



#### Review

## Abuse of Prescription Drugs in the Context of Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS): A Systematic Review

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Abstract: Recently, a range of prescription and over-the-counter drugs have been reportedly used as Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS), due to their potential for abuse resulting from their high dosage/idiosyncratic methods of self-administration. This paper provides a systematic review of the topic, focusing on a range of medications which have emerged as being used recreationally, either on their own or in combination with NPS. Among gabapentinoids, pregabalin may present with higher addictive liability levels than gabapentin, with pregabalin being mostly identified in the context of opioid, polydrug intake. For antidepressants, their dopaminergic, stimulant-like, bupropion activities may explain their recreational value and diversion from the therapeutic intended use. In some vulnerable clients, a high dosage of venlafaxine ('baby ecstasy') is ingested for recreational purposes, whilst the occurrence of a clinically-relevant withdrawal syndrome may be a significant issue for all venlafaxine-treated patients. Considering second generation antipsychotics, olanzapine appears to be ingested at very large dosages as an 'ideal trip terminator', whilst the immediate-release quetiapine formulation may possess proper abuse liability levels. Within the image- and performanceenhancing drugs (IPEDs) group, the beta-2 agonist clenbuterol ('size zero pill') is reported to be self-administered for aggressive slimming purposes. Finally, high/very high dosage ingestion of the antidiarrhoeal loperamide has shown recent increasing levels of popularity due to its central recreational, anti-withdrawal, opiatergic effects. The emerging abuse of prescription drugs within the context of a rapidly modifying drug scenario represents a challenge for psychiatry, public health and drug-control policies.

Keywords: drug abuse; novel psychoactive substances; NPS; pharmacovigilance; prescribing drugs' abuse

#### 1. Introduction

Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS; 'legal highs' or 'research chemicals') are molecules designed to mimic the effects of legal traditional recreational drugs with intense psychoactive effects and virtual non-detectability in routine drug screenings. NPS include synthetic cannabinoids, cathinone derivatives, psychedelic phenethylamines, novel stimulants, synthetic opioids, tryptamine derivatives, phencyclidine-like dissociatives, piperazines, psychoactive plants/herbs and a range of prescribed medications [1]. The term NPS was first used by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to refer to "substances of abuse, either in a pure form or a preparation, that are not controlled by the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs or the 1961 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, but which may pose a public health threat" [2]. At present, the emergence of NPS, typically from outside Western countries [3], represents a considerable public health challenge.

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## **Table of Contents Free Research Paper On Drugs**

- 1. Understanding the eBook Free Research Paper On Drugs
  - The Rise of Digital Reading Free Research Paper On Drugs
  - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
- 2. Identifying Free Research Paper On Drugs
  - Exploring Different Genres
  - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
  - Determining Your Reading Goals
- 3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
  - Popular eBook Platforms
  - Features to Look for in an Free Research Paper On Drugs
  - User-Friendly Interface
- 4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Free Research Paper On Drugs
  - Personalized Recommendations
  - Free Research Paper On Drugs User Reviews and Ratings
  - Free Research Paper On Drugs and Bestseller Lists
- 5. Accessing Free Research Paper On Drugs Free and Paid eBooks
  - Free Research Paper On Drugs Public Domain eBooks
  - Free Research Paper On Drugs eBook Subscription Services
  - Free Research Paper On Drugs Budget-Friendly Options
- 6. Navigating Free Research Paper On Drugs eBook Formats
  - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
  - Free Research Paper On Drugs Compatibility with Devices
  - Free Research Paper On Drugs Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience

- Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Free Research Paper On Drugs
- Highlighting and Note-Taking Free Research Paper On Drugs
- Interactive Elements Free Research Paper On Drugs
- 8. Staying Engaged with Free Research Paper On Drugs
  - Joining Online Reading Communities
  - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
  - Following Authors and Publishers Free Research Paper On Drugs
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Free Research Paper On Drugs
  - Benefits of a Digital Library
  - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Free Research Paper On Drugs
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
  - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
  - Minimizing Distractions
  - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Free Research Paper On Drugs
  - Setting Reading Goals Free Research Paper On Drugs
  - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Free Research Paper On Drugs
  - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Free Research Paper On Drugs
  - Distinguishing Credible Sources
- 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
  - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
  - Exploring Educational eBooks
- 14. Embracing eBook Trends
  - Integration of Multimedia Elements
  - Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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