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Has the Damage Been Done?

Examining the effects of Legal Synthetic Cannabis and Subsequent Effects of Prohibition on Synthetic Cannabis and Other Illicit Drug Use

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Abstract

Synthetic cannabinoids are chemically produced psychoactive substances, which are the most recent trend in designer drugs in New Zealand, and until the 8th of May 2014, were purchased freely in retail stores throughout New Zealand. Synthetic cannabis was marketed as a “safe” alternative to natural cannabis; however, its harm profile has been considered greater than other illicit substances. The objectives of the current study were to examine the prevalence of synthetic cannabis use and how previous users have responded to prohibition, and to assess the physiological and psychological harms associated with consumption. Participants ($N = 94$) self-selected to participate in the study and were recruited from the community. They completed a computerised structured questionnaire that was designed for the study and incorporated two measures, the Severity of Dependence Scale and Brief Symptom Inventory. Results indicated that there was a significant decrease in the frequency of synthetic cannabis use following prohibition, although 40% of participants reported that they would continue to source synthetic cannabis illegally. While most participants reported fairly minor issues from use, some respondents noted more serious physiological and psychological problems, including coma, chest pain, breathlessness, seizures, and psychosis. Nearly one-quarter of participants (25%) reported that they required emergency care following synthetic cannabis use. High rates of dependency (72%) were detected in the sample and participants’ average psychological symptom profile was of a magnitude to be considered in the clinical range for psychological distress, although there were no significant differences in psychological well-being between current synthetic cannabis users and current non-drug users. Following synthetic cannabis prohibition, there was a significant decrease in illicit substance use across all drug categories and only a small number of participants (3%) had started using legal synthetic cannabis and progressed to using other illicit drugs. Of concern is that 32% of participants reported using methamphetamine and not using this substance in the past, with 14% of the sample going on to use methamphetamine regularly as an alternative to synthetic cannabis. Findings are interpreted in relation to previous research and limitations of the study are highlighted. Recommendations are made for future research, including examining the long-term effects and chronic exposure to the adverse toxicities of synthetic cannabis.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
List of Tables and Figures	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Literature Review	
Inception of Synthetic Cannabinoids	8
Synthetic Cannabinoid Pharmacology and Toxicology	9
Factors Contributing to Synthetic Cannabis Use	10
Trends in Legal Highs in New Zealand: The BZP Phenomenon.....	12
The Legislation and Control of Synthetic Cannabinoids	15
Future Sale of Synthetic Cannabis	17
Prevalence and Patterns of Use of Synthetic Cannabis.....	18
Adverse Health Risks Associated with Synthetic Cannabinoid Use	19
Impact of Synthetic Cannabis on New Zealand’s Healthcare System	24
Extent of Dependency Among Legal Psychoactive Drug Users	25
Synthetic Cannabis as a Gateway Drug	27
Does Prohibition Work?	29
Chapter 2: Method	
Introduction	32
Study Design and Rationale	32
Participants	33
Instrumentation	34
Recruitment	44
Procedure.....	46
Data Analysis Procedure	47
Ethical Considerations	50
Chapter 3: Results	
Introduction	54
Description of the Sample.....	54
Prevalence of Synthetic Cannabis use Pre- and Post-Prohibition.....	57
Physiological and Psychological Effects of Synthetic Cannabis Use	60
Extent of Dependency Among Synthetic Cannabis Users	62

Psychological Well-being of Synthetic Cannabis Users.....	66
Association Between Synthetic Cannabis and other Drug Use	71
Demographics by Type of User	74
Clinical Significance	80
Chapter 4: Discussion	
Introduction	81
Summary of the Findings:	
Description of the Sample.....	81
Prevalence of Synthetic Cannabis use Pre- and Post-Prohibition.....	83
Physiological and Psychological Effects of Synthetic Cannabis Use.....	89
Extent of Dependency Among Synthetic Cannabis Users.....	93
Psychological Well-being of Synthetic Cannabis Users.....	96
Association Between Synthetic Cannabis and other Drug Use	100
Further Findings.....	105
Research Implications	107
Limitations of the Study.....	107
Recommendations for Future Research	113
Conclusions.....	115
Postscript.....	118
References	119
Appendices	133
Appendix 1 Research Recruitment Advertisement	134
Appendix 2 Screening Questionnaire to Determine Approval Procedure	136
Appendix 3 Synthetic Cannabis Product List	137
Appendix 4 Participant Information Sheet.....	140
Appendix 5 Survey Questionnaire	142
Appendix 6 Power Analysis.....	149

List of Tables and Figures

Tables

Table 2.1 <i>Dimensions of the Brief Symptom Inventory</i>	40
Table 2.2 <i>Results from Cronbach alpha analysis for each of the BSI subscales</i>	44
Table 3.1 <i>Demographic Characteristics of the Sample</i>	55
Table 3.2 <i>Paired Samples t-test for comparison between frequency of use pre- and post-synthetic cannabis prohibition</i>	58
Table 3.3 <i>Self-reported physiological effects of synthetic cannabis use</i>	61
Table 3.4 <i>Self-reported psychological effects of synthetic cannabis use</i>	62
Table 3.5 <i>Results of the Severity of Dependence Scale</i>	62
Table 3.6 <i>Brief Symptom Inventory results displaying average T-scores for each psychological dimension</i>	67
Table 3.7 <i>ANOVA for differences in BSI scores between the drug user groups</i>	69
Table 3.8 <i>Comparison of Brief Symptom Inventory T-scores between drug user groups</i>	70
Table 3.9 <i>Other drugs used by participant users before and after synthetic cannabis prohibition</i>	72
Table 3.10 <i>Paired Samples Test for frequency of other illicit drug use pre- and post-synthetic cannabis prohibition</i>	73
Table 3.11 <i>Category that best describes participant's current drug use</i>	73
Table 3.12 <i>ANOVA for demographic characteristics between drug user groups for age</i>	74
Table 3.13 <i>What ethnic group do you most identify with? Cross tabulation by type of user</i>	75
Table 3.14 <i>Chi-Square Test for differences in ethnicity between drug user groups</i>	76
Table 3.15 <i>What is the highest qualification you have achieved? Cross-tabulation by type of user</i>	77
Table 3.16 <i>Chi-Square Test for differences in employment status between drug user groups</i>	78
Table 3.17 <i>What source of income do you receive? Cross tabulation by type of user</i> ...	79

Table 3.18 <i>Chi-Square Test for differences in source of income between drug user groups</i>	80
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Figures

Figure 3.1 <i>Frequency of use before synthetic cannabis was made illegal and use following prohibition</i>	58
Figure 3.2 <i>Current availability of synthetic cannabis, 2015</i>	59
Figure 3.3 <i>Methods for obtaining synthetic cannabis pre- and post- synthetic cannabis prohibition</i>	60
Figure 3.4 <i>Short Dependency Scale scores of synthetic cannabis users and severity indicator</i>	63
Figure 3.5 <i>Extent that synthetic cannabis use was out of control</i>	64
Figure 3.6 <i>Prospect of missing a dose made you feel anxious or worried</i>	64
Figure 3.7 <i>Worry about your synthetic cannabis use</i>	65
Figure 3.8 <i>Wish you could stop using synthetic cannabis</i>	65
Figure 3.9 <i>How difficult did you find it to stop using synthetic cannabis</i>	66
Figure 3.10 <i>Brief Symptom Inventory clinical profile of respondents</i>	68