of alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, other illegal drugs and legal highs (broken down by: herbal blends; other legal highs/‘bath salts’, etc., and research chemicals). Questions as to the specific products/substances consumed.

Consumption motives: block of questions containing a list of possible consumption motives; questions as to how the consumption patterns would (presumably) change without legal highs; question as to experience with drug tests/screenings (since it was presumed that this could be a major motive).

Acquisition: questions as to the sources/dealers of various legal high products

Problems/risks: questions as to personally-experienced side effects or after effects, estimation of the consumption risks of herbal blends and other legal highs (list containing possible risks) and of the specific risks involved with certain research chemicals

The data available made it possible to carry out group comparisons with which specific characteristics of current users of specific legal high products could be examined. This allowed for the identification of different types of users, orientated in line with the nature of the substances consumed, consumption patterns/intensities, the consumption of other drugs and other determinants.

The results of the study are by definition not representative. In the light of other data available (Werse *et al.* 2011), it can be presumed that this sample reached legal high users who tended to be more experienced consumers and to those currently using the substances.

Gender mainstreaming

The final report was drafted in gender-neutral language. It was noted when analysing the data that almost nine out of ten respondents were male. This indicates that the gender gap among legal high users appears to be even wider than in other populations of regular drug users.

Results, conclusions, continuation

A total of 860 individuals who have experience with legal high products completed the entire online questionnaire. They were reached primarily via topically-relevant websites. 89% of the respondents are male; the average age is 24.2. Their level of education is relatively high. People from all over Germany took part in the survey, albeit the Southern Federal *Länder* (in particular Bavaria) are clearly overrepresented. It can be presumed that above all the greater pressure from the prosecution authorities was indirectly responsible for this imbalance: Cannabis users from the Southern Federal *Länder* above all appear to resort to the legal alternatives more frequently.

Almost all respondent users (99%) have used illegal drugs at least once in their lives, 80% having also used at least one illegal substance apart from cannabis ('hard drugs'). More than two-thirds have also used cannabis in the last month, and one-third have used at least one 'hard drug'. Virtually all legal high users therefore have prior experience with illegal drugs, and a particularly large percentage of them have considerable experience (regular cannabis use, trying out several different illegal drugs).

Herbal blends – cannabinoid-containing herbal preparations – are the most prevalent among the legal high products to which the questions referred: 86% of respondents have experience of using these. The lifetime prevalence of research chemicals – pure, synthetic compounds – is 39% and that of other legal highs (e.g. so-called 'bath salts') is 35%. Somewhat more than half have used at least one legal high product in the last month. All in all, the respondents named more than 300 different products which they had tried at least once. This illustrates the broad range of legal highs on offer.

Almost two-thirds have taken at least one type of legal high product more than ten times, and can hence be regarded as experienced users. Only a small percentage of the respondents completely substitutes the use of illegal drugs by using legal highs, meaning that legal highs are frequently taken to expand the spectrum of psychoactive substances (or as a temporary stopgap solution should the availability of illegal substances be restricted). Herbal blends are most likely to be used as a mere substitute for illegal drugs (cannabis). The users of these products are somewhat older on average and more frequently live in small towns. There is a noticeable sub-group – 16% of the sample – in which herbal blends are used frequently (more than ten times per month).

Current users of research chemicals are especially likely to be experienced, regular users of various illegal drugs; they also frequent the techno party scene more often. Those who regularly use other legal highs are to be regarded as a more unspecific group of users.

Legal availability is a major motive for consumption for more than three respondents out of five; this reason is particularly important among regular herbal blend users. The fact that the active agents cannot be detected (e.g. in traffic checks) plays a larger role in this group than in any other, while such legal consumption motives are much less important for research chemical users. More than half of the respondents stated that they would increasingly shift to other drugs, primarily illegal ones, if legal high products were no longer available. On the whole that the relative ease of availability (primarily via online dealers) appears to be more important than the fact that possession of the drugs is not banned.

The lion's share of legal high use takes place at home; this also applies to research chemicals, which are generally sold as party drugs (or substitutes) and other legal highs.

A considerable share of the respondents has experienced acute side effects or after effects at least once; these occur more frequently among more regular consumers. The most frequently stated conditions, in descending order, were increased heart rate, circulation problems, headaches, nausea and anxiety. Most of the respondents consider not only the risk of acute physical problems as high, but also

that of long-term damage. Roughly one-third has also been deterred from continuing to use specific products because of side effects.

Internet shops in Germany and abroad are by far the most important source of all types of legal high products. Headshops were also used by a notable sub-group for herbal blends and other legal highs (it remains unclear however at what time). Some of the respondents also acquire the substances via friends or through acquaintances.

The source of information used most frequently by legal high users by far is online fora, whilst virtually no use is made of media such as the press and television. This indicates the considerable importance of information which should be as up-to-date as possible, and should come from sources who are familiar with legal highs. All in all, the results regarding sources of acquisition and information reveal the considerable importance of the Internet for the legal high phenomenon.

The sufficiently large sample that was reached in a comparatively short time proves that there is a market for this kind of product. The size and share among the overall population of this group would have to be clarified by a corresponding representative survey.

It is possible to identify a variety of user types by using the data on consumption patterns. These range from cannabis and/or herbal blend users pure and simple, on the one hand, to regular users of a variety of drugs, including research chemicals, on the other.

Even if there is a sizeable sub-group of 'pure' legal high users, the products in question are not used instead of illegal drugs in the majority of cases, but rather in addition to them. Especially among users of herbal blends the major reasons for consumption are to be regarded as consequences of the Narcotics Act (*Betäubungsmittelgesetz*). However, the evident lack of availability and/or quality and the inconvenience of acquisition, play a somewhat more prominent role here than the risk of being prosecuted (including traffic checks). Such legal motives however often play a minor role in the consumption of research chemicals.

Since there is a lack of empirical data on the subject so far, further – quantitative and qualitative – studies would be desirable.

Implementation of the results by the Federal Ministry of Health

Initial results of this study were presented in advance at the Annual Conference of the Federal Government's Commissioner on Narcotic Drugs on 11 October 2011. In addition to publishing the final report, the results of the online questionnaire are to be presented at various national and international conferences, including at the "First International Conference on Novel Compounds" ("The Ever-Changing World of Psychoactive Drugs") of RedNet and the EMCDDA on 12/13 March 2012 in Budapest by the author of the study. The results are furthermore to be contributed to the EU's project entitled "Spice and Synthetic Cannabinoids", which is to run until the end of 2012. The communication of the results of the study aims to provide information on the users of these substances as a foundation for prevention efforts, as prevention has been the subject of too little discussion so far in Germany and in Europe. An initial evaluation of the results suggests that there is no need for further primary preventive activities beyond those aimed at all substances which are already in place. However, it should be considered what indicated prevention measures – such as "online streetwork" in the relevant fora – could be successful.

Literature used

Werse, B./ Müller, O. (2010): Spice, Smoke, Sence & Co. – *Cannabinoidhaltige Räuchermischungen: Konsum und Konsummotivation vor the Hintergrund sich wandelnder Gesetzgebung*. Final report. Frankfurt: Goethe University, Centre for Drug Research.

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