DM for Details 😉

Selling Drugs in the Age of Social Media

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volteface

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Executive Summary

Introduction

In this report, Volteface aims to bridge the gap in understanding of how social media is being used as a marketplace for illicit drugs and the impact this is having on young people – social media's primary user group.

This report examines how prevalent this phenomenon is, which platforms are most likely to host this activity, what drugs are being advertised, how the platforms are being used, and what impact this is having on young people's wellbeing, as well as the challenges facing social media regulators and law enforcement.

Methodology

This research used a mixed methodology of both qualitative and quantitative research. To ascertain the prevalence of this phenomenon, Volteface commissioned Survation in January 2019 to conduct a nationally representative poll of 2,006 16-to-24 year olds.

An unrepresentative ethnographic trawl was conducted on Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat – the platforms on which the poll suggested that drug distribution activity is most prevalent. This involved setting up accounts that observed and recorded evidence of drugs being advertised and sold through these platforms. The researchers did not communicate with any social media users during the trawl and all published screenshots have been anonymised.

Volteface also invited relevant stakeholders to take part in interviews, an online survey and focus groups to evaluate the impact of drug selling and buying through social media platforms. A total of 24 interviews were conducted, five online survey responses were received and 30 young people aged 13 to 17 participated in four focus groups.

Key Findings

Prevalence

One in four young people (24%) reported that they see illicit drugs advertised for sale on social media – a significant figure considering how recent a phenomenon this is.

Of those who reported seeing illicit drugs advertised for sale on social media:

- 56% saw drugs being advertised on Snapchat, 55% on Instagram and 47% on Facebook.
- 63% saw cannabis being advertised - making it the most commonly seen drug advertised for sale.
- Cocaine was the second drug most commonly seen advertised (26%), followed by MDMA/ Ecstasy (24%), Xanax (20%), Nitrous Oxide (17%) and Codeine/Lean (16%).
- 72% said that they see illegal drugs advertised for sale on social media sites or apps once a month or more.
- 36% were not concerned by seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media. Worryingly, this percentage increased the younger the respondent. 33% aged 18+ were not concerned, but this jumped to 48% for under-18s.

The data indicated that there is an association between frequency of social media use and the likelihood of seeing drugs advertised for sale. The baseline of seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media is 24%. This increases to 29% of respondents who use social media every hour, compared to 14% of respondents who use social media once a day.

How social media platforms are used

The ethnographic trawl of Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram revealed how drugs are advertised and bought through social media platforms. Typically, dealers would advertise their drugs by posting, videos, photos and statuses onto their social media feeds or 'stories' showing what drugs they have available, the price and quantity they are selling them for, and notifying users when they are open for business.

It was observed that buyers would then contact the dealers by either commenting below their posts or contacting them in private via the platform's direct messaging function or encrypted messaging sites, such as WhatsApp or Wickr. Drugs could be exchanged in person, either with the buyer going to meet the dealer or vice versa, or by postal delivery. The trawl revealed that online payment services such as PayPal were used if the drugs were delivered by post.

Social media's in-built design features has helped dealers to expand and professionalise their businesses. The 'search bar' function can help dealers identify customers, hashtags can assist in their posts getting a wider reach, dealers can advertise their products and availability through pictures and videos and the 'suggested friends' function allows dealers to be suggested to new potential buyers.

Impact

Witnessing

Seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media may normalise drug use, interviews with young people and professionals revealed. The evidence base corroborates this, for example, the frequency of seeing gambling advertisements plays a strong role in the normalisation of gambling in sports.[1] Additionally, the evidence suggests that advertising is more persuasive and effective when conducted in familiar settings, such as on people's social media feeds,[2] and studies have shown that paid social media advertising has an impact on consumer buying behaviour.[3]

It is concerning that many young people in the UK are bombarded by these advertisements but are unlikely to be in receipt of good quality drugs education.

These platforms provide opportunities for dealers to build trust with potential customers, with young people highlighting that they are more likely to see an account advertising drugs as a 'friend', rather than as a 'dealer'. This can leave young people vulnerable to exploitation, as well as reduce any trepidations they may have around buying drugs.

The ethnographic trawl revealed that dealers can advertise their associated lifestyles to their social media networks, for example, by posting pictures of luxury items and cash – a technique that can be used to recruit and control victims.[4] There are reports that social media is changing how the county lines model operates as there is no longer the need to transport children from cities to rural areas to sell drugs, as children who live in those rural areas can be groomed using social media.

Buying

Social media has made it easier for young people to buy drugs. Dealers can be found in an accessible way through platforms and without young people needing to have an existing drug user network. Even if a person already had access to a network, it was found that social media provides widened access to a range of dealers and drugs. Once a network is found, social media's in-built design features can then help expand this network. For example, the 'suggested friend' function can recommend other dealers. Greater accessibility can lead to an increase in: drug use, the likelihood of people starting to use drugs and access to a wider variety of drugs.

It was suggested during interviews that buying drugs through social media could be seen as some form of harm reduction. The public facing nature of social media incentivises dealers to build-up their online reputation as users are able to connect more easily, promote dealer accounts and leave public comments if they are unhappy with the service. This can make dealers more accountable to their customer base, though it would be relatively

easy for dealers to provide fake reviews of their products or delete negative reviews.

Young people also highlighted that they could 'vet' dealers before purchasing drugs from them by scrolling through their social media profile. There is no way of knowing if the information presented on social media is real or accurate and there is a risk of young people meeting up with strangers who they feel they have 'vetted'.

The public-facing nature of social media also leaves buyers more exposed and vulnerable as dealers are able to access their profiles which may contain personal or identifiable information.

Social media can remove some harms by reducing face-to-face interactions with drug dealers, particularly if the drugs are sent via post. However, there is no guarantee that, where physical contact between buyers and dealers does occur, it is less safe than it would have been without the use of social media, particularly if they are meeting with strangers rather than people recommended through their peer networks.

Selling

Interviews revealed that social media platforms have made drug dealing easier to get into and sustain as social media provides a familiar and easy-to-use interface that gives dealers the option to operate anonymously, without having to engage in face-to-face interactions. The interconnectedness of social media is beneficial for sellers as they can increase their exposure and expand their client base. However, this visibility can lead to dealers, particularly those who are young, forgetting the legal risks attached to supplying drugs.

Concerns were raised, particularly by professionals who have worked with vulnerable young people, that as customer bases quickly expand, selling drugs through social media can escalate into large scale dealing. It was also highlighted that social media can often make it harder to stop once dealers have built up an online reputation and become accustomed to a particular lifestyle. Moreover, social media features leave exploited young people vulnerable to being tracked and monitored by criminal gangs.

Lastly, several interviewees stated that selling drugs through social media can reduce certain risks from traditional methods of selling, contributing to the argument that this constitutes a form of harm reduction. Most notably, where interactions take place virtually and away from the streets which may reduce risk of violence. However, if this encourages more people to become involved in the drug trade, this would increase harm overall.

Regulation and Enforcement

Volteface's research reveals that, among the police, there is a lack of awareness and understanding of the role that social media plays in drug dealing. Additionally, the use of ever evolving coded language and emojis can make it challenging for police and social media platforms to identify accounts that are suspected of supplying drugs. Volteface also identified that there is a reluctance from young people to report the content in question.

Encryption and VPN technology can make it difficult to trace dealers once suspicions have been raised. Moreover, it was revealed that there is currently a lack of information sharing between police and social media platforms which makes it harder for them both to enforce this activity. Additionally, even if social media platforms were to shut down one account, it cannot be claimed that one dealer has been taken out, as the dealer can simply set up a new account.

The police and social media companies have an essential role to play in disrupting and regulating illicit drug supply on social media platforms, but Volteface' research has shown that they will face greater obstacles than those posed by traditional drug dealing.

Volteface commends the Government's proposals to address this issue through the introduction of its Online Harms White Paper, which this research indicates is affecting a significant number of young people.

However, Volteface is concerned that the white paper's proposals may fail to adequately address illicit drug supply on social media. Notably, social media platforms would only have to report and respond to illegal activity within their own platform, which may lead to under-reporting. Additionally, it remains unclear whether companies would have an obligation to report illegal activity to the police. Volteface identifies challenges that the Government may face when implementing the white paper's proposals, for example defining private communications, what constitutes selling illegal drugs and how users could be encouraged to report this activity.

Conclusion

Social media is providing drug dealers with easy-to-use and familiar platforms that they can utilise to find and build trust with customers, advertise their business, and disguise their activities. Concerningly, Volteface's research has shown that dealers have been quick to take up this opportunity, with one in four young people now seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media.

The emergence of drug markets on social media is not simply a transfer of harmful activity from the offline world onto the online world. It is a new problem which presents new threats. Regulators and enforcers will not be able to tackle this new, illicit online drug market and minimise the harms associated with it unless innovative approaches are put in place.

Recommendations

1. Volteface's polling of 16-to-24 year olds has shown that one in four see drugs advertised for sale online and the majority of what they see is cannabis. Cannabis is the UK's most commonly used drug and leaving it unregulated places a £2.5 billion market into the hands of criminal gangs who have made full use of the market opportunities provided by social media. Cannabis legalisation is the policy which would be most effective at alleviating the problems outlined in this report, by: tackling the illicit market, restricting access to underage use and regulating the products available to buy. With the majority of the UK in favour of reform[5] and more countries abandoning prohibition, the legalisation of cannabis should now be seen as an inevitability. A taskforce of experts should be appointed by the Government to recommend a world leading legislative and regulatory framework.

2. The scope of the Government's Online Harms regulatory framework should include Snapchat, Facebook and Instagram, and any other social media platforms known to be hosting drug distribution activity.

3. The Government should introduce a regulatory requirement for social media companies to monitor activity on their sites to ensure that they are aware of how language, emojis and design features may be used to facilitate drug dealing. This information, along with accounts suspected of drug dealing, should be shared with the police.

4. Social media platforms have the ability to determine if other accounts have been opened or used by a banned device and these powers should be used to ensure that multiple accounts or new accounts are blocked.

5. The Government and social media companies should undertake representative research examining why young people are reluctant to report accounts suspected of drug dealing, what an accessible reporting function should look like, and what would incentivise young people to report online drug dealing.

6. Volteface recommends that the Government's 'Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)

and Health Education' statutory guidance should advise that schools have honest conversations with young people about the drug dealing they may witness on social media and educate them on how they can stay safe online, as well as the risks and consequences attached to buying and selling drugs through social media.[6]

7. It should become more widely adopted practice for individuals who have been convicted of large scale drug dealing to be banned from using social media as part of their probation order, when it is clear that social media is particularly relevant to their business model.

8. Where police apprehend people who buy drugs through social media, schemes should be in place which divert them away from the criminal justice system and into awareness programmes and support services. Additionally, where the police find evidence of children buying or selling drugs through social media, this should be treated as an indicator of vulnerability, not criminality, and appropriately dealt with as a safeguarding concern.

9. The Government should commission national guidance that advises police on how they should best respond to and disrupt illegal drug markets on social media platforms.

10. Any platforms known to be hosting illicit drug distribution activity should have a responsibility to make a significant investment in schemes which address the harms caused by drugs.

11. Regular research should be conducted which examines the size of drug markets on social media platforms and trends within these markets.

12. Social media platforms that host illicit drug distribution activity should implement a 'Trusted Flagger Programme', that was developed by YouTube to help provide robust tools for individuals, government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to report concerning content.

Introduction

The 21st Century is undoubtedly the age of social media. Increasing connectivity and engagement across continents, digital platforms have enabled communication and participation within and between societies like never before. But, for all of its benefits, social media also has a darker side.

A core part of the daily life of most teenagers and young adults, 93% of 16-to-24 year olds use social media.[7] However, increasingly, concerns have been raised around such use,[8] including questions on how social media platforms have become a marketplace for illicit drugs.

In Volteface's seminal 2018 report *The Children's Inquiry*, interviews conducted with young people exposed how cannabis – the UK's most commonly used illegal drug – can be easily accessed through social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram.[9]

But, as a relatively new phenomenon, on which a large body of academic research is lacking, much of the discussion around social media's role in drug dealing has so far been anecdotal.

This report aims to bridge that gap.

DM for Details: Selling Drugs in the Age of Social Media is a robust examination, using both qualitative and quantitative research, of how social media is being used as a marketplace for illicit drugs, where drugs are advertised and supplied through online platforms.

It explores the real-life consequences of drug dealing invading online spaces through social media platforms and applications, how these are being used to advertise and supply drugs, and the effects of this on social media's primary user group – young people. Also under examination are the challenges facing regulators and enforcement.

Volteface's research includes a revealing new poll shedding light on how much of an issue this is among 16-to-24 year olds, a detailed ethnographic trawl of the social media platforms on which drugs are most commonly seen advertised for sale, and interviews and focus groups with a broad range of young people and professionals to ascertain the impact of this new phenomenon.

With the evidence it has uncovered, Volteface makes the case that drug dealing through social media is an increasingly prevalent and urgent issue. The internet is providing young people with easy access to a wider range of drugs than they would have otherwise and presenting dealers with a quicker, more efficient way of contacting those to sell to. Worryingly, the young people who are most vulnerable to this do not appear to be concerned by what is happening.

Volteface believes that education through open, pragmatic conversations on the risks and dangers posed by social media – particularly in relation to drugs – and how these might be best confronted are required as a priority. While 'reporting' functions are available on social media platforms, Volteface believes these must be made more accessible and their use encouraged as this research suggests that young people are unlikely to use them.

Since cannabis is the drug most commonly advertised for sale on social media, this report recommends that significant consideration should be given to its legalisation and regulation. Indeed, the implementation of a legal, regulated market that outcompetes the current illicit cannabis market – which is now flourishing further on social media – would be the best solution.

In the years ahead, the use of social media by young people will continue to evolve – and with it the supply of illicit drugs. Politicians and policy-makers must ensure that they are one step ahead and that these platforms, which have transformed how each one of us communicates, are not subverted for harmful purposes. Action is required sooner rather than later.

Literature Review

A review of existing literature conducted for this report revealed there to be a limited amount of research into how social media platforms facilitate illicit drug supply.

Only two studies have examined this phenomenon within a UK context in recent years.

One of these is a Scottish Government report on the community experiences of organised crime, which gave some consideration to how social media platforms are facilitating drug dealing.[10]

The second, a paper published in the International Journal of Drug Policy, specifically focused on how smartphone-enabled social media and messaging applications ('apps') are used in the drug economy.[11] The only other material published on this issue are newspaper articles[12] and one BBC documentary, *Stacey Dooley Investigates: Kids Selling Drugs Online.*

Study 1: Community Experiences of Serious Organised Crime in Scotland[13]

In 2018, the Scottish Government published research examining the community experiences of organised crime in Scotland, focusing on people who may have an awareness of serious organised crime (SOC) in their communities and have been affected by it, either directly or indirectly.

It collected data from 188 individuals through interviews or focus groups. The sample included: expert interviews, community participants, business participants, statutory participants, people with lived experience of SOC, and stakeholders in diffuse SOC.

The research was unique as "it sought to move beyond police and law enforcement perceptions of organised crime to engage a range of community voices".[14]

The study identified social media as having a significant impact on the drug dealing landscape through the facilitation of new drug markets. It stated that the rise of social media has:

> *"Collapsed the distances between suppliers and markets, allowing local criminal actors to readily source illicit commodities for themselves via online sources and social media, and to use similar media to discreetly distribute and sell such commodities to local consumers. This allows for the emergence of small criminal enterprises at a local level, running local illicit markets, whilst simultaneously being able to trade and import globally."*

The research also revealed that social media has widened the net of young people who can be recruited as drug dealers on an ad hoc basis via such platforms, rather than from territory-based gangs.

The study raised concerns that dealers will exploit the use of social media encryption, which creates barriers to intelligence gathering. To this end, Snapchat was identified as the social media platform which is particularly challenging. Criminal justice professionals highlighted that they "do not have the resources or capabilities to deal with highly mobile and/or technology-enabled criminality".

As a qualitative study, it was not able to identify how widespread illicit drug supply is via social media platforms or what drugs are most commonly being advertised. Nor could it explain how these platforms are being used and the experience of buying and selling drugs through them.

The report made no recommendations on what action could be taken by police or other stakeholders to address the problems relating to social media.

Study 2: #Drugsforsale – An exploration of the use of social media and encrypted messaging apps to supply and access drugs[15]

In early 2019, the International Journal of Drug Policy published a paper exploring the use of social media and encrypted messaging apps to supply and access drugs – the first piece of published academic research of its kind.

It used three ways of collecting data: an international online survey of 358 drug users who had used or considered using apps to access drugs, 20 'rapid' interviews, and 27 in-depth interviews. Survey respondents were predominantly from Australia, with only 4.7% (17) of survey respondents from the UK. Additionally, the 'rapid' interviews took place in Australia but the majority of the in-depth interviews were conducted in the UK.

Of the 358 drug users surveyed who had used or considered using apps to access drugs, 288 identified as 'app users' (people who use apps to access drugs), and 70 as having considered using apps to buy drugs.

Just under half, 44%, indicated that they had first used apps to access drugs within the last year, suggesting that it is a relatively new phenomenon. However, despite its increased use, the study stated that social supply clearly still dominates for many groups and was identified as the preferred supply method by those surveyed.

The survey showed that Snapchat (76.1%) and Instagram (21.6%) were the apps most commonly used to buy drugs. Others such as Wickr, Kik, WhatsApp, Facebook/Facebook Messenger, Telegram, Tinder, Whisper, Grinder, Yik Yak, Twitter, GroupMe, and Signal were highlighted, but weren't as commonly used.

The survey revealed that cannabis was the most common drug bought through these apps (64.5%), followed by LSD (7.9%) and ecstasy/MDMA (6.5%), mushrooms (4.7%), cocaine, (3.7%), and prescription stimulants (3.3%). Prescription opioids, prescription benzodiazepines, heroin, ketamine and crystal methamphetamine were all under 2%.

Respondents were asked what the advantages were of using social media to buy drugs, as opposed to offline markets. These included: it was more convenient to organise a transaction, the speed at which drugs can be obtained, safety, quality, reliability and predictability. Interviews revealed access to a wider variety of substances was one of "the best feature of apps". Availability, convenience and immediacy of online drug markets provide another important motivation for customers. Users who were interviewed suggested that apps were much easier than the 'dark web' to navigate.

Another key advantage noted relates to the notion that images and videos posted on social media platforms and sent via encrypted messaging services give buyers the chance to assess the quality and safety of drugs. Purchasers were commonly motivated by a desire to transact anonymously on encrypted messaging services such as Wickr and WhatsApp, without the fear of violence many associate with face-to-face trading. Additionally, the structure of using apps, most notably that you can be instantly connected to thousands of people, to buy and sell drugs attracts further trade and income for dealers and there is a review system in place which promotes confidence around drug quality.

However, some respondents said they had anxieties when using apps to access drugs – that they were of poor quality, fake or the incorrect weight. Additionally, those who had considered using an app to buy drugs were most concerned about "law enforcement being aware of the transaction", with 65% of respondents stating "a potential encounter with law enforcement" as the most common rationale for choosing not to use apps.

The study asked interview respondents about

the process of obtaining drugs via social media channels, with respondents stating that dealers post photos and/or videos of the drugs on offer and users are able to directly message sellers on these apps to enquire further.

The study also found that app-mediated supply transactions commonly take place 'face-to-face' at a local level through public meetings or home drop-offs. Apps most commonly facilitate offline supply, rather than act as a 'one-stop' virtual marketplace.

The paper concluded that drug supply through online apps is likely to grow, particularly among young people, and recommended that education around the possible risks of purchasing unknown substances from strangers on social media platforms is critical and urgent.

The study provides interesting details of the experiences of people who buy drugs on these platforms, including which social media platforms are most commonly used, which drugs are sold, and the process of how they are advertised.

However, as the survey specifically targeted people who have used or considered using apps to buy drugs, it is unable to gauge the scale of prevalence in the general population, and nor does it examine the experiences of those who witness drugs being advertised for sale. Additionally, the international sample survey was conducted mostly in the US, Australia and Canada, with only a small percentage of respondents from the UK, which makes it difficult to draw conclusions in relation to the UK.

Methodology

This research used a mixed methodology of commissioning a nationally representative poll, undertaking an ethnographic trawl of social media platforms, and inviting relevant stakeholders to take part in interviews, an online survey and focus groups.

A research advisory group was established to advise on design, delivery and ethics. The members were: a young person and an adult with lived experience, a director of a drugs education charity, a young person's drug and alcohol manager, and an academic. All had relevant experience relating to the research area.

Poll

In January 2019, Volteface commissioned Survation to poll 2,006 16-to-24 year olds (the age group most likely to use social media),[16] to ascertain the extent to which social media platforms have become a marketplace for illicit drugs.

The polling questions were generated from initial interviews with the research advisory group and evidence gathered from the literature review.

The poll asked respondents whether they had seen drugs advertised for sale; which platforms were being used; the frequency with which they were seeing illicit drugs advertised for sale; which drugs were being advertised, the impact of seeing drugs advertised for sale; and whether social media was taking over from more traditional ways of finding dealers.

Respondents were asked about their social media activity, which was defined as looking at social media sites or apps, uploading or sharing videos or photos online or sharing links to websites or online articles.[17] Social media sites included in the poll were: Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitter and YouTube. A 2018 Ofcom report identified that these are the platforms which 16-to-24 year olds are most likely to have a profile/ account on, compared to the average.[18] Facebook was also included in the poll as Ofcom reported that there are no differences by age in having a profile/ account on Facebook, compared to the average. All polling options are defined by Ofcom as 'social media'.[19]

An 'Other' option was also included to monitor whether there were any new applications that were being used to advertise drugs, though this option was only filled in by eight respondents. Applications such as WhatsApp were not included as options in the poll as these were identified by Ofcom as instant messaging apps, as opposed to publicly viewable social media.[20] As Wickr is also recognised as an instant messaging application it has been excluded from the poll.[21]

Illegal drugs categories were guided by the 'Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use Among Young People in England – 2016' survey for 11-to-15 year olds, and 'Drug Misuse: Findings from the 2017/18 Crime Survey for England and Wales' in relation to 16-to-24 year olds.

Ethnographic trawl of social media platforms

An ethnographic trawl, in which the researchers manually browsed online profiles and content, was conducted on Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat – the platforms identified by the poll's respondents as where they most commonly saw drugs advertised for sale.

The aim of the trawl was to gain an in-depth understanding of how social media platforms facilitate drug dealing. This was achieved by extensively browsing social media platforms and observing and recording evidence of illicit drug supply.

It was not intended for this to be representative of illicit drug supply as a whole. Rather, it would provide rich, experiential insights into this phenomenon.

Over the course of one month, researchers took screenshots of drugs advertised for sale and noted all activity in a research diary, including the language and emojis used by individuals selling or advertising drugs, the types of drugs sold, and exchanges between potential consumers and suspected dealers. Detail of how the researchers discovered posts advertising drugs is explored further in detail later in this 'How social media platforms are used' section of this report.

Screenshots were taken on a phone, then uploaded to a password-protected laptop for further analysis. Videos were also taken of users' stories or videos they had posted on their pages.

The researchers did not communicate with any of the users and the researchers did not respond when users contacted them through their covert social media accounts.

After consulting with the research advisory group, it was advised that it was not Volteface's role to bring to the police's attention accounts of suspected drug dealers encountered in this part of the research.[22] No empirical evidence was passed onto the police, which the researchers would only have done if they came across evidence of serious harm or risk of serious harm. This would have been immediately reported if they had.

Volteface decided to select generic, anonymised screenshots for publication as it is in the public interest to draw attention to how illicit drugs are advertised on social media platforms. To ensure effective anonymity, user names have been blurred in the screenshots published and none feature an identifiable person or location. Academic researchers have previously conducted digital ethnography on Snapchat, Facebook and Instagram and included screenshots in their paper.[23]

Overall, this report is designed to raise awareness of drug dealing on social media so that the public, law enforcement and regulators can better understand this emerging and prevalent issue. After consultation with the research advisory group, it was recommended(or posited) that the value gained from disclosing the details of the process by which illegal drugs are being advertised and sold through social media platforms, including publicising screenshots and language used by dealers, outweighed the arguments for not disclosing this.

Facebook

To begin the trawl of Facebook, the researchers set up a profile. Previous academic research has identified that it is standard practice for researchers to go on Facebook and other social media platforms and observe drug dealers' activity.[24]

The account was set to 'private' and appeared to be active, with the account holder joining and liking several pages relating to cannabis.

Instagram

The researchers set up a profile on Instagram in a similar way to Facebook. Initially, no other information was provided and the researchers struggled to gain access to private accounts that were suspected of dealing as these accounts appeared to be cautious of blank and inactive accounts, suspecting that they may belong to the police or law enforcement. After consulting with an adult with lived experience of interacting with sellers on Instagram, it was recommended that 'Flavour Chaser' was written in the bio with several emojis suggesting an interest in cannabis, to increase the number of follower requests and to help to convince those involved in the drug market that the account was credible.

The account followed those who seemed to have an interest in cannabis and searched hashtags which might relate to, or specifically mention, drugs. Once the researchers started recognising trends in language, which was documented in their research diary, it was easier to identify accounts suspected of selling or advertising drugs.

Snapchat

As Snapchat is a more private platform than Facebook or Instagram, it was challenging to connect to drug dealers without an existing network.

Snapchat usernames associated with illicit drug supply were identified through other social media platforms commonly associated with drug supply. These usernames were added through the Snapchat account set up for this research.

Snapchat has a popular feature called 'SnapMaps' which allows the account holder to see the location of individual users. Location services were disabled to ensure the researchers were not compromised.

The researchers did not engage in one-to-one conversations with individuals over Snapchat, including instances where users messaged the researchers asking why they were screenshotting their content.

Interviews and focus groups

A total of 24 interviews were conducted with teachers, parents, drug and alcohol practitioners, youth workers, police, and criminal justice professionals, and adults and young people who buy drugs through social media. Volteface recruited participants using its existing networks and through social media. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, a SurveyMonkey was created allowing people who had seen, bought or sold drugs to respond anonymously. Volteface received five SurveyMonkey survey responses.

Interviewees were given an information sheet and consent form, outlining the aims and details of the research, and were asked to sign, date and return them. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing flexibility for the interviewee to discuss in-depth areas of relevance to them or which they felt were pertinent to the research.

Focus groups were conducted in a: rural Key Stage Four Pupil Referral Unit, an inner city Year 12 Sixth Form, an inner city and suburban Year 12 youth group, and a suburban Independent Year 12 Sixth Form. In total, 30 young people participated in the focus groups. The demographic responses of the pupils in the focus groups were: 13-to-17 years old with a mean age of 16, 73% female / 27% male and 73% White / 26% BAME.

Those taking part in the focus groups were reminded at the beginning that all contributions were confidential and that they could withdraw at any time. No school staff were present during the focus groups, but it was disclosed to pupils that, if any welfare concerns were raised, this would be escalated to a member of staff. Pupils were asked a set list of questions, but there was flexibility for them to talk about issues that were meaningful or particularly relevant to them. Each participant received a £10 Amazon voucher for their time after the focus group was completed.

Prevalence

To investigate the extent to which social media platforms are being used as a marketplace for illicit drugs, Volteface commissioned a nationally representative poll of 16-to-24 year olds which aimed to discover: how many young people are seeing illicit drugs advertised for sale, how frequently they are seeing these drugs, which social media platforms are being used to advertise drugs, which illicit drugs are being advertised, how seeing illegal drugs advertised for sale on social media sites is making young people feel and if it leads to behavioural change, if young people had bought illegal drugs or knew people who had bought illegal drugs through social media, and which sources were the easiest and most difficult to obtain the contact details of a drug dealer.[25]

Due to the limited academic research in this area, initial interviews were conducted with six experts (professionals and those with lived experience) who helped Volteface formulate the polling questions. Other nationwide surveys and reports also helped inform survey responses including: the Crime Survey for England and Wales, the NHS survey 'Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use Among Young People in England – 2016' and Ofcom reports on social media usage.

Prevalence of seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media

Significantly, the poll identified that 1 in 4 (24%) young people, aged between 16 and 24, had seen illegal drugs advertised for sale on social media sites or apps.

This finding mirrors the Crime Survey for England and Wales in which 20% of 16-to-24 year olds said they had tried drugs in the last year.[26]

When considering the frequency of social media use, this 24% baseline increases to 29% of respondents who use social media every hour, compared to 14% of respondents who use social media once a day. This suggests that there is an association between frequency of social media use and the likelihood of seeing illicit drugs being advertised for sale. It should be noted that 39% of the sample use social media every hour.

The poll found that 18 and 19 year olds are the age group seeing drugs advertised for sale the most (29%). This was evenly distributed between gender and geographical location.

Those Volteface interviewed were given the key statistic that 1 in 4 (24%) of young people had seen illegal drugs advertised for sale on social media sites or apps. Some were shocked, particularly individuals who worked in the police, whilst others suggested it was quite low. Professionals who work with vulnerable young people thought that the statistic would be higher, indicating that this cohort are at greater risk.

> "I would be surprised if, over the next 12 months, if I work with any under 18 year olds that hasn't seen drugs on social media. But that's not to say that the national picture is 100%. That's just in my line of work it's 100%."
>
> *- Criminal Justice Youth Worker*

> "Taking it at face value obviously, I'm surprised it's that high. If the question was have you seen images or discussions around illicit drugs then I'd expect it to be higher. In terms of a genuine offer to sell, I'd be surprised if it was that high."
>
> *- Senior Police Officer*

The poll found that 72% of respondents who had seen illegal drugs advertised for sale on social media sites or apps said they saw them being advertised once a month or more, suggesting that it is not a one-off occurrence.

> "Young people tell me that they are constantly bombarded with social media – either requests from vendors or those sites which purport to expose scammers… it's pretty ubiquitous for lots of the targeted vulnerable young people that I'm working with, who already have, more or less, a foot in the world of substance use."
>
> *- Drug and alcohol practitioner*

Social media platforms

For those who had seen illegal drugs advertised for sale on social media, the three most common platforms were: Snapchat (56%), Instagram (55%) and Facebook (47%). Respondents also said they had seen drugs advertised for sale on Tumblr (8%), Twitter (19%) or YouTube (18%).

It was apparent that older people had seen illegal drugs advertised on Facebook, compared to younger groups. 26% of under-18s said they had seen illegal drugs advertised for sale on Facebook, compared to 53% of over-18s.

Seeing drugs advertised for sale on Snapchat was more common for under-18s, with 70% seeing them, compared to 54% of over-18s. Seeing drugs advertised for sale on Instagram was similar across all age groups.

Drugs being seen advertised for sale on Facebook was low in London (30%) and high in the North East (61%). For Instagram, London was significantly higher than the baseline (67%), with the North East lower than this (46%). For Snapchat, the North East was high (68%) and the East lower than the baseline (42%).

What drugs are being advertised?

Cannabis was the most common drug, with 63% of respondents saying they had seen it advertised for sale on social media. This mirrors the findings from Moyle et al's 2019 study.[27]

Cannabis was followed by cocaine (26%) and MDMA (24%).

Interestingly, Xanax and Codeine/Lean – prescription medication, use of which is reportedly on the rise in the UK[28] – had been seen by 20% and 16% respectively, despite there being little known on the prevalence of these substances in the UK. The ethnographic trawl also supported this as the researchers came across several profiles selling these substances frequently, particularly on Instagram. The figures contrast with Moyle et al's study[29] which found that only small percentages of respondents had seen any drug other than cannabis advertised.

Both Xanax and Codeine/Lean were seen more frequently than ketamine (13%). Some of the professionals Volteface interviewed found this surprising as these are emerging drugs. This could indicate that Xanax is more established than professionals are perhaps aware of. Furthermore, when comparing the statistics with usage data of 16-to-24 year olds from the Crime Survey for England and Wales, Ketamine is the fourth most commonly used drug by this age group. However, specific prescription medication is not included in these statistics.

Other substances that were seen by respondents were: nitrous oxide 17%, amphetamines 8%, crack cocaine 12%, heroin 8%, LSD/acid 16%, magic mushrooms 11%, steroids 14%, synthetic cannabinoids 11%, valium 11%, and tramadol 8%. Please see Figure 1 overleaf.

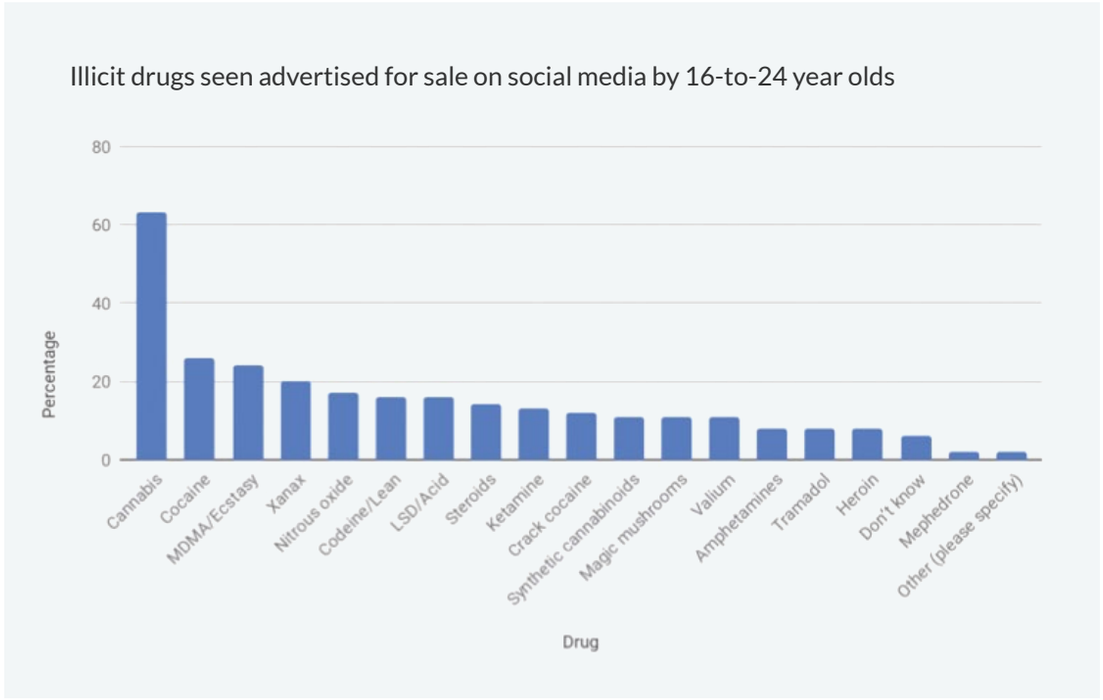


Figure 1: Illicit drugs seen advertised for sale on social media by 16-to-24 year olds

Whilst most of the drugs advertised on social media were seen similarly by females and males, there was a higher proportion of males who had seen 'harder' drugs for sale. For example, 16.3% and 10.3% of male respondents who reported seeing drugs advertised for sale online had respectively seen crack cocaine and heroin for sale, compared to 7.7% and 4.7% of females. But, more female respondents (23%) saw Xanax advertised for sale, compared to 18% of males.

Higher proportions of under-18s saw cannabis (70%), cocaine (28%), MDMA/ecstasy (35%), LSD/acid (24%), magic mushrooms (14%) and Xanax (27%) for sale, compared to over-18s (18-to-24 year olds) and the baseline figure. Over-18s were more likely to see amphetamines (9%), crack cocaine (14%), heroin (8%), nitrous oxide (18%), steroids (15%), synthetic cannabinoids (12%), tramadol (9%) and valium (11%) compared to under-18s. There were no significant age differences for Codeine/Lean, cocaine, ketamine or mephedrone.

There are some notable regional differences in what drugs respondents had seen advertised for sale on social media.[30] See Appendix A for the regional data breakdown. For example, 26% of young people from Scotland who had seen drugs advertised for sale had seen Valium, compared to 11% of respondents from all regions. Additionally, 0% of respondents from the North East stated that they had seen Valium advertised. This indicates that drug use trends vary across regions in the UK. Interestingly, it has been reported in the media that 'street valium' has been linked to drug-related deaths in Scotland.[31]

Respondents' experiences with drugs

20% of all respondents said they had used illegal drugs, which again mirrors official statistics in the Crime Survey for England and Wales.[32] 7% of under-18s, 20% of 18-to-21 year olds, and 28% of 22-to-24 year olds stated that they used illegal drugs.

13% of respondents said that they had bought illegal drugs, which was 4% of under-18s, 12% of 18-to-21 year olds, and 18% of 22-to-24 year olds. Of these, 14% had bought illegal drugs through social media sites or apps (2% of overall respondents).

Whilst only 2% of all respondents said that they themselves had bought illegal drugs through social media sites or apps, a larger number (22%) said they knew someone who had done this.

The results found an association between using and buying drugs, and seeing drugs advertised for sale. The baseline for seeing drugs on social media is 24%. However, when looking at respondents who have used illegal drugs this number jumps to 40%. Similarly, 44% of respondents who had bought illegal drugs had seen drugs for sale on social media. This shows that young people who have used or bought drugs are seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media more frequently than those who have not.

Obtaining Drug Dealers' Contact Details

When asked which method is the easiest to obtain contact details of a drug dealer, "searching on social media sites or apps" ranked second out of four options (asking a friend, asking a family member, and asking a stranger). Interviewees and young people explained how it was commonplace to contact a dealer through social media and then complete the transaction through offline methods or on PayPal.

Obtaining contact details through friends was ranked the easiest (52%) out of the four options. 23% of young people ranked social media platforms as the easiest, 15% of young people ranked asking a stranger as the easiest, and 10% of young people ranked asking family members as easiest.

There were some differences when analysing the age of respondents. For example, 27% who were under 18 ranked 'searching for contact details of a drug dealer on social media sites/apps' as the easiest method, compared with 17% of 22-to-24 year olds.

Interestingly, young people from Northern Ireland ranked obtaining contact details of a drug dealer through social media as the easiest of the four options – the only region to do so. 44% of respondents from Northern Ireland ranked it as the easiest method, compared to 34% who ranked obtaining contact details through friends as the easiest. All other regions ranked friends first and social media second.

There were no significant differences when these responses were broken down by gender.

27% of young people who hadn't used drugs ranked 'searching social media sites or apps' as the easiest way to find the contact details of a drug dealer, compared to 9% who had used drugs. Additionally, 26% of respondents who had not bought drugs ranked 'searching social media sites or apps' as the easiest way to get the contact details of a drug dealer, compared to 8% who had bought drugs. This suggests that people who have not bought or used drugs are less likely to have a drug network, so would value the networks that social media provides more highly.

Perceptions and behaviour change

42% of the poll's respondents said that seeing illegal drugs advertised for sale on social media made them feel uncomfortable. There were differences between the genders, with 48% of females saying it made them feel uncomfortable, compared to 36% of males. Moreover, 36% said it did not concern them. Again, 42% of females stated this, compared to 29% of males.

Analysis of the data revealed significant differences in age when looking at how young people felt about seeing illegal drugs advertised for sale on social media. See Appendix B for the age data breakdown. Children (under-18s) are less concerned than young people (over-18s) when it comes to seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media. This is evidenced in the percentage differences for the statistics relating to seeing drugs for sale on social media making respondents feel less safe online, making them feel uncomfortable and it not concerning them. For example, 48% of under-18s

stated that it did not concern them, compared to 33% of over-18s. This suggests that seeing drugs advertised for sale is more normalised among children than young adults.

There are also some clear differences in responses from those who had used drugs and those who hadn't. See Appendix B for the data breakdown of respondents who had used and hadn't used drugs. This is evidenced in the percentage differences for the statistics relating to feeling uncomfortable or feeling distressed when seeing illegal drugs advertised for sale on social media. For example, 30% of respondents who had used drugs stated that seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media made them feel uncomfortable compared to 49% of respondents who hadn't used drugs. Moreover, the statements relating to behaviour changes showed that, if respondents had used drugs previously, seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media influenced a change in their behaviour more than respondents who hadn't used drugs. For example, 19% of respondents who had used drugs stated that seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media had made them consider using illegal drugs, compared to 0% of young people who hadn't used drugs.

Interestingly, the poll indicates that seeing drugs for sale on social media did not result in a change in behaviour for the respondents.

Only 9% of those who had seen drugs advertised for sale online said it made them consider using illegal drugs, 6% said it resulted in them using illegal drugs, 3% said that it resulted in them buying illegal drugs, 2% said that it made them consider selling illegal drugs or giving them to friends, and 0% said that it resulted in them selling illegal drugs or giving them to friends.

However, it must be acknowledged that respondents may have been reluctant to say whether seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media has led them to engage in illegal activities. They also may not be aware that it has done so. And, as this is a recent phenomenon, is too early to say that seeing drugs advertised for sale has had little impact on young people's behaviour.

There was no significant regional differences between regions in England when analysing respondents' answers to each of the statements relating to behaviour change and how seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media made them feel. However, there were some notable differences in responses between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

A high percentage of respondents from Northern Ireland stated that seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media made them feel less safe online (79%) and feel distressed (29%), compared to other regions in England and Scotland. Additionally, a high percentage of respondents from Northern Ireland reported that seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media had made them consider (29%) or had resulted in them using (15%) illegal drugs, which was significant compared to the baseline percentages. A low percentage of respondents from Northern Ireland (25%) stated that seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media didn't concern them, compared to a high percentage (51%) of respondents in Wales. And a higher percentages of respondents from Scotland reported that seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media had made them consider (17%) or resulted in them buying (11%) illegal drugs, compared to Wales, Northern Ireland and other regions in England.

How social media platforms are used

Observing how drugs are advertised for sale on social media was key to Volteface's research.

This was achieved through conducting an ethnographic trawl of Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram. The trawl was extremely revealing, but is not representative as the researchers specifically searched for drugs advertised for sale, which many people who see drugs advertised for sale would not do.

It took the researchers one month to complete the trawl, in which they manually browsed profiles and content. However, once they had gained access to profiles on the three platforms, these profiles were accessible for further analysis after the initial trawl period had ended. As the researchers were using a new profile on all three platforms, they relied on a 'snowball effect' to observe profiles suspected of selling drugs.

Looking to gather evidence of drug dealing on Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram, the researchers started by searching for cannabis, as this was identified by the poll as being the most commonly seen drug advertised for sale on social media.

It is important to note that, on all three platforms, it was difficult to confirm with complete certainty whether the accounts suspected of drug dealing were actually dealing.

The trawl revealed that conversations about buying drugs would regularly happen in private via the different apps' direct messaging functions or on encrypted messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Wickr, which the researchers could not see. Therefore, the assumptions and observations of profiles gathered are based purely on what was seen on public profiles on these platforms.

Additionally, during the process of looking for accounts advertising drugs on social media, the researchers also came across accounts that appeared to just be posting pictures of drugs for personal use, and sometimes there was no indication that these profiles might be selling drugs.

The use of certain language and emojis is also not necessarily indicative of a social media account being involved in dealing drugs. When it became apparent that it was unlikely that these profiles were involved in drug dealing, the researchers would skip past these profiles.

Facebook

Facebook is a social networking website and app, allowing people to post comments, share photographs and post links to news and other content.[33] Users can also chat live, watch videos and join groups and pages. Shared content can be made publicly accessible, or it can be shared with a select group.

How were accounts advertising drugs found?

As Facebook is a fairly closed platform, in that a user acquires their own networks and connections through their account, it was difficult to initially find profiles or groups selling drugs.

The researchers joined multiple cannabis fan accounts and groups, as the literature review revealed that dealers targeted these groups.[34] Individual drugs were also searched for in the bar on Facebook's main page, as well as 'drugs for sale' or, for example, 'ecstasy for sale'. However, no significant pages, groups or profiles appeared.

Image 1: Facebook search bar function

The researchers also browsed pages and groups that had an interest in drugs and drug use to observe if there was any discussion of buying or selling drugs on these. It took two weeks for the researchers to find one group suspected of cannabis dealing. However, due to the closed nature of Facebook, the researchers struggled to find individual profiles that were advertising drugs for sale on Facebook.

After three weeks of trawling all three social media platforms, the researchers discovered a dealer's Instagram account which posted screenshots of feedback from buyers on Facebook, including their Facebook names. This led the researchers to search those profiles on Facebook, which then resulted in a snowballing of dealers' profiles. In total, more than 50 Facebook profiles were found which were suspected of selling drugs. The researchers identified accounts that were selling drugs due to the language used in their usernames and on their profiles. Some dealers also publicly posted photos of drugs on their profiles and advertised ways for individuals to contact them privately relating to their content, for example, asking potential buyers to direct message them for more information about their 'services'.

What was being advertised?

The drugs advertised for sale on Facebook were: cannabis edibles, cannabis oils, different strains of cannabis advertised as being imported from California, mephedrone, magic mushrooms, LSD, cocaine, ketamine, pregabalin, tramadol and benzodiazepines, including valium, lorazepam, zopiclone and diazepam.

The profiles may have been selling other drugs, but as the researchers did not engage with them and receive further details about the drugs they were selling or their drug 'menus', they could only see the drugs advertised on the profile itself.

How was the platform used to advertise, buy or sell drugs?

Profiles

On an individual's Facebook profile, there is a section named 'Intro', which can include a bio of the person with some written text, their location or where they are based, their workplace, school/ university, home town and relationship status.

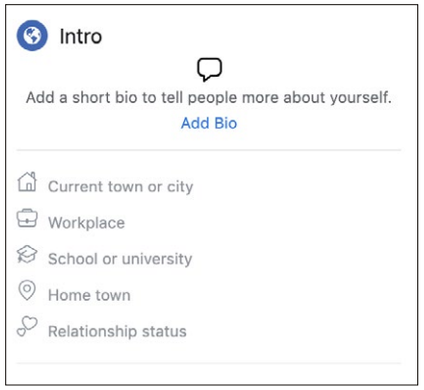


Image 2: Facebook intro feature

On the Facebook profiles of suspected dealers, it was common for WhatsApp and Wickr details to be stated in the intro, suggesting that this was how they wanted potential buyers to contact them due to the secure nature of these platforms.

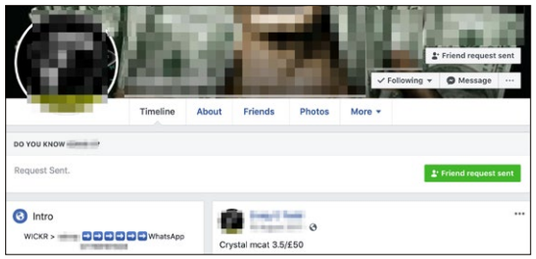
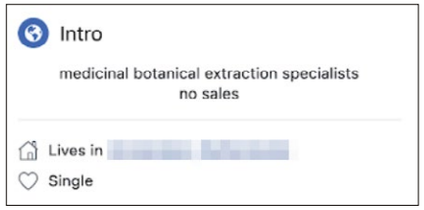


Image 3: Screenshot of a Facebook profile suspected of dealing drugs. This suspected dealer has posted that they are selling 'Crystal mcat'. Mcat is slang for Mephedrone. They have written '3.5/£50' which means they are selling 3.5 grams for £50.

Image 4: Screenshot of a Facebook intro that indicates suspected dealers operate through Wickr. 'Top Shelf' means high quality. The account holder has included the maple leaf emoji which is used to symbolise cannabis. The different flag emojis suggest that they are selling cannabis imported from these different countries.

On some profiles' Intros, the account holder would be stated as "self-employed" and that they "grow plants", suggesting that they grew and sold cannabis.

Facebook profiles would often state "no sales" in their bios, to avoid suspicion. However, it was still obvious to the researchers that drugs were being sold through such profiles as they included price lists, asked people to directly message them for more information about content they had posted, and stated that they were taking "orders".



Images 5 and 6: Screenshots of a suspected dealers' writing 'no sales' in their Facebook intro.

It was common for account holders to include their locations so potential buyers could see where they are based and could feasibly sell to.

Image 7: Screenshot of a suspected dealer displaying their location in their Facebook intro.

Profiles suspected of dealing were frequently anonymous, with little information. As these profiles often use discrete and subtle language, it's not always obvious that these profiles are explicitly dealing drugs. For example, these account holders would not show their faces or anything identifiable in photos, although it was typical for them to have a drug-related image for their profile picture or cover photo. Some profiles did have names, but still had pictures of cannabis or drugs to make it known that they were selling drugs.

It was also observed that dealers might have multiple accounts in case any one account was shut down by Facebook. Such account names were usually very similar and the dealers would let Facebook users know what other accounts they had. For example, one account had two profiles where the only difference was the surname: "Green" and "Greenn".

Groups

After browsing pages and groups related to drugs, particularly cannabis, the researchers came across one group that had a cannabis leaf as its picture. The group's members were able to leave reviews, but the product they were referring to was referred to as 'carrots'. It is reasonable to suggest that 'carrots' could be cannabis. For example, reviews stated "banging carrots mate" and the "best carrots I've ever had". It appeared that the page had been put back up recently after being removed. When the researchers looked back four weeks after first viewing it, the page had again been removed.

The researchers also joined multiple groups on Facebook where users would discuss their drug use and share drug memes – images, videos, text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users.[35] On these groups, users would often comment below memes or write posts asking for contacts or numbers of dealers in specific locations.

Image 8: Screenshot from a Facebook group where a suspected user is asking for dealers' numbers in a specific area. The nose emoji and blowing smoke emoji is used to refer to cocaine, as 'blow' is slang for cocaine.

One interviewee who had experience of procuring drugs on Facebook told Volteface that Facebook groups were used by dealers to deal drugs within those closed networks. His experiences suggest that these groups are more private and closed and would not be searchable or easily found by the researchers.

Statuses

Some profiles were very blatant about selling drugs. They would post statuses saying when they were active, if the drugs were for delivery or collection, and what drugs were available. These accounts would encourage potential buyers to contact them via a direct message, through which they could provide a full price list or menu.

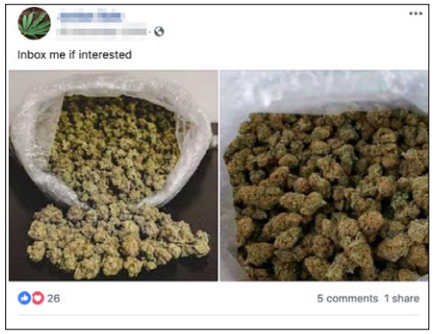
Potential buyers would comment on these statuses to ask after specific drugs or for more information about the drugs or services the dealer could provide. For example, the researchers saw comments asking how much a product was or what time the account holder would be available to deliver or collect.

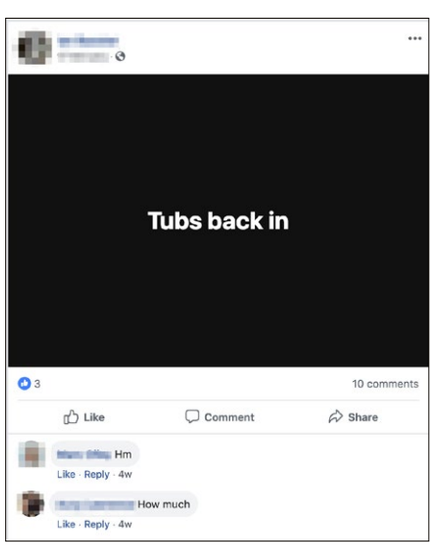
Image 9: Screenshot of potential buyers commenting below statuses expressing interest in drugs advertised for sale. 'Tub' refers to tubs (containers) of prescription medication.

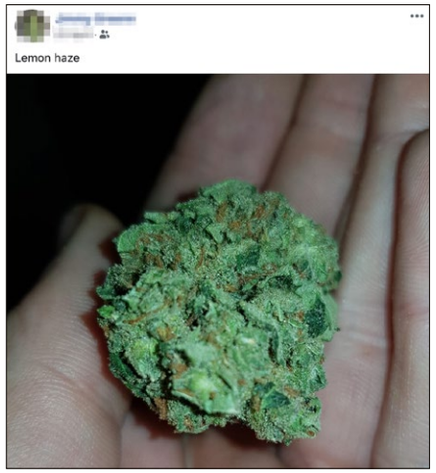
Screenshots of statuses have not been included as they are easily searchable and could compromise anonymity.

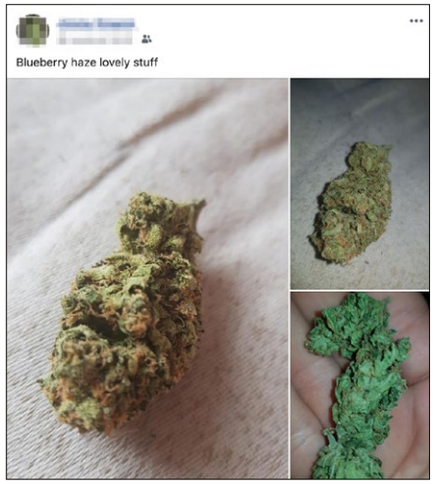
Posting pictures

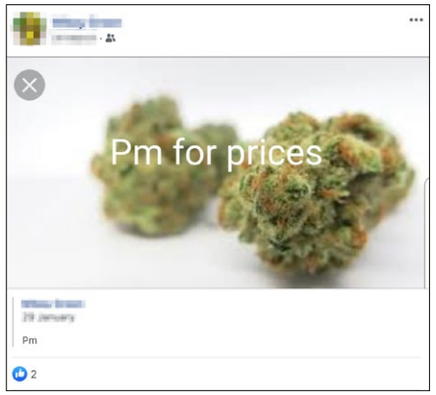
Dealers on Facebook advertise their drugs by posting pictures of them, often captioned with the product name. For example, if it was a particular strain of cannabis, the account would say that it was "Lemon Haze". A photo could also be captioned as "inbox me if interested". Interestingly, the researchers observed that some account holders would write their name and a date next to their product to show they were not scammers. Potential buyers would engage with these posts by commenting on the photos and registering an interest in the product by writing "how much?" or "dm [direct message] me". Potential buyers would also comment asking for the dealers' price lists and menus.











Images 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14: Screenshots of suspected dealers advertising drugs for sale by posting pictures on Facebook. These screenshots are examples of dealers advertising cannabis and 'tubs'. 'Tubs' refers to tubs (containers) of prescription medication.

Some accounts would not post photos of the products and would instead post images of block text instead describing what they were selling and prices, for example: "200 vals £90 200 lorazepam £120". Additionally, it appeared that several dealers used Google photos as the researchers Google image-searched some of the pictures these profiles used. For example, one dealer had a bottle of diazepam pills as their profile photo, which was sourced from Google, suggesting that they do this for ease or to add a layer of protection. If they were to get caught, they could say that they were just posting pictures from Google and were not in possession of drugs with the intent to supply.

Image 15: Screenshot of a suspected dealer on Facebook posting an image with block text with information about quantities and prices of drugs. 'Vals' refers to Valium. Lorazepam is a type of benzodiazepine.

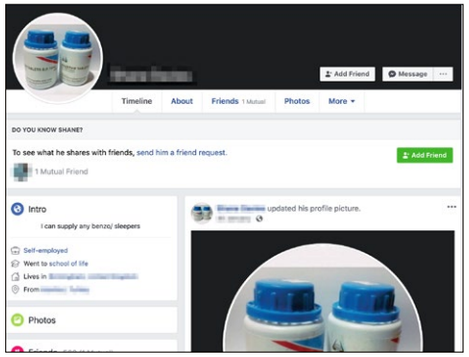


Image 16: Screenshot of a suspected Facebook dealer using photos of drugs from Google. The picture shows tubs of diazepam which is commonly known as Valium.

Facebook also offers a function whereby users can post an item for sale and the researchers saw evidence of this being used by suspected drug dealers.

Image 17: Screenshot of a suspected Facebook dealer using the 'item for sale' function. This dealer is selling 'Msj tubs' which are diazepam, commonly known as Valium.

Direct messaging

It was uncommon for the researchers to observe dealers signposting users to message them on Facebook's direct messaging service 'Facebook Messenger'. This may be due to the fact that Facebook Messenger does not use end-to-end encryption unless the user turns it on manually.[36] End-to-end encryption scrambles a message as it travels over an internet network so that it can only be read by the recipient.[37]

Instead, it was more common for dealers to direct potential buyers to phone or text them privately or to use secure messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Wickr as these offer end-to-end encryption.

Observations:

Professionalism

The account holders often emulated legitimate business by promoting their quick and efficient delivery services.

One account holder referred to themselves as an "[Anonymised name] Enterprises", with their cover photo a professional banner of their services, contact details and other social media accounts.

The researchers also came across profiles which referred to membership and how buyers would have to be referred to them by an existing client through a referral system. It is likely that this is done to avoid getting caught or to ensure that the dealer would not get scammed by people.

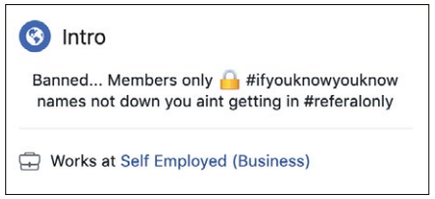


Image 18: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Facebook intro saying that buyers can only use their services if they are referred.

Accounts suspected of dealing drugs were very concerned about their online reputation and would often name and expose known scammers to justify and prove that they were not scammers themselves. Scammers would be described as not delivering the product the consumer was expecting, or taking the consumer's money but not giving them a product or a good quality product.

The trawl revealed that dealers frequently offered incentives for buyers, for example offering discounts when buyers bought drugs in bulk and larger quantities such as offering five grams of cocaine for the price of four. This is something which is often being cited as the professionalisation of the drug market,[38] whereby online dealers adopt the marketing and promotional activity style used by legitimate businesses. Moreover, dealers would advertise packages which included various different drugs at discounted prices, for example, offering various prescription medications for a reduced price if they were all bought together. One dealer even offered scratchcards with their drug packages.

Image 19: Screenshot of a suspected dealer posting a picture on Facebook which shows a scratchcard is included in their drug package. This package contains a variety of prescription medication including Clonzaepam, which is a benzodiazepine, and pregabalin, which is used to treat seizures.

'Suggested' features

After the researchers befriended accounts on Facebook, they were exposed to more profiles of dealers through Facebook's 'suggested friends' function. Mutual friends of dealers, who were also suspected of drug dealing, were then suggested to the researchers through this feature. Additionally, when the researchers searched for accounts in Facebook's search bar more accounts appeared that were suspected of dealing.

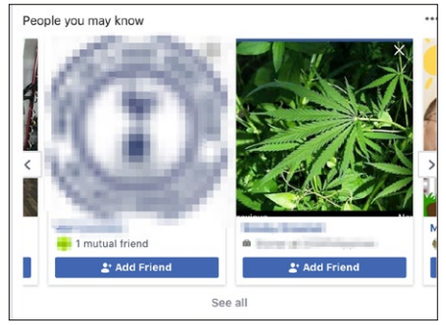


Image 20: Screenshot of the Facebook 'suggested friends' function showing that other suspected dealers are being recommended by Facebook.

Delivery/collection method

Compared to Instagram and Snapchat, dealers on Facebook rarely discussed how they would deliver to or exchange drugs with buyers. It is likely that this information was discussed in private, either by direct messaging or on secure encrypted messaging apps. However, the researchers did find some evidence of dealers emulating delivery services by displaying a van in their profile picture, signalling that their drug supply business acted similarly to 'man with a van' services.

Image 21: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Facebook profile showing them likening their services to 'man with a van' services.

Language

It was common for account holders to use language that would not arouse suspicion, for example, stating "no sales" or "personal use only" on their profiles.

Suspected dealers frequently used sophisticated language to avoid detection or suspicion and, for this reason, it was difficult to find drugs on Facebook without already knowing which profiles to search for or without an existing network.

The researchers found that, while it was common for Facebook profiles to remain anonymous, such profiles included language and slang in their names related to drugs. For example: Green, Spliff, White and Herbs. This made it more obvious that these profiles were selling drugs.

Dealers also sometimes stated that they were in the medical business, particularly when they were selling cannabis or prescription medication. For example, they would include "Med" in their name. Some dealers used the names of places with more liberal cannabis policies, such as Amsterdam or California. People who had bought drugs through social media revealed to Volteface that dealers on social media often pretended their products were from America when they weren't.

Image 22: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Facebook profile showing use of terms such as 'Meds' in their name.

When selling cannabis, suspected dealers often used slang and strain names such as: "cali 'import", "bud", "green", "lemon haze", and "ak47". Some referred to cocaine as "ching" or "white". Prescription medication was often referred to as "diaz", "bars", "tubs", and "benzos" and ketamine referred to as "k".

It is important to note that language around drug use changes frequently and terminology can become out-of-date very quickly.

It appeared that emojis were not as frequently used on Facebook, but they were sometimes used in intros. See Table A for a glossary of the emojis used across all of the platforms.

The researchers did not come across any dealers who used hashtags to advertise their drugs for sale on Facebook.

Involvement or response from platforms

There was evidence during the trawl of Facebook making proactive efforts to close profiles that appeared to be selling drugs. For example, a number of account holders spoke of how their profiles had been taken down or banned due to them posting photos and content relating to drugs. It was also difficult to search for posts relating to the sale of drugs in Facebook's search bar function. When 'cannabis' or 'cocaine' was entered, for example, it would state that no posts were found. Additionally, some groups which the researchers suspected sold drugs were shut down by the time this report was written. Suspected dealers often stated that they had a new profile as their other one had been banned or shut down.

Snapchat

Snapchat is a mobile app and service for sharing photos, videos, and messages with other people.[39] Users can take a 'snap' (picture or video) and send it to one or more of the people in their friends list. They can also post a 'snap' on their Snapchat story, which is a collection of Snaps that play in the order they were taken and are visible to their contacts list for 24 hours. Users can also view their friends' stories by clicking on the 'stories' function within the app.

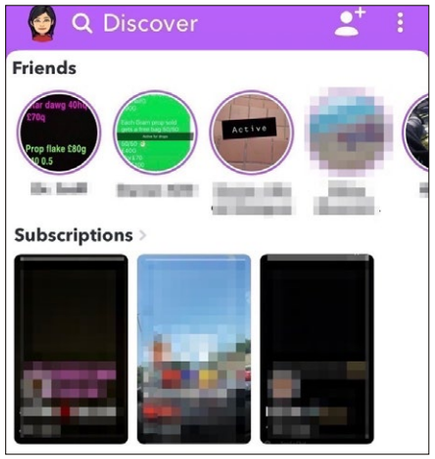


Image 23: Screenshot of Snapchat's 'story' function. Clicking on the circles at the top opens up a user's Snapchat story.

How were accounts advertising drugs found?

Like Facebook, it was initially difficult to find evidence of drugs advertised for sale on Snapchat due to the closed nature of the platform.

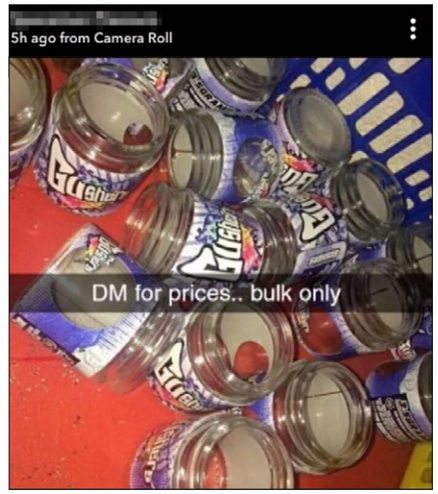
It took two weeks for the researchers to find profiles of dealers and, in total, 13 Snapchat accounts suspected of dealing drugs were found.

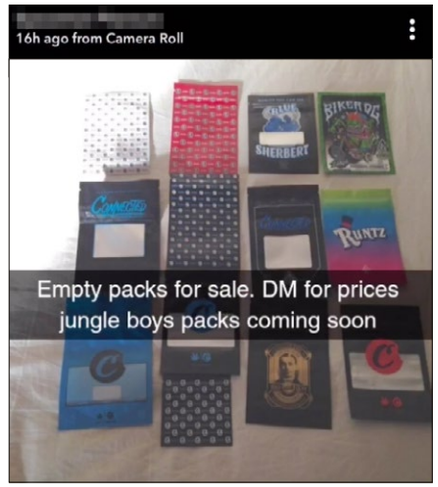
What was being advertised?

The drugs seen advertised were mainly different varieties and strains of cannabis, such as 'Stardawg' and 'Lemon Haze', cannabis edibles, as well as ketamine, magic mushrooms, pills, MDMA and cocaine.

Interestingly, as well as the actual substances advertised, the researchers discovered that dealers were selling empty packaging for cannabis in bulk, which appeared to be for strains sold in California. This suggests that some dealers may package the cannabis they are selling in such a way as to pretend it is sourced from California.

> "If you go to America or anywhere where weed is legal and you get the fancy glass pots and you get labels which say the THC content and the CBD content. It says what it was grown with, it will say the make, the strain, all the hybrids of the strain, it will say the brand name of the company or the organisation that grew it. It will look very professional and that is very common now."
>
> *- Young person who has witnessed drugs advertised for sale on social media*





Images 24, 25 and 26: Screenshots of a suspected dealer's Snapchat stories showing them advertising 'empty packs' for sale, which other dealers can use to package their products. These 'empty packs' are for different varieties of cannabis.

How was the platform used to advertise, buy or sell drugs?

Snapchat stories

The Snapchat stories function allows users to post videos or photos that can be seen by their contact list or people who subscribe to their feed/content. These videos and photos disappear in 24 hours. Snapchat stories also have a 'chat' function at the bottom of that picture or video where the user or potential buyer can respond directly to that specific video or photo.

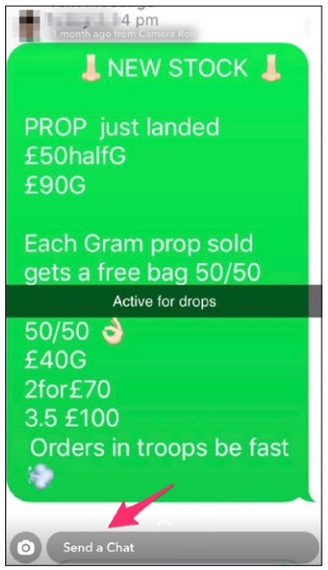


Image 27: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Snapchat story showing their drug menu for 'prop' – another term for cocaine. The suspected dealer is selling two types of cocaine in this menu – high quality 'prop' and '50/50' 'prop'. '50/50' prop is the dealer advertising half cocaine and half cutting agent (for example benzocaine or a stimulant). The suspected dealer is selling the high quality cocaine for £90 per gram and the 50/50 cocaine for £40 per gram.

It was common for dealers to post their drug 'menus' and price lists to their Snapchat stories. For example, what drugs were available that day, what quantity they sold the drug in, and what prices they would be selling them for. The 'chat' function allows users to directly respond to a picture or video if they are interested in buying the product. Dealers would often give daily updates on what products they had in stock and what new drugs were on their way. It appeared that dealers' activity was more frequent at night times and at weekends.

Image 28: Screenshot of a suspected drug dealer's Snapchat story which shows their drug menu for different cannabis strains and varieties. 'Platinum Gelato', 'Manny Dawg' and 'Armageddon Haze' are all different strains of cannabis. The numbers below the strains are the prices the dealer is selling the cannabis for, for example '40/80' means the dealer is selling this strain in amounts of £40 and £80.

Image 29: Screenshot of a suspected drug dealer's Snapchat story which shows their drug menu for different cannabis strains and varieties. 'Stardawg', '10/10 amnesia' and 'Gorilla glue' are different strains of cannabis. This suspected dealer is advertising the prices of these strains in grams, for example '7-£50' is 7 grams for £50. The dealer is selling these strains for £200 per ounce (28 grams). This suspected dealer has then advertised a 'cali menu' of 'Mochi', 'Gelato #41' and 'Tropicana Cookies' which are all different strains and varieties of cannabis allegedly from California. The suspected dealer is advertising the prices of these strains in grams, for example '3.5-£60' is 3.5 grams (an eighth of an ounce) for £60. The suspected dealer has used American flags to indicate that their products are from the US.

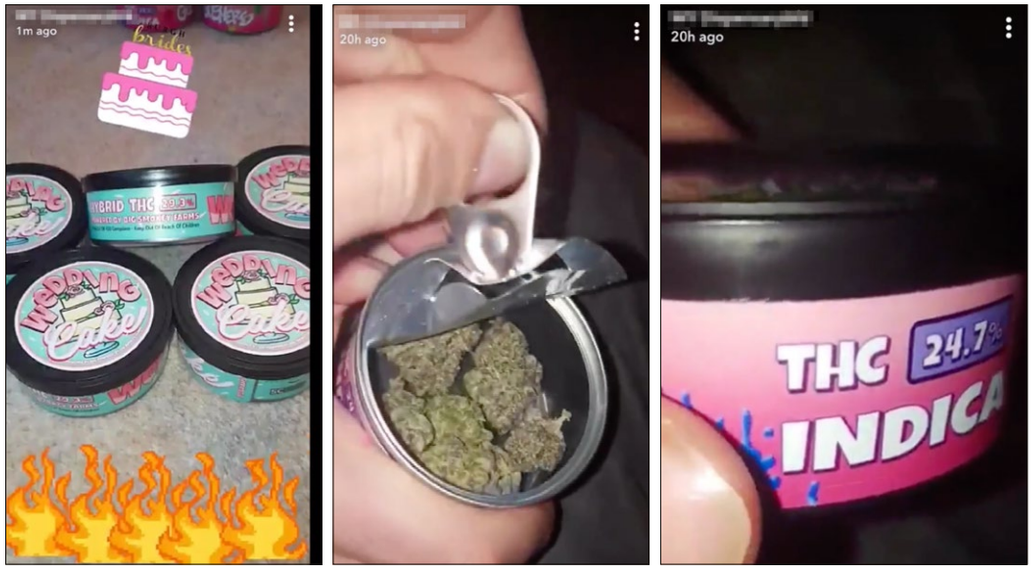
It was common for suspected dealers to show videos of the drugs they were selling with phone numbers included so customers could get in direct contact with them either by text or call. The videos would often show the drugs already in 'baggies' (small sealable bags) and display text stating the available price, product type and quantity in grams. For cannabis in particular, suspected dealers would show the drug from all angles to show its quality and that it was a legitimate product.

Image 30: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Snapchat story which shows cannabis in 'baggies' ready to be sold. The suspected dealer is selling the cannabis in bags of 1.8 grams '1.8s'. The suspected dealer has used UK and Canadian flags to indicate that the cannabis that they are selling is from these countries.

Image 31: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Snapchat story which shows cannabis and a phone number for potential buyers to contact them.

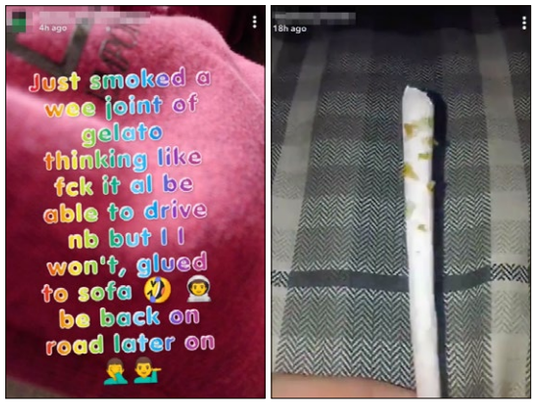
Some videos on Snapchat showed dealers selling cannabis in tinned packaging, which is associated with cannabis from Californian brands. This would show the user the THC content of cannabis on offer, the psychoactive chemical in cannabis that gets users 'high'. However, as the products are unregulated, there is no way of knowing if the cannabis sold is the same as is described on the packaging.

> "People who sold cannabis would advertise their new strains on Snapchat… and Instagram as well. So, you'd get a nice close-up video of all the crystals on the buds of cannabis and things like that."
>
> *- Adult who has bought drugs through social media*



Images 32, 33 and 34: Screenshots from a suspected dealer's Snapchat story which shows packaging of different varieties of cannabis with THC content included on the label. 'Wedding cake' is a strain of cannabis from the US.

The researchers also commonly saw videos or discussion of dealers consuming their own products.



Images 35 and 36: Screenshots of suspected dealers posting on their Snapchat stories about their personal drug use. One suspected dealer has described that they have 'just smoked a wee joint of gelato' ('gelato' is a strain of cannabis), which means they have just smoked a joint of cannabis. The other suspected dealer has taken a picture of a joint with crystals of cannabis on the outside.

One suspected dealer posted photos of them growing their products, which included cannabis and magic mushrooms. Another posted photos of a vacuum sealing packaging machine, normally used for food, insinuating that's what they put their drugs in when they sell them.

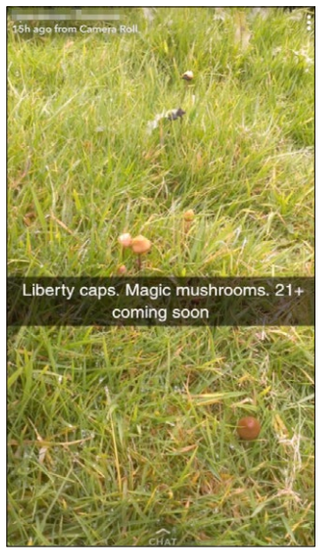


Image 37: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Snapchat story which shows a picture of 'liberty caps' (magic mushrooms). '21+' suggests that the suspected dealer would only sell these to individuals who are 21 and over.

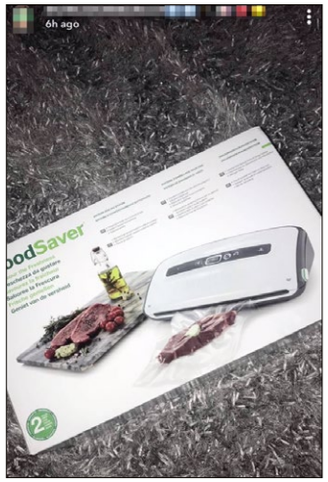


Image 38: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Snapchat story which shows a vacuum sealed packaging machine, indicating this is what they use to seal their drugs.

Similarly to Facebook, dealers would often have photos of block text stating what products they had and their menus and prices.

Image 39: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Snapchat story showing their drug menu. The suspected dealer has used UK and US flags to indicate that the drugs they are selling are from these countries. The suspected dealer is selling 'Stardawg', 'Pineapple haze' and 'Papaya' which are different strains of cannabis. There is a US flag emoji next to 'Papaya', which suggests that the 'Papaya' strain of cannabis is from the US. The suspected dealer is advertising these strains at £25 for 1 gram and £80 for 3.5 grams (eighth of an ounce) – '1g-25 3.5-80'. 'Extracts' means cannabis extracts which are high concentration THC oil.

Some dealers posted screenshots of their Instagram page on their Snapchat stories which showed customers giving feedback on their products. It appeared that Instagram was the most common platform for dealers to display feedback.

One dealer selling ketamine posted a photo on their story which suggested that the dealer tested their products before selling them. By including references to testing, the dealer claimed that they had the 'best ketamine about'.

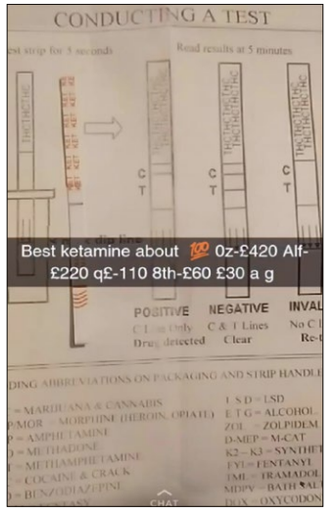


Image 40: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Snapchat story which shows them advertising ketamine for sale. The suspected dealer is advertising the ketamine at £30 a gram, an eighth of an ounce for £60, a quarter of an ounce for £110, half an ounce for £220 and an ounce for £420. The suspected dealer has used the '100' emoji to suggest that the ketamine is good quality i.e. 100% legitimate. The background picture is instructions for a urine test.

Alongside photos and videos of drugs, dealers would post other types of content such as photos of large amounts of money that would show-off their lifestyle, or even their normal day-to-day activities such as them going to college or the cinema.

Image 41: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Snapchat story which shows them waving a significant amount of cash. 'Evenings like these' suggests that the suspected dealer had a successful evening and made the money through dealing drugs.

'Snaps' (direct messaging either text, video or photos)

Snapchat allows users to send 'Snaps' to other users or groups, which can contain either a photo, video or text. It is important to note that 'Snaps' that consist of photos and videos are end-to-end encrypted, whereas other messages, such as text messages and group chats, are not.[40]

Throughout the trawl, the researchers received several 'Snaps' in the form of photos and videos from dealers offering different varieties of drugs. The 'Snaps' would contain videos or photos of the drugs themselves, for example a 360 degree video of the cannabis bud, or pictures of their drug 'menus'. Interestingly, the researchers never received text message 'Snaps' from dealers explicitly selling drugs, which is likely due to the fact that text 'Snaps' do not offer end-to-end encryption. For example, even when dealers sent their drug 'menus' this would always be in the form of a picture.

Image 42: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Snapchat story which shows their drug menu in the form of a picture with text. 'Prop' means cocaine, 'KET' means ketamine, 'MDMA' and 'Pills' are ecstasy and 'Weed' is cannabis. The suspected dealer has included the quantities and prices for which they are selling each drug underneath, for example 15 pills is £100.

When 'Snaps' are sent directly to users, the user will receive a notification from Snapchat on their phone saying that they have received a 'Snap'. However, when a dealer posts on their Snapchat story for the potential buyer to see the content, the user has to proactively look at that story, therefore not guaranteeing that users will see it. The ability to send direct end-to-end encrypted photo or video 'Snaps' to potential buyers of their drugs is beneficial to dealers as they can send advertisements directly to users and at low risk.

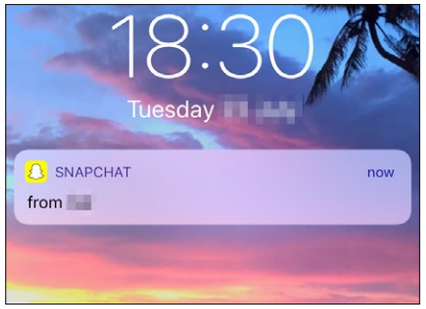
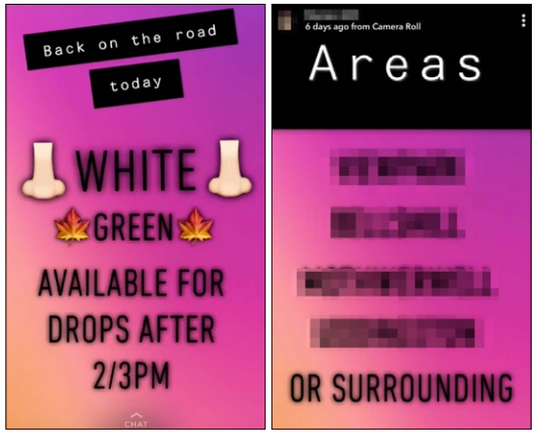


Image 43: Screenshot of the researcher's phone which shows how users receive a notification from Snapchat when they are sent a 'Snap'.

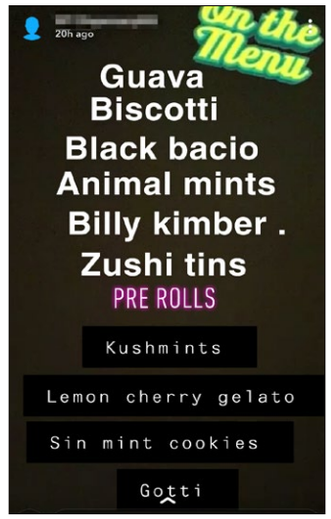
Observations:

Professionalism

The researchers observed some activity by dealers on Snapchat that emulated legitimate businesses. For example, dealers would frequently post their drug 'menus', which included details about the quantities the drugs could be bought for and at what price, on their Snapchat stories or would send these as a 'Snap'. Dealers often notified users when they were 'open for business' and what time they were available to deliver the drugs, what locations they would be delivering to, and if the drugs would be available for collection.



Images 44 and 45: Screenshots of a drug dealer's Snapchat stories which shows their drug menus, what times they are available from, which areas they are delivering to and what they are selling. One suspected dealer has stated they are selling 'White' with nose emojis either side, indicating that they are selling cocaine. They have also written that they are selling 'Green' with maple leaf emojis either side which suggests that they are selling cannabis. The suspected dealer has also included which areas they will be dealing to.



Images 46 and 47: Screenshots of a suspected dealer's Snapchat story which shows their drug menus for different strains and varieties of cannabis. One screenshot includes the quantities and prices, for example 7 grams for £50 '7-£50'.

The researchers witnessed dealers promote giveaways, discounts and competitions to users on Snapchat. For example, one Snapchat dealer offered competitions whereby if users screenshotted his account onto their own story, they would have the chance to win a free ounce of cannabis. This would incentivise users to assist in advertising his business.

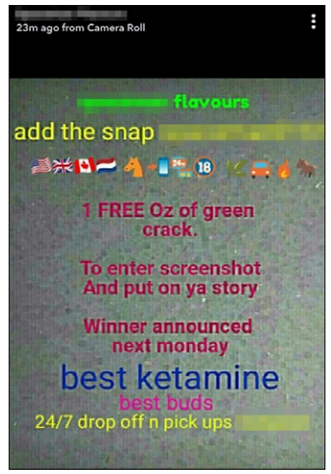


Image 48: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Snapchat story showing their drug menu and a competition they are hosting. One observed suspected dealer frequently

held competitions for their followers to win free drugs. In this image, they are offering '1 free oz of green crack' to those who screenshot the suspected dealer's story and publish it on their own story. 'Green crack' is a strain of cannabis. The suspected dealer is offering ketamine and 'buds' which is a term for cannabis. The suspected dealer also advertises that they do '24/7 drop off n pick ups', which means that the suspected dealer is available to do business 24/7. Flag emojis suggests the suspected dealer sells drugs from the US, UK, Canada and the Netherlands. The horse emoji indicates ketamine as it is know as horse tranquiliser. The phone emoji suggests the suspected dealer is available via phone. The 24 emoji suggests the suspected dealer is available 24 hours a day. The 'no 18' emoji suggests the suspected dealer would not sell the under 18s. The car emoji suggests the suspected dealer delivers the drugs via car.

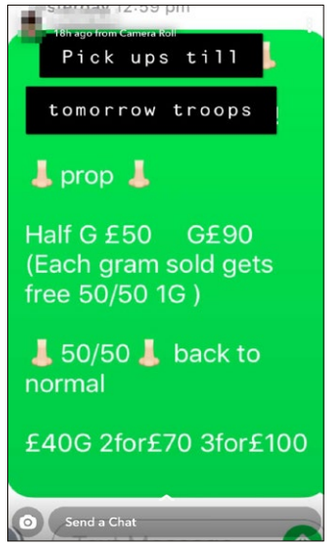


Image 49: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Snapchat story showing their drug menu and offering discounts. This suspected dealer is selling 'prop' which is a term used for cocaine and the nose emoji is also used for cocaine. The suspected dealer has written that if customers buy a gram of cocaine they can get a free gram of 50/50 cocaine. 50/50 cocaine is half cocaine and half cutting agent.

'Suggested' features

Snapchat has a 'Quick Add' function underneath the 'Add Friends' function which displays 'suggested friends' to users. Whilst Facebook and Instagram allows users to click on their suggested friends' full profiles and discover more information about them, Snapchat only displays the username and emoji of a 'suggested friend'. This meant that it was difficult for the researchers to determine whether a 'suggested friend' was a drug dealer.

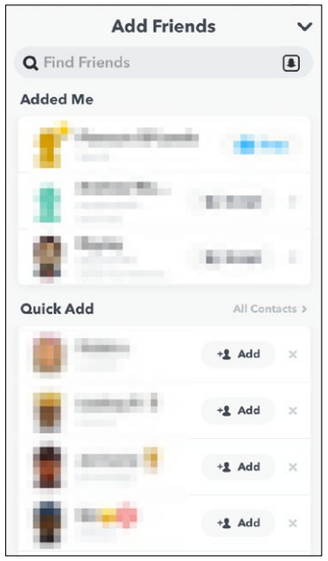


Image 50: Screenshot of the Snapchat 'Add Friends' page showing the 'Quick Add' function. This function suggests friends to the user.

Nevertheless, the researchers did successfully add an active dealer on Snapchat who appeared under the 'Quick Add' section, whose username included 'Flavours'. This suggests that this function can expand a user's dealer network.

Delivery/collection methods

Dealers would often state whether their products were available for collection or where they could be delivered to. The research observed that some dealers would offer discounts for buyers who collected from them.

Image 51: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Snapchat story which shows the dealer offering a £5 discount for buyers who collect their drugs from the dealer's address.

The accounts followed by the researchers mostly only delivered to local areas. However, there were a couple of profiles that said that they were able to deliver all over the UK.

Image 52: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Snapchat story which shows that the dealer can post their drugs all over the UK. The suspected dealer also offers next day delivery if the buyer orders before 2pm.

Alongside this, dealers would often say what time they were available to deliver or for customers to collect. The researchers also found videos of dealers delivering their products in their cars.

Images 53 and 54: Screenshots of suspected dealers' Snapchat stories which shows the dealers in their cars, signifying that they are out doing business. 'Manny Dawg' is a strain of cannabis.

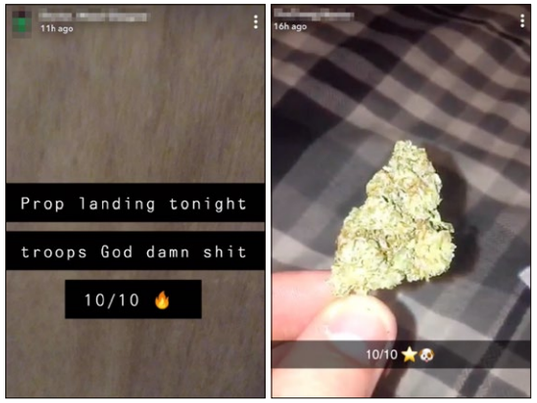
Language

Dealers on Snapchat tended to be very open about their activity – perhaps because Snapchat is a more private platform and only people a user accepts as their friends or followers can see their content. While dealers were open about their drug dealing activity on Snapchat, profiles of the dealers remained anonymous. Dealers did not include names in their usernames and they rarely showed their faces in photos or videos.

When advertising drugs for sale, suspected dealers would use different language to describe different strains or types of weed, for example: 'Stardog' 'Spanish Super Lemon Haze', 'Armageddon Haze', 'Stardawg', '10/10 amnesia', 'Gorilla glue', 'Cali menu', 'Mochi', 'Gelato #41', and 'Tropicana Cookies'.

Common drug-related phrases or words were used in suspected dealers' usernames, such as "420", "weed" and "dispensary". Some referred to themselves as "doctor", drawing an analogy between a doctor providing someone with medicine and a drug dealer giving someone drugs. There appeared to be a common theme around dealers using language linked to legitimate healthcare practices, such as: "doctor", "pharmacy", "medicinal" and "medicine". Additionally, dealers would have their location in their name so customers would know where they are based.

The researchers found that some dealers referred to customers as their "troops", called drugs "prop" (which was commonly used as slang for cocaine on Instagram) and said that their drugs were "10/10".



Images 55 and 56: Screenshots of suspected dealers' Snapchat stories showing them using language such as 'prop', 'troops' and '10/10'. 'Prop' is known as cocaine, 'Troops' is the suspected dealer referring to their followers or buyers and '10/10' is a description of their drugs.

Suspected Snapchat dealers used emojis frequently on their Snapchat stories and in their Snaps. Communication on Snapchat is primarily through photos and images which means dealer advertisements are more visual than on Facebook and emojis are used often. See Table A for a glossary of the emojis used across all of the platforms.

The researchers did not come across any dealers who used hashtags to advertise their drugs for sale on Snapchat as dealers mainly used photos and videos to advertise their drugs.

Involvement or response from platforms

Compared to Facebook and Instagram, suspected Snapchat dealers who the researchers followed did not mention or discuss getting their accounts closed down by the platform. Moreover, dealers on Snapchat were the least discrete of the three platforms trawled. It is difficult to draw any concrete conclusions about how Snapchat responds to drug dealing on its platform due to the small sample size of users observed.

Instagram

Instagram is an online photo-sharing application, allowing users to edit and upload photos and short videos through a mobile app.[41]

Users can add a caption to each of their posts and use hashtags and location-based 'geotags' which make them searchable to other users within the app.

Each post by a user appears on their followers' Instagram feed. It can also be viewed by the public using hashtags or geotags. Users have the option of making their profile private, so that only their followers can view their posts.

On a user's individual Instagram profile, there is an icon photo (similar to a profile picture on Facebook), and a space for a name and bio, which can include written text or emojis.

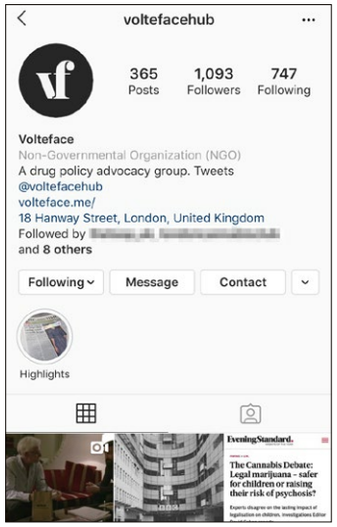


Image 57: Screenshot of Volteface's Instagram profile which shows the icon photo, bio, followers list, following list, highlights, photos and videos.

Instagram users can 'like' and comment on other users' posts and send private direct messages. The platform also has a 'Stories' feature, allowing users to share photos and videos that disappear after 24 hours. However, users can add videos or photos they posted to their story to their 'Highlights' which appears permanently on their profile.

Most of the content analysed in the trawl was from Instagram, as it is the most public platform out of the three. Because of this, the researchers were able to search for hashtags and drug-related posts easily, as words such as 'cannabis' and other drugs were not blocked like they were on Facebook. Additionally, the design features on Instagram allows users to access each others 'following' and 'follower' lists, which can be used to expand their networks.

How were accounts advertising drugs found?

Instagram was the easiest platform on which to find profiles selling drugs.

The researchers began by following cannabis fan accounts. Many of the profiles were set to private, meaning they had to be followed for their profiles and content to be viewed. From there, profiles appearing to advertise drugs for sale followed the researcher's account. The researchers were then able to access the 'following' and 'follower' list of these profiles. It was common for suspected dealers to 'follow' each other, which provided another avenue for the researchers to find other accounts advertising drugs for sale.

Image 58: Screenshot of Volteface's Instagram profile which shows the icon photo, followers list and following list.

Once the researchers began to build up a network of followers, accounts started following the researcher's account, which lead to more profiles suspected of dealing drugs being found.

Cannabis was the drug predominantly advertised for sale on Instagram. It only took the researchers one day to find accounts suspected of selling it, whereas it took two weeks to find those suspected of selling other drugs. The researchers found approximately 120 accounts suspected of selling drugs on Instagram.

Some of the profiles suspected of dealing drugs were initially found by entering certain hashtags into Instagram's search bar.[42] These included: #cannabis, #mdmapills, #weed, #acid, #drug, #pills. From there, the researchers would click on the hashtags and scroll through the content to find accounts suspected of dealing. It must be noted that many accounts simply used the hashtag and did not appear to be dealing. For example, accounts posting drug memes or documenting personal drug use.

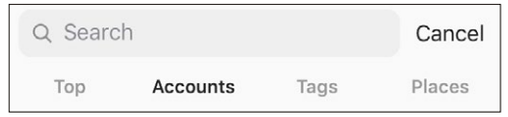


Image 59: Screenshot of Instagram's search bar. Under 'Top' users can search for top posts. Under 'Accounts' users can search for account profiles. Under 'Tags' users can search for posts containing certain hashtags. Under 'Places' users can search for posts and profiles from specific locations.

What was being advertised?

An extensive list of illicit drugs was seen advertised for sale on Instagram.

The drugs were: cannabis oil, cannabis vape pens, a strain of cannabis called 'cali tins', cannabis edibles, shatter (high cannabis concentrate), cocaine, MDMA/Ecstasy in pill and crystal powder form, magic mushrooms, LSD/acid, ketamine and nitrous oxide.

Many prescription drugs were also seen to be advertised on Instagram including: valium, liquid valium, white roche, diazepam, zopiclone, benzodiazepine, pregabalin, xanax, codeine/lean, oxycontin, pregabalin, tramadol, rohyphol, zimovane, temazepam, lyrical, viagra, subutex, lorazepam, nitrazepam, bensedin, caffeine anhydrous powder, fluoxetine, sertraline, simavastatin, loratadine, levothryoxine and baclofen.

Cannabis was the drug the researchers most commonly saw advertised for sale, with suspected dealers promoting the different strains, varieties and flavours they had on offer. It was typical for suspected dealers advertising cannabis on Instagram to say that their product had been

shipped from the US to the UK. However, it could not be ascertained if this was true.

It appeared from the trawl and interviews that it was popular for dealers to advertise their products as being imported from the US, to meet a large demand for 'cali weed'. Holland, Canada and the UK were other locations dealers would state their cannabis was from. They would also use flag emojis of these countries to signify these locations to potential customers.

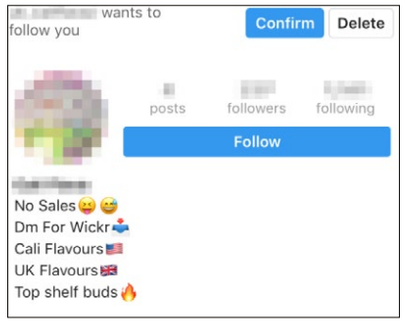


Image 60: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram bio. The suspected dealer has put 'No sales' in their bio followed by smiley emojis which suggests that they are writing 'no sales' to avoid detection but are still selling. 'Dm for Wickr' means to direct message them from their Wickr account. The suspected dealer has written that they have 'flavours' of cannabis from 'Cali' (california) and UK. 'Top shelf buds' is written to advertise that their cannabis is high quality.

The researchers did occasionally come across profiles based in the US selling cannabis, for example from California and Colorado, where it is legal. However, it is still illegal to sell cannabis on Instagram even in states in the US where it is legal.[43]

Some dealers sold a variety of different substances and were posting photos of multiple drugs in one picture. For example, one dealer posted a photo of pregabalin, cannabis and ketamine. There were also dealers who would just sell one specific drug, such as cannabis, or exclusively one category of drug, such as prescription medication.

The majority of dealers appeared to be selling drugs for personal use. However, there were a couple of profiles advertising drugs which could be resold by customers. For example, one account was selling ounces of cocaine, suggesting it is not just low-level dealing occuring on these platforms.

Image 61: Screenshot of a photo posted on Instagram by a suspected dealer showing a large quantity of cocaine. The dealer has written in the caption that their account has previously been shut down. The suspected dealer has stated that they still operate from the same Wickr account. The suspected dealer is advertising that they are selling an ounce of cocaine for £1450. The suspected dealer describes the cocaine as 'pure grade A' to advertise that it is good quality. The suspected dealer also offers the buyers to try before they buy.

How is the platform used to advertise, buy or sell drugs?

Profile

Instagram's bio feature was used by all of the suspected dealers the researchers found and often gave a useful indication of whether that account was involved in illicit drug supply or not.

Image 62: Screenshot of Volteface's Instagram bio

The bios of dealers' accounts seemed to vary significantly on Instagram, with some being very blatant about their dealing, while others were more discreet.

Many profiles stated "not for sale", "nothing for sale" or "personal use only" in their bio. An interview with an adult who knew buyers and sellers on social media revealed that account holders would do this to avoid suspicion or detection. However, the interviewee did highlight that some accounts on Instagram were there to document personal use rather than for illicit drug supply.

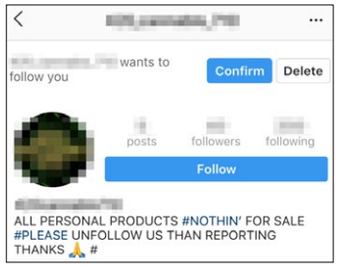


Image 63: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram bio which shows them stating that all their posts relate to personal use and there is nothing for sale. The suspected dealer has asked users to unfollow them rather than report them.

Other profiles were more explicit in their advertising and included prices in the bios. For example: "White Roche 10s 30 for £10" (White Roche is a brand of diazepam) and scale of prices for 10mg MSJ's (MSJ is known as diazepam or valium).

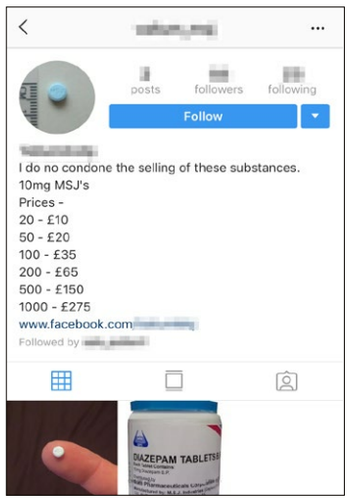


Image 64: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram profile which shows the suspected dealer advertising their price list and quantities in their bio. The suspected dealer has written that they do not condone the selling of these substances but then includes a price list for MSJ's. MSJ's are known as diazepam or Valium. '20 - £10' means 20 pills for £10. The suspected dealer has included their Facebook profile and their Instagram bio.

One profile the researchers observed stated "nosales.com" in their bio but appeared to be dealing drugs as they would post when they were out for delivery and provided drug menus with the price and quantity sold. Some dealers stated in their bios that their photos were "all from Google" or "pics from Google". This might be to avoid detection from the platform, not wanting to take pictures of their own products in case this was used as evidence by the police, for the sake of ease, or to forestall complaints from buyers if the product did not match the picture advertised.

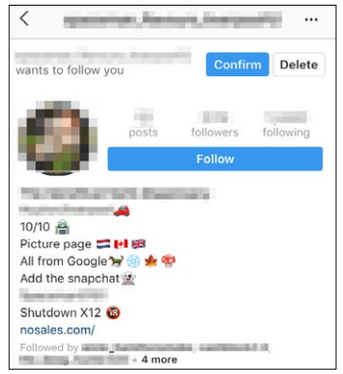
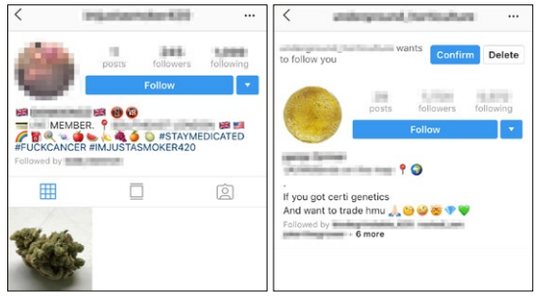


Image 65: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram bio. The suspected dealer has shown which location they operate in (this has been blurred out for anonymity), with a car emoji next to it suggesting that they are available for delivery. The suspected dealer has advertised that their products are '10/10' to suggest good quality. The suspected dealer has stated that their page is a 'picture page' to avoid detection, however, includes emoji flags from the Netherlands, Canada and the UK, suggesting that their drugs are from there. The suspected dealer has mentioned that their photos are from Google. The suspected dealer includes their Snapchat name. 'Shutdown X12' indicates that their profile has been shut down 12 times. 'No 18' emoji suggests that the dealer would

not sell to under 18s. 'Nosales.com' is included to avoid detection.

It was common for suspected dealers to include their location followed by a pin emoji to show users or potential customers where they were based and the area they were operating in. Many dealers also put their location in their username.



Images 66 and 67: Screenshots of suspected dealers' Instagram bios which include their locations. Locations are included to give potential buyers an idea of where suspected dealers will sell to.

The majority of dealers had their icon photos as pictures that were unidentifiable or anonymous. For example: using cartoons, graphics of their username, images relating to drugs, or no picture at all.

Instagram stories

Instagram stories appear at the top of the application when it is first opened, making the Instagram story function popular for dealers who want potential customers to see their products without having to go directly onto the dealer's profile.

Image 68: Screenshot of Volteface's Instagram feed which shows user Instagram stories.

Suspected dealers would frequently use the Instagram story function to post pictures and videos of drugs, saying what their menu is/what they have available, price lists, what quantity of drugs they had available, what locations they deliver to and at what times. Dealers would also add onto their Instagram stories, using either videos or photos, when they were out for delivery. Most dealers would post this daily, however, activity seemed to spike in the evenings and at weekends.

Image 69: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram story that advertises which drugs they have available and how to contact them. 'Sunset x Sherblato' and 'Cheese' and 'Ammi' are different strains for cannabis. 'Dm 4 Wkr' means direct message for their Wickr account. The suspected dealer has stated that further details, including pictures, sizes and prices, will be on Wickr. 'For details on cali' followed by a US flag emoji suggests that the dealer sells Californian strains of cannabis.

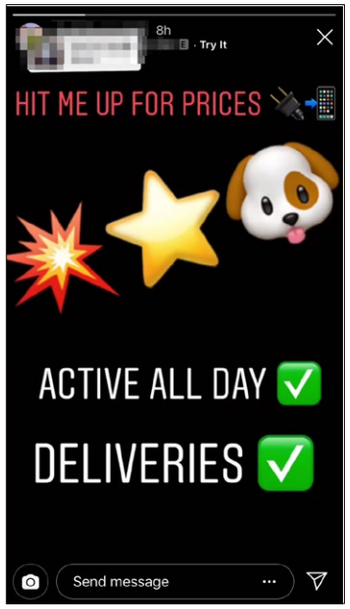


Image 70: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram story which advertises that they are active all day and are doing deliveries. The 'bang' emoji suggests that their product is 'banging', which means good quality. The use of the star and dog emojis indicates that the dealer is advertising 'Stardawg', which is a strain of cannabis.

Image 71: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram story which advertises 'fishscale', a term used for very high-quality cocaine. The suspected dealer advertises their price list and quantities for cocaine, for example '0.7 £60' means that they are selling 0.7 grams for £60. The nose emoji and underscore is used to depict snorting a line of cocaine.

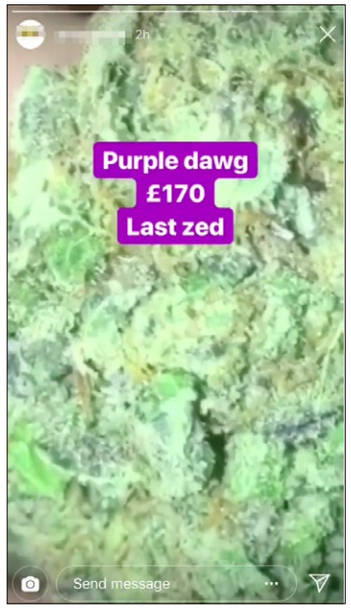


Image 72: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram story which shows a picture of cannabis, the strain, price and quantity. 'Purple dawg' is a strain of cannabis. 'Zed' means ounce, thus, the suspected dealer is stating that they have one more ounce left of 'Purple dawg' to sell at £170.

As well as posting content relating to drug supply, dealers would also post content of their personal lives on their stories. For example, one dealer posted a picture of themselves in bed (with their face hidden) saying "Late start for me today people, everything's going at 3pm so u have from now until 2.30 to get your order for tomorrow (sat)" and another dealer talked about attending his sister's comedy show.

One dealer hand wrote on their Instagram story when they were available to drop off or post drugs to buyers. They also hand wrote the price of a certain quantity of drug and asked for potential buyers to contact them on Wickr by writing 'dm 4 //'. This may have been to avoid any algorithms that could pick up on text relating to illicit drug supply.

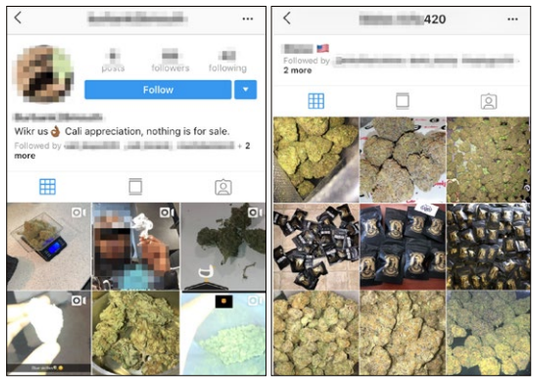
Images 73 and 74: Screenshots of a suspected dealer's Instagram story which shows the dealer hand writing that they are 'active now' and available for 'drops/ postal', meaning they could drop off the drugs or post them. The suspected dealer has also written '£160 Z' which means £160 for an ounce. The suspected dealer has not specified what drugs they are selling. 'Dm4//' means direct message for Wickr.

Instagram also allows users to add photos and videos they have posted onto their stories (which only last 24 hours) to their 'highlights' on their Instagram profile. 'Highlights' save a user's Instagram story permanently rather than deleting it after 24 hours. For example, if a dealer was advertising drugs by posting a video to their story, they could save this permanently on their profile by adding it to their 'highlights'. This could be a way for potential customers to see what dealers had previously advertised on their stories.

Image 75: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram profile which shows their 'highlights' on their profile page underneath their bio. 'DM for number' means direct message the dealer for their number. The picture in their highlights is suspected to be cocaine.

Posting pictures and videos on their Instagram profile

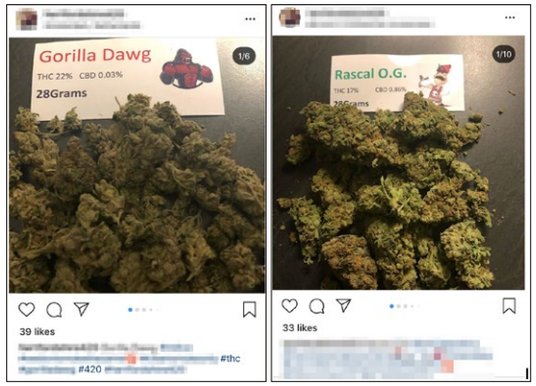
As well as posting content on their Instagram stories and highlights, it was common for accounts to have photos and/or videos of their drugs on their main profiles, particularly the accounts that sold cannabis.



Images 76 and 77: Screenshots of suspected dealers' Instagram profiles which shows the dealers posting several photos and videos of cannabis. One suspected dealer has put 'Wikr us' with an ok emoji in their bio, indicating that they want potential buyers to communicate with them via Wickr. 'Nothing is for sale' is written to try and avoid detection. One suspected dealer has a US flag next to their name to advertise that their product is from the US.

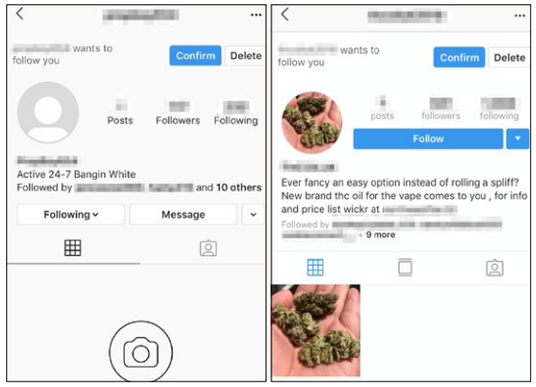
With cannabis, it was common for a dealer to provide a 360 degree angle of the product in video format so potential buyers could see all angles of the cannabis bud.

One dealer observed by the researchers would post pictures of the cannabis they were selling with a business card above it, containing the name of the strain, how many grams they were selling, and the THC and CBD contents, though there is no way of verifying if this was accurate. Some dealers also put their username and the date in their photos of the product, to prove the product was theirs and that they were recently active. The researchers also observed many dealers who posted photos of text with their drug 'menus' listed.



Images 78 and 79: Screenshots of photos posted on Instagram by suspected dealers showing cannabis being advertised for sale. The suspected dealer has included the strain of the cannabis they are advertising in each photo–'Gorilla Dawg' and 'Rascal O.G.'. The dealer has also included the THC and CBD content of cannabis in their advertisement and included the quantity (28 grams or an ounce).

A large number of profiles had only one or no permanent pictures of the drugs they were selling – perhaps to avoid suspicion or detection by Instagram, as the less content the user had on their page related to drugs, the less likely it would be that they would get caught.

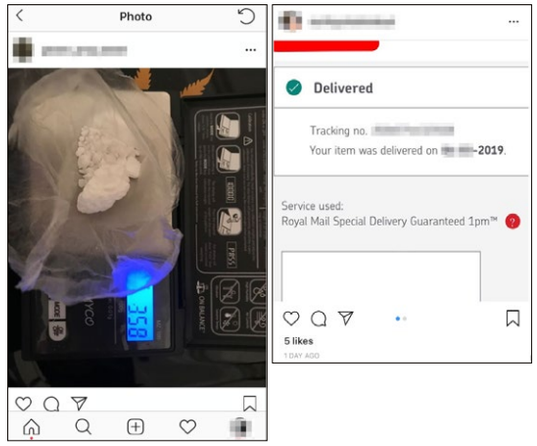


Images 80 and 81: Screenshots of suspected dealers' Instagram profiles which shows that they only had one or no permanent pictures of drugs they were selling. 'Bangin White' means cocaine. One suspected dealer has directed buyers to Wickr by stating 'for info and price list wickr at [username]'.

Underneath photos and videos posted by suspected dealers were captions. These varied, but it was common for dealers to ask users to 'inbox' or directly message them for more information. Some dealers put "personal only" in the caption, which may have been to avoid suspicion. The researchers observed users commenting below dealers' photos asking for prices, and dealers replying saying "dm me", again confirming that much of the activity would happen in private messages. Users would also comment below pictures and ask for their Wickr. Other profiles were more obvious about their dealing. For example, one dealer wrote a caption under a video of weed saying "recorded on my burner apologises for the quality" – the use of a burner phone suggested they were a drug dealer.

Image 82: Screenshot of the comments posted below a photo of cannabis which was posted onto Instagram by a suspected dealer. 'Dm' means direct message.

While it was mostly photos and videos of drugs which the researchers came across on Instagram, they also saw content related to dealers' activity. For example, dealers would post pictures and videos of weighing scales with their products on; the packaging that dealers packaged their drugs in, for example, 'baggies' and tinned packaging; and some dealers even posted Royal Mail tracking slips to prove they deliver their products in the post and are reliable.



Images 83 and 84: Screenshots of photos posted on Instagram by suspected drug dealers. One image shows what appears to be cocaine on weighing scales. The other image shows a screenshot of Royal Mail tracking showing that an item has been delivered.

Outside of content relating to drugs, the researchers also came across accounts selling iPhones, expensive clothing, fake printed money and fake IDs. There were also examples of suspected dealers posting links to drill music or drill videos.[44]

Direct messaging

It was common for dealers to navigate potential customers to alternative encrypted methods of communication.

They would state in their bios, in photos, in captions to photos or videos and on their Instagram stories, that individuals should direct message or "dm" them, message them on Wickr (// - symbol for Wickr), WhatsApp them, phone them, text them or add them on Snapchat.

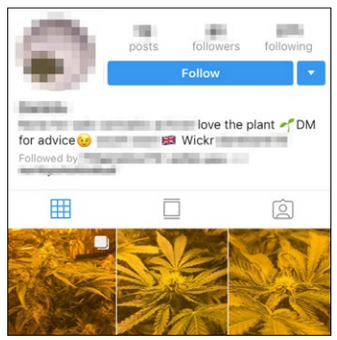


Image 85: Screenshot of suspected dealer's Instagram bio which shows them saying that users can 'DM for advice'. The bio includes a seedling emoji which represents cannabis. 'Dm' means direct message. The wink face emoji suggests that users can 'dm' the suspected dealer for more information about buying drugs. The dealer has included a UK flag emoji which suggests their drugs are from the UK. They have also included their Wickr username.

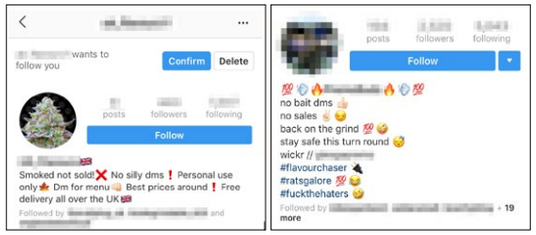
Image 86: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram bio which shows them advertising their Wickr username. // is the symbol for Wickr. 'Nothing for sale' is written to avoid detection. The US flag, plane and world emojis suggests that their drugs are imported from the US.

Image 87: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram story which shows them advertising what drugs they have for sale and the prices they are selling them for. 'Platinum Cookies' is a strain of cannabis.

The US flag emoji indicates that the cannabis is imported from the US. '20s' is the price that the suspected dealer is selling them for, for example £20 worth of 'Platinum Cookies'. The dealer has also signposted potential buyers to their Wickr as they have written 'Ask for //' - // means Wickr.

Dealers said that, once the individual contacted them through another method of communication, they could: receive their drug 'menu' with price list and quantities, receive product information, access other information or order products advertised.

Communication regarding deals would clearly take place through direct messaging, or other encrypted messaging apps, rather than publicly on the platform. Some dealers stated that "bait DMs" would be blocked and deleted, suggesting that they are careful about who they interact with.



Images 88 and 89: Screenshots of suspected dealers' Instagram bios which state 'no silly dms' and 'no bait dms'. 'Bait' means obvious. 'Dms' mean direct messages.

The researchers received several direct messages during the trawl from users who said they had various strains of cannabis, asking if the researchers were interested in buying them and giving price details of products. The researchers did not respond. However, this confirmed their suspicion that communication between potential customers and drug dealers would happen privately via the direct messaging function.

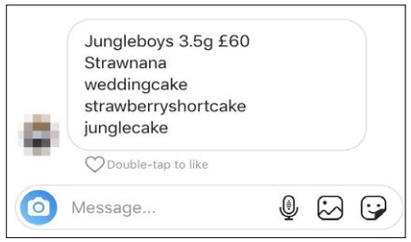
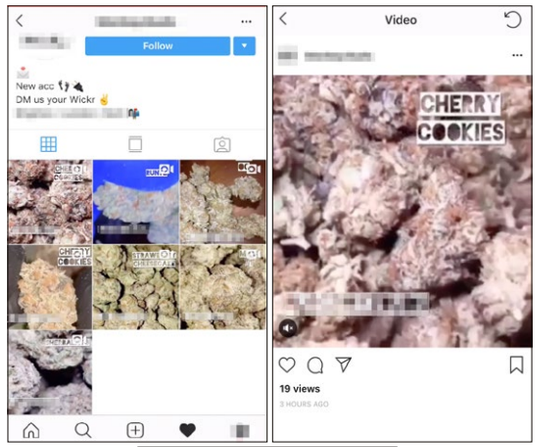


Image 90: Screenshot of message sent to the researchers by a suspected dealer on Instagram advertising their drug menu. 'Jungleboys', 'Strawnana', 'Weddingcake', 'Strawberryshortcake' and 'Junglecake' are strains of cannabis. The suspected dealer has advertised that they are selling these cannabis strains for £60 per 3.5 grams.

Observations:

Professionalism

Suspected dealers on Instagram used the most sophisticated graphics and branding out of the three platforms. For example, one had posted permanent videos of cannabis on their page which had their name in graphics branded in the bottom left corner of the video and had the name of the strain of cannabis in the top right corner in the same branding. Additionally, it was common for dealers to make post menus using bright colours, fonts and emojis.



Images 91, 92 and 93: Screenshots of a suspected dealer's Instagram profiles where cannabis is being advertised for sale. The suspected dealer has posted videos of cannabis to their profile and labelled which strains they are, for example 'cherry cookies'. The suspected dealer has signposted potential buyers to direct message them with a Wickr account – 'DM us your Wickr'.

There were many elements observed by the researchers that likened profiles to businesses. For example, some dealers would give potential customers the chance to try their products before buying them, stating in their bios that customers were able to "try before you buy". There were also dealers who stated that they send freebies, samples and testers out to customers. Interestingly, several dealers suggested that they wouldn't sell to under-18s by writing "No under *18 with a cross emoji*". This suggests that some dealers felt they could not deal drugs to children. However, it would be difficult to determine the age of people from their online profiles and it is unlikely that dealers would ask for ID. One advantage of buying from social media is its anonymity and having to show ID would jeopardise this.

Images 94 and 95: Screenshots of suspected dealers' Instagram bios which include the 'no 18' emoji used to state that they would not sell to under-18s. Emojis of maple leaf and different fruit emojis suggests that the suspected dealer has many strains of cannabis available. Both profiles have written that they have nothing for sale. 'Dm //' means direct message for Wickr.

Drug dealing on Instagram also appeared to replicate legitimate business models. For example, dealers would offer drugs in bundle giveaways and prizes for followers who re-shared their page or promoted their products.

> Yes, definitely. I mean, he's run competitions before, where he'd put, like, a rock of MDMA on a scale, and the person to guess the weight of this rock of MDMA to the closest milligram won, like, a gram of ketamine and a set of reagent tests, so that people could perform their own reagent tests on their different products – which is quite a simple form of harm reduction that most people can access.[45]
>
> *- Adult buying drugs through social media*

Image 96: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram story which shows an image of someone posting that they received a package, which is suspected to contain drugs. They write that they received a reagent kit with the package, suggesting the buyer can test their products.

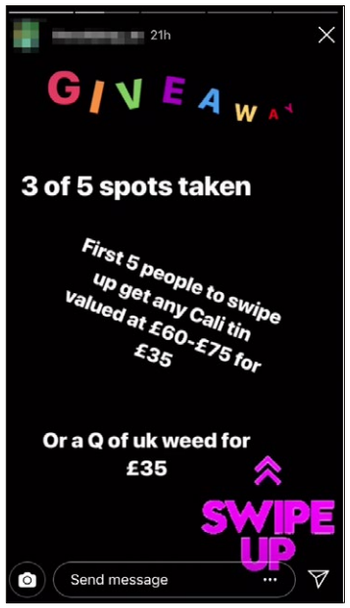


Image 97: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram story which shows them offering discounts and giveaways. The suspected dealer has posted that the first five people to reply to their story gets 'any cali tin' (any strain of cannabis from California) for a discounted price. 'Q of uk weed' means a quarter of an ounce of cannabis from the UK.

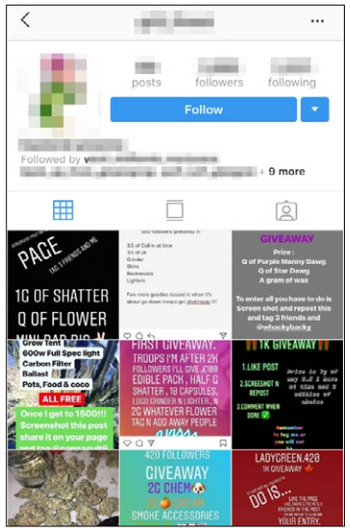


Image 98: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram profile showing numerous photos advertising 'giveaways' when the suspected dealer's profile has received a certain amount of followers.

Profiles with a large following also offered profiles with a smaller following the chance to be advertised on their story. For example, they might write on their story that their followers should follow other dealer accounts. It appeared from the trawl that profiles with a large following would ask for money in return for promoting other users' profiles. The researchers came across several accounts that stated they "do reviews and promotions" and asking for individuals to "inbox them". This would mean that dealers review other dealers' services and promote them on their channels to prove that those profiles are legitimate and not scammers. In their bios, some dealers gave 'shout outs' to other accounts selling drugs.

Image 99: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram story which shows them shouting out another profile. The plug emoji is used to 'plug' or promote other dealer accounts.

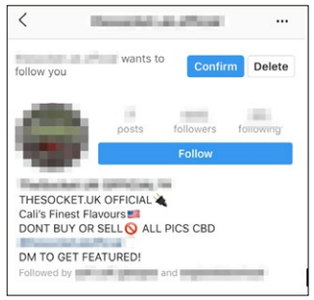


Image 100: Screenshot of a profile on Instagram that was observed promoting different cannabis dealer accounts. The plug emoji is used to suggest they are

promoting or 'plugging' accounts. 'All pics CBD' may be included as CBD is legal and this could help avoid detection.

Dealers would often write posts exposing accounts they knew were scamming people or were reportedly doing so. Scamming, in the context of drug dealing on Instagram, is when someone sets up a profile pretending to be a drug dealer, but takes the customer's money without providing them with the product. Additionally, it may be described as someone who gives poor quality products or the wrong product to a consumer. The researchers also viewed specific profiles set up just to broadcast known scammers on Instagram. This suggests a sense of community among dealers on Instagram.

> "They said, "I'll send you a sample for 10 quid in the post. I'll send you one gram of flower in the post." So, I transferred him the money, didn't hear anything back from him, got blocked, and then I got talking to somebody else because I'd seen a post that they'd written about that seller, and I said, "Fucker scammed me." And he went, "Well I sell it." And he said, "I'll send you some if you want."
>
> *- Adult who has bought drugs on social media*

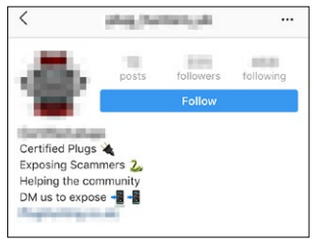


Image 101: Screenshot of a profile that was observed to be exposing scam accounts advertising drugs for sale. The plug emoji is used for promoting or plugging profiles. The snake emoji represents scammers.

Similarly to Facebook, dealers would frequently post images of screenshots of feedback from their customers. This would be screenshots of texts or Facebook messages posted on Instagram, stating that they had received their product and that it was of good quality. This presumably was to prove that they were reliable and not scammers to other potential customers.

The research also observed that dealers would use the Instagram story function to keep potential customers updated with their stock, for example, how much they had left, when they were getting a delivery in, what products were coming in soon, and telling them to get their orders in before the stock was gone.

'Suggested' features

Similarly to Facebook and Snapchat, Instagram also has a 'suggested friends' function. After the researchers began following dealers, Instagram suggested other dealers for the researchers to follow. This indicates that the 'suggested friends' function assists users to expand their dealer networks.

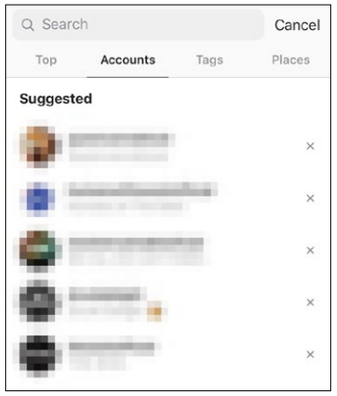


Image 102: Screenshot of the Instagram 'suggested friends' function.

Delivery/collection methods

Many of dealers had "24/7" in their bios, suggesting that they were available 24/7. Some elaborated on this by posting "active 24-7 banging white" (slang for cocaine) or "whenever you want 24 hour active inbox for more information".

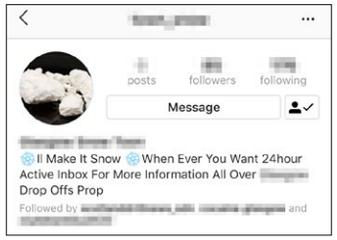


Image 103: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram bio showing that they are active '24 hour'. The snowflake emojis are used for cocaine. Their icon picture appears to be cocaine. 'Drops Offs' indicates that they are available to drop the drugs off to the buyer. 'Prop' means cocaine.

Additionally, some would be explicit about their opening hours, for example, "not active from 6am – 6pm mon-fri", suggesting weekend activity. From the trawl, it appeared that all suspected dealers' activity on Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook increased over the weekend, from Friday night to Sunday, as this would be the time when demand for drugs would be the greatest.[46] Dealers would also say they were taking orders until a certain time in their stories. Dealers were also seen 'crossing out' products in their 'menus' to let customers know what was sold out, keeping them updated.

From Instagram, it was clear that a variety of different delivery methods were available. Many accounts stated that they shipped to the UK and abroad, others delivered just to the UK, and some dealers were clearly more local, only delivering to their local areas. Some dealers also gave a specified location that buyers could collect from, often offering discounted rates if the buyer opted for collection rather than delivery.

> "You PayPal the dealer and it gets posted recorded delivery. It's quite corporate when it actually gets down to it, quite, I don't want to say professional because ultimately they're drug dealers. But as far as running a mail order business, it's quite professional and slick."
>
> *- Criminal Justice Youth Worker*

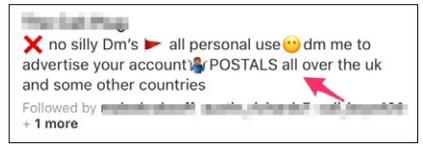


Image 104: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram bio which indicates that they post their drugs all over the UK.

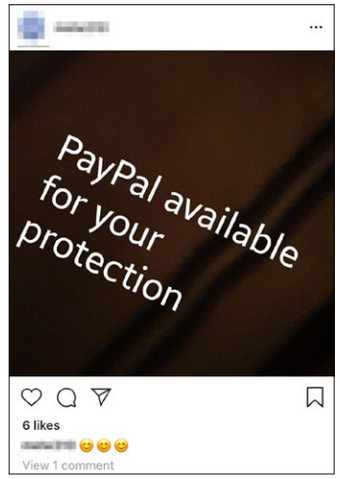


Image 105: Screenshot of a photo posted on Instagram by a suspected dealer which indicates that they take payment via PayPal.

Some dealers had "meets" in their bio suggesting potential customers could arrange collection. Some said they did "pick ups only".

Language

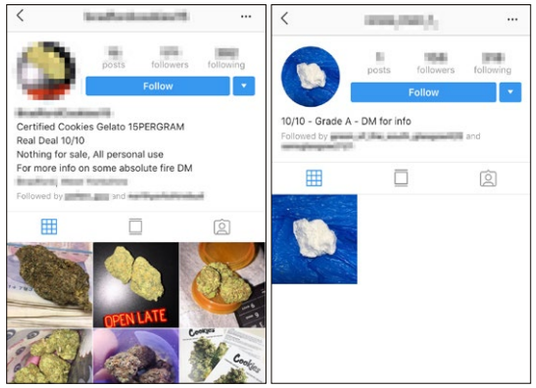
It was common for Instagram dealers to use language that would not arouse suspicion, for example, "no sales" or "nothing for sale" in their bios. However, the researchers observed that dealers would often use a 'wink face' emoji after this to suggest otherwise. If someone was unaware of the terminology and language used by dealers, it might be difficult to identify that drugs were being advertised for sale.

The researchers found that the majority of profiles they suspected of dealing drugs had something related to drugs in their usernames.

For example “420”, “710” (which spells oil upside down in numbers), “Green”, “Flavours”, “Benzo” and “Strains”. Several dealers used language associated with healthcare or medicine, for example, calling themselves pharmacies or medical shops, especially if they were selling multiple drugs including prescription medication. One user stated that they were a dispensary, with others using “medical” or “pharmacy” in their name. This same account also specified that they had nothing for sale. It was implied by some dealers that their products were for medical use only.

The language and slang used when discussing particular drugs was similar to language used by dealers on Snapchat and Facebook. For example, referring to cannabis as “bud” and placing emphasis on “cali flavours” or “cali weed”. Other slang and strains for weed was: “Nug”, “Kush”, “Dank”, “Scoobs”, “Lemon Haze”, “Critical Mass”, “Cheese dog” and “Star dog”. Other language included: “prop” or “rocket fuel” (slang for cocaine), and “benzos” (for benzodiazepines). In relation to cannabis, a lot of language was used around the “flavours” of cannabis, that is, the strains.

Dealers often used “10/10”, “premium Grade A” to describe their drugs and products, implying they were very good quality. The term ‘fish scale’ was also used by many dealers who sold cocaine. This term implies that it is very high quality. The term “plug” and an emoji of a plug was often used to suggest they were “plugging” (selling) something. Language and slang used to describe drug quantities included: “Henry’s”, “Q’s” and “Oz’s”.



Images 106 and 107: Screenshots of suspected dealers’ Instagram profiles which show them using terms such as ‘10/10’ and ‘Grade A’. These terms are used to suggest their products are high quality.

The majority of accounts on Instagram suspected of selling drugs were discreet in how they advertised their drugs, for example, by using certain language or directing users onto other, more private platforms.

Once the researchers studied and picked up on the tactics used by dealers, it became easier to find accounts as the trawl went on. Nevertheless, there were some accounts that were very blatant about their activity and openly stated they were selling drugs.

Other language used in dealers’ usernames were the dealers’ location, followed by ‘pick ups’ – suggesting that they were available for people to pick up the drugs. Some usernames stated the drug they were selling followed by the location.

Emojis were used by every dealer the researchers came across on Instagram. Emojis were used in suspected dealers in their Instagram bios, Instagram stories, photos, videos and highlights. Emojis were commonly used as code for drugs, which may have been to avoid detection. Similarly to Snapchat, Instagram is used primarily to post photos and videos, which meant dealers advertisements on Instagram were more visual, leading them to use emojis more often than on Facebook. See Table A for a glossary of the emojis used across all of the platforms.

Image 108 and 109: Screenshots of suspected dealers’ Instagram stories which appear to show rocks of cocaine. The phone and car are used to show that the drugs can be ordered by phone and delivered by car. The nose emoji represents the most common method of consuming cocaine, snorting up the nose.

Hashtags were used frequently by those who advertised drugs for sale on Instagram. This allows users to search for particular hashtags, for example, #cannabis, and view all public content and posts in which that hashtag is included.

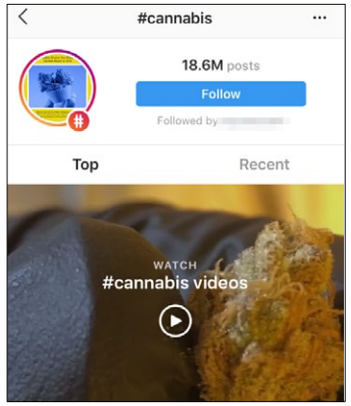


Image 110: Screenshot of results from searching ‘#cannabis’ on Instagram.

Hashtags that were commonly used on Instagram included: #green #flavours #420 #strains #sale #weed #marijuana #cannabis #edibles #potent #mdmazing. It was also common for dealers to include hashtags of their location in their posts so that potential buyers knew which areas they were operating in.

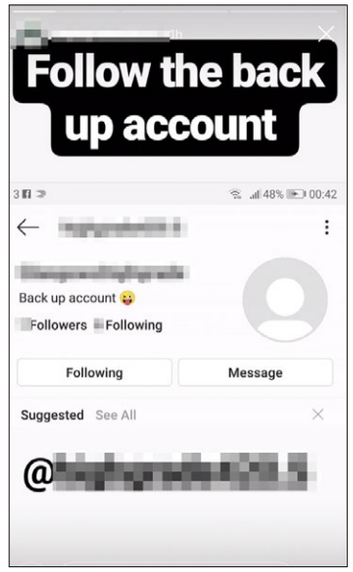


Image 111: Screenshot of a suspected dealer’s Instagram story which shows them telling users to follow their back up account. It includes a screenshot of their back up account and their username.

Involvement or response from platforms

There was evidence of Instagram making a proactive effort to close down accounts suspected of dealing drugs. This is due to the fact that some profiles had multiple ‘back-up’ accounts in case their current account was shut down. The researchers also found examples of dealers who would write about their frustration and anger at their accounts being shut down, with one account holder stating in their bio that their account had been closed 12 times. It was common for suspected dealers to say in their bios that their previous account had been deleted at a certain amount of followers, for example “deleted at 7k”. Moreover, the observed profiles which stated that their “posts keep getting deleted” by Instagram. Profiles would often express their frustration by including emojis in their bios such as the rat emoji or snake emoji which signify the police, social media enforcers, or profiles that “snitched” on them.

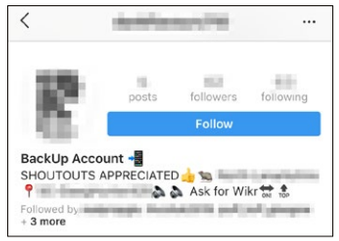


Image 112: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's back up Instagram account. The suspected dealer has written 'shoutouts appreciated' which means they would like other users to promote their back up account. The rat emoji represents snitches.

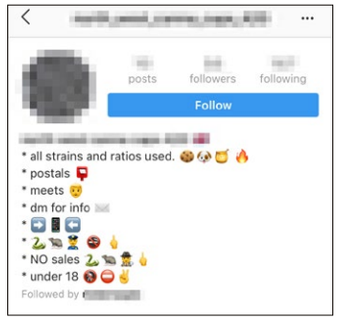


Image 113: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram bio which shows them using the snake, rat, detective and police emojis which indicates an awareness that they could be reported. 'Postals' means drugs can be posted. 'Meets' means that the dealer is able to meet up in person.

The researchers also observed lots of content of individuals consuming drugs for personal use or posting pictures of drugs, particularly cannabis. It seems that Instagram allows profiles to operate and post such photos, as long as they are not seen to be selling. For example, lots of fan cannabis accounts were active. In an initial interview, an individual with lived experience explained that users are allowed to post pictures of drugs, but are not allowed to sell drugs. From the subtle language and slang used by dealers, proving these accounts are selling drugs might be difficult.

Image 114: Screenshot of a suspected dealer's Instagram story which shows them consuming what appears to be a cannabis joint.

Table A - Glossary of Emojis seen on Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram

🇬🇧	Union Jack flag = Sells in the UK or grown/procured from the UK
🇺🇸 🇨🇦 🇪🇸	US, Canada, Spain, Netherlands flags = Where products are imported from or to indicate drugs are for sale by showing flags of countries where drugs have been decriminalised or legalised
😄 🤪	Faces = To indicate drugs are being sold following "no sales"
🔞	No under 18s = Will not sell the under 18s
📱	Phone = To get in contact
🏪	Convenience store = Deal drugs 24/7
💯	100 = Good quality i.e. 100% legitimate
💰	Money bag = Drugs are for sale, for example, following "no sales"
🚗	Car = Ability to deliver in and around that location
📮	Post box = Drugs can be posted
🍁 🌱	Leaf, Maple Leaf and Seedling = Cannabis
🐎	Horse = Ketamine
🍄	Mushroom = Magic Mushrooms
💊	Pill = Ecstasy or prescription medication
🍓 🍋	Fruit = Cannabis strains i.e 'flavours'
🚀	Rocket = Description of drugs associated with cocaine i.e. rocket fuel
👃 💨	Nose, blow, snowflake = Cocaine
💎	Diamond = Pure cocaine
🔥	Fire = Good quality drugs
👻	Ghost = Snapchat account
🐷 🐍	Pig, rat or snake = Snitches or individuals who reported their accounts or the police
🙏	Pray = Please do not report
🔌	Plug = Plugging or promoting other accounts

Impact

This section examines the impact that witnessing, buying or selling drugs through social media is having on young people by drawing on qualitative interviews and focus groups with professionals and young people.

Seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media

Those Volteface spoke to highlighted several ways in which people would see drugs advertised for sale on social media platforms.

A social media user may come across drug dealer accounts by typing in specific words, hashtags or content related to drugs in the platform's search bar, and then find dealers who follow or engage with this content. This may be done proactively, where users search for drug-related content with the specific intention of finding dealers, or this may occur accidentally, where a user looks for drug-related content and then stumbles across dealer accounts. Dealers can expand their business by targeting accounts that post drug-related content and follow their followers, who dealers will assume are more likely to be drug users. They can also post underneath drug-related content, such as memes, pictures or videos, and advertise what drugs they have for sale.

The search bar function on Facebook allows users to search for posts, people, photos, videos, pages, groups, events and places. Instagram's search bar function allows users to search for accounts, hashtags and places. However, on Snapchat, users can only search for usernames in the search bar which makes it more difficult to find or stumble across drug-related content or accounts selling drugs without an existing network.

> "I think it depends how much you buy into it and how much you want to follow and how much you want to see. It seems that the more of it you follow various different vendors, the more requests you get and the more it takes over your feed."
>
> *- Drug and alcohol practitioner*

Before social media, young people will have actively sought out drug dealers or those curious around drugs may have stumbled across dealers. The use of social media has reduced these obstacles by providing opportunities for dealers and buyers to expand their reach and make interaction between the two much easier.

Young people Volteface spoke to highlighted that, where people see drugs advertised for sale online, this may be reflective of their offline network, where drugs are offered to them because they have friends or mutual friends who are dealers. Volteface's research has identified that social media algorithms appear to exacerbate the network effect, by connecting users with people who they would not have met in real life. The 'suggested friends' feature on social media platforms also widens a person's network and increases the likelihood of them befriending drug dealers. Volteface found that, once a few drug dealer accounts had been followed, the platforms would soon start 'suggesting' other drug dealer accounts to follow. One research participant said:

> "I've seen it on Snapchat and Instagram. So Snapchat is just expected, it's not out of the blue or anything like that. There is this one guy I know who I met on a summer programme[47] and he posts it all the time, either him smoking it or him selling it. Then my friend, through him, added another person who she can buy drugs from so it's like a virality thing. So if there is one person who can sell it, they know someone else that you can reach out to. So it's like everyone being connected."
>
> *- Inner city and suburban Year 12 youth group*

Young people said that it was often commonplace for users to post 'shout outs' to other accounts which would be advertising or selling drugs, as a way to impress other friends or followers on social media. In order to gain 'likes' or traction on their posts, young people may be incentivised to share drug advertisements which they perceive to be 'cool'.

> *P: "It's like friends of friends, people helping out their mates, advertising for them.*
>
> *P: So you follow one person and then they're like, "Oh my mate has got this," and it will just…"*
>
> *- Inner city Year 12 Sixth Form focus group*

The rise of drugs being advertised for sale on social media is not simply the transfer of an existing problem into the online world as the design features of the platforms are exacerbating the risks young people face.

Impact of seeing drugs advertised for sale

Normalisation and glorification of drug use

The most prominent concern raised by those Volteface interviewed was that seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media has normalised drug use, especially for young people, by creating or reinforcing the incorrect belief that it is commonplace to use drugs and that there are minimal risks attached to doing so.

> "I think it's become normalised in real life because of social media. So before, when I wouldn't use social media, so when I was really young and I saw someone doing drugs, I'd be like, "Oh my god, they're so dangerous." But now it's changed who a druggie is. It's not someone dangerous, someone shady in the street with a tracksuit on. It can be one of your close friends. So it's really changed how we see people who do drugs."
>
> *- Inner city and suburban Year 12 youth group*

> "Yes, it romanticises it so where people think that nothing can go wrong. It really overshadows any drug education people had in the past, like in PSHE lessons or anything like that."
>
> *- Inner city and suburban Year 12 youth group*

Professionals highlighted that, the more frequently online advertisements are seen, the greater the normalisation effect will be. It is therefore concerning that 72% of poll respondents who had seen illegal drugs advertised for sale on social media sites or apps said they saw them being advertised once a month or more. For example, there is evidence to suggest that the frequency of seeing gambling advertisements plays a strong role in the normalisation of gambling in sports.[48]

The effects of these advertisements are exacerbated by other drug-related content found on social media, such as memes or videos, which promote reckless drug use and further normalise drug-taking behaviour.

> "I think alongside social media platforms to buy and sell drugs there probably needs to be recognition of the very, very popular meme accounts that talk about, and I'd argue promote, drug use, especially reckless drug use. It might be that if people are looking at both of these they might see dealers selling a lot of drugs and they see their accounts and making jokes about using a lot of drugs, again, that more normalised behaviour, idolising having a lot and taking a lot."
>
> *- Drug and alcohol practitioner*

The polling data revealed that nearly half of young people aged under 18 (48%) who saw drugs advertised for sale were not concerned by this, which was substantiated during the focus groups. Participants explained that they were not concerned because they see the content frequently, they are able to skip past the content or block it, and they perceive drug use and supply as victimless crimes. As most facets of real life now have a social media presence, it did not appear unusual to them that drug dealing should too.

> *P: "It's not particularly significant though, I can't remember when I first saw it, I just don't really care. It's like, "Oh okay."*
>
> *P: Just skip past it."*
>
> *- Inner city Year 12 Sixth Form focus group*
>
> *P7: "It's just normal. Bang, you see weed. Bang, you're on another story.*
>
> *P5: Just leave it. Just let them get on with it."*
>
> *- Rural Key Stage 4 Pupil Referral Unit focus group*

It is not yet apparent whether the advertisement of these products and their accessibility has had any meaningful impact on behaviour. There is some evidence that suggests advertising is more persuasive and effective when conducted in familiar settings, such as on people's social media feeds,[49] and studies have shown that paid social media advertising has an impact on consumer buying behaviour.[50]

Volteface's poll showed that 9% of those who had seen drugs advertised for sale online said it made them consider using illegal drugs, 6% said it resulted in them using illegal drugs, 3% said that it resulted in them buying illegal drugs, 2% said that it made them consider selling illegal drugs or giving them to friends, and 0% said that it resulted in them selling illegal drugs or giving them to friends. As drug advertising on social media is a recent phenomenon, further research will be needed to identify impact. Moreover, it should be noted that many young people may not want to admit to this activity, so this data may not be an accurate reflection of behaviour change.

> "It depends. If you buy it… like, me, if I see an account, it doesn't affect me because I don't really care about it. But if someone who was interested in taking drugs saw an advert, like, 'oh, get this weed, blah, blah, blah', with a deal, then they might think, "Oh, yes, I might get that."
>
> *- Adult who has bought drugs through social media*
>
> "It's like, "Should we do it?" send it to the group chat like, "Guys, it's the weekend. Shall we try this and have a bit of fun?" I guess it does spur your interest a bit. If it wasn't advertised, I guess we wouldn't think about it but we know that we can get it. We know that it's really accessible. It's so accessible."
>
> *- Inner city Year 12 Sixth Form focus group*

Unreliable source of drugs education

Young people use social media and the internet as a tool to learn about drugs, with a recent NHS survey identifying that 56% of young people viewed the internet as a helpful source of information when it came to drug use.[51]

Evidence from those Volteface spoke to, the trawl and the poll strongly indicate that social media has diversified the drugs available to purchase by widening the reach of dealers, and thereby the number of products advertised.

Early exposure to a range of new or different drugs is concerning given the current state of drugs education in the UK.[52] Volteface's 2019 report Making the Grade revealed that, despite the increased availability of 'new' drugs such as Lean and Xanax, drugs education is failing to keep up-to-date with the latest drug trends and emerging threats, such as drug dealing through social media. The delivery of drugs education on the ground is considered to be a postcode lottery and content on social media platforms may be the first time a young person learns about different drugs, rather than in a classroom.

> "When I'm flicking through social media they're all shown together as well, so there's normalisation, you've got cannabis, next to the pills, next to Xanax and it puts them mainly on a bit more of an even playing field than they would have been in the past when you had to jump around from dealer to dealer."
>
> *- Drug and alcohol practitioner*

It is difficult to monitor the quality of drug information and advice that is shared by users and dealers on social media platforms. One interviewee with lived experience of buying drugs spoke positively about his experiences, explaining that his Snapchat dealer provided practical harm reduction advice alongside their drug sales. However, there is no guarantee that the drug information provided is correct as it is provided by dealers who ultimately have a profit incentive.

As young people are turning to the internet and social media to learn about drugs, it is essential that they learn from high quality, accurate materials, rather than advertisements posted by drug dealers.

Increased vulnerability to exploitation

Those Volteface interviewed described how the advertising of drugs for sale on social media – a platform that many young people feel at ease on – has changed perceptions of drug dealing from something that was considered to be intimidating, difficult to get into and abnormal to be involved with, to something that is accepted among their 'friends' in their online community. This arguably normalises drug dealing on social media. For example, young people stated that they did not view their followers or 'friends' who advertise drugs for sale on social media as 'proper dealers'.

> P4: "On social media it feels like everyone is your friend so that may be why people do it over social media because you have more connections.
>
> **I2: So it feels safer because they're your friends?**
>
> P4: Yes, definitely because the whole picture of a drug dealer has changed."
>
> *- Inner city and suburban Year 12 youth group*

A theme during focus groups was that young people placed trust in drug dealers on social media, seeing them as their 'friends' even though they may have never met them in person. Personal relationships have always existed between dealers and customers but social media has allowed these relationships to develop before any transactions have taken place or without the parties having met. Social media allows dealers to show, what young people perceive to be, their 'authentic' self, or, as is the case with all social media, a side of themselves that the dealer wants the social media user to see. For example, during the trawl, Volteface saw drug dealers posting about going to college, talking about their family and going to comedy shows.

> "It's almost like there is a connection, they would never sell me off to the police or something because we're friends. It's almost like you build a bond and a relationship with your dealer so you wouldn't necessarily want to expose them or anything like that because you don't see them as a dealer, as a bad person. You see them more as a friend or they're just trying to make extra money on the side."
>
> *- Inner city and suburban Year 12 youth group*

Some young people did say that they felt upset when they saw someone they knew or a friend advertising drugs for sale.

> "I feel it makes me sad sometimes if it's somebody I grew up with, maybe someone from primary school or someone I know. I think it touches me more when it's someone I know because it's like, "Wow, I grew up with this person," or, "I knew this person. We would talk about how we would never be those type of people," and then seeing someone."
>
> *- Inner city and suburban Year 12 youth group*

Drug dealers can also use social media to promote an associated lifestyle. Volteface saw evidence of dealers bragging about how much money they had earnt in a short amount of time and how easy it was, making dealing look attractive and appealing by posting pictures of large quantities of cash, cars and footwear onto their social media feeds. Findings from the National Crime Agency (NCA) annual assessment of county lines corroborated this finding as it found that dealers would use social media to post images and videos of cash, designer clothing, luxury cars and other high value goods to create a misconception that involvement in crime is rewarding. These lifestyle advertisements would be used to recruit and control victims with limited economic opportunities.[53]

> "I think it's a lot easier to make and sell it, because of social media and because of social media, it's being glamorised even more and becomes more of a normal thing."
>
> *- Adult who has bought drugs through social media*

One academic highlighted that, as young people are continually seeing drugs advertised brazenly on social media, this could also threaten the perceived legitimacy of the law and reduce any deterrent effect.

> "I suppose if young people are seeing drugs getting sold online, that's got a real problem in terms of threatening the legitimacy of the law more widely because it's very clear that the police are not managing to enforce a law that's on our books, rightly or wrongly. Whether or not that law should be on our books or not, it is."
>
> *- Academic*

The normalisation and, at times glorification, of drug dealing on social media may place young people at a greater risk of exploitation, particularly in areas where youth services have been cut and fewer opportunities exist for young people.

Emerging evidence suggests that social media widens the number of opportunities to exploit young people as criminal gangs can groom remotely, allowing them to target young people from a wider range of locations and backgrounds.[54] The NCA has reported that victims of exploitation in county lines activity can be recruited both face-to-face and via social media, stating that it is used to control offenders and assist in identifying and recruiting new vulnerable individuals.[55]

One charity interviewed by Volteface explained how social media is changing how the county lines model operates as there is no longer the need to transport children from cities to rural areas to sell drugs, as children who live in those rural areas can be groomed over social media.

There is also the added concern that dealers will be able to access personal information via young people's social media accounts which could be used to track them.

> "With social media it is so easy to know everything about a person. I think less with guys but more with girls. If you go on their Instagram, you can find everything about them pretty much, their family, the holidays that they've been on and all these little things."
>
> *- Inner city Year 12 Sixth Form focus group*

It is a fundamental concern that the shift of drug dealing onto social media has potentially created more opportunities for criminal gangs to exploit young people.

Buying drugs through social media platforms

Similarly to how individuals might see drugs advertised for sale on social media, users can search for accounts that advertise or sell drugs and make contact with them by following their account, directly messaging them or commenting below one of their posts. Interviewees with lived experience said that this is often how they would procure drugs, for example, one participant said that they proactively searched for accounts selling cannabis.

> "On Instagram, you'll just use the search function to search for any particular username or hashtag. So with a user name you might search THC. A lot of them like to vape cannabis so they'll search vaping, THC vaping, something like #vapeTHC. It will bring up a list of users with those names, typically a closed account. You request to follow."
>
> *- Adult who has bought drugs through social media*

Young people said that they could buy drugs through social media from friends who posted about their drug use, as this gave them the opportunity to ask that person where they got their drugs from and if they were selling.

> "I would see someone, if I was going to buy it, they would be someone smoking a zoot or something and then I would pop up and be like, "Where did you get that from?" or, "Can I have some?" and they'd be like, "Yes."
>
> *- Inner city Year 12 Sixth Form focus group*

The accessibility and connectivity of social media allows users to easily share the profiles of dealers who they can recommend to other buyers, creating opportunities for buyers to purchase drugs from new sources who they might not have been aware of previously or been able to access.

> "Typically you need to know one user or somebody involved with it and then you can get the recommendation as a friend of a friend and so on and so forth .. "My brother's cousin buys it through this person, add them."
>
> *- Adult who has bought drugs on social media*

Once initial contact had been made on social media, the trawl and interviews revealed that it was commonplace for transactions to move to secure encrypted messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Wickr. Deals were made either by the dealer dropping off the product to the buyer, the buyer picking up the product from the dealer, or the product being posted to the buyer by the dealer, typically with a cost incurred.

Impact of buying drugs through social media

When discussing the impact of buying drugs through social media, those Volteface interviewed often compared it to traditional methods of buying drugs, such as texting or phoning a dealer and meeting them in person. The expansion of drug supply onto social media and the internet makes it possible to connect with a dealer, exchange money and receive a wide variety of different drugs – all without leaving the comfort of one's own home. However, the trawl evidenced that it was still commonplace for deals to take place face-to-face, with social media acting more as a platform for advertising or a marketplace for initial contact between buyers and sellers.

Greater accessibility

When comparing buying drugs via social media to more traditional methods, it was voiced by young people that the interconnectivity of social media has made it easier to buy drugs. Young people are able to find dealers more easily through design features on social media, for example, through the search bar function, looking at 'suggested friends' or allowing users to see each other's 'following', 'follower' or 'friends' list. Additionally, the interface of social media platforms are perceived to be easier to navigate and are more user friendly than the dark web.[56] The dark web is a collection of thousands of websites that use anonymity tools like Tor and I2P to hide their IP address and are commonly associated with the sale of drugs. [57]

> "It's a platform for it [dealing]. It's definitely a platform that you can link with people and really easy to find."
>
> *- Inner city Year 12 Sixth Form focus group*
>
> "With social media, you don't need to go through all of that hassle [when compared to dark web]. It's much more expedient. It's quicker. You can just, you know, arrange to meet somebody and pick it up, or you can PayPal it through, or even… you know, for some people, I'm sure that even setting up a Wickr account would be too much hassle."
>
> *- Drug and alcohol practitioner*

Drugs can be procured via social media platforms without having any existing network or local knowledge, with one interviewee explaining that it is ideal for people on holiday or who are new to an area.

> "I have only been back in the [location anonymised] for a couple of months, so I don't really know anyone, so this way there is a measure of connection of the people you can actually see. Rather than just asking some barfly who you happen to be sat next to."
>
> *- Adult who has bought drugs through social media*

As social media platforms have made drugs more accessible there is a risk that this will increase the frequency of drug use or the likelihood of initiation of use. A poll commissioned by Volteface in 2018 highlighted an association between access to drugs and their use.[58] According to its findings, young people who had tried alcohol were 11.6% more likely to think alcohol was 'somewhat easy' or 'very easy' to access. Equally, young people who had tried cannabis were 28.2% more likely to think that cannabis was 'somewhat easy' or 'very easy' to access. Similarly, a US survey of young people and parents found that accessibility of alcohol is associated with significant increases in the trajectories of young adolescent alcohol use.[59] A recent increase in the availability of higher purity cocaine on Europe's drug markets has been attributed to the recent rise in cocaine use across Europe.[60]

> "I think there's a big risk there because it's going to make drug use, or buying drugs, for young people much more accessible. Young people have phones from an earlier age now and once their brother shows them or they get to understand from their mates or their brother's mates, then I think if it's much more accessible and easier to buy drugs then yes I think it has that potential, yes."
>
> *- Drug and alcohol practitioner*

It is concerning that social media users, including young people, are able to find dealers and drugs more easily, largely due to its easy-to-navigate interface, and can procure drugs without an existing network. This may increase drug use or the likelihood of people starting to use drugs.

Greater choice

A key impact of drug dealing moving onto social media is that it has led to a greater choice of dealers and a wider variety of drugs available to buyers. The connectivity of social media allows potential buyers quicker access to a greater number of dealers, providing the opportunity for buyers to 'shop around' before deciding who they want to buy from.

"He [dealer on social media] didn't have a great selection one day, I decided to go to someone else, and again, you just kind of, you bounce from person to person. I've been doing this kind of about four years now, kind of buying online. So, it's the same with kind of your favourite takeaway sometimes. Sometimes, it gets taken over and you go somewhere else. It doesn't come up to scratch and you go somewhere else."

- Adult who has bought drugs through social media

This was evidenced in the trawl as the researchers came across hundreds of dealers who were selling a broad variety of different drugs. Buyers who were interviewed voiced that, before the internet and social media, it was commonplace for a buyer to have one individual dealer who would only supply drugs such as cannabis, cocaine and ecstasy. One interviewee explained that social media has given him access to psychedelics such as 2-CB and LSD, which were previously difficult for him to access.

"Yes, it's the only thing that I've bought off this person, because psychedelics are quite hard… well, have been quite hard to source, in my experience."

- Adult who has bought drugs through social media

Interviewees proposed that another reason social media provides greater choice of drugs and dealers is that dealing on social media has less risk attached to it, which leads to more dealers operating within that environment.

"I think it's [social media] expanding the market. I think the market is getting bigger. Why? Because it's less risk. Less risk. People can sell more and that's the point – you go on the dark web, these dealers – you have more choice. You can buy larger quantities and you can get it quicker. And it's so much safer. So much safer."

- Adult who has bought drugs through social media

Previously, if a person wanted to buy specific, niche drugs they would have to purchase them on a dark web cryptomarket, such as the Silk Road. Purchasing drugs on the dark web requires a certain level of technical skill, including operating the browser Tor and exchanging drugs with the cryptocurrency Bitcoin. As social media platform's interface is easier to navigate and more familiar to buyers, it has made these rarer types of drugs more accessible.

"I guess, with social media, you don't have to be an expert… You're not accessing the dark web and you're still having access to these rarer types of drugs."

- Adult who has bought drugs through social media

Increased access to a vast variety of drugs means that young people have more exposure to a wider range of drugs than they may have previously. This may increase the likelihood of poly substance use, which has harms associated with it,[61] particularly in the absence of good quality drugs education as young people may not be aware of the dangers of mixing drugs.

Accountability and Vetting

Those Volteface interviewed for this report highlighted that dealers on social media are more accountable to their customers because their businesses are public-facing. Social media allows potential buyers to research dealers on social media platforms, for example, by checking the number of followers they have, seeing their posts, reviews or feedback or asking one of their followers if they are 'legit'. The trawl revealed that dealers on social media are motivated to build up a reputation to gain a client base. Dealers would post pictures of customers leaving reviews, similar to how reviews are left on drug cryptomarkets on the dark web to prove to potential customers that they are reliable and provide a good service.[62] Some interviewees felt that this could be viewed as a form of harm reduction.

"But, definitely, I think there are elements by which it can used as harm reductionist – certainly if there are customer reviews there."

- Drug and alcohol practitioner

"There was one [dealer] that said 'I'm getting quite a few reports of amphetamine-cut cocaine and fake ketamine going around in Newcastle at the moment. If you have details of a dodgy dealer selling fake or cut stuff, or who has ripped you off, send in their details and we'll get a list going of everyone to avoid, so that no-one else has to get screwed over' – which I think is quite a good thing."

- Drugs educator

However, while social media may bring some elements of accountability, it is hard to determine when the drug dealer is misleading the buyer. The trawl revealed that it would be extremely easy to create a fake social media account, post as an individual and write fake reviews to create the illusion that you are a reputable seller. One interviewee highlighted that the customer review system on social media is not as robust as the review systems on the dark web, as dealers can select which feedback they want users to see or write the feedback themselves.

"So, on Insta or Snapchat, you might get some sort of, you know .. user reviews – you know, likes, shares, bits and pieces – but there is no solid customer review system in the same way as you'd get on the dark web."

- Drug and alcohol practitioner

Social media allows dealers to display their products in photo or video format to potential buyers. Some young people who participated in focus groups felt that, by seeing pictures or videos of drugs, they could often tell if the product was reliable or of good quality.

P2: "If it's brown [cannabis], sometimes that's good. There are little brown bits.

P7: You can just see the crystals and stuff."

- Rural Key Stage 4 Pupil Referral Unit focus group

The focus group participants made the case that this reduced the risks associated with buying drugs because social media allowed them to vet the dealers or the dealers' products before purchasing. The young people also felt that by 'stalking' a drug dealer on social media, they could get a sense of whether they were trustworthy.

Ultimately, young people cannot be certain that what they are viewing on a dealer's social media feed is genuine or is representative of that person. A young person's perception that this dealer is 'safe' or trusted may lead to them taking risks. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the drugs that dealers are advertising on social media are the drugs that they would be given. This is evidenced by many interviewees with lived experience of buying drugs via social media who said it was commonplace for buyers to get scammed, either by a poor quality product or no product at all. Young people may be putting misplaced trust into the credibility of the products being showcased.

"Sometimes, people get stung, and nothing turns up. The pages go, they just disappear. People get blocked on the messaging platforms or on social media. And they're out of pocket really unless, there's ways and means of trying to get your money back."

"So, it really is, it's a double-edged sword really, there are, the risks are lower, the risk's kind of lower for the violence side of things but risk in terms of getting scammed, but then again, it's the opposite way around as well. You lower the risk of violence but you're more susceptible to being scammed if that person isn't legitimate or you may find somebody who is legitimate, and you do get through the post and it's banging."

- Adult who has bought drugs through social media

Vetting dealers on social media does not necessarily reduce the risks associated with buying drugs as dealers may provide misrepresentative or false information about their products and themselves.

Moves drug dealing off streets

It was mentioned in interviews that buying drugs on social media can remove some of the harms which are present when buying drugs face-to-face from a drug dealer. As mentioned previously, there can be fewer transactions between buyer and dealer because initial contact can occur remotely and can be the option of the drugs being posted.

> "So to remove them from street dealer exposure, not necessarily just the dealer but the environment in which they will buy it, that's a harm reduction. As far as the actual consumption of substances, it's as it ever was."
>
> *- Criminal justice youth worker*

Young people spoke about the differences between talking to someone they did not know on social media compared to real life. They perceived that talking to strangers on an online familiar setting was less threatening and uncomfortable than in real life situations.

> "I think it's [interacting with drug dealers on social media] less threatening as well. Obviously if you meet someone in person it's quite intimidating but on social media, because it's so normal, it's not even drugs. It's just you're talking to someone."
>
> "It's crazy because we're always brought up, "Don't talk to strangers," but we do it online. So it shows how people are more comfortable doing it online. Even though we're all strangers online, it's still anonymous. It's okay because you're a stranger too, if that makes sense."
>
> *- Inner city and suburban Year 12 youth group*

However, there is no guarantee that, where physical contact between buyers and dealers does occur, it is less safe than it would have been without the use of social media. For example, the risks of meeting a dealer or stranger are still present if the buyer and dealer decide to meet face-to-face to exchange the drugs. Indeed, the risks may be increased as professionals voiced that young people may meet up with strangers who deal on social media rather than getting their drugs from a friend or someone in their social network.

> "Disadvantages of it are the extra level of risk, you're not getting your mate or a trusted network, especially if we're looking at Instagram where it is just searching trying to find one that is local to you and trusting that it's not going to go wrong, which is a big game. For some people it can be absolutely fine but there's always that element of risk and trust when you're meeting up with a stranger to buy an illicit substance."
>
> *- Drug and alcohol practitioner*

Evidence of harm reduction advice

Interestingly, it was highlighted that some social media accounts advertising drugs for sale offered harm reduction advice to potential buyers. Dealers may be incentivised to provide harm reduction advice as customers who have bad experiences when using their products may complain on a dealer's channels and damage their reputation. However, as mentioned previously, dealers ultimately have a profit incentive and are not trained professionals so there is no guarantee that the harm reduction advice they provide will be reliable.

> "But yes, this dealer in [location anonymised], he seemed [pause] not like your stereotypical dealer. He seemed to have a conscience about who he was selling it to. And he made a big point of taking pictures of reagent tests that he'd done on his products, so you could see the results of those."
>
> *- Adult who has bought drugs through social media*

Buyers are more exposed

An obvious impact that buying drugs through social media might have on young people is the criminal or punitive consequences that could result if they are caught buying drugs. Social media may leave buyers particularly vulnerable to criminalisation because the blatant visibility of social media may mean that people forget the legal risks and openly speak about buying drugs on unencrypted platforms. This was evidenced in the trawl. However, for others, the public nature of social media can make them suspicious of engaging in this activity.

Buying drugs on social media can also make it difficult to then report drug dealers to the police or the platform as buyers may feel complicit in an activity that could potentially be traced.

> "Reporting messages... It's very easy but again, if you were the one asking for drugs and … you wouldn't want to report because that might trigger you getting in trouble because you were asking for drugs."
>
> *- Suburban independent Year 12 Sixth Form focus group*

Due to the public nature of social media, dealers can access more personal information about their buyers than they would through more traditional methods, for example, they may have instant access to their personal photos; their friends list (which may include family members); their location, including personal addresses such as which school they attend and their home address. Snapchat, in particular, has a feature called 'SnapMaps' which allows users to view other users' live location. If a young person has bought drugs this could put them at risk of exploitation and intimidation.

> "It depends how much you put out there on your social media platform anyway. If you're stupid enough to say you're at [anonymised name of school], they can try and find you, can't they?"
>
> *- Suburban independent Year 12 Sixth Form focus group*

Whilst buyers may be more exposed on social media, they do retain control of their social media accounts and are able to block dealers if they are made to feel uncomfortable, if transactions don't go as planned, or they decide to stop buying drugs.

> "Because again, if you don't want to see it, just unfollow the person, block them. If I don't know someone and it only happened once, I'd just block the account. So what's the point of reporting them, unless it's something really, really harmful."
>
> *- Suburban independent Year 12 Sixth Form focus group*

Selling drugs through social media platforms

Social media allows users to publicly post their activity to their friends and followers, including posting videos and pictures relating to their own drug use. One way that individuals may start selling drugs through social media is when they are publicising their drug use on a platform, for example, posting a video or picture of themselves smoking cannabis, which may then lead to them receiving enquiries from their friends or followers asking if they are selling that drug. The user might then sell to the person who has made the enquiry and this can escalate into wider dealing.

> "In terms of actually selling substances, there are a couple of young people who have almost found themselves in that situation, where they have posted pictures themselves of larger amounts of substances and then been contacted by people within their peer group asking to buy, and have ended up selling, via that means, to people they don't really know."
>
> *- Drug and alcohol practitioner*

The young people in Volteface's focus groups recognised that friends may become 'casual sellers' on social media, by selling any extra drugs that they may have. They saw them as distinct from 'dealers' who were considered to be more heavily involved in gangs or organised crime.

> "I would never go to a dealer. I would rather someone who smokes weed quite often and then them to just get a little bit extra from their dealer and give it to me. But I wouldn't call them a dealer."
>
> *- Inner city Year 12 Sixth Form focus group*

It also appears that dealers who were already operating in the offline world have moved their services onto social media as a way to expand and professionalise, much like a legitimate business would.

High-risk selling situations are where young people are groomed and then implicitly or explicitly coerced to sell drugs via social media.[63] This may happen through social media or in the offline world.

A lack of legitimate opportunities can increase the appeal of dealing, which may be seen as a quick way to earn money and gain material goods. In recent years, with the introduction of extensive austerity policies, cuts to youth services and school exclusions rising significantly, young people are vulnerable to turning to the drug trade.[64]

Impact of selling drugs through social media platforms

Selling drugs in any circumstances, particularly as a young person, can have a serious impact on wellbeing and life chances. Selling drugs via social media mitigates and increases certain harms. As Volteface was unable to source interviews with people who sell drugs through social media, all findings that pertain to this experience come from professionals and people with lived experience of buying or witnessing drug dealing on social media.

Greater accessibility

Interviews with professionals who work with vulnerable young people identified that social media platforms have made drug dealing easier to get into and sustain. Selling through social media platforms allows a dealer to anonymously operate their 'business' within the confines of their own address, on an easy-to-use platform which they are already familiar with and without having to engage in face-to-face transactions.

If transactions are completed remotely and through post, social media dealers are less likely to have to contend with territorial disputes with other dealers. Drug dealers who operate in public spaces and on the street can get into disputes over which territory they can deal in, which can result in eruptions of violence.[65] Professionals explained that young people perceive selling drugs through social media as a lower level of commitment to drug dealing than traditional dealing.

A common theme throughout the interviews and focus group discussions was that, due to social media increasing interconnectedness across vast distances, sellers can reach more people geographically than they were able to previously. For example, someone who lives in a rural part of the UK that might have previously found it difficult to access customers but could now use social media to contact a potential buyer and deliver drugs to them.

Increased Seller Exposure

Increased exposure is beneficial for sellers as social media creates more opportunities to increase their client base. When considering how large the market is, how recently dealing has moved onto social media and the fact that many dealers operate anonymously, it is unlikely that dealers who operate on social media will be apprehended by the police.

The blatant visibility of dealing on social media can often lead to dealers forgetting the legal risks attached to being complicit in drug supply and posting or sharing activity that either clearly identifies them as a drug dealer or compromises their identity.

The trawl revealed that other dealers treated social media with suspicion and were very cautious about what they publicly posted, for example, only posting minimal content publicly and asking for followers or potential clients to contact them privately.

While it can be argued that policing the activity of drug supply online is challenging and the likelihood of being caught is low, increased seller exposure can mean that, where an individual is caught by the police, there may be more recorded evidence of drug dealing. For a young person, a criminal record can have a devastating impact on their life chances, affecting future employment and housing opportunities.

Quicker escalation

A risk of dealing drugs via social media is that it can quickly escalate to dealing on a larger scale than the seller may have originally intended to. One interviewee from a young person's drug and alcohol charity discussed a case study of a young person who posted pictures and videos of themselves with large amounts of drugs and was then contacted by people within their peer group who asked them if they were selling. This led to this young person selling drugs on a wider scale.

> "It was quite a frightening experience for this particular young person. They said that, actually, they suddenly felt that instantly they were in over their head. They were getting requests from everywhere, from people they didn't know. Their account and subsequent contact details were being circulated without them really having any control over that. And all of a sudden, it felt like, you know, they're… what had been, for this particular young person, a quite casual and social dealing – you know, amongst peers, picking up a couple of ten bags for people – all of a sudden, he felt like he was placed in a position where he didn't want to say no to people, but then he was getting requests and hit up from people he didn't even know. So, he suddenly felt really out of control with it."
>
> *- Drug and alcohol practitioner*

This same interviewee went on to explain that this young person ended up getting robbed after organising a deal. Only after this serious incident did he seek help to stop dealing. This case study highlights the risks of posting drugs on social media, how this can escalate to dealing on a larger scale, and the likelihood that a young person will delay asking for help until they have already been harmed or at serious risk of harm.

Ability to stop

Drug dealing through social media can be easy to stop among those who feel able to block buyers and delete accounts that they may be dealing from.

However, selling through social media is also used to gain status and, once a reputation is developed on social media, it can be hard to give up that lifestyle, particularly if it is more lucrative than legitimate forms of employment available.

> "You know, there is certainly a cultural element and cultural representation, in terms of wanting to be seen as part of that illicit trade."
>
> *- Drug and alcohol practitioner*

Others may not value their reputation as a dealer but find it a difficult one to shake off, particularly if they are selling non-anonymously to their peer network, whom blocking may not be an option.

And, for young people who are groomed into dealing drugs through social media, it will be even harder. As mentioned previously, features on social media allow users to track other users' locations, such as Snapchat's 'SnapMaps' feature which can give access to users' live locations. Accessing users' locations makes it easier for criminal gangs to keep track of the young people they have exploited into the drug trade. Moreover, as dealers on social media publicly advertise drugs for sale, criminal gangs can keep track of this activity to check that the young person is still dealing. This means that a young person can be kept track of, even if the person who has groomed them is hundreds of miles away.

Accessing help and support presents further challenges to young people who may fear that they will be penalised instead of being treated as a victim of exploitation.

Reduces contact with buyers

Several interviewees stated that selling through social media reduces certain risks from traditional methods of selling, contributing to the argument that this constitutes a form of harm reduction.

Most notably, it was raised that transactions can now take place away from the street as dealers can operate out of their own homes if they post drugs to buyers' addresses. Or social media can facilitate the initial contact between buyer and seller with the transaction still taking place on the street, with reduced contact time with buyers meaning that sellers may be less exposed to personal abuse and violence.

> "Absolutely because they don't have to do anything, they don't have to leave the house until they've got a number of drop-offs and it's all done from home so they're not stood on street corners or doing anything. Once they've got their orders then they can just go and drop off, so I think yes it makes it far more attractive I would say."
>
> *- Drug and alcohol practitioner*

However, one interviewee mentioned that, if this encourages more people to become involved in the drug trade, this would increase harm overall.

> "Absolutely. I can definitely see that it would take the risks out associated with street dealing but I guess the problem for me is if drug markets remain illegal and buying over social media becomes more popular ... that just makes it an even more tempting option for young people to go into. One of the main concerns I have is that young people are falling into involvement in drug dealing in street markets because of the lack of alternatives, attractive alternatives in the legitimate economy. So if you're making dealing less harmful by shifting markets online, that just means that more and more young people will be attracted to drug markets as opposed to engagement in education and the legitimate economy. So yes, I agree with the premise of the question that it will reduce certain harms. Well particularly in terms of interpersonal violence. But if that means that more young people get involved in it to a greater extent then that's obviously an additional harm that needs to be factored into that."
>
> *- Academic*

Regulation and Enforcement

The police and social media companies have an essential role to play in disrupting and regulating illicit drug supply on social media platforms, but will face greater obstacles than those posed by traditional drug dealing.

Awareness

Volteface's research reveals that, among the police, there is a lack of awareness of the prevalence of drug dealing on social media platforms, particularly ones which are more public-facing. There is currently an expectation made that this issue is one which primarily affects more private platforms, such as Snapchat. However, a poll commissioned for this report has revealed that drugs are being advertised for sale on more public-facing platforms such as Instagram.

> "I personally haven't seen social media being used as a market platform because if your customers can see it so can the police, so can your competitors. Now I do know other less public platforms do get used all the time, from WhatsApp to Snapchat to Messenger to whatever. They come under the broad umbrella of social media. But most people think of social media as something that's publically viewable by all, whether it's Facebook or Twitter."
>
> *- Senior police officer*

There is also an expectation that social media drug markets only effect small cohorts of seasoned drug users and vulnerable young people, however, Volteface's poll has shown that one in four 16-to-24 year olds see drugs advertised for sale.

The lack of understanding of the issue, and how mainstream it has become, will have hampered the effectiveness of any proactive police response.

No national guidance has been published which advises on how police should respond to this emerging threat.

As no social media companies were interviewed for this report, it is not known the extent to which they are aware of their platforms being used as a marketplace for drugs.

Language

Though some accounts are brazen about their drug dealing, it will be difficult for the police and social media platforms to distinguish between those accounts which are posting personal drug use and those that are supplying. The trawl revealed that dealers will disguise their advertisements by making it appear as though they are drug users to deflect attention away from their pages, such as writing 'no sales' and 'personal use only' on their profiles.

The use of coded emojis and language will make it more difficult for police and social media companies to ascertain if an account is dealing drugs. This is, however, a challenge that police are accustomed to facing when tackling offline organised crime and resources could be put into monitoring language as it evolves.

> "I'm already starting off a couple of steps behind because I have to make up that knowledge gap before I can start to try and identify who is doing what...The reality is we do focus groups and we'll say to a group of 10 young people, "Let's name every different word that we know for weed." We'll end up with 100 words. Then we'll do another focus group two months later and 25% of those words could have changed or new ones would have been added."
>
> *- Senior police officer*

In line with this, the judicial system would need to be able to interpret the use of emojis and ensure that the collection of such evidence is able to result in prosecution. Senior lawyers have called for high-level guidance on all cases in which emojis might be involved and that infrastructure should be in place to convict people based on the evidence of emojis.[66]

Reporting

One of the key challenges facing social media platforms is that there is a reluctance from young people, their primary user group, to report the content in question.

> "A lot of social media is left to be self monitored and asking users to report content which shouldn't be on there which is difficult if you're just trusting that people are going to report the things they shouldn't be seeing. When in reality if they're the ones seeing it, they're probably the ones who want to utilise it."
>
> *- Drug and alcohol practitioner*

Focus group discussions revealed that young people are reluctant to report this content as: they may know the person selling the drugs or they are mutual friends, they do not want to be viewed as a snitch, they do not want the platform to shut down the place they source drugs, they are concerned that they are complicit as they have sourced drugs through this avenue and fear repercussions, they are concerned that they are complicit as they have chosen to follow this content, they do not think reporting it will have an impact, there is a perception that the dealers are doing no harm, and because seeing the content is perceived to be funny and interesting. The ethnographic trawl also found evidence of dealers discouraging reporting by using accusing those who do report of being 'snitches', 'rats' or 'snakes'.

> "I wouldn't do it [report content] because it's so normalised. People don't see it as something illegal when it is."
>
> *- Inner city and suburban Year 12 youth group*
>
> "Yes, I wouldn't want to, like, go through the process of reporting it, so then it could affect me in the future if people found that I reported it."
>
> *- Young person who has witnessed drugs advertised for sale on social media*
>
> "I also don't know the impact that these Snapchats have. When I see it, I don't know how many people go, "Oh yes, I'll call that." So if I knew the data and how many people are doing it and it was a lot, then I'd probably be more inclined to report them. But when I see it, I just think, "No one is going to..."
>
> *- Inner city and suburban Year 12 youth group*

As only 30 young people were spoken to for this report, more representative research will be needed to determine if each of these reasons do discourage reporting and how reportng could be incentivised.

In order to tackle online abuse on their platform, YouTube recently introduced a 'Trusted Flagger Programme' to help enforce their community guidelines.[67] This programme was developed to help provide robust tools for individuals, government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to report concerning content. Trusted Flaggers can: bulk flag videos, have visibility into decisions on flagged content, prioritise flag reviews, have ongoing discussion and feedback on various YouTube content areas and NGOs can be given the opportunity to receive online training sessions.

Parliamentary evidence submissions have revealed that the programme is beneficial to Youtube as the platforms is constantly overwhelmed by reports and that the programme often leads to content being removed in a couple of hours.[68] Moreover, a higher percentage of reported content from Trusted Flaggers is removed compared to reporting from all users- 88% of what flaggers report will be taken down, compared to an overall rate of 32%.[69] However, some Trusted Flaggers have stated that they need more resources from the social media platforms to help them continue to monitor the platform.[70] Additionally, Trusted Flaggers stated that YouTube is not effectively sharing intelligence on new harms, which means they often have to play catch up.[71]

At the time of writing, no other social media platforms operate this programme, or a similar programme.

Large adaptive markets

Police forces have experienced significant cuts since the introduction of austerity measures in 2010. The Home Office and police forces saw cuts of nearly 25% from 2010 to 2015,[72] with overall police officer numbers dropping by 15% from 2010 and 2018.[73] Police officers who were interviewed for this report warned that there are not yet the teams and resources in place to disrupt online social media markets, which they recognise to be large in scale and growing.

> "I don't think it's more difficult. I think it's more … To be honest, it's more numerous. So therefore, you know, it's which investigation. If there are so many, what do you investigate? And only it's going to [come] down to risk or actually the bigger players where that activity is more justified. So, it's just wide, the market is significant. So, it just widens accessibility."
>
> *- Senior police officer*

Volteface's poll revealed that, though a wide range of drugs can be found on social media platforms, the vast majority of what is advertised is cannabis. Enforcement of cannabis has been deprioritised in most England and Wales constabularies[74] and it seems unlikely that the enforcement of the sale of cannabis through social media platforms will be prioritised, particularly as police would be facing new obstacles that will need resources to overcome.

One officer explained that the increased use of technology across the whole spectrum of criminality has fundamentally changed how the police do their job and keeping up with cyber crime, which cuts across constabularies, alongside cuts in resources has been difficult.[75]

The trawl revealed that many drug dealers on social media had multiple accounts so if one account was shut down they could move their business to their 'back up' accounts. Additionally, it was clear that if accounts were closed down it was easy for dealers to create another one. It will be challenging for social media platforms and the police to successfully regulate this activity when it is easy for dealers to have multiple accounts or set up a new account if their current one is closed down.

When tackling street dealing, police already have to contend with the reality that, if they remove one drug dealer, another will take their place, and this method of policing has been proven to have limited effectiveness by often only disrupting the market temporarily.[76] The same can be said to be true of drug dealing on social media. if enforcers shut down one account, it cannot be claimed that one dealer has been taken out, as the dealer can simply set up a new account.

Difficult to trace

The encryption of some social media and messaging apps that are used by dealers to discuss illicit transactions or complete these transactions presents further challenges to enforcement, as the messages cannot be intercepted by the platform or law enforcement. End-to-end encryption is a way of transmitting a message so that it can only be read by the intended recipient, and not intercepted by accessing the servers or networks via which the message is sent.[77]

The trawl revealed that drug dealers redirected users from social media platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram to messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Wickr, likely due to the fact that these messaging apps offer users end-to-end encryption.

Facebook's direct messaging service 'Facebook Messenger' only offers end-to-end encryption when this feature is turned on manually. Facebook Messenger users can opt in to end-to-end encryption conversations by selecting the 'Go to Secret Conversation' feature when they begin a text conversation with another Facebook friend. It has been reported that Facebook is planning on introducing end-to-end encryption as default to Facebook Messenger in the near future.[78]

Snapchat has end-to-end encryption that applies to "Snaps" – picture and video messages sent between users. However, other forms of message on Snapchat, such as text messages and group chats, are not end-to-end encrypted.[79]

Instagram direct messages are not currently encrypted. However, Facebook – which also owns Instagram and WhatsApp – has stated that it plans to add end-to-end encryption to Instagram direct messaging chats in a plan to merge the underlying messaging system across Facebook Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp.

It is likely that the encryption of Facebook and Instagram would make is easier or more efficient to sell drugs, as the deals could all happen on the same platform rather than buyers being moved onto Wickr or Whatsapp.

Users are also able to use VPN technology which can change the location of their IP address to anywhere in the world. Users also often use anonymous accounts, again making it harder for the police to trace dealers. One officer highlighted that, while this technology makes it difficult for the police to enforce, it is not impossible and co-operation from social media platforms and messaging apps themselves is vital.

Information Sharing

The extent to which social media companies are working in partnership with the police and sharing information and evidence of drug dealing is unclear.

If a social media company finds that an individual is using their account to sell drugs, the company may shut this account down but there is currently no obligation for the company to share this information with the police. As drug dealing increasingly moves onto social media, it could be that the police becomes one step removed from dealers who only have to fear their account being shut down, rather than risk being arrested. This reduces the risks associated with drug dealing and could risk increasing the size of the illicit market.

White Paper

In April 2019, the Government published its Online Harms White Paper, which sets out its plan to tackle online content or activity which harms individual users, particularly children.[80] The Government states that it will *"establish a new statutory duty of care to make companies take more responsibility for the safety of their users and tackle harm caused by content or activity on their services"*. The introduction of a duty of care would provide the opportunity for system-level change with social media platforms required to demonstrate reasonable and proportionate measures to mitigate harm to users in terms of proactive measures and system design. Compliance with this duty of care would be overseen and enforced by an independent regulator.

In the white paper, the Government specifically states that *"for codes of practice relating to illegal harms, including incitement of violence and the sale of illegal goods and services such as weapons, there will be a clear expectation that the regulator will work with law enforcement to ensure the codes adequately keep pace with threat"* (pg. 7). The sale of illegal drugs will come under this remit.

Volteface commends the Government's proposals to address this issue, which our research indicates is affecting a significant number of young people. However, the white paper is currently vague on what specific policies or actions will be put in place, setting out the principles and ideas behind the forthcoming regulations.

Below is an excerpt from an accessible summary of the Online Harms White Paper:

- The government will put in place a new statutory duty of care to make companies take more responsibility for the safety of their users. It will also make companies deal with harm that is caused by information or activity on their sites.
- An independent regulator will make sure companies meet this duty of care.
- All companies that fall under this regulatory framework will need to be able to show that they are meeting their duty of care.
- The regulator will have a number of powers to take action against companies that do not meet their duty of care. This may be a power to charge big fines or a power to make senior managers take responsibility for not meeting their duty of care.
- Companies must meet their new duty by law. The regulator will set out how to do this in codes of practice.
- The Government will have the power to tell the regulator what goes in the code of practice for very serious threats to the safety of the country and to the safety of children. The regulator must work with the police and other organisations for codes of practice about harm that is illegal.
- The regulator will have the power to ask for transparency reports from companies. These reports should give information about how much harmful information and material there is on their sites and what they are doing to deal with this. These reports will be put online by the regulator.
- The regulator will push companies to make it easier for researchers to access the information that they need. This is so that they can see how well those companies are doing in keeping people safe.
- For the most serious online crimes we will expect companies to show us what steps they will take to stop this information and illegal behaviour from spreading. For example, for child sexual exploitation and abuse and terrorism we will write interim codes of practice later this year which will give a guide for what companies must do around these two areas.

The Government has stated that the Online Harms White Paper will align with the 2018 Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD).[81] The AVMSD governs EU-wide coordination of national legislation on all audiovisual media.[82] In 2018, the scope of AVMSD was extended to include video-sharing platforms, covering social media sites where video is 'an essential functionality'.[83] The directive requires EU member states to ensure that video-sharing platforms put measures in place to protect minors from harmful content, including illegal activity such as drug dealing. Guidance on which video-sharing platforms fall under the scope of the AVMSD is expected in 2019, however, it is likely that Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram will be included as video sharing is a key feature. All member states, including the UK, must have the new AVMSD rules incorporated into national legislation by September 2020.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding Brexit, the UK Government consultation document[84] lays the foundations for the UK to align national law with the updated AVMSD regardless of whether the UK is legally obliged to do so.[85] The consultation document does acknowledge that if the UK leaves the EU without a deal it would not be bound to transpose the AVMSD into UK law. However, it states that the UK "would be free to align domestically in certain areas" and states that further analytical work would be required to identify these areas and the best way forward.[86]

Criticisms

A flaw in the white paper is that social media companies would be required to report on the harmful activity on their own platforms, creating an incentive for the companies to under-report illicit activity. The regulator will have information disclosure and investigatory powers, but it is not specified how robust these powers will be.

There is no mention of companies having an obligation to report illegal activity to the police. Rather, companies would be asked to show the regulator 'what steps they will take to stop this information and illegal behaviour from spreading'. As illicit activity increasing moves from offline to online public spaces, there is a risk that those who break the law will only have to answer to social media companies, rather than the criminal justice system.

Concerns have also been expressed by experts interviewed for this report that the duty of care would emulate a 'one-size-fits-all' model for all online harms and not offer distinct responses. For example, drug dealing through social media requires a different response to cyber bullying or sexual exploitation.

Challenges

Volteface's research has shown that some drug dealers are very explicit about their online activity while others are more discreet, and the regulator would need to consider how the selling of illegal drugs should be defined. It will be problematic if the regulator allows each social media company to set their own methodology of what constitutes harmful activity.

Another challenge the Government would face when implementing the duty of care proposals is establishing a clear definition of private communications on social media. This matters because communications defined as private will be exempt from the obligations outlined in the paper. For example, while Facebook and Instagram are public platforms, they also have direct messaging functions attached to them and Snapchat appears as mostly private communications.

If the Government does define Snapchat or Facebook and Instagram messenger functions as private platforms, this will mean that a significant amount of illicit drug supply will continue unchallenged.

The white paper also places an emphasis on social media users who witness harmful illicit activity or content being encouraged to report it, however, many young people Volteface spoke to said that they would not report the evidence of drug dealing they witness on social media platforms.[87] The Government will need to recognise and address many of the obstacles that currently stops users from reporting drug dealing.

Conclusion

Social media is providing drug dealers with easy-to-use and familiar platforms that they can use to find and build trust with customers, advertise their business, and disguise their activities. Concerningly, Volteface's research has shown that dealers have been quick to take up this opportunity.

One in four young people now see drugs, mainly cannabis, advertised for sale on social media – a figure which is astonishingly high considering how recent a phenomenon this is. Drugs for sale are being seen frequently by young people on three leading social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. Rather than simply being advertised on fringe social media platforms, used only by seasoned drug users and vulnerable groups of young people, the reality is that online drug selling is a mainstream issue.

An ethnographic trawl of the three social media platforms revealed that social media has helped dealers to professionalise their businesses by having in-built design features which help them identify customers, advertise their products and availability through pictures and videos; promote deals and prizes; and build an online reputation through developing a public dialogue with customers.

It is too early to tell what impact witnessing drugs advertised for sale online is having on young people, social media's primary user group. However, Volteface's research has found that seeing this activity does not concern young people, which could potentially be normalising drug use and drug dealing. For those who are buying and selling drugs online, there is a debate around whether this constitutes a form of harm reduction, where interactions between the dealer and buyer are being taken off the streets and conducted remotely. However, there are concerns that many of the proposed harm reduction features of social media platforms risks creating a veneer of credibility, with users arguably putting misplaced trust in the authenticity of a dealer's posts and products.

The emergence of drug markets on social media is not simply a transfer of harmful activity from the offline world onto the online world. It is a new problem which presents new threats. Regulators and enforcers will not be able to tackle this new, illicit online drug market and minimise the harms associated with it unless innovative approaches are put in place.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Volteface's polling of 16-to-24 year olds has shown that one in four see drugs advertised for sale online and the majority of what they see is cannabis. Cannabis is the UK's most commonly used drug and leaving it unregulated places a £2.5 billion market into the hands of criminal gangs who have made full use of the market opportunities provided by social media. Cannabis legalisation is the policy which would be most effective at alleviating the problems outlined in this report, by: tackling the illicit market, restricting access to underage use and regulating the products available to buy.

With the majority of the UK in favour of reform[88] and more countries abandoning prohibition, the legalisation of cannabis should be seen as an inevitability. A taskforce of experts should now be appointed by the Government to recommend a world leading legislative and regulatory framework.

Recommendation 2

Volteface recommends that Snapchat, Facebook and Instagram should be included within the scope of the Government's Online Harms regulatory framework. All of these platforms have been defined by Ofcom as social media and this report has found evidence of them being used as a marketplace for illegal drugs. Social media companies will have to be explicit in letting users know if their private conversations fall under the remit of the regulatory framework.

Recommendation 3

The Government should introduce a regulatory requirement for social media companies to monitor activity on their sites to ensure that they are aware of how language, emojis and design features may be used to facilitate drug dealing.

This information should be shared with the police and be used to inform algorithms which monitor and remove content and accounts.

Social media companies should be expected to share with the police accounts which are suspected of drug dealing.

Recommendation 4

Social media companies need to be more effective at preventing drug dealers from creating new accounts or operating multiple accounts, if their account has been identified as being involved in illicit activities. Platforms have the ability to determine if other accounts have been opened or used by a device and these powers should be used to ensure that a user's multiple accounts or new accounts are blocked, if they are found to have been undertaking illegal activities in breach of the platform's terms and conditions.

Recommendation 5

For many different reasons, the young people Volteface spoke to said they do not intend to report to the online drug dealing they witness to the social media platform. As the sample was small, the Government or social media companies should undertake representative research examining why young people are reluctant to report this content, what an accessible reporting function should look like, and what would incentivise young people to report online drug dealing. If the Government is serious about empowering and encouraging young people who come across harmful content or activity on social media to report it to the platform, it is essential that it draws on their voices, opinions and experiences to find out how best to do this.

Recommendation 6

It should not be the case that a drug dealer's online advertisements is the first place young people learn about drugs. Nor is it an acceptable state of affairs that witnessing drug dealing on social media has become a normal part of some young people's lives and but is unlikely to be talked about by their teachers ands discussed with their parents.

The delivery of early, high quality sustained drugs education in schools is essential and it is commendable that the Government has committed to introducing compulsory drugs education in primary and secondary schools.

Volteface recommends that the Government's 'Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health Education' statutory guidance should advise that schools have honest conversations with young people about the drug dealing they may witness on social media and educate them on how they can stay safe online, as well as the risks and consequences attached to buying and selling drugs through social media.[89] Schools should involve parents in the delivery of drugs education and work collaboratively with local agencies, such as the police and substance misuse services, to ensure that delivery keeps abreast of emerging drug trends.[90]

Recommendation 7

There will be instances where it is appropriate for individuals who have been convicted of large scale drug dealing to be banned from using social media as part of their probation order, when it is clear that social media is particularly relevant to their business model. It is recommended that this practice becomes more widely adopted within the criminal justice system, in response to the issues highlighted in this report.

Recommendation 8

For adults who buy and consume illegal drugs, the evidence shows that entry into the criminal justice system can have a damaging impact on their life chances and does not reduce re-offending.[91] Diversion into awareness programmes and support services which address the reasons why a person is using drugs has been proven to be a more effective intervention.[92] Volteface recommends that, where police apprehend people who buy drugs through social media, diversion should be in place.

Where the police find evidence of children buying or selling drugs through social media, this should be treated as an indicator of vulnerability, not criminality, and appropriately dealt with as a safeguarding concern.

Recommendation 9

The Government should commission national guidance that advises police on how they should best respond to and disrupt drug dealing through social media platforms. As technology enabled criminality evolves at a fast pace, this guidance should be frequently reviewed.

Recommendation 10

Given that Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram are hosting potentially harmful activity, the companies, and indeed any platforms known to be hosting illicit drug distribution activity, should have a responsibility to make a significant investment in schemes which address the harms caused by drugs. This could include drug treatment, harm reduction services, drug education and services which support people who have been groomed into the illicit drug trade.

This corporate social responsibility practice is already being adopted by some other social media companies, with google.org recently investing £600,000 in training professionals around the links between social media use and violence.[93]

Recommendation 11

The threats outlined in this report have only recently emerged and ongoing research will be required to identify what impact they have had, including whether the emergence of drugs markets on social media has led to a rise in drug use, drug selling and exploitation. Alongside this, regular research should be conducted which examines the size of drug markets on social media platforms and trends within these markets.

Recommendation 12

Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and other social media platforms that have been shown to facilitate illicit drug supply should implement a similar programme to YouTube's 'Trusted Flagger Programme', that was developed to help provide robust tools for individuals, government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to report concerning content. Trusted Flaggers can: bulk flag videos, have visibility into decisions on flagged content, prioritise flag reviews, have ongoing discussion and feedback on various YouTube content areas and NGOs can be given the opportunity to receive online training sessions.

To ensure that Trusted Flaggers are able to operate effectively, social media platforms should allocate more resources and funding to individuals, government organisations and NGOs who are Trusted Flaggers, so that they are able to assist the platforms alongside their own work. Additionally, information should be shared freely between social media platforms and Trusted Flaggers, so that Trusted Flaggers are aware of new drug-related harms, terms and trends.

Appendix

Appendix A - Regional differences between respondents seeing individual drugs advertised for sale – including the two regions with the highest percentages of seeing a particular drug advertised for sale and two regions with the lowest percentages of seeing a particular drug for sale on social media.

	Highest		Lowest		Baseline %
	Region	%	Region	%	
Amphetamine	North East North West	25 18	Northern Ireland Scotland	0 2	8
Cannabis	Northern Ireland Wales	86 75	Yorkshire and the Humber West Midlands	53 55	63
Cocaine	Northern Ireland Scotland	36 35	Yorkshire and the Humber East Midlands	13 19	26
Codeline/ Lean	Northern Ireland South East, Wales	29 21	North East East, Yorkshire and the Humber	6 10	16
Crack cocaine	London Yorkshire and the Humber	20 18	South West Northern Ireland	2 7	12
MDMA/ Ecstasy	Northern Ireland Scotland	57 33	Yorkshire and the Humber East Midlands	13 16	24
Heroin	Wales London	17 16	East Midlands, South West	0	8
Ketamine	Yorkshire and the Humber Northern Ireland, Scotland	25 21	East, West Midlands	5	13
LSD/Acid	Scotland South East	26 23	Northern Ireland Wales	0 8	16
Magic mushrooms	London, South East	18	Northern Ireland East Midlands	0 7	11
Mephedrone	Wales West Midlands	8 5	East Midlands, North East, Northern Ireland, Scotland, South East	0	2
Tramadol	North East Northern Ireland	31 14	East, Wales London, South East	0 3	8
Valium	Scotland Northern Ireland	26 14	North East Wales	0 4.2	11
Xanax	North East, East	31	East Midlands	13	20

Appendix B - Differences in age and drug use behaviour in respondents' answers to statements of how seeing drugs advertised for sale on social media made them feel and if it initiated behaviour change.

Seeing illegal drugs advertised for sale on social media sites or apps	Baseline figure	Age		Drug use	
		Under 18s	Over 18s	Used drugs	Not used drugs
Has made me feel less safe online	31%	22%	33%	29%	35%
Has made me feel uncomfortable	42%	32%	41%	30%	49%
Has made me feel distressed	16%	16%	16%	10%	22%
Has made me consider using illegal drugs	9%	9%	9%	19%	4%
Has resulted in me using illegal drugs	6%	6%	6%	19%	0%
Has made me consider using buying drugs	7%	5%	8%	15%	2%
Has resulted in me buying illegal drugs	3%	1%	4%	10%	0%
Has made me consider selling illegal drugs or giving them to my friends	2%	1%	3%	4%	1%
Has resulted in me selling illegal drugs or giving them to my friends	0.2%	0%	0.3%	0%	0.3%
Does not concern me	36%	48%	33%	33%	34%

Appendix C - Regional differences between respondents who had seen drugs advertised for sale on social media.

Location	%
UK	**24**
East	23
East Midlands	21
London	24
North East	19
North West	28
Northern Ireland	24
Scotland	26
South East	23
South West	27
Wales	24
West Midlands	22
Yorkshire and the Humber	23

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