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## ABSTRACTS



# COVID-19 Chaos and New Psychoactive Substances: New Threats and Implications

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## ABSTRACT

The new psychoactive substances (NPS) have been a challenge for control by the international regulatory measures. Parallely, the enormous growth of darknet, has joined hands for illicit drug trafficking and marketing. COVID-19 pandemic has brought a unique opportunity for growth and herald a further shift towards online commerce and communication, which may evolve the global criminal activities through darknet, further. COVID-19 pandemic has also called for the socio-economic crisis which may divulge vulnerable group into drug-trafficking and supply chain. Amalgam of these makes situation worse, eclipsing epidemiology of NPS, further. Eventually, it also bears ill effects on health of people using it. Hence, there is a need to frame stringent policies for darknet usage and strategies to control NPS, keeping the current crisis in mind.

**Keywords:** New psychoactive substances, COVID-19 pandemic, darknet, legal highs, illicit drugs, drug trafficking

## INTRODUCTION

New psychoactive substances (NPS) denote substances of abuse that are not subject to international control measures but mimic effects akin to controlled drugs, which may cause harm to the public health. Termed as “designer drugs”, “herbal highs”, “research chemicals” and “legal highs”, NPS have posed multi-faceted insurmountable challenges, with respect to its poor epidemiological knowledge; existing huge number and accelerated emergence rate; difficulty in identifying in biological samples and lack of standard laboratory reference sample; physical and psychological effects; marketing via crypto-markets [1]. These “legal highs” have become a legal alternative for illicit drugs. NPS

have been deceiving international legislative control measures despite lumberous/ numerous efforts. Anonymity in crypto-markets and legal safety makes the trade of NPS convenient. Burgeoning information technology, especially the darknet, and globalization have revolutionized our lifestyle, including the use and trade of illicit drugs. COVID-19 pandemic has brought a new set of challenges with regards to NPS, in terms of its use and supply [2]. The pandemic paves for unique health implications due to NPS use, and tasks for policymakers from legal perspectives.

## UNDERGROUND WEB COMMERCE OF NPS ‘DARKNET’: THE MYSTERIOUS ‘BERMUDA TRIANGLE’ FOR NPS SALE

Internet is a major platform for NPS distribution.<sup>3</sup>Broadly, worldwide webs can be surface web (which is readily available to the general public and indexed by standard

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search engines such as Google, Mozilla Firefox, etc.) and the dark web or darknet (which refers to encrypted online content that is not searchable by conventional search engines, and cannot be accessed without an adept software, like Tor, Freenet and I2P) [4,5]. Surface websites (for ex: a version of Firefox) often provide listings of '.onion' addresses or bundles of software to download, and access dark net markets [6].

The Dark Web is anonymous and cannot demarcate between criminals and ordinary users. It is a matter of debate whether online anonymity on dark web should be maintained in spite of the illegal activities (like cyber-attacks, hacking, drug trafficking) that it enables.<sup>4</sup> With its discovery in 2011, the anonymous trade of illicit drugs, including NPS, is progressing through hidden-web drug marketplaces (crypto-markets). The ban of first online crypto-marketplace Silk Road (with fascinating innovative technology to hide internet user activities) in Europe and United States, sprang around 45,000 dark websites [7-8]. The situation is smoldered by the huge number of NPS, with the rapid rate they emerge and number of vendors, across the globe. The 2015-16 CASSANDRA project, where data collection was done bimonthly, revealed that overall, both the numbers of individual NPS and vendors escalated to 94% and 72%, respectively [9]. NPS possibly begin from the darknet and later migrate to the open web [10]. Customarily, drugs on the darknet are purchased using digital non-identifying form of money, cryptocurrency such as bitcoin [8].

### **NPS SALE-SECRETS AND BEGUILING RISE OF INTERNET AND DARKNET DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A GRUELING COMBINATION**

During the first quarter of 2020, average broadband consumption expanded to 47%, 402.5 GB from 273.5 GB, during the same quarter of 2019 [11]. The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) analyzed three darknet markets (Agartha, Cannazon and Versus) activities during the same time revealed that regular consumers stocked up drugs, anticipating market disruption and lockdown, akin to other consumables. Cannazon, a market devoted to cannabis products, had an increased business and traded 1.6 metric tons, which is approximately EUR 4.3 million over three months of the lockdown. It indicated

awanedurge for the synthetic drugs like MDMA, commonly used in recreational settings. However, few countries like Netherlands were trading the drugs on offers and discounts [12]. The menu proffered "Corona Lock Down Survival Pack". The contents listed masks, gloves, hand sanitizers, cannabis and a variety of NPS [13].

### **POSSIBLE FEARED NPS RELATED RAMIFICATIONS DURING AND POST-COVID-19 PANDEMIC ERA**

- 1. Drug use:** India and China manufacture NPS in bulk. These are imported to Europe and elsewhere, where they are processed, packaged and sold. The street-level drug-dealers are also involved in such trading [14]. United Nations News reported of surge in prices of illegal drugs in many regions of the world [15]. Moreover, many darknet narcotics purchasers remained largely confined to their homes, with more free time and fewer opportunities for face-to-face transactions. Behavioral addiction like internet addiction and usage of NPS often, co-exist. This might have resulted in an increased NPS sale and consumption during the pandemic while buyers are spending more time online at home [16]. Online retailers have deciphered a unique opportunity from this pandemic, and may herald a further shift towards online commerce. This shift is indicated by a recent report which claim a massive spike in narcotic business after COVID-19 lockdown restrictions ease in India [17].
- 2. Masking epidemiological data:** Crypto-markets pose a challenge for law enforcement with regards to illicit drug trade due to anonymity and sophisticated security [18]. Moreover, drug manufacture, processing and trafficking are designed to escape legal authorities. Consumers are often unaware of their NPS usage, and seek treatment services. This makes learning exact NPS epidemiological data arduous.
- 3. Drug supply:** COVID-19 containing measures have a mosaic impact on drug supply chain. COVID-19 and lockdown has impeded NPS manufacture, either due movement inhibition to workplace, spread of contagion and disease suffering or quarantine. Due to overall paucity of drug, manufacture concluded with hiked rate and decrease purity. Eventually, users diverted to alternative substances (for example, from heroin to synthetic opioids like fentanyl) and/or approaching

drug treatment (benzodiazepines, buprenorphine, etc.).

Territories with stringent shut down had decreased drug seizures (*eg*; Italy and Central Asia). Countries with lenient lockdown and probably marching drug trafficking (Islamic Republic of Iran and Morocco) and postal services (like Nigeria) had more seizure [2]. Access to internet, empty time and more time being spent online, may result in people with adventurous and novelty seeking personality, to buy NPS for recreation, via darknet.

- 4. Health implications:** NPS have been marketed to large populations, apart from targeted ones, such as psychonauts, clubbers, life-style users and gym-visitors (in food supplements or pre-workout booster) [19-20]. For marketing, Phenibut is described as to 'improves mood, induce relaxation, enhance sexual desire' [21]. NPS use may cause acute and chronic health effects (respiratory, cardiovascular, transmission of blood-borne diseases like HIV, Hepatitis B and C, neuro-psychiatric problems, dependence and death), depending upon the user characteristics, dose, route of administration and adulteration [22-28].

Anticipated lockdown led to stockpiling of preferred drug. Availability of substantial amount of drug, addicted to could cause accidental overdose. The risk of drug overdose may be higher among those injecting drugs with COVID-19 infection [15]. Due to price hike and drug unavailability might had abrupt and dangerous withdrawal.<sup>17</sup>Increased contamination with poor knowledge could have caused deleterious health effects or overdose. Possible deficit of sharing injection equipment may carry higher risk of spreading diseases like HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C and COVID-19 itself [15].

- 5. Social-economic problems:** NPS is known to worsen social issues at workplace, with partners or family, housing problems and legal problems [29]. The economic crisis sprouted by the pandemic may metamorphosize drug markets. This could engage more people, especially vulnerable and socio-economically disadvantaged, in illicit drug marketing or trafficking organizations. The learning from the economic crisis of 2008, reminds that economic crisis and consequent reductions in drug-related budgets may end-up in escalated substance use, more use of low-priced drugs and injectables and hence, increased risk of harm [30].
- 6. Increasing crime, offences and challenges for legal system:** Drug trafficking usually camouflage legal trading to reach consumers. The Indian Financial Hack-

2020 reports at least 50 lakh CVV and credit card dumps on the darknet. These stolen credit and debit card details are sold online. The recent escalation in One Time Password frauds may be ascribed to increased darknet activity during lockdown [31]. The organized criminal groups involved in drug trafficking has switched from their usual illicit activities by emerging crime linked to the COVID-19 pandemic; for example, cybercrime and trafficking in falsified medicines.<sup>30</sup> Drugs such as GHB and Rohypnol are well-known for date-rape and robbery [32]. Overall, criminal activities may rise due to the pandemic. Banning substances altogether may be intuitively effective, but has its unintended consequences too. Although adequate legal provisions are there for use of substances in research, restrictive scheduling may discourage researchers for conducting substance related (like NPS) research [33]. Banning of a particular NPS also results in the development of alternative substances [34].

- 7. Services and policies:** The economic decline caused by the COVID-19 could, in the medium-term, increment drug production, trafficking and use [30]. Since beginning of this decade, role of stakeholders, including policy makers, practitioners and researchers, has been emphasized for regular evidence-based data on new substances, use pattern, the possible harms they may cause, and policy strategies to reduce the harms. This task becomes grueling during this pandemic, as we are already facing a mankind crisis of multi-dimensional nature [35]. A possible solution can be framing stringent terms and conditions for darknet usage.

## CONCLUSION & FUTURE DIRECTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought multiples challenges, one of them being drug use. This pandemic may result in change in availability and pattern of drug use. Number of people involved in the drug trafficking may rise. Socio-economic down-gradation puts socially-disadvantaged individuals at risk of drug use and get involved in drug-trafficking or supply chain. Darknet being anonymous and out of judicial jurisdiction, sets an easy platform for illicit drug market. Therefore, it demands attention for establishing stringent terms and conditions. India is a hot bed for manufacture of NPS and supplies substances across the globe. There is a need to frame and implement policies keeping these in mind, especially in India. To effectively control the increasing



use of NPS during this COVID-19 pandemic, following domains need to be addressed in future research:

- Burden of NPS use (country and region specific)
- Vulnerability factors for NPS use
- Loopholes in cyberspace that facilitates NPS marketing
- Lacunae in the existing policies to control NPS trafficking
- Innovative strategies for control of manufacturing, selling and transport of NPS

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