

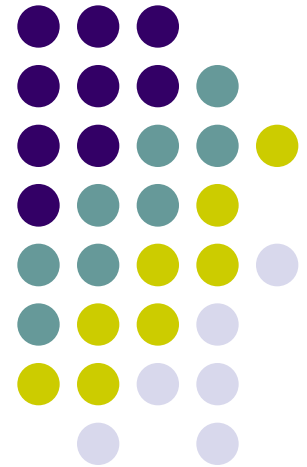
The emergence of mephedrone, the perversity of prohibition & the rehashing of 'moral panic'

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Winter 2009/10...



Today's Random Medical News

from the New England
Journal of
Panic-Inducing
Gobbledegook

Mephedrone

CAN CAUSE

Death

IN

Teenagers

ACCORDING TO A
REPORT RELEASED
TODAY...

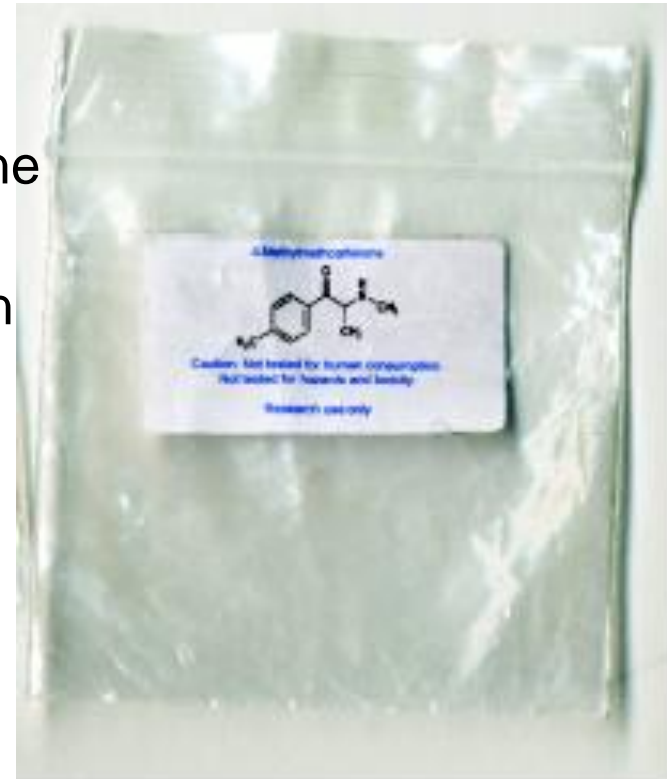
NEWS



Overview



- Background: Spring 2009 emergence & rapid increase in popularity of substituted cathinones (eg. mephedrone) → 16th April 2010 Class B, Schedule 1, Misuse of Drugs Act 1971
- Prevalence
- Role of internet in sales & promotion: mephedrone as 1st drug of the internet age
- Media coverage: drug deaths & eager application of concept of moral panic
- Emerging typology of users
- Wider implications regarding regulation of legal highs within context of high levels of demand, willingness to experiment & lack of evidence for deterrent value of criminalisation
- Critique of moral panic – now 40 years old

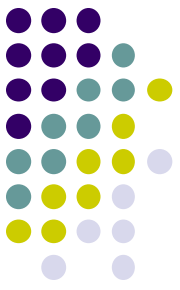


The “mephedrone menace”

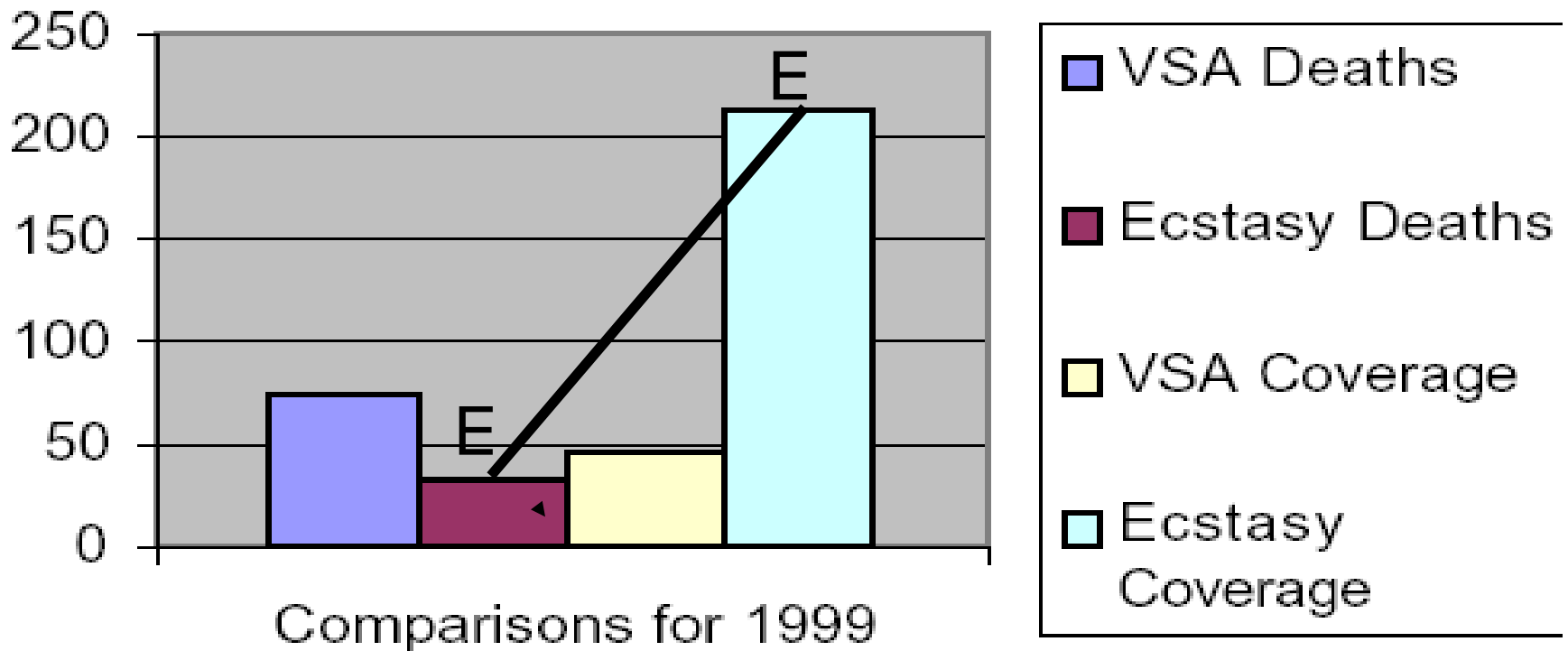
- Nov 2009 Gabrielle Price’s death precipitated the “mephedrone menace” (Daily Mail 27/11/09)
- Mephedrone implicated in 26+ deaths – ‘ghouls’ (Forsyth) awaiting 1st confirmed death
- Ingredients of media drug deaths: young, white, female, photogenic, ‘respectable’ family, “never used drugs before” e.g. Leah Betts (ecstasy), Hester Stewart (GBL)
- UK politicians quick to condemn: *“We are determined to act to prevent this **evil** from hurting the young people of our country”* (Gordon Brown, PM, Hansard 24/3/10)
- No retraction about Gabrielle’s death in national press after coroner’s report that due to bronchial pneumonia



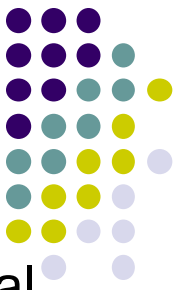
Volatile Substance Abuse & Ecstasy Deaths & News Coverage, E, W & S



- Privileging of certain drug deaths: hypervisibility of ecstasy in media contrasts with 'disappearance' of VSA illustrating media 'value' given to 'respectable' & marginalised youth (Manning, also Forsyth)



“Mephedrone”, last 12 months, UK



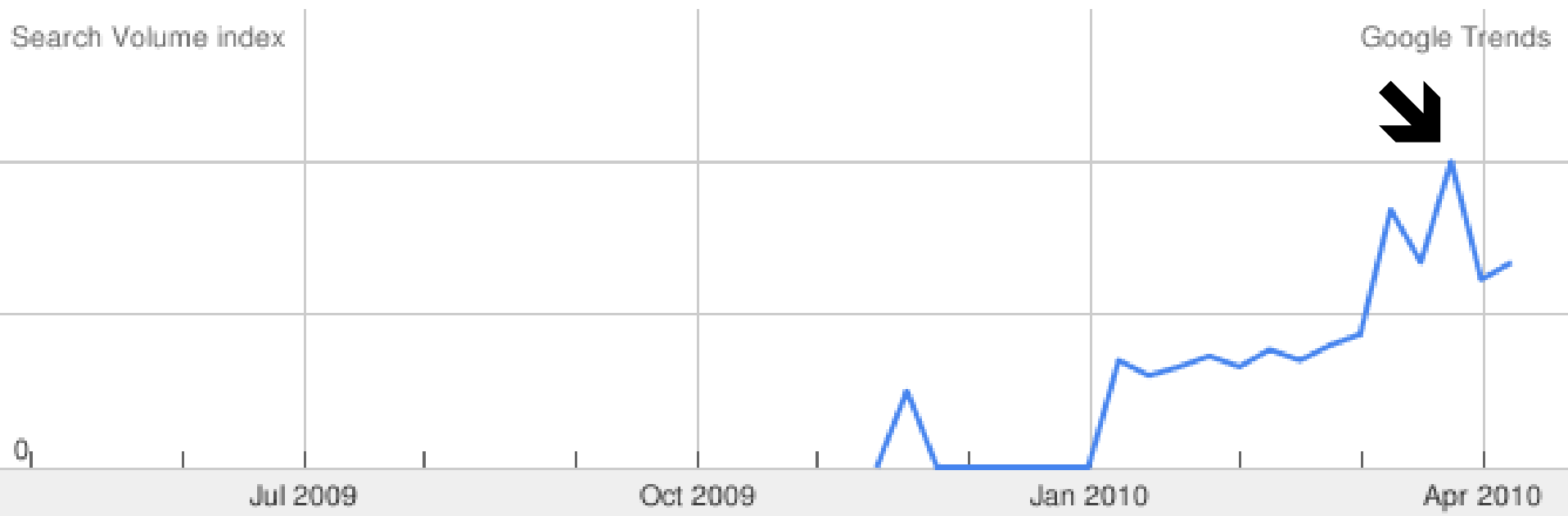
- B = 1st death where mephedrone implicated 21st Nov, reported in local paper 24th Nov, national tabloid coverage 27th Nov (eg. Daily Mail “Mephedrone Menace: The deadly drug that’s cheap, as easy to order as pizza... & totally legal”)
- C = ACMD review & govt announcement of imminent criminalisation, 29/3/10
- 15/3/10 2 men died after having mephedrone, methadone & alcohol



“Buy Mephedrone”, last 12 months, UK



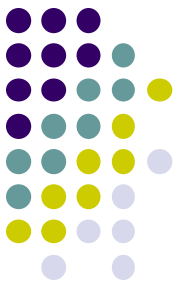
Biggest online search to buy is when criminalisation announced



No data available

Why mephedrone *now*?

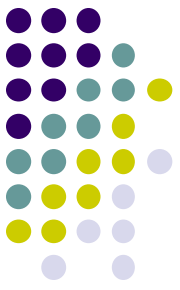
(Measham et al, 2010; Newcombe 2010)



- 1. Legality/convenience:
 - Appeal of legal drugs: conveniently purchased **online**, no physical meetings with ‘dealers’, cheap, reliable next day delivery, no minimum age requirements, no maximum quantity restrictions
 - No evidence of deterrent effect of *illegality* – many have drugs history
- 2. Availability/purity:
 - Across 2000s: growing user disillusionment with purity of illegal drugs (e.g. switch from ecstasy pills to ‘purer’ MDMA powder)
 - UK 2009: “dire drug drought” - lack of availability/low purity of ecstasy (MDMA in pills decreased from 52mg in 2007 to 33mg in 2008; >½ BZP) & cocaine (decreased from 60% in 1999 to 22% in 2009)
- → Substantial **substitute displacement** to M-Cats from spring 2009

Why take mephedrone?

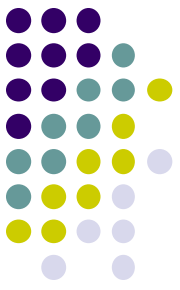
Disillusionment/Displacement



- “I guess it has kind of replaced my desire for ecstasy... because I don't really feel like I can get hold of proper ecstasy. Whereas mephedrone I feel much more comfortable taking because I kind of know what I am getting. So in that way it has probably replaced my, yes I would say it probably has – until I can find, *if* I find a good source of MDMA – it has replaced my use of that drug.” (Professional male, 34)
- “ ‘Bubbleluv’ – oh my god! I took a whole capsule & I was off my face. I haven't been like that for years. I've done pills [ecstasy] for years & years & I've had nothing like that for a long time. I was really sweaty as well. It took a while to come up, then I was just really high! It makes your jaw really tight & my friend said my eyes were rolling. She'd never seen me like that. It was brilliant. Me & my friend couldn't believe it... For me it didn't feel like a 'new' drug, just felt like a better quality drug, having had shit quality drugs for years. It's been a long time with shit drugs.” (Professional female, 38)

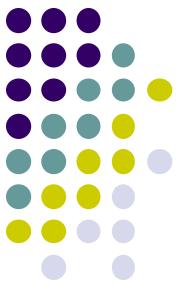
Why take mephedrone?

Purity/Consistency



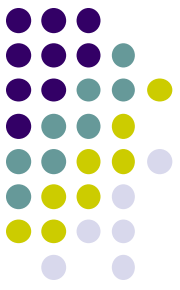
- “I think it is definitely like good pills all the time & it’s consistent. You know pretty much what you are getting if you get it from the same place. And it just doesn’t let you down really.” (Professional female, 34)
- “The advantages are that up until Friday it was legal which meant it was easy to get hold of but that actually didn’t make that much difference to me. It was more that it was I knew what I was buying. I knew it was pure so I knew it wasn’t cut with something I didn’t realise about. Rather than the illegality of that, what was infinitely more important to me was that I knew what I was getting and the fact that I could just order it over the internet, it was delivered the next day was a pretty big bonus but not the most. Because the way that I take it, I wouldn’t go out & be sat at a table in a pub snorting mephedrone, you know, a line of mephedrone on the basis of ‘oh don’t worry, this is legal’ because you would get turfed out anyway & it would cause all sorts of problems. So seeings as I take it in secluded situations anyway actually the illegality doesn’t bother me. It’s purely the fact that I knew what I was getting & then I am able to control what I am doing to myself. I am not in the hands of some chemist, someone who may not know what they are doing when they are re-crystallising stuff, & a bunch of criminal middleman that could be cutting it with anything that they have to hand.” (Professional male, 34)

Emerging Typology of Users



- Age, motivation, context, pattern of use, drug history, timing of emergence
- 1. Psychonauts – purity**
 - 2008 onwards across Europe, 30s/40s, extensive drug histories, occasional use, varied dose levels, varied contexts (home, alone, festivals), experimentation, psychic exploration
 - 2. Clubbers – availability**
 - Summer 2009 onwards, 20s/30s, hedonistic, disillusionment with Class As, weekend polydrug repertoires in club/chill out context, experienced in management of stimulant drugs
 - 3. Novices – legality**
 - Autumn 2009 onwards after media coverage because cheap & legal, teenagers, little previous drug history beyond cannabis, parties & parks, from occasional to daily, curiosity, no experience of managing stimulants, now presenting to A&E and GPs

The regulation of legal highs



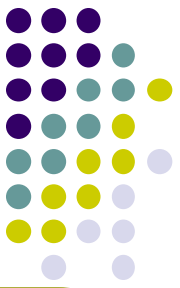
● Pre-legislation:

- MDA – arrested for supply of unknown white powder & also for possession e.g. the ‘Sugarhouse 7’ at Lancaster, fingerprinted & released
- Intoxicating Substances (Supply) Act 1985 – if supplied to be inhaled by under 18s
- Criminal Attempts Act 1981
- Arresting suppliers: eg. Liverpool, Durham (also conversely suppliers claiming cocaine is mephedrone to evade arrest)
- 29th March immediate ban on imports – through licensing not legislation – all imports into UK are banned!

● Post-legislation:

- 16th April Class B, Schedule 1: drug; ACPO concentrating on suppliers? Large seizures eg. Stanstead ½ metric tonne

The perversity of prohibition



Interviewer: *“What will you do if mephedrone is made illegal?”*

Dealer: *“Put up my prices”*

(Mephedrone dealer in Sheffield trance club, Feb 2010)

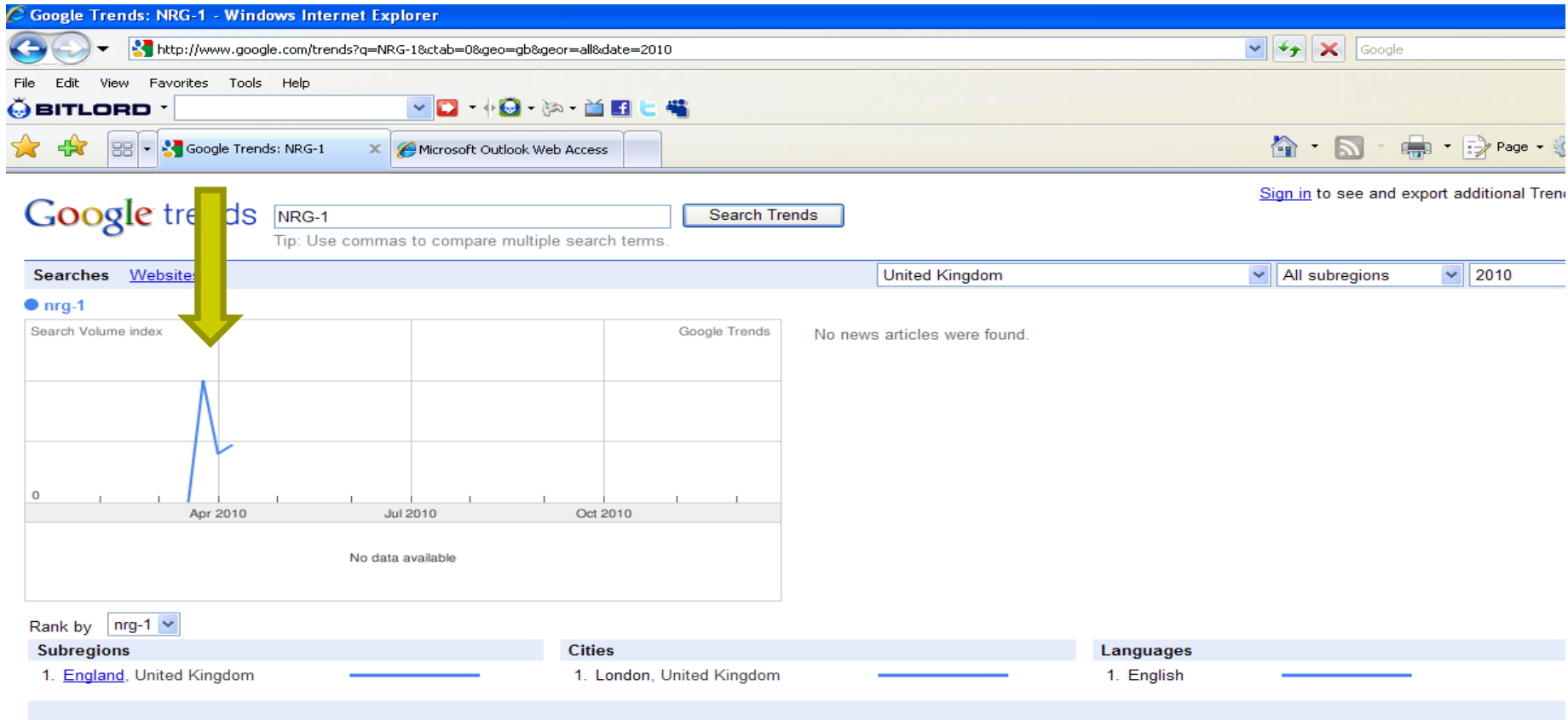
- ‘Successful’ enforcement suggests continuing lack of availability of ‘tried and tested’ higher purity ecstasy & cocaine
- Substantial substitute displacement to mephedrone Spring 09-10
- Stockpiling for post criminalisation
- Substantial substitute displacement from mephedrone to...

Internet supply & (previously untapped?) demand: Further substitute displacement?



The image displays two screenshots of the UK Legals website. The left screenshot shows the product listing page, featuring a navigation menu at the top (Home, Log In, My Account, Shopping Cart, Checkout) and a large 'UK Legals' logo. The main content area is divided into sections: 'Products' (listing MDAI, NRG-1, and Dimethocaine), 'Information' (Shipping & Returns, Privacy Notice, etc.), and 'Weights & Measures'. A 'New Products For April - Products' section is highlighted, showing items like Dimethocaine 1g (£15.00), NRG-1 5g (£60.00), NRG-1 50g (£325.00), NRG-1 1g (£19.00), NRG-1 20g (£170.00), NRG-1 0.5g (£11.50), Dimethocaine 2g, MDAI 5g (£80.00), and MDAI 10g (£135.00). The right screenshot shows a promotional banner with the text: 'Professional - Discreet - Safe & Secure Online Card Payment - Quick Delivery', 'We continually strive to offer the best value with highest level of service and quality of compounds available.', 'Your original and most trusted r/c source!!', 'No.1 for MDAI, NRG-1 & DMC', 'All Products Shown Are In Stock Now', 'For Immediate Shipping!!', and '+ We also have new products arriving shortly!'. The CVC COMODO logo is also visible.

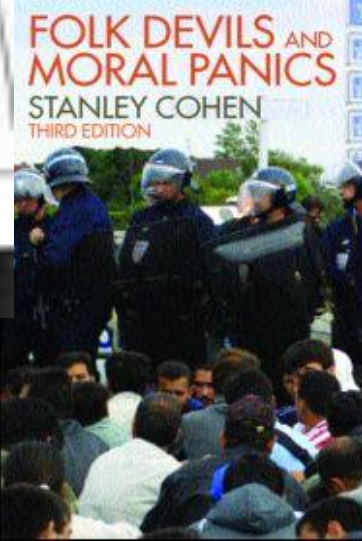
Internet searches for NRG-1 spike at end of April 2010



Google Trends provides insights into broad search patterns. Please keep in mind that several approximations are used when computing these results.

Cohen's '*Folk Devils & Moral Panics*': The concept

- The events – Clacton 1964 – mods, rockers & minor disturbance
- The coverage – exaggeration, sensation:
 - 'Day of Terror by Scooter Groups'
 - 'Youngsters Beat Up Town'
 - 'Wild Ones' Invade Seaside
- Creation of a 'folk devil' – the 'enemy' of society
- Responses – law & policing
- The effects – reaction, amplification, perpetuation



The “mephedrone menace”: At 1st glance a classic moral panic?



Users as
‘innocent
victims’



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Is Lois, 24, victim number six of 'legal high' Meow Meow drug?

By JAMES SLACK
Last updated at 7:38 AM on 24th March 2010

Comments (183) Add to My Stories

A 'quiet and lovely girl' who lived in a small rural market town was named yesterday as the latest suspected victim of the deadly 'legal high' mephedrone.

The death of 24-year-old Lois Waters, a bacon factory worker, was confirmed as MPs attacked Home Secretary Alan Johnson for his continued failure to ban the so-called party drug.

Meow meow, as it is nicknamed, has now been linked to at least six deaths.



FEMAIL TODAY

- ▶ Not too unhappy to be stranded abroad then Ms Brook? Kelly tops up her tan in a pink bikini Model, 30, enjoys holiday extension caused by Iceland volcano
- ▶ She's beautiful, British and has a degree in astrophysics - now 'Iron Maiden' wins £1m poker tournament Olivia Boere wins European Poker Tour
- ▶ Peter Andre turns back the clock 17 years as he

Dealers as
‘folk devils’



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Free £25 bet with Will

I can give you 50kg of meow a month... UK demand is huge



It's a deal ... Sun man and Abidi in Riga

By OLIVER HARVEY, Chief Feature Writer, in Riga, Latvia

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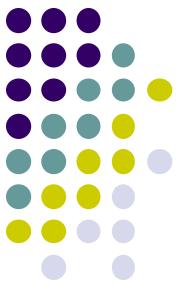
Moral Panic Revisited or Rehashed?



- Relationship between media, state & drug users: lack of critique of concept of moral panic
- Tabloid reaction and liberal counter-reaction both over-simplify (Murji 1998)
- Active audience ignored; framed as passive and gullible on both sides (Garland 2008)
- Importance of niche media & internet in youth drug culture (McRobbie & Thornton 1995); especially important given mephedrone one of first 'internet drugs'; online website suppliers as new 'folk devils' with no previous history of drug dealing?
- Possibility of harm from mephedrone downplayed or denied (at least initially), partly through moral panic argument: emphasis on new & unknown dangers, not keto-amphetamine – the sneaky reappearance of speed!



If the law isn't enforced, is it a deterrent?



- “Our enforcement will initially concentrate on those people who sell & traffic this harmful drug rather than on the young people who we may find in possession of it. It is not our intention to criminalise young people... Its new classification will... provide a degree of reassurance that something is being done about it. It does not, however, solve what has become an increasingly complex issue & making something illegal does not stop it being sold, bought or consumed.”

Association of **C**hief **P**olice **O**fficers statement by Chief Constable
Tim Hollis, ACPO lead on drugs, 29/3/10

Concluding thoughts



- Displacement, deterrence & demand:
 - Voracious UK desire to experiment with recreational chemicals contrasted with minimal scientific research base & lack of deterrence from criminalisation of legal highs & resulting legal sanctions
- The internet comes of age for promotion and distribution of legal highs – what next?
- Relevance of dated concept of ‘moral panic’?
Risk?