

The management of cannabis engagement among residents of Riga, Latvia

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Background

- ▶ Despite normalisation & medicalisation of cannabis in some Western parts which incentivises national policy reviews (Kolar et al, 2018; Pennay & Measham, 2016; Shildrick, 2010), Latvian policy remains unchanged.
- ▶ No qualitative study has examined cannabis engagement experience in Latvia.
- ▶ This research addresses this knowledge gap & notes the role of labelling and stigma in cannabis engager everyday lives.
- ▶ The findings provide pragmatic basis for the evaluation of the current punitive cannabis legislation enforcement capacity and effect (Rogeberg, 2018).

Methodology

Participants & sampling.

27 16min-3.5hr semi-structured interviews in Riga or online via



Sampling in 3 waves:

1. Convenience and snow-ball sampling (17)
2. Self-selection via Facebook posts in set groups (10; 3tbd)
3. Self-selection via Instagram influencer post (7tbd)

27 participants (9 female, 16 male; aged 19-50):

- ▶ 16 users; 1 grower; 8 user-dealers (Coomber & Moyle, 2013); 3 commercial dealers (Coomber & Moyle, 2016); 2 medical sphere.



Methodology

Interview themes

Similar to Becker (1959: 237) *The interviews focused on the history of the person's experience with the drug, seeking major changes in... attitude toward it and in ... actual use of it and the reasons for these changes.*

The interview themes:

- ▶ First engagement -> last engagement
- ▶ Shifts between social and individual use
- ▶ From sharing to first purchase
- ▶ Perception & motivation for use
- ▶ Experience with & opinion of current legislation (Downes et al, 2014)

Findings

First experiences

- ▶ Most first experiences occur in a social setting and via **social supply**

(Coomber & Moyle, 2014; Werse & Bernard: 2016: 71; Potter, 2016; Parker, 2000)

- ▶ The social group tie exists prior to cannabis or is not primary

(contrasts alienation Becker, 1963: 20)

...the first time we smoked, it proper kicked in and then you just ride on the skateboard and everything feels like magic. (Male, 28, user & ex-social dealer)

I felt safe, I had a good company, we were girls, we were putting on make up, drinking and planning to go out. One said “Hey, lets smoke now and go”, we smoked and stayed at home, we didn’t need anything else. We were stoned.

(Female, 28, user)

The first time you try to roll a joint - it is a funny process, because nobody knows, how to do it and so you watch Youtube videos... (Male, 30, user)

Findings

Perception of the Law

Participants with no experience with the law, justify this as personal achievement:

- ▶ *...I am Hannah Montana, I know many policemen, and I will always be like 'Goodday, yes, la la la'... you can not break the system, but you can nicely walk around it.* (Female, 27)
- ▶ *I am the smart one. When I have smoked something, I do not show to police eyes* (Male, 27)
- ▶ *I find it funny how police always focus on people of a specific look* (Male, 26)
- ▶ *...going back to the stereotypes of people that are associated to smoke weed. I was someone - I am still someone who is well kept. Like my hair is clean, I dress well.* (Female, 26)

Findings

Perception of the Law

- ▶ Perception of formal sanctions as too harsh / unnecessary
- ▶ Highlight police
 - ▶ Corruption & involvement in the cannabis market
 - ▶ Legal ability to victimise a user by telling police of their use

...turn down the aggression. There simply is no need for such aggression against such calm people. (Female, 26)

...but in Latvia, you know that those that sell the biggest amounts, the biggest dealers, are policemen (Male, 26)

Under current legislation cannabis users are so f-ing vulnerable. At any moment, if I have an argument with anyone and I know he uses... I can send police on them

(Male, 30)

Findings

Dealing

- ▶ Most participants have embodied user-dealer role at least once, 3 self identify as *the dealer*:
 - ▶ Female, 26; Male, 26; Male, 22
 - ▶ Male 27 <- 1x seller 10yrs ago, when 1 plant is grown in garden

Motivation for involvement = financial instability

When do people do it? When they need money, and in Latvia... in normal workplaces, employers like to really work a person and pay them nothing...

(Female, 26)

The problem in Latvia is not that people's first choice is to sell weed... you physically cannot survive on 600 euros. And you don't want to be a low income young person, you actually want to develop yourself

(Male, 26)

Findings

Dealing

- ▶ Male (26) dealer describes himself as coming from a financially privileged background.
- ▶ Cannabis use occurs with friends in nature, parties or cars where food and non-alcoholic beverages are prepared beforehand.
- ▶ Turns to dealing with close friends due to frequent favour requests and sees this as an answer to previous failed financial security attempts.
- ▶ Organises purchase and movement of cannabis across EU to LV.
- ▶ Leaves dealing as further success means needing to become an 'asshole' & has saved money for university abroad.

Findings

Dealing

- ▶ Male (22) dealer describes himself as coming from a financially unstable household, names grandmother as main caretaker.
- ▶ Since 14 engages Spice; at 16 experiences cannabis for first time:
 - ▶ Unlike use of Spice, cannabis use is not accompanied by guilt for using something of bad quality.
- ▶ Explains the turn towards dealing:
 - ▶ Grandmother pressurises him to go to university
 - ▶ He worries about no finances while at university
- ▶ Because of spiritual experiences and a religious community halts use and sale. Now is part of the community for the past year.

Findings

Experience with the Law

Female, 30 - Parents found cannabis seeds & internet history at age 17 and called police. Parents pay a fine & blood test. No further police checks, she continues to use cannabis shortly afterwards.

Male, 21 - Felt sick in 2017, taken to hospital, blood test for drugs revealed LSD & cannabis. Paid 20 euro sanction & must provide blood tests every 3 months. Uses cannabis in-between tests.

Male, 22 - Paid a police officer to locate a man who had robbed him of cannabis & money during an exchange. After the man's location was given, he began outsourcing the sanction, before changing his mind.

Discussion

- ▶ Contrasts Becker's (1963: 24-25) cannabis group membership as inevitability for alienation
 - ▶ Participant social group tie is not primarily located in cannabis engagement - friendship exists prior to cannabis or is not a primary factor
 - ▶ All other areas of life and friendship ties within group are 'normal'
 - ▶ Stigma & deviance is not internalised (similar to Dirisu et al, 2018).
- ▶ A key explanatory factor may be the felt easy access & popularity of cannabis within and outside their main social group.
- ▶ Current legislation enforcement is unlikely to penetrate these social networks

Discussion

Coomber & Moyle's (2014) *user-dealers* are present in the interviewed participants in Riga, Latvia.

Formal sanctions should differentiate between user-dealer and commercially-driven dealer and take account of financial instability.

Unlike Taylor & Potter's (2013) user-seller *drift* to commercial sale, the 3 commercial dealers describe a conscious decision.

The *social supply* is the key factor in the management of stigma and risk of formal sanctions for the interviewed cannabis engagers in Riga, Latvia.

Thank you!

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