



INTERNET DRUG TRADING: NATIONAL REVIEW OF NEW ONLINE DRUG MARKETS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

Illicit drugs are marketed both via dark web platforms and social media, but there are also research reports buying these drugs online. This study is intended to analyse the risk factors for the purchase of online illicit drugs. We assumed that social interactions, low levels of self-control, and impaired mental health would be correlated with online opioid sales following criminological and addiction analysis research. Moreover, online drug sales are expected to be related to low self-control and daily drug consumption. Participants in this nationwide study were aged 15 to 25 years and lived in Germany (N=1,732) and France (N=1,732). Measures of impulsivity, ability sensitivity, social association, psychological tension, and repetitive activity (drinking, gambling, and Internet use) predicted online drug use. 4% of German and French respondents reported buying drugs online of which, 63% did so via social media services. Online opioid purchases were associated with lower self-control, elevated social anxiety, heavy gambling, and Internet use, as shown by multinomial logistic regression and binary intervention regression models. It was not a risk factor to have online friends, but close social links with offline friends served as a security factor. The results indicate that more attention should be paid to mainstream social media services as a source for buying drugs as there are many psychological and self-control issues among online drug consumers.

KEYWORDS: *drug abuse and dependence; portrayal of drug use in the media; prevention; intervention; adolescent; young adult; technology; Internet; online social media; marketing; social marketing; message; Facebook; Twitter; Social Learning Theory; Media Practice Model; Facebook Influence Model*

INTRODUCTION

Like technology in general, social media has both an upside and a downside. When it comes to social media's effect on teens, these upsides and downsides are especially significant.

On the plus side, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat can be a lifesaver for teens who feel isolated or marginalized. These groups include LGBTQ teens and teens struggling with mental health issues. In addition, researchers have found many positive effects of social media on friendships.

However, the frequent use of social media among teens and young adults has many fewer positive consequences. These include cyberbullying, negative self- and body-image, social media addiction, and less time for healthy, real-world activities.

Drugs are also sold on both dark websites and social media, but online drug purchases are also undergoing analysis. Drug vendors also use sophisticated technology to increase profits and mitigate risks. While a range of reports has centered

on the procurement of opium drugs by online pharmacies and cryptocurrency markets, nothing has been written about how smartphone-enabled social networking and messaging applications ("apps") are utilized throughout the drug business, despite increased media attention. This paper explores the aspects of which these apps (Snapchat, Instagram, and WhatsApp) were used for drug transfer and availability.

METHODS

Three techniques were used to gather data: a worldwide internet survey of 47 opioid patients currently using or exploring drug access applications; 'rapid interviews' (n=10) with a comparable population; and in-depth interviews (n=10). The main themes were the possible advantages and risks associated with mobile sales, with a special emphasis on innovative dispensing and procurement.



RESULTS

Apps are a fast and convenient way to pull together buyers and sellers. They are also a valuable intermediary between crypto-exchanges and street trading, providing a 'secure' function and way to verify products without technical knowledge. In new and complicated ways, mobile phones are being used, for example on social networks, to endorse drugs and to communicate and arrange transactions with established vendors as encrypted messaging systems. The key concerns were about potential law enforcement exposure and the legality of drugs.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE CONSIDERATION

Our research was cross-sectional and restricted to two countries. Future research in other countries should further investigate this concept. While our risk and safety models and mediation research offer a strong theoretical foundation, the causal relationship needs to be confirmed in prospective longitudinal studies. In addition, it is important to explore better impulsivity assessments. The strength of the study was that two national samples were used, but further testing is needed in other cultures and contexts.

This is one of the few studies focused on illicit drug trade, a new and risky issue behaviour that cannot be monitored online. Online drug buyers have many self-control and mental health issues and selling drugs online will make their situation worse. They are especially quick to be tempted by social media. In addition, a greater focus can be placed on the behaviour of young people on traditional social media services.

The policy and implementation consequences underline the need to speak to young people about their use of social media, as young people spend a significant amount of time online. Social networking sites are related to a broad variety of deviant behaviours, including cannabis addiction, which can be used for prevention initiatives that pin down young people's online behaviour. The ubiquitous availability of illegal drugs is a wider concern that needs to be addressed with enforcement action especially online. Studies show that young people who use drugs online need clinical strategies and support.

There is a need to promote face-to-face experiences among young people, as good offline social interactions can protect against drug-related risks and accidents. To improve their safety factors and reduce risks, robust school-based drug use programs should include components that address the sale of opioids online.

CONCLUSION

Although "social procurement" by friends is still preferred, and there is some uncertainty regarding app-mediated procurement, our data show that apps are fast becoming a viable drug option. Apps may offer an easy-to-use portal that links users with suppliers of commercial drugs that are otherwise difficult-to-access. Providing data that demystifies the common-sense belief that smartphones are healthy and that this "visual" opioid economy promotes better consumption habits will reduce possible harms.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

This paper does not contain any conflict of interest.

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