

# Cannabis, adolescence and identity: beyond the 'stoner'

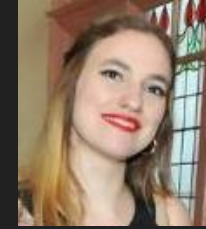
Grand Challenges: Adolescent Lives

Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> October 2018

# Team

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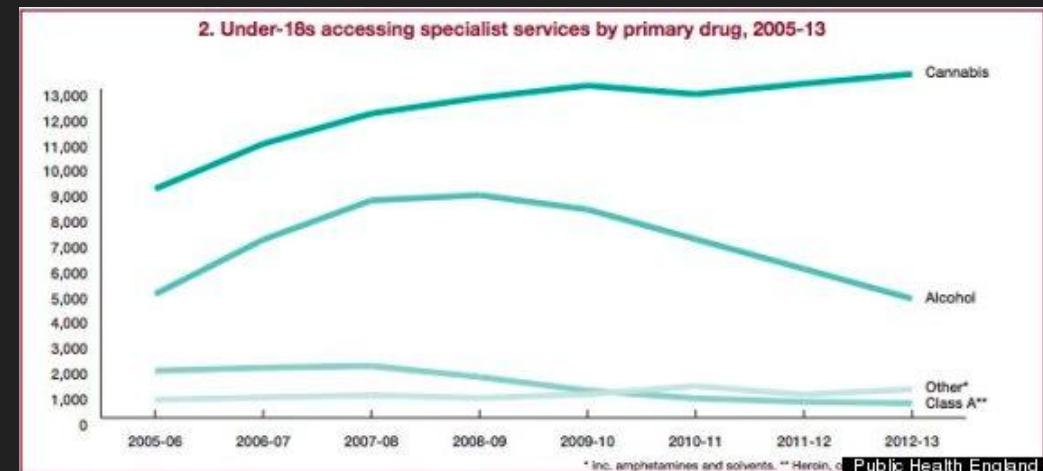
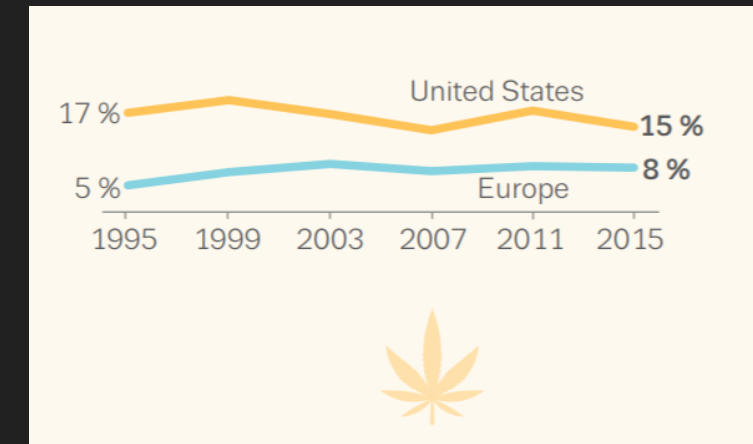
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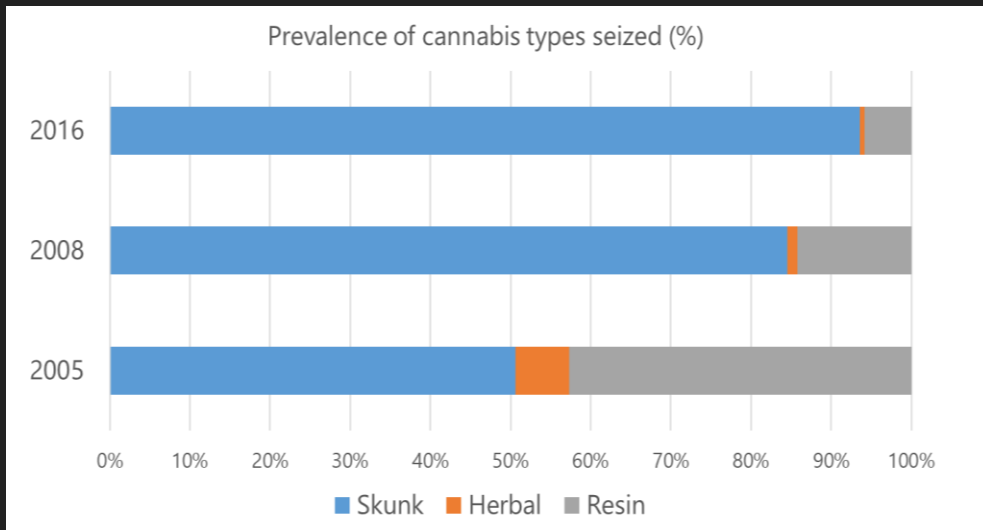


# Background

- In the UK, 19% of 15-16 year olds have tried cannabis. And 8% have used it in the past year.
- 50% of users, globally, try cannabis before age 18.
- The number of under-18s accessing treatment for cannabis problems has risen over the last decade. The number accessing treatment for alcohol problems have fallen.
- *Cannabis is used by a substantial number of teenagers in the UK. A growing number of them have problems with it. But many do not have problems.*



# Background



Skunk



Thai/ Herbal



Hash/ Resin

Over the last decade +, the type of cannabis available in the UK (and around the world) has changed to be dominated by high-potency cannabis (i.e. 'skunk').

Skunk use has been more strongly associated with addiction and psychotic outcomes, than use of the other types. So cannabis might be becoming more harmful.

Many states and countries are changing their cannabis laws – high-grade cannabis remaining popular in those places.

# Background

“Adolescence starts with puberty and ends when individuals attain an independent role in society” Dumontheil (2016).

In our research – we focus on 16-17 yr olds.

- Arguably, the last two decades+ have seen a ‘normalisation’ of adolescent drug use, especially with regards to cannabis use.
- Adolescence is a time in which identity is in flux.
- Cannabis may play a role in identity formation and identity may influence future cannabis use.



However, we know very little about:

- What UK teenage cannabis users think about cannabis and their identity.
- What they see as the pros and cons of cannabis use.
- What they think about the different types of cannabis.
- What non-using teenagers think about their cannabis using peers.

## CANNABIS USE AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

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# Aims of the project

- Understand the existing literature on cannabis, adolescence and identity.
- Understand what London-based adolescents think about cannabis use, identity and the pros and cons of cannabis use.
- Investigate longitudinal associations between cannabis-related identity and cannabis problems in teenagers.

# Describing our project to a young person...

- How does cannabis affect how you see yourself and how others see you.
- What does a 'stoner' look like? And is it a fair representation?
- In what ways does cannabis play an important part in your life?
- What are the positives of your cannabis? What are the negatives?

# Methods

- Systematic literature review about: cannabis, identity, and adolescence.
- Two focus groups with adolescents (16-17 year olds)
  - One with participants who use cannabis (at least weekly)
  - One with participants who have never tried cannabis
- Participant and Public Involvement (PPI). Get them involved with some of our related research.
- Inclusion of the 'Cannabis Self-Concept' (Blevins et al., 2016) scale in our large, longitudinal project with teenage cannabis users (CannTeen).





# Systematic literature review

- Terms (and their synonyms): (1) Cannabis, (2) Adolescence, (3) identity.
- Search produced 206 articles. 40 appeared relevant initially. 13 then actually fitted our criteria.
- Existing literature focuses on: group identity - protection and vulnerability; positive/negative self-image; ethnic identity – protection.
- Little qualitative work. Little work that aimed to understand how cannabis contributed to identity in teenagers, or why cannabis might be important in their lives.

# Focus group 1: never users (n=6). 1 hour.

*16-17 yr olds. Never used cannabis.*

*Proviso: we have not conducted proper thematic analysis.*

## 1. a typical cannabis user?

*"A lot of people associate cannabis use with people who are urban"*

*"In my school, they're normally the quite academically unserious kids, if that makes sense."*

*"I don't know, I just see it on Snapchat, you see people smoking or blowing smoke at the camera."*

*"I had a friend, he was actually quite smart and then he just started bunking school a lot more, and then started smoking weed."*

# Focus group 1: never users

## 2. distinct social groups?

*"I talk to them but I don't really want to spend time, well, not a lot of time with them. Because at the end of the day, I don't want to associate myself with them."*

*"Well, I know a group of people and I think they really just smoke it because they just want to stay in the group, they don't want to detach themselves"*

*"In school-time or outside, we're great friends but then sometimes they'll go in their little group of smokers and do something like a gathering, and then that's one of the things where I won't go, for example. Where I won't be invited as well"*

# Focus group 1: never users

## 3. perceived negatives of use?

*"...sleep problems and we also had someone come to talk to our school and he said he had a lot of memory problems, it affected his memory over time."*

*"...it became an addiction probably."*

*"I do just think they're a bit weak for taking it, they're relying on something artificial to make them happy, to get through the day."*

*"I think once you do get in contact with it, I think it can let you down in some scenarios but sometimes it doesn't always end that way either. I think it just depends on the person and how they use it."*

# Focus group 1: never users

## 4. perceived positives of use?

*"... there's quite a bit of medicinal benefits to it so they say."*

*"... when they smoke, it's like they're all friends. Even if they don't talk in school, they're all friends. Yeah, and they all hang out in the group."*

*"Stress relief, some people use it for stress relief."*

*"Some people that suffer with mental health issues or depression, I know they smoke a lot because they just need a break from life."*

# Focus group 2: weekly users (n=3). 1 hour.

*16-17 yr olds. At least weekly use.*

*Proviso: no proper thematic analysis, and disappointing number (we had 8 booked in)*

## 1. typical cannabis user?

*"He's wearing a puffer jacket and trackies, and just sitting there, not really doing much."*

*"...cannabis makes people a lot more relaxed and chilled out about everything."*

*"I guess there are lots of different ideas of what people who smoke weed are. It's definitely changing. It's not as negative. I don't think weed carries as much of a stigma."*

# Focus group 2: weekly users

## 2. perceived negative effects?

*"I definitely get really paranoid when I smoke too much. I'll be walking down the street and I'll think someone is going to come up behind me and start beating the shit out of me."*

*"I didn't feel like a human; I felt like a worm."*

*"...from skunk, people can really go psychotic and get sectioned and stuff."*

*"A lot of them [my friends] stopped talking to me when I started, so I have my one best friend who is pretty much the same as me."*

*"...it got to the point where he was smoking up to 3 grams every day of really strong skunk, and I could tell that it was affecting him. He just forgot everything. And he started having panic attacks when he didn't smoke."*

# Focus group 2: weekly users

## 3. perceived positive effects?

*"It helps you build conversations. I can't make conversations with people, but when I smoke..."*

*"It's definitely built my friendships with most of my mates, just being able to sit in a circle and pass around a spliff. There's something very ritualistic about it."*

*"And it definitely helps some of my friends with anxiety."*

*"I just know how it feels if you feel high and you're outside in nature and you really appreciate everything a lot. Especially in summer when it's sunny and you can feel the heat and everything. It's just really nice."*



# Focus group 2: weekly users

## 4. different types of cannabis?

*"Everybody I know smokes skunk. I don't really know anyone who smokes hash or brick weed. And the people who do are usually really up themselves about it."*

*"I think I like skunk more, because it has a special place in my heart."*

*"...because from skunk, people can really go psychotic and get sectioned and stuff."*

*"It's just bud, pure bud. And it fucking stinks."*

*"I find if I smoke hash, it relaxes me and I can open up to people. But with the super strong stuff that I pick up usually, it shuts me down socially and I can't do it."*

*"I've smoked hash before. I think it's better if you're going out somewhere, because it doesn't give you much of a high, and it doesn't last as long."*

# Focus group 2: weekly users

## 5. part of who you are?

*"I just feel like I should want to be sober more than being high. So I don't really think of cannabis as part of my identity. It's just something that I do sometimes."*

*"...people probably would view me as that guy, because I do post it on my [snapchat] story. I just haven't thought of it like that. I think of identity as things I'm interested in, things I'm passionate about, stuff that's on my mind."*

*I'm not thinking every day, when am I going to pick up? When am I going to smoke a zoot? Let's talk about weed. But I'm sure people view me as that, because I like posting about it. I guess social media is such a big part of people's lives now. It does play a role in it."*

# Preliminary thoughts- what we found interesting

- Explicit cannabis self-identity wasn't particularly apparent in users, and was even resisted.
- Cannabis was important to the users – and played an important role in their social life.
- Cannabis's apparent positive and negative effects on mental health were often mentioned.
- Many of the non-users had a very clear idea of what a 'cannabis user' was – and it tended to be negative.
- Users often recognised that skunk was stronger & sometimes had negative effects, but they still preferred it. One user was very connected to skunk: *'it has a special place in my heart'*.

# Policy implications?

- Both using and non-using teenagers are aware of the link between cannabis and mental health problems. Users aware that skunk may be more harmful. So education on this has worked, to some extent.
- However, users still prefer skunk and it is more available. So perhaps radical changes needed? Regulation of the market: no under-18 use and a maximum THC limit in cannabis?
- Users and non-users say cannabis can help with social anxiety, panic attacks, depression. In the long-term, this is unlikely. Education about this?
- Some non-users view users as weak and unserious, and do not want to associate with them. Perhaps users are stigmatised by non-using peers. Policy to educate and de-stigmatise? (But perhaps stigma prevents some from using in first place).

# Future work

- Hopefully get a masters student to conduct a few more qualitative focus groups to increase the numbers of participants – and to conduct formal thematic analysis.
- Publication of our systematic literature review.
- Analysis of the ‘cannabis self-concept’ scale in our longitudinal project. How much do regular users see cannabis as part of them? Does it predict future cannabis use problems?

**Thanks for listening. Any questions?**

# Lit review criteria

- Age 10-19 (definition of adolescence according to UNICEF & WHO)
- Cannabis using participants
- Studying identity & cannabis

# Systematic literature review: Results

- Group identity:
  - Miller et al. (2016)
    - Identifying with family & school vs. friend groups associated with lower odds of cannabis use
    - Identifying with more groups associated with lower odds of cannabis use
  - Verkooijen & Nielsen (2007)
    - Identifying with 'skate/hip-hop', 'techno' and 'hippy' associated with increased odds of use
    - Identifying with 'sporty', 'quiet', 'nerd' and 'religious' associated with reduced odds of use
  - Fletcher et al(2009)
    - Cannabis use is a source of bonding and social identity
    - Identifying with 'hip-hop culture' and 'rebellious behaviour' associated with increased odds of use



# Systematic literature review: Results

- Self-identity
  - More negative self-image associated with increased cannabis use (Weiss et al., 2011)
  - Cannabis has been almost entirely normalised (in Canada) and is not related to self-identity; indeed, not being a user involved more of a separate self-identity (Mostaghim & Hathaway, 2013)
  - Adolescents enjoy smoking cannabis in a group; it maintains social connections (Lamb, 2011).
  - Cannabis use is not necessarily a rebellious action, more a way to meet their psychological needs in particular social scenarios (Lamb, 2011).

# Systematic literature review: Results

- Ethnic identity:
  - Greater identification with own ethnicity associated with lower drug use, including cannabis (Zapolski et al., 2017).
  - Replicated in Chedebois et al. (2009)

# Systematic literature review – what's missing from the literature?

- How do adolescents actually view 'a typical cannabis user'?
- How much do they think cannabis is part of '*who they are*'?
- How does cannabis use positively and negatively affect their life? (i.e. what opportunities and barriers does it provide?)
- How do those who don't use cannabis view those who do?
- Do adolescents identify more with skunk use than use of hash or Thai weed?