

New Psychoactive Substances

The Case of *Salvia Divinorum*

Executive Summary

This research gathers the main information available about consumption and commercialization of *salvia divinorum* in Portugal. Instead of focusing exclusively on the substance, special attention is paid to social dimensions.

The documentary research work, including a content analysis of discussion forums on the Internet, has been done in January and February of 2013, before Decree-Law 54/2013 entry into force. Scattered information about *salvia divinorum* and *New Psychoactive Substances* (NPS) is summed up from different sources.

With hallucinogenic properties, *salvia divinorum* is traditionally consumed for centuries in rituals and ceremonies of the Mazatec, a culture of southern Mexico. In the West and as part of a broader use of different hallucinogenic products, initially carried out by hippies and other counterculture members, the plant is used since the second half of the twentieth century. Fifty years later, *salvia divinorum* is considered one of the NPS, being until very recently one of the most sold products in national smartshops.

In Portugal, the plant had been used few years before the opening of these shops. After that, consumption had surely reached both a new level and new consumers, reason why the plant can not be studied except in the broader context of NPS.

Despite being presented as an absolute novelty, a careful analysis of NPS shows that they stand today as a result of an older process of synthesis and laboratory manipulation of substances and active ingredients in order to circumvent the laws and bring more psychoactive products to the market, from one or more substances not controlled hitherto.

The survey made in January 2013 accounted for 63 points of NPS sale in Portugal: 56 open door shops, located in main cities, especially Lisbon and Oporto, and 7 operating exclusively online.

The interaction analysis on internet, namely in discussion forums, allowed to conclude the:

- Importance of cyberspace for the purchase, discussion, learning and socialization with NPS;

- Lack of information of many NPS users, showing ignorance and belief in myths;
- Most of NPS users have low opinion of substances: they are considered inferior to illicit, as well as addictive and hazardous to health;
- Existence of a relationship between NPS and other illicit substances: the users seem to consume both and tend to compare each other;
- Difficulty to profile a NPS consumer-type, but with the possibility to detach four great groups: clubbers, university students, teenagers and former injecting drugs consumers. It's also possible to conclude that some substances seem to be looked for some particular groups: stimulants by more frequent clubs visitors or hallucinogenic products (like *salvia divinorum*) by, for instance, trance parties goers;
- Importance of curiosity as motivation to consume many of these products. Overall, the use of NPS seem to be more experiential and sporadic than intensive, though some of them (as those sold as plant fertilizer) seem to be associated to more frequent uses and states of physical and/or psychological dependency;
- Existence of risk behaviors as is the case of polydrug use, ignorance of safe use practices, search for the most potent possible substances, etc. The clear risk culture resulting from the analysis is generally and largely assumed by NPS consumers;

The importance of new effects in transition to drug market and, later, to recreational settings is discussed. A list of studies with available data about *salvia divinorum* use is done, concluding that generally it is sporadic, non intensive, associated with alcohol, cannabis and other hallucinogens, and motivated mainly by curiosity. Even not being an alarming consumption, in certain countries and groups (college students and nightlife places, for example), *salvia divinorum* is equally or more consumed (lifetime and 12 months) than other drugs, like cocaine, ecstasy or LSD.

At the end, one can conclude that *salvia divinorum* is a plant with potent psychoactive effects mainly consumed in recreational settings by a young population that valorizes a bizarre and frightening experience as something funny, looking for a good time in the company of friends.

This search for strong emotions, regarded by some as something potent and frightening, is a practice of risk and a clear devaluation of potential risks (mainly mental). This should be brought into account in future interventions and design of preventive strategies.