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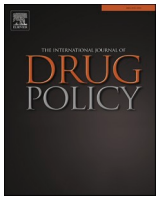

Research Paper

Hybrid drug dealing: Merging on- and offline spheres when dealing drugs via social media

Nina Tvede Korshøj *, Thomas Friis Søgaard

Aarhus University, Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research, Bartholins Allé 10, 8000 Aarhus, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

Background: Research exploring online mediated drug dealing has gained momentum in recent years. Much existing research is characterized by a primary focus on the "online" aspects of drug sales facilitated by social media, resulting in a divide between "on"- and "offline" drug dealing. We wish to bridge this gap, by focusing on the hybridity of dealing drugs via social media and by arguing for a more holistic understanding of contemporary drug dealing.

Methods: This article is based on in-depth digitally facilitated oral interviews with 25 individuals with experience of dealing drugs via social media platforms and encrypted messaging apps and on observational data from different apps and platforms.

Results: We found that many sellers start by dealing offline and gradually drift into sales using social media technology. While the internet offers drug sellers new opportunities to expand their business, many sellers are not technological exclusionists but rather adopt a multichannel approach where they sell both via social media and occasionally or regularly also through in-person and technologically analogue means. Additionally, many sellers do not draw clear cut distinctions between whether they use social media, SMS or encrypted apps, but rather see their "drug sales phone" as one medium for all sales related communication. Findings also show that local offline power dynamics continue to influence sellers' ability to build and expand their online business, and that offline as well as online networks play a crucial role in sellers' hiring of helpers and in their bulk drug sourcing.

Conclusion: We discuss how our findings have analytical, conceptual, and methodological implications for the development of a more nuanced and holistic approach in the study of drug sales involving online technologies.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a growth in studies on digitally mediated drug dealing, including research on darknet cryptomarkets (e.g. Aldridge & Askew, 2017; Aldridge & Décary-Hétu, 2016; Masson & Bancroft, 2018) and on drug dealing via social media platforms and encrypted messaging apps (e.g. Bakken, 2021; Bakken et al., 2023; Demant & Bakken, 2019a; Demant et al., 2019b; 2020; Haupt et al., 2022; Moyle et al., 2019; van der Sanden et al., 2023a). Compared to cryptomarkets, so-called "social media markets" are more localized, because these have lower technological access thresholds, and because buyers and sellers often meet in person (Bancroft, 2023). While providing important insights, existing research into digitally mediated drug dealing has mainly focused on the *online* dimensions as well as on the differences between "on-" and "offline" drug dealing. This is particularly the case within research on cryptomarkets, but also so for studies on social media facilitated drug dealing, the focus of this article. We aim to develop a more holistic understanding of drug dealing via social media by exploring how often overlooked interconnections between on- and offline spheres give shape to what we call "hybrid drug dealing".

Drug dealing via social media has been described as existing "between cryptomarkets and street-based drug markets" (Moyle et al., 2019, p. 104) because it typically combines online marketing with face-to-face money-for-drug exchanges between sellers and customers. While offline elements are mentioned, typically in passing, existing studies tend mainly to focus on the online aspects of this type of drug dealing. This mode of selling, for instance, is routinely described as "online drug dealing", "social media dealing" or "app dealing", while sellers are described as "social media dealers" or "online dealers" and

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: ntk.crf@psy.au.dk (N.T. Korshøj).

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the market sphere as an "online market", a "digital market", an "app market" or a "social media market" (see Bakken, 2021; Bakken & Demant, 2019; Bakken et al., 2023; Demant & Bakken, 2019a; Demant et al., 2019b; Demant et al., 2020; Moeller, 2022; Moeller et al., 2021; Moyle et al., 2019; Oksanen et al., 2021; van der Sanden et al., 2022a). Furthermore, in analyzing drug dealing via social media, primary attention has been devoted to mapping the types of drugs marketed online, the different sizes of social media groups and their varying degree of openness (Demant & Bakken, 2019a; Demant et al., 2019b; Haupt et al., 2022; van der Sanden et al., 2022b). Researchers have also focused on people's motives for sourcing drugs through social media (Moyle et al., 2019; van der Sanden et al., 2021), on seller's use of online marketing strategies, including use of written posts, videos, images, emojis (Demant et al., 2019b; Moyle et al., 2019; Bakken et al., 2023; Haupt et al., 2022) and gendered scripts (Bakken & Harder, 2023). This research emphasizes the importance of "digital capital" (Bakken et al., 2023) in interactions between sellers and customers, and researchers have also focused on buyers' online risk management (Bakken & Demant, 2019; Moyle et al., 2019; van der Sanden et al., 2023a), on how trust is established online (Bakken, 2021), on online price formations (Moeller et al., 2021), on buyers' and sellers' drift between different online platforms (Childs et al., 2020a; Demant et al., 2019b; van der Sanden et al., 2022a) and on the rationalities characterizing drug exchanges on social media (Childs et al., 2020b).

The tendency to focus mainly on the online dimensions of drug dealing via social media seems to be driven by several factors. The first and most obvious is that the online technology is of great importance to how drugs are marketed and become accessible to buyers. Second, researchers' tendency to focus primarily on the online aspects is also a result of the methods used. Similar to research on other "online drug markets" (Aldridge & Askew, 2017; Aldridge & Décary-Hétu, 2016; Martin, 2023), research on social media facilitated drug dealing rely heavily on computer-based netnography to collect and analyze online content on social media platforms (see Bakken, 2021; Bakken & Harder, 2023; Demant & Aagesen, 2022; Haupt et al., 2022). Only to a lesser extent have researchers used interviews, often rapid in-situ interviews (Moyle et al., 2019) or shorter app-based textual interviews (Bakken, 2022; van der Sanden et al., 2022a;2023a), and often with the aim of documenting buyers' and sellers' online activities. Lastly, the online focus also seems to be driven by a typological understanding of drug markets, where different drug market spheres are differentiated and compartmentalized on the basis of the key technology used (see also Childs et al., 2020b). Reflecting a general "fetishism with the 'new'" in the broader drugs field (Ayres & Taylor, 2023, p. 392), the tendency to "compartmentalize online spaces for buying and selling illicit drugs" (Childs et al., 2020b, p. 176), seems, at least in part, to be driven by many researchers' desire to document what is *new, unique* and *different* about social media drug dealing. Documenting new trends, practices and dynamics is obviously important. The problem with the framing of "social media dealing" as a distinct new category, is that this is often done through a demarcation process where "online drug sales" is contrasted to and differentiated from so-called "street" and "traditional" markets, including the analogue "phone-based market". The result too often is silo-thinking (Søgaard et al., 2019), and an under prioritization of a focus on *continuities, overlaps* and *interconnections* between on- and offline spheres, marketplaces, and sales methods.

Importantly, however, existing research on "online drug trading" do point to important overlaps between offline and online spheres. As described above, research on drug dealing via social media, for instance, often includes brief remarks about drug sellers' use of apps to arrange physical meetings with customers (Moyle et al., 2019; Demant et al., 2019b; Bakken & Demant, 2019). Nordic studies have also shown how drug sellers' preferences for different social media platforms and apps vary by geographical context i.e. between countries (Demant et al., 2019b Demant & Aagesen 2022), and in their study from New Zealand van der Sanden et al. (2022b; 2023b) found that drug sales on Discord servers and certain affordances on social media platforms have the potential to expand pre-existing offline social supply networks. Bakken and Demant (2019) also shortly describe how some sellers at times combine public marketing on social media platforms with use of analog phones to arrange meetings, and Hall et al. (2017) and Gibbs (2023) briefly describe how some sellers of controlled substances combine online and offline sales methods, thus indicating "hybrid forms of distribution" (Tzanetakis & Werse, 2021, p. 164). Lastly, Demant and Nexø (2024) analyze how social media mediated drug selling is at times tied to offline cognitive processes within the individual and the social situation. The overlap between on- and offline spheres has also been touched upon by cryptomarket research. In line with Aldridge and Askew's (2017) assertion that drug transactions are "stretched" across virtual and physical spaces, Masson and Bancroft (2018) describe how one of their participants used his ability to access and source drugs from online cryptomarkets to gain a position as a middleman in a local offline market. Research has also documented wholesale activities on cryptomarket platforms, indicating that some crime groups and individuals source drug from these online platforms to re-sell or give away locally (Aldridge & Décary-Hétu, 2016; Demant et al., 2018a). Relatedly Martin et al. (2020) describe how some cryptomarket sellers buy larger quantities of drugs through offline social networks later to be resold online. Other studies describe how offline police measures can shape the activities of cryptomarket drug traders. While Demant et al. (2018b) outline how national borders and fear of custom officials can result in structural regionalization of online cryptomarket activities, Aldridge & Askew (2017) describe how cryptomarket sellers and buyers use various offline tactics to prevent shipped packages from being intercepted by police and custom services. Lastly, street-based sellers involved in primarily analogue ring-and-bring drug services have also been shown to use encrypted apps (Søgaard et al., 2019). As the above indicates, many current drug markets are in fact hybrid.

Although existing research points to important online/offline linkages, there remains a need for more in-depth understandings of how such connections shape contemporary drug dealing. In order to forward a perspective on online/offline connectivity, we draw inspiration from recent criminological research on cybercrime, which argues that if we are to develop a nuanced understanding of cybercrime, researchers need to explore how such crime is embedded in social networks, local offline contexts and in wider market structures, otherwise we risk neglecting "the hidden face of cybercrime" (Lusthaus & Varese, 2017, p. 4. See also Bakken & Harder, 2024; Berry, 2018; Gibbs & Hall, 2021; Leukfeldt & Roks, 2021; Leukfeldt et al., 2019; Roks et al., 2021; Storrod & Densley, 2017). Based on classical ethnographic approaches and a focus on larger crime scripts, Roks et al. (2021), for instance, found that many who engage in cybercrime are not exclusively cybercriminals, but simultaneously engage in offline crime. Research also shows that while street offenders adapt to and exploit the opportunities provided by online media, offline social networks, local power dynamics, and offline recruitment of collaborators often remain central in shaping crimes committed through electronic means (Berry, 2018; Lusthaus & Varese, 2017; Roks et al., 2021; Storrod & Densley, 2017). Against this background, Roks et al. (2021) argue that if we interpret individuals, groups or crime (scripts) as either "street" or "cyber" we risk obfuscating the vital importance of *both* the offline and the online in the doings of crimes. This perspective mirrors Gibbs and Hall's (2021) point that the internet is not a separate realm, but rather part of a person's blended journey through the world, thus acknowledging "that subjects and everyday practices drift in and out of online and offline spaces" (Gibbs & Hall, 2021). If we want to understand how digitally mediated drug markets function, we thus need to "consider the interdependencies between physical territory and digital ether" (Berry, 2018, p. 10). Roks et al. (2021) suggest that the concept of "hybridity" might be useful in this endeavor, because, similar to Lane's oxymoron "the digital street" (2016), this concept encourages researcher to focus on connections, relationships and activities that cut across the online-offline divide to

construct new realities.

Following this line of thinking, this article draws on interviews with 25 individuals involved in commercial drug dealing via social media, to shed light on the hybrid nature of the larger crime script of social media facilitated drug dealing. More specifically, we explore the interconnectedness of online and offline activities and relations, with a focus on three aspects of sellers' hybrid drug dealing: starting up a sales business, recruiting employees, and bulk sourcing of drugs for resale.

Method and data

All data collected and coded for this article was done by the first author (NTK). The data consists of 25 in-depth digitally facilitated oral interviews with 23 males and 2 females, who all have experience with dealing drugs via different, and sometimes multiple, social media platforms and encrypted messaging apps. Further, data was produced through netnography (Kozinets, 2019), by observations of drug sellers' activities on Facebook, Snapchat, Wickr, Reddit and Telegram. To gain access, NTK created a research profile, using the same alias across all platforms and apps (except Facebook, where access was obtained using NTK's private account). NTK applied a "lurking approach" (Ferguson, 2017, p. 689) observing only, without participating in what played out on the platforms (except when approaching sellers directly in private messages with interview request). The article is based predominantly on the interview data, and the observational data are only used sporadically to further complement findings from the interviews.

Participants were recruited both on- and offline. Online, NTK contacted sellers directly through Snapchat, Reddit, Telegram and Wickr, and posted adverts for the project on two large Danish Subreddits. Offline, posters were distributed at a local university, high-schools and technical colleges and drug treatment centers across the country. The criterium for participating were previous or current experience with dealing drugs via social media. All participants were offered gift vouchers of 150 DKK. Consent was gathered by distributing a link to an online consent form. Here, participants could choose an alias to protect their anonymity. The participants were aged between 16 and 30, while one participant was 52 (median age 22.8). All interviews were conducted orally. 24 of the 25 interviews took place online (1 being physical), via either Zoom, Wickr, Signal, Discord and Snapchat utilizing these platforms' videochat or call features. The participants could choose which platform they felt most comfortable using and whether or not they wanted cameras to be turned on. Most decided not to. The decision to utilize these online platforms for interviewing meant that participants' anonymity could better be upheld (both in terms of their location, and some never revealed their physical appearance), and it created greater flexibility for both the participants and the interviewer in terms of the 'place' of the interview (see e.g. Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Sipes et al., 2022). The interviews lasted between 30 min to 2,5 h (average 1.5 h). All interviews were recorded and transcribed, resulting in ranges of between 12- and 48 pages per interview, totaling 748 pages (average: 31 single spaced pages).

Similar to the situation in other countries (see Barratt & Maddox, 2016), the data collected for this study could in principle be of use to law enforcement, though there are no examples of research data being seized by law enforcement in Denmark to our knowledge. However, to protect participants' anonymity, several steps were taken, such as altering participants' names and their place of residence prior to saving transcripts. Furthermore, we deleted voice recordings and any contact information.

The interview guide was designed to explore several themes related to participants' drug dealing: how they got started, their motivations, their modus operandi, how they sourced drugs, and if (and how) they recruited helpers and employees. Also, the participants were asked to reflect on their choice of platform(s), their marketings strategies, screening of customers, and how they dealt with competition from other drug sellers, and the risks of getting caught by the police. Initially the interview guide only minimally included direct questions regarding the merging of on- and offline spheres, however, as this topic emerged in several early interviews, the interview guide was altered to better explore this issue. The revised interview guide included questions about the participants' broader lives, their offline (drug) crimes and about the connections (and contrasts) between their on- and offline criminal activities, especially regarding their pathways into drug sales, their wholesale drug sourcing, their use of marketing tactics, their recruitment of labors and their management of risks from police and criminal competitors. All interview data was coded using NVivo14. Using a thematic analytical approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) the data was initially coded into overall categories such as "getting started", "daily work", "sourcing drugs", "employees", "the technology", "competition", "recruiting customers", "police" "getting caught", "social life", with different subcodes underneath. In total 17 codes and 68 subcodes were created. After the first coding, a re-coding was done focusing specifically on the overlaps between on- and offline spheres in the participants' crime scripts. All quotes used in this article have been translated from Danish to English.

The project has been registered with the Danish Data Protection Agency and follows the ethical standards required by the Danish Social Sciences. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

Results

The article is divided into three sections. The first explores on- and offline hybridization in relation to how participants started and expanded their drug dealing business. Section two focuses on how they utilized both on- and offline methods when recruiting helpers and employees, and the third section focuses on the hybridization of participants' modes of sourcing drugs for resale.

Setting up shop

The participants used a variety, and often multiple, platforms and encrypted messaging apps when dealing drugs. Snapchat and Wickr were reported as the most used, respectively by 19 and 17 participants, followed by use of analogue text-messages ($n = 8$), Telegram ($n = 7$), Reddit ($n = 6$), Facebook ($n = 5$), Signal ($n = 4$) and WhatsApp ($n = 3$). The size and social organization of the participants' sales activities varied. Some operated alone, some in collaboration with a few friends, and others were part of, or managed, larger businesses with multiple people involved. The participants sold a variety of substances, and often multiple. Most reported selling cannabis ($n = 18$) and cocaine ($n = 11$), followed by MDMA ($n = 6$), LSD ($n = 6$), amphetamine ($n = 5$), mushrooms ($n = 4$), different benzodiazepines ($n = 4$), Oxycontin/Tramadol ($n = 4$), 2-CB ($n = 2$) and ketamine ($n = 1$).

The participants' pathways into the drug trade varied, but just about all had entered via offline social networks. Some got involved via friends or acquaintances who were already in the drug business, and a smaller minority through more crime-experienced individuals in their local neighborhood. Most had started with using drugs themselves, and then gradually moved into social supply and small-scale selling to friends and acquaintances to finance their own drug use (see also Søgaard & Brænmer, 2023; Taylor & Potter, 2013). While some stayed small-scale, using social media only to sell to friends and acquaintances, others moved into more commercial forms of selling. For some, this latter process was driven by an ambition to build a larger business. For others, their expansion, was not based on a conscious choice or plan, as illustrated by Peter (age 24) who sold cannabis, ecstasy, LSD and 2-CB:

> *"I just had a network, right? Well, at first it was acquaintances and friends who contacted me, because they knew I had something. Word spreads like a wildfire, so everyone knows about it […]. So, of course it started with being a friend, and then it was a friend's friend contacting me. 'Okay, I know him a bit through that guy'. But soon it became a*

friend's friend's friend, you know? It [words] spreads like that very quickly, and all of a sudden, you get contacted by all sorts of people".

Similar to findings in studies of drift processes into "offline" modes of drug sales (see e.g., Søgaard & Bræmer, 2023), the above illustrates how entries into social media facilitated drug sales can also be an effect of demand-pull processes. Participants who drifted into drug sales experienced that their private social media accounts gradually fused into a mixed private- and business account. Some therefore decided to create new accounts solely for drug sales. For many, this decision was driven by ambitions to expand their sales activities, and by a wish to separate their personal and their "professional" lives. In this process, many started migrating customers to their new drug-dealing accounts, as illustrated in the following quote by Noah (24), who sold cannabis:

"*If someone contacted me privately [on e.g. Messenger] then I would give them my [new] Snap […]. I've always bought [drugs] through Snapchat myself, so I thought, if they [other dealers] can do it, so can I. And it's not more difficult than you put up a name, and you have the profile, and then you make a few daily updates with prices and what you sell*".

Similarly, Anna (27) described how people initially came to her apartment to buy cannabis and oxycontin, before she decided to expand her business into the virtual sphere:

"*There was basically [a business] up and running anyways. So, I might as well just make it official […]. You open [the business] up to more than just friends and acquaintances, so that's when you start having a [separate drug] phone going, with a phone number and social media, so that people can reach you […]. So official in that way, yeah? So, you suddenly become the town's pusher instead of just your friend's pusher, right?"*.

For participants eager to build a larger business, the ability to attract customers through proactive online marketing was of crucial importance, as described by Abdi (23), who sold cannabis and cocaine:

"*I've seen dealers sit with 10 different phones and 10 different apps. So, every phone has an app […]. They must ensure that they are present on as many apps as possible, because they have to make sure to get as many customers as possible. And it is the same as any other business: If you want to reach your customers, you have to make sure that you're at eye-level with them. So how do you ensure that? It is to be where the customers are. So, it's being present on Snapchat, it's being on… well all the other apps, it's being on Telegram, and also having a Wickr and a Signal. It's having all those things, because then you are all the places where people could think of going onto [to look for drugs]*".

In line with the above, many sellers deployed a "multichannel retailing" strategy (Childs et al., 2020a, p. 174). Parallel to using social media some participants occasionally engaged in offline street dealing, as illustrated by Kristian (20), who sold cannabis and cocaine:

"*So, we've done it [sold] mostly on Snapchat, but we've also done it the old-fashioned way, with seeking out people on the street, looking for people who look like they liked to smoke a bit, and have some fun*".

Additionally, some participants also advertised and communicated through traditional text-messages (SMS). In Denmark, and most likely in most countries, the social media drug market has in large part grown out of the phone-based delivery market. Rather than social media replacing the phone-based market, many drug sellers in Denmark today use a diversified selling strategy where they operate with parallel social media- and analogue phone-based modes of selling. Sellers' use of such multichannel retailing is done to cater for the many people who use drugs, and who became accustomed to the phone-based mode of buying, and still prefer this option or who routinely shifts between buying from phone lines and social media (see Søgaard, 2019). Many so-called "social media drug dealers" are thus in practice not technological exclusionists, but rather technological diversifiers, and the same can be said about their modes of selling. As further evidence of the overlaps and interconnections between the phone- and the social media market, many participants, when discussing their drug sales via social media, simply referred to this as running "phones" or "sales-phones", indicating a spillover of linguistic terms which originated among and is still used by so-called "ring and bring" drug sellers (see Søgaard et al., 2019). For the drug sellers in this study, it did not make sense, as is often done in much research, to draw clear cut distinctions between selling via social media, apps, or SMS. Rather, they saw the entire phone as one medium for customer contact and marketing, as illustrated by Abdi (23) in the following quote:

"I'm talking about sales-phones in general, that is [sales] through social media, through delivery services, the whole system. It doesn't matter if it's text [SMS] or Snapchat or whatever".

Many participants also described methods of attracting new customers by exploiting existing customers' (offline) social networks, by encouraging customers to share their profiles both online and through offline word-of-mouth, or by promising existing customers discounts or even free drugs if they helped recruiting new customers.

Much research emphasizes that drug sales via social media are firmly localized (e.g. Bancroft, 2023). In line with this, the interview data showed that sellers' offline local situatedness influenced the degree to which they used online marketing strategies. While use of proactive online marketing was very pronounced among participants residing in larger towns and cities, with a high level of competition from other drug sellers, this seemed to be less so for participants, who lived in smaller towns and villages, as illustrated by Peter (24):

"*[…] I always had more customers than I had product. So, I had no difficulty selling it. It was more about getting enough [product] to actually sell. So, I didn't have a reason to do any extra advertising and stuff like that [online] to get more customers. Again, I was more or less the only one selling there*".

The physical offline contexts also impacted participants' ability to sell and meet with customers. Many dealers today offer mobile delivery of drugs, why sellers do not need to "own" particular trading hotspots to the same extent as in traditional street dealing. This, however, does not mean that competition around territorial ownership has completely disappeared. The ability to offer delivery is still, in some areas, governed by local offline power-structures (see Søgaard et al., 2019). This was evident in much of the interview data, but especially in the case of Anna (27). Where Anna lived, several other dealers already operated, and she explained that before expanding her business to sell via social media, it was important for her to get an overview of competitors. In doing this, she utilized both on- and offline means. She used Snapchat's search function to locate other sellers in her area, and offline she reached out to friends in her social network, who might know who was dealing locally. While Anna was a woman in a drug market dominated by men, having family ties to prominent figures of a national gang, she had close connections to local hardmen. After acquiring knowledge about local competitors, Anna reached out to these dealers via Snapchat to set up meetings, where she would bring muscle power in form of several of her big male friends, because as she explained:

"Because then it's like making it clear to them [existing dealers]: 'Hey, I'm getting started in the north part of the town too'. Or 'You know what, I think we should team up, or I'll come and wipe you out'".

Other participants reported using similar on- and offline strategies before expanding their businesses into other local areas or neighboring towns. These cases indicate how internet-mediated drug sales at times also involves strategic use of "street capital" (Sandberg & Pedersen, 2011) as well as "social criminal capital" (Fader, 2016), in the form of offline social relations to local (prominent) crime-involved persons, to be able to conduct actual drug-for-money transactions in physical localities.

Recruiting employees

For some participants, hiring helpers and employees was crucial to the everyday running of their business. This could be for tasks such as storing drugs, working as drug runners, laundering money, conducting long-distance transport of bulk quantities, renting cars, repackaging and preparing the drugs for resale and many other things.

Some participants described using social media platforms to recruit employees. Andrei (29), who sold oxycontin, tramadol and benzodiazepines, described how finding "external" storage was done easily this way:

> "*It was nothing more than posting a story on Snapchat or write a message on Telegram or Signal, saying: 'If someone would like to earn a little extra money, they are welcome to help out a little for a while' […]. It's amazing how many people are willing to do that, to be honest. There are many, many, many, quite ordinary people… It has been everything from people I know, to people I have no idea who the hell are, who are willing to earn a few extra 1000 kroner for just storing something for you, right?*".

In a similar fashion, Abdi (26) also utilized online recruiting:

> "*When I was looking for employees, I did the same as with my advertising [of drugs]. I made job-ads on Snapchat [posting stories], where I wrote: 'Looking for a driver'*".

Observational data showed that job-ads were also present on Telegram and Facebook, where the larger groups also functioned as job-posting bulletin boards. Similar to studies showing how individuals involved in other types of cybercrime tend to recruit helpers from their local neighborhoods (see e.g., Leukfeldt & Roks, 2021; Lusthaus & Varese, 2017), the interview data revealed that many participants, who were eager to hire employees, also recruited from their offline networks. Rasmus (25), who sold cannabis and cocaine, explained that trust and knowledge were key:

> "*There were a lot of people looking for drivers [online], but it wasn't something that I did. You had to know the person well in advance […]. It was important that they were decent people, who had something between their ears, who could handle situations and who had a clean criminal record, so no one were recruited that way [online] at all. It usually had to be people I knew and trusted*".

Participants, who recruited offline, would mainly employ trusted friends or acquaintances. Others recruited more broadly from their local neighborhood, as Mikkel (23), who sold cocaine, explained when asked if he recruited online:

> "*No, we keep our circle narrow. We didn't find people online. We found people on the street, you know? We met people and kept an eye on them, [to see] whether they were stable. For example, if I see someone who has a driver's license, and stays off drugs, and can keep his head down, you know? And just wants to make a little extra money and stuff, then I just keep an eye on him*".

Similar to online recruitment strategies, offline recruitment also included hiring drug customers. In offline recruitment, participants would however only ask long-time loyal customers, and not just anyone on their customer-list. A key reason why some participants only recruited offline, was that this was believed to be less likely to attract attention from police, as Mikkel explained:

> "*I think the open [online] display of something like that [recruiting and advertising] … I think that is totally stupid. Then you might as well call a judge and say: 'I do this', you know? Then you might as well just snitch on yourself, I'd say. Because every time you do something like that, the chances get higher that the police will spot you*".

Importantly, both interview and observational data showed that it is not always the sellers who are the instigators. Customers also seek employment online by making posts in the larger groups on Facebook or Telegram, offering their service, as e.g. drug-runners, debt-collectors or helping with storage. Several participants also reported how friends, acquaintances, and customers would inquire about job opportunities:

> "*I have people who ask me every time I sell to them: 'Hello, instead of [you] selling by foot, I can drive for you*'" (Andreas, 16, cannabis, LSD, benzodiazepines, and ecstasy).

> "*We also sometimes had some of our customers offering that we could borrow their apartment [to deal from], if they could get a bit [of drugs] for it*" (Kristian, 20, cannabis and cocaine).

While other studies have raised concern that online modes of recruiting employees can have serious drift potential for users buying drugs via social media (Demant & Aagesen, 2022), this study indicates that recruitment into various aspects of drug dealing via social media platforms is very much, if not predominantly, an offline activity.

Wholesale drug sourcing

Combinations of online and offline spheres were also central to participants' sourcing of bulk quantities of drugs to be resold. Only two participants sourced drugs from cryptomarkets, primarily psychedelics, and this way of sourcing played a very marginal role compared to the offline modes that these two participants predominantly sourced drugs (cf. van der Sanden et al., 2023b). Most participants sourced drugs from connections in their offline social networks. Several, for instance, stated that knowing people from the local drug milieu was crucial for buying bulk quantities at a good price. This could be friends or relatives also involved in drug businesses or other larger-scale local sellers. Several participants described how having offline social connections could "open doors" and grant them access to better deals and a larger variety of drugs. As Noah (24) explained when asked how he sourced cannabis:

> "*It was people who had been in the game longer than I had. It's like, the longer you're in that game, the more contacts and stuff you build up*".

Similarly, Emil (21), who primarily sold cocaine, amphetamine and cannabis, explained how he and his associate, were able to access a larger array of drugs, through his childhood friend Søren who was affiliated with a national biker gang. This enabled them to be competitive and better cater for their customers' desires:

> "*We could get our hands on everything because we had Søren, right? So, if people were looking for something special, like mushrooms, then we could drive to [name of city], because Søren knew someone [who sold there]*".

The importance of offline affiliations was also key, when it came to gaining access to bulk suppliers in hidden private groups on e.g. Facebook and Telegram. In recent years, Facebook officials have become better at moderating illegal content, making groups where drugs are on offer harder to locate through searching (Demant & Aagesen, 2022). Given their increased hidden nature, getting access to sales groups with bulk suppliers is therefore often premised on getting someone, who is already in a group, to either invite and/or vouch for you (see also van der Sanden et al., 2022b). Participants described how being invited into closed groups by friends meant they were able to expand their array of drugs. Viktor (22), who initially sold cannabis, for instance, explained how his business quickly evolved to include amphetamine, cocaine, and benzodiazepines after he got invited by relatives to a hidden group on Facebook:

> "*I got invited into these Facebook groups, by my older brother and my cousin who have been deeply involved in the criminal environment in [name of city], so they had some contacts there. It was easy for me, because they [the suppliers in the online groups] knew me as the little brother. So I quickly got access to some people where I could buy larger quantities and also buy on credit, because my brother knew them. He had a name [in criminal circles], so it was quite easy for me to start*".

Some participants utilized a combination of offline social networks and online possibilities. Andrei (29), for instance, combined offline sourcing with opportunities created through their social media profiles. He explained how he and his associate would sometimes get access to oxycontin by paying friends and acquaintances to go get prescriptions from their doctor, but also by turning online to their customers:

> "*We also sometimes just put up a post, or a story, on our Snapchat, asking 'Is there anyone who wants to earn 1000 kroner, just to go to the doctor quickly?' Everyone wants that, of course*".

A few participants, who ran smaller-scale businesses, described how they would use social media platforms to locate other larger dealers, from whom they bought bulk quantities. Oskar (28) who sold cannabis, for instance, described how he and his associate used the search function on Snapchat to get in contact with other dealers who could supply them:

> "*[…] and then you end up getting hold of two or three contacts who actually answers, and then you say: 'Hey, I'm going to need this and that', and if they can't get it themselves, quite often they are quite nice and help, [saying]: 'Well, I have a contact who can get it, because that's how I get it myself'*".

The above shows how the participants sourced drugs for resale in a myriad of ways, often through combinations of on- and offline spheres and networks. For many, albeit the marketing of drugs is done through online means, their access to drugs is often rooted in offline connections.

Discussion

Tzanetakis and South (2023) have argued that digital drug markets should not be conceptualized in isolation, but rather as embedded in wider societal digital transformations. Complementing this assertion, in this article, we have argued that one way to further advance our understanding of so-called "digital drug markets" is to avoid online-siloing, and instead explore how these markets are often embedded in offline local contexts and realities. We have done this by investigating the hybrid online/offline nature of much drug sales via social media, and by suggesting that most current drug markets, including cryptomarkets, are in fact hybrid to a greater or lesser extent. In the analysis, we showed how many sellers start by dealing offline and gradually drift into drug sales mediated by social media. While the internet offers drug sellers new opportunities to expand their business, this, however, does not mean that sales via social media totally replace offline sales. Many sellers are not technological exclusionists but rather adopt a multi-channel approach where they, aside from dealing via social media, occasionally or regularly continue also to deal through in person and analogue means. Findings also showed how geography shapes sellers' online marketing behavior, and how local offline power dynamics influence sellers' ability to build and expand their online businesses. Lastly, we showed how offline as well as online networks play a crucial role in sellers' hiring of helpers, and in their wholesale sourcing of drugs to be marketed on social media platforms. Our findings thus support Coomber's point that "[a]ny one "drug market" is in fact a nest of intersecting and sometimes interconnected drug markets with differing dynamics dependent on a range of variables" (2015, p. 11). Our findings also have several analytical, conceptual, and methodological implications for how we investigate digitally mediated drug sales, moving forward.

We fully acknowledge the importance of documenting and analyzing activities in online spheres. However, given that much current research on internet-facilitated drug dealing is underpinned by techno-centric conceptualizations, where drug trading activities are divided into different types of "markets" based on the key technology used (i.e. street-markets, phone-markets, social media-markets, online-markets), there is a risk of (static) silo-thinking (Søgaard et al., 2019), which blinds us from paying sufficient attention to the interactions and interconnections between different online platforms (Childs et al., 2020a), and especially from exploring links between online and offline spheres. We suggest that one way to develop a more holistic understanding of contemporary drug trading is to shift our attention away from a fixation on technology, and instead adopt a more person-, activity- and network-centered approach. Such an approach not only appreciates the blended reality of post-modern life, it also encourages researchers to focus on continuities and on connections, interactions, relations, influences and activities as these flow in and out of virtual and offline spaces and give shape to illicit drug sales.

Developing a more holistic and less techno-centric understanding of present-day drug dealing also requires a more reflexive and critical use of language. Often used terms and phrases such as "online drug sales", "selling drugs *on* social media", and "app dealing", are not unproblematic when applied to the context of drug sales involving social media. Not only can such terms/phrases be essentializing in that they highlight specific elements – communication and marketing via online platforms – as the quintessential characteristics of this type of drug selling, at the expense of other important activities and relations, as we have shown. Empirically, such phrases/terms are also often inherently flawed. For instance, if we define "sale" narrowly as a money-for-drug-exchange it is often outright false to claim that drugs are sold *on* social media platforms, when in fact the actual transaction takes place offline. If sale is defined broadly, as a larger process of activities and exchanges, it seems odd that sale, in much of the existing literature, is often narrowly associated only with online marketing and communication, when in fact, as illustrated in this article, it involves a range of other activities, relations and exchanges that often span the online-offline divide. Instead, it would often be more analytically fruitful and empirically correct to use phrases such as "hybrid drug dealing", "to sell drugs *via* social media", "drug dealing involving social media", "drug sales facilitated by social media" or "digitally facilitated drug trading".

An exploration of the hybrid or blended online/offline nature of drug sales also has methodological implications. As argued by Gibbs and Hall (2021), if we are to understand how subjects and everyday activities drift in and out of online and offline spaces, researchers must do the same to elicit data. Gibbs and Hall (2021) suggest that applying a connective (ethnographic) approach, with a specific focus on online/offline interconnections, would be useful. Concurrently, we suggest that such a connective approach could imply that when researchers interview individuals participating in online mediated drug dealing, they do not merely or primarily ask questions about the participants' online activities – as is often the case today – but equally so ask about their broader lives, their offline (drug) crimes and about the connections (and contrasts) between on- and offline spheres, as was done by the first author in this study. A connective approach could also include a methodological integration of digital and traditional ethnography (Berry, 2018; Moretti, 2024). Such approaches would enable researcher to better explore the complex reality of current illicit markets, including how sellers merge on- and offline spheres when dealing drugs via social media platforms.

Limitations

The findings are based on a relatively small ($n = 25$) sample of people who sell drugs via social media and on their self-reported experiences. Participants were recruited roughly 50/50 via the different on- and offline recruiting methods, and most were of male gender and relatively young (median age 22,8). We have no way of knowing if our findings would have been different had more sellers been recruited via the different social media platforms and if more sellers were older and/or of female orientation. Most importantly, however, while our study provides insights into the hybrid nature of drugs sales in a Danish context, we acknowledge that much drug sales is inherently localized in nature (Bancroft, 2023), and that it is possible that the specific linkages between online- and offline spheres might play out differently in other contexts. Despite these limitations, we hope to have provided empirical, analytical, conceptual, and methodological inspiration for future

research into the hybrid nature of contemporary drug markets.

Conclusion

This article aimed at bridging the divide between "on-" and "offline" drug dealing, by exploring the hybrid nature of drug dealing via social media. We illustrated how many sellers are not technological exclusionists, how many adopt a multichannel sales approach involving both on- and offline means, and how combinations of online and offline spheres are central to sellers' recruitment of drug laborers and to their bulk sourcing of drugs for resales. Our findings point to the importance of replacing traditional techno-centric silo-thinking with a more holistic approach, and in the article, we offered analytical, conceptual, and methodological reflections on how future research might be better able to capture the blended reality of most current drug markets, including cryptomarkets.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Nina Tvede Korshøj: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Thomas Friis Søgaard:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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