

Cultural capital in illegal online drug markets

How digital capital changes the cultural environment of drug dealing

Silje Anderdal Bakken^{ab}, Atte Oksanen^c & Jakob Demant^b

^a Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law, University of Oslo; ^b Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen; ^c Unit of Social Research, University of Tampere

Abstract

Digital societies demand technological competence, including for actors in illegal activity. Inspired by Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and related criminological concepts such as street capital, this study analyses digital capital as a wider concept relating to digital drug markets that capture both technological and cultural competences. We pursue this empirically via interview data (N = 107) on social media and darknet drug markets. The overall need for digital competence erodes the earlier divide in drug markets based on either subculture or networks. The need to be familiar with mainstream technological tools and behaviours connects digital drug markets to more general cultural competencies. Consequently, illegal activities become connected with mainstream cultural capital because both fields value the same competencies.

Contact information: Silje Anderdal Bakken, s.a.bakken@jus.uio.no.

Introduction

Internet and digitalization play massive roles in modern societies (Fuchs, 2007; Graham and Dutton, 2019; Keipi et al., 2017). Not only do they affect forms of communication in everyday life for most people, but also the digital space provides new possibilities for illegal behaviour (Wall, 2007; Yar and Steinmetz, 2019), such as Internet-based markets for trading cannabis and other illegal drugs (Barratt and Aldridge, 2016; Demant et al., 2019; Martin, 2014; Moyle et al., 2019). However, digital communication platforms not only facilitate new ways of doing traditional illegal activities. They also change these activities in a more general sense by being an embedded part in people's everyday lives (Lane, 2019; Stratton, Powell & Cameron, 2017). For example, much of today's communication happens through written messages, images, and videos, which sets certain expectations for how people present themselves and document their or others' activities, both online and offline – legally and illegally.

Similar to many other social activities today, drug dealing takes place in a digital era where communicating through online digital platforms, such as the various forms of social media, is the norm. Already a decade ago, a massive change occurred in the use of technology to trade illegal drugs. In the beginning, online drug dealing took place on the open Internet, where simple searches resulted in a selection of websites featuring drugs, mainly selling 'spice' or 'legal highs' (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016; Hillebrand et al., 2010). At that same time, so-called cryptomarkets arose (Martin, 2014). Encryption and anonymity are central within these markets, and cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin and Monero are used as means of payment. The latest development concerns the use of various phone applications to sell drugs. Some sales are made openly, for example on Facebook and Instagram, while others occur in a more hidden fashion on Wickr and Snapchat (Demant et al., 2019; Moyle et al., 2019). These types of hybrid digital drug dealing seem to be gaining more traction (Childs et al., 2020), and COVID-19 has boosted this tendency even further (Groshkova et al., 2020).

The growing use of online communication in illegal drug markets disrupts some of its fundamental structures for communication by changing the context of social interaction. Sellers and buyers now need to market themselves and their drugs through text, images and emojis in a global context with high competition where various market types merge. Although there is a steadily growing body of empirical studies, there is a lack of necessary theoretical explanations and understandings of how the use of digital communication platforms for interaction affects

these markets as social spaces. Most of the existing theories have explained how the online setting changes, for example, trust systems (Hardy and Norgaard, 2016; Munksgaard, 2021; Nurmi et al., 2017). Now, there is a need for a theoretical framework that discusses a wider aspect of online drug markets. We suggest that such thinking takes the onset in a wide premise of a space where new possibilities and restrictions through technology form traditional, physical drug market values.

In this article, we pursue thinking within this premise by using a Bourdieusian theory of practice to discuss how the digitalization of communication affects the valuation of culturally based assets within today's drug markets. According to Bourdieu (1984), every actor within a society holds certain amounts of various capitals that result in necessary power to succeed in the general society. Cultural capital is one example, emphasizing that certain dominant cultural values give higher status and power in specific settings for social action (or fields) (Bourdieu 1986). Traditionally, offline drug dealing has been part of the 'street field', which is a concept used for understanding illegal activities and deviance as a specific setting for social actions (Shammas & Sandberg, 2016). Within this field, certain cultural resources, named 'street capital', are necessary to achieve success (Sandberg, 2008). Digitalization of communication has started, however, to disrupt somehow the previously closed street field, which has brought up the need to update theory.

This article makes use of and develops the concept of digital capital to focus on how cultural aspects of illegal drug markets have changed due to the new social context that networked technology drives in today's drug dealing. Using such a broad concept as digital capital allows including both technological skills and more communicative, cultural skills. From this, we achieve a wider understanding of the online drug markets phenomenon. We apply the concept of digital capital to qualitative data based on semi-structured interviews (N = 107) with drug buyers and sellers from various digital markets, as well as extensive digital ethnography. Earlier research on technology and capital often focused on the social capital aspects of technology (see, e.g., Resnick, 2001; Gilbert, 2010), developing concepts such as 'technological/technical capital' and 'sociotechnical capital'. Rather, our focus is on the cultural side of technology and the digital as incorporated in people's everyday lives.

We use the formations of digital capital and cultural capital to discuss our findings in relation to 'street capital'. By doing this, we look at the transformations that happen between the

different forms of capital in relation to the new social context of digital interaction technologies that has changed the social reality of drug dealing.

Practical sense and crime

Bourdieu (1984) introduced the concepts of *field*, *habitus* and *capital* to understand social life and to capture both the structural and individual factors of how people behave. The field or social space in which we are interested within the context of this paper is what previous criminological literature named ‘street field’ (Shammas & Sandberg, 2016). The use of the term ‘street’ does not necessarily refer to the physical street, but rather actions and practices in relation to illegalities and crime more generally. According to Bourdieu’s theory, *field* as a social space determines what logics are at play and what is regarded prestigious (Bourdieu, 1993). Street field then refers to a particular social context where crime-related actions and practices are valued higher than what is appreciated and necessary for power and success in mainstream society (Shammas & Sandberg, 2016; Sandberg, 2008).

Bourdieu mainly discusses the society in general, meaning the mainstream society. Originally, in Bourdieu’s capital theory there are three types: cultural capital (traditions, objects and assets), economic capital (material assets or possessions), and social capital (social networks) (Bourdieu 1986). There are several types of capitals that all allow for a higher status; however, there are certain *capitals* that have higher value than others do (Bourdieu, 1986). This sets certain expectations for people within the field, based on what competencies hold the most value. Regarding crime, the most known concept is ‘*street capital*’, which Sandberg (2008) introduces in relation to street-level drug dealers in Oslo, Norway. Sandberg (2008) bases the concepts on Bourdieu’s cultural capital (1984) and argues that street drug markets should be analysed as social systems with their own values, rules and regulations. Street culture has grown to be a counter-reaction to feeling rejected by mainstream society, where people have found an alternative social space in which they feel recognized (Bourgois, 2003). The composition of street capital—that is, the relational and situational characteristics of skills—explains how they function within street culture. Ilan (2013) rather emphasizes the relational values within crime by developing ‘*street social capital*’ out of Bourdieu’s social capital concept. Through this concept, he emphasizes how street networks allow people to maintain a constant street cultural terrain when navigating through the modern, what he calls ‘liquid’, city.

All the rules and expectations that originate from ranking capital forms are then embodied within people through *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1998). Habitus is a way of understanding how social fields shape and modify the people acting within them. Through habitus, people acquire certain preferences based on cognitive structures that remain relatively stable across time (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Early experiences mainly shape such bodily dispositions, which then affect and form one's later experiences. Wacquant (2002) first uses the concept of street habitus where he points to the relatively stable and sometimes unconscious disposition of individuals in the street economy because of spending time in the field. Sandberg and Pedersen (2011) rather describe it as an embodied practical sense that makes some actions, such as violence, more prominent than others do. Most important, across all three concepts of fields, capital and habitus, manoeuvring the practical sense within social space varies according to historical and social context (Bourdieu, 1990). Therefore, our focus is on how the digitalization of society, here illegal drug markets, changes what types of practical senses are valuable in today's social space.

Cultural capital and street capital

Bourdieu (1979; 1984; 1986) uses the concept of cultural capital to describe people's cultural assets. These cultural assets include cultural traditions transmitted and embodied via socialization (embodied form, e.g., learned set of style or habits that are valued in the field), cultural objects (objectified form, e.g., cultural objects valued in the field) or formal recognition of one's cultural assets (institutional form, e.g., education or similar status gained) (Bourdieu 1979). These aspects also have been bases for understanding the drug market culture. Anderson (1999) uses the term 'code of the street' to emphasize the importance of understanding how people within the culture act, look, perform and dress. Sandberg (2008) and Sandberg and Pedersen (2011) further develop a cultural understanding of drug markets by establishing street capital to underscore cultural competence's value in illegal markets. Cultural competence is crucial, for example, in knowing how to avoid the police and make good deals, but also to be prepared to use violence and to represent oneself as a gangster (Sandberg and Pedersen, 2011). It also influences the way people talk, which further helps create the field's boundaries (Sandberg & Fleetwood, 2017). While social capital emphasizes the social networks and competence that

derives from social relationships, cultural capital rather consists of knowing what is possible and what Fleetwood (2014) calls the ‘drug trade know-how’.

Scott and Wright (2015) applied a cultural capital concept to understand white middle-class drug dealing. They identified that the ‘code of the suburbs’ foregrounded a completely different set of competencies, namely the ability to avoid physical confrontations and accept partial losses on sales. This describes a field different from the previously discussed street markets. Henson et al. (2016) apply Anderson’s (1990) concept of the code of the street in an online context. In their analysis, they show that the codes of the street affect the digital drug trade, emphasizing the importance of understanding these codes, compared to the street and prison codes, within the context of what is going on online.

The concept of street capital needs further development beyond the physical street to better understand and include the online environment. For these reasons, it is important to identify how and to what extent the competencies identified within digital drug markets are supplementary or complementary to various versions of capital within other types of drug markets. In addition, it is worthwhile recognizing cultural capital as a central part of digital capital. Digital capital, similar to cultural capital in Bourdieu’s original framing, involves socialization (e.g., learnt ways to act in digital environment). Digital cultures also involve highly valued objects and cultural references, as well as cultural assets that guarantee recognition within the community.

Online markets for illegal drugs

Digital drug markets exist in various forms, with various degrees of openness to the public and use of encryption or other security measures. One of the most common types of public market is cryptomarkets, which can only be accessed through encrypted browsers. Cryptomarkets such as Silk Road look similar to eBay in the way illegal goods (mainly drugs) are portrayed and sold (see, e.g., Barratt and Aldridge, 2016; Aldridge and Décary-Hétu, 2016). Despite being quite technical and security focused, they operate as open online markets where potential buyers can openly browse a wide selection of drugs from all over the world. Buyers order the drugs through the website and pay for them with cryptocurrency before the seller sends

them through the post. Today, cryptomarkets vary in size and success, and law enforcement and administrators have closed down most.

The dominant research on online drug dealing focuses on these darknet cryptomarkets, and only lately has the focus shifted partly to social media-related drug markets. A few recent studies show that young people buy drugs online, and that a larger portion of them does so through social media (Oksanen, et al., 2021; Demant & Bakken, 2019). As in mainstream society, life on the street has also become digitalized through social media (Lane, 2019). Social media applications offer a convenient method for sellers and buyers to connect, both more publicly through Facebook and Instagram posts and one-on-one using apps such as Snapchat, WhatsApp or Messenger (Moyle et al., 2019; Demant et al., 2019). According to Demant et al.'s (2019) Nordic study, drug dealers typically use sites such as Facebook and Instagram to expand their clientele or seller selection, where access is reached by simply asking around in the right forums or asking certain individuals. A more hidden use of social media is messaging services, both encrypted and unencrypted, where the trade is mainly one-on-one (Demant et al., 2019; Moyle et al., 2019). Within the more closed one-on-one markets, access happens through acquaintances.

In this article, we analyse drug dealing on social media, in particular, to discuss possible changes in valued capital when illegal drug markets have gone digital. The digitalization of society has mainly taken place after Bourdieu developed his theoretical understanding of social space; therefore, technology has not been widely included in his theories (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017; Sterne, 2003). However, several researchers argue for the usefulness of translating Bourdieu's theories to understand the use of technology. Sterne (2003) argues that habitus, field and capital can help overcome the binary divisions that exist in today's research on technology, such as technology and society. Although, Ignatow and Robinson (2017) show how Bourdieu's ideas are useful to understand the social impacts of digital communication technologies due to his focus on empirical research as well as having an interdisciplinary approach. This has resulted in concepts such as 'technological/technical capital' and 'sociotechnical capital' that merge the technological and the social regarding how technology leads to new forms of competencies being valued. However, most of this research bringing in technology to capital theory focuses on the social capital aspects of technology (see, e.g., Resnick, 2001; Gilbert, 2010). These investigations dismiss the role of cultural capital and the role of digital communication

technology in setting the standard of culturally based competencies. We make use of the concept of digital capital, defined as ‘a predetermined set of dispositions that influences how people engage with digital technology’ (Park, 2017: 27). The concept was developed to investigate digital divides in mainstream society (Kvasny and Keil, 2006; Hsieh et al., 2011) and to understand technological possibilities (Park, 2017). By focusing on the digital competencies and wider technological skills participants show within social media drug markets, we aim to discuss the new digital context of illegal drug dealing in a cultural perspective.

Materials and methods

Our data consist of 107 semi-structured interviews and four months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted on social media sites in five Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Data collection took place between August 2017 and January 2018 as part of the project ‘Nordic Drug Dealing on Social Media’ (NDDSM).

Part I of data collection consisted of online ethnographic fieldwork on various social media sites to identify illegal drug sales. In such data collection, ethnographic research practice is adjusted to online communication (Kozinets, 2015), and we conducted what Garcia et al. (2009) call ‘lurking’: ethnography through passive observation of online forums. Several studies of online illicit markets have used similar procedures (see Bancroft and Reid, 2016; Aldridge and Askew, 2017). Observations and active searching took place between September and December 2017 on several platforms in Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish. Variations in searchability and openness of the platforms made some easier for data collection than others, which was also reflected in the platforms’ popularity for selling drugs. The drug trade varies across the countries (Demant et al., 2019). While Facebook and Instagram were the two most popular in Denmark, Sweden and Iceland, the drug trade in Norway and Finland took place on more hidden messaging platforms or the darknet. The countries with the most use of open social media provided large amounts of ethnographic data, which is part of our understanding of these markets.

Part II of data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with sellers and buyers identified within the observed markets or recruited through posts in drug-related online discussion forums. We conducted 107 interviews consisting of 35 sellers, 38 buyers and 34 participants who identified as both buyers and sellers. We used Wickr, an encrypted messaging application, to conduct interviews in a safe environment for the interviewers and interviewees.

An interview guide provided basic guidance for questions concerning topics such as risk, trust and general practice. The interviewees had experience with various online platforms, including darknet and cryptomarkets, which extended the information gathered throughout the study. Despite clear differences between the countries, we decided not to do any national comparison, but rather to use the markets as examples of variation.

We used NVivo for a content analysis by interpreting and coding screenshots and interviews on general codes such as *modus operandi*, risk, motivation and trust. These were the main overall topics during the projects, which provided the baseline for the initial coding. In this paper, we included all four topics because the topic was quite broad concerning the roles of competencies and culture within online drug markets. Some examples of codes we used are motivation for using or not using various platforms, what they perceived as risky behaviour, and specific expressions of needed knowledge or background.

We closely considered ethical and methodological challenges throughout the study. Online ethnography and interviews on encrypted messaging services are relatively new methods, and the related ethics are still debatable. All quotes are translated from their original language to English. All interviewees gave their consent to participate and could end the interview at will. Project members continuously de-identified the data sets and securely saved them for analysis. The project was ethically approved at the University of Copenhagen, and we consulted ethics committees in other Nordic countries.

When subcultural interaction goes online

We operationalize street capital in relation to online drug markets within the following three categories. First, the street capital takes on a new form when subcultural communication goes online. As opposed to regarding oral interaction and body language on the street, the online space is rather about written communication and visual representations to establish trust and become successful. Secondly, it is crucial to show that one is merged into the subculture of which one is a part, such as by knowing the where, when and how's. Thirdly, there is a need to know how to manoeuvre digital platforms securely and successfully. Online, it is not about knowing where to run, how to manage the right stories or ways to talk to avoid law enforcement or others. Here, it is rather about managing the use of social media platforms, anonymity and encryption.

Self-presentation and management through text and visual images

Body language, clothes and physically worn symbols hold no importance for selling drugs in digital markets. Instead, emphasis is on written presentation and building an online persona. Actors within these markets must spend time understanding how to present themselves and how to communicate in ways that other participants appreciate in the digital space. This demands a certain type of capital adjusted to the digital society in general, where, among others, correct language, images and emojis are important to online drug dealing in particular. Understanding the codes concerning self-presentation is as important in textual online presentations as it is in street markets to achieve higher status.

The written aspect of online drug markets largely affects the market subculture and capital. One important aspect in both cryptomarkets and social media markets is self-presentation in profiles and drug sales posts, where sellers in particular establish an online persona, through which they show the degree of capital they possess and set their position within the market. Despite the importance of anonymity, all sellers need to master a balance of complete anonymity and providing enough information based on basic knowledge about the market culture. Written language is an easy way to communicate several sides of their business that might attract customers, such as expressed by this Facebook seller:

I get customers' attention by offering low prices and quality goods, but they don't always trust the quality before they have tried them. So first impression is all about prices + that you have to show that you know what you are talking about. And you have to sound nice, of course. I always write 'Always great service 🍷'. (Seller 43)

The openness of both cryptomarkets and Facebook/Instagram markets makes it possible for buyers to click through several sellers and choose the one they find most to their liking. Service, prices and knowledge of drugs is important, but so are the sellers' written abilities: '*I buy from people who have great ads and who write correctly. You can often see how people are by seeing how they write (...)*' (Seller 106). This goes for not only public profiles and posts but also when communicating through direct messages. In cryptomarkets, language is one of the ways buyers can ensure the seller is most likely from the country listed, which is important regarding the risk of receiving drugs in postal shipments. Bad language can also reveal a possible drug use on the

part of the seller/buyer, which is something several buyers list as negative: *‘I also look at the grammar. Are they so ruined that they can’t spell?’* (Buyer 5). Signs of heavy drug use make buyers sceptical about the degree of organization and seriousness and it reduces trust.

Additionally, on social media, intense drug use could mean an extra risk when meeting face-to-face, both for the seller and buyer.

Another example of the importance of language in online drug markets is the correct use of emojis, both as subcultural symbols and as replacements for body language and words. In many of the observed Facebook groups, it was only allowable to mention drugs by nicknames or emojis due to the risk of Facebook catching them.

Interviewee: (...) I took some pictures and posted and wrote some codes, as one does, so it wouldn’t be deleted by Facebook and so they would not shut down your account.

Interviewer: Yes? What kinds of codes, for example?

Interviewee: Well, where you don’t say what you really mean but write it in a way so that others can understand it.

Interviewer: Yes, yes, okay. So Facebook, they are able to trace it?

Interviewee: Yes, if you write, ‘buying and selling of mushrooms’ on Facebook, then Facebook will know right away, and then they close it down again. (Seller/buyer 25)

In some ways, the use of emojis resembles wearing physical symbols in street capital because they are used or virtually ‘worn’ to send certain messages that subcultural rules guide. Emojis then reflect the embodied understanding of the field, where the right handling of mainstream emojis become valued cultural capital within the digital drug market. In other groups, the use of emojis was more about showing personality and ‘humanity’, as this Icelandic seller called it when explaining why his posts were banned at one point.

I tried having them quite short, and I had a rule about not using smileys or stuff like that. It was supposed to be a bit cold, distant, and a bit business-like. No images or smileys, only business. So I thought, why not make it more ‘easy going?’ When I say it now, I do understand why I made the changes after it had been banned. It became much more accessible and more human. (Seller 105)

Our study shows clear national differences in emoji use, indicating that general culture can greatly affect the experienced digital safety (e.g., Cyr, 2013). While drug market actors in

Denmark use large numbers of emojis to bring attention to their drug posts, Swedish interviewees mentioned that they did not trust sellers with too many emojis.

In sum, participants underscored the importance of spending time interacting directly or indirectly with potential sellers or buyers. People's first impressions are important. Especially within online markets where sellers and buyers compete to be the ones who are trusted enough to go through with a deal. It is relatively easy for both parties to move on quickly to other sellers or buyers if they were met with little communication or a bad tone. Sometimes it comes down to a gut feeling: *'I was going to buy LSD from a guy, to resell. It was this guy who contacted me. (...) my gut feeling told me not to become involved. So I didn't. Mostly because of the way he wrote. And he took a while to answer'* (Seller/buyer 27). Knowing how to manage the written language and visual self-presentations is crucial within online drug markets, which most often requires building a profile, publishing public posts or interacting directly with others through comments or personal messages.

Being part of the subculture

Much of the online drug dealing takes place in plain sight. However, in many instances, it is necessary with certain subcultural insights or knowledge to manoeuvre the social space correctly. For example, it is impossible to succeed without knowing where (on which platforms) to meet potential sellers or buyers, how to market drugs safely and successfully and how to stay informed. One way of showing one's degree of immersion into the subculture was to correctly use and decode the use of emojis. Both sellers and buyers used emojis to signal one's interests in relation to illegal drugs, while not addressing drugs directly to stay under the radar of law enforcement and/or social media companies. An example could be, *'I want [thumbs down] in [area].'* This indicated that this buyer was looking for amphetamine. Such replacement images or figures can be quite culturally conditioned and easily misunderstood (Miller et al., 2016), underscoring the importance of knowing the language-based cultural codes. For example, several sale posts on Facebook switched MDMA with the girl-emoji, linked to the nicknames 'Emma' or 'Girl.'. Cocaine is snow crystals or diamonds, while amphetamine is the thumbs-down emoji—at least until law enforcement or the social media company catches up, and then the emojis change quickly.

A large part of the communication takes place more publicly, in groups or in related forums. Being part of the community through sharing information with others and knowing where to gather it is important, something this foreign buyer did not display when writing a public post in a Facebook group: *‘Advice for people in [Finnish city]! (...) I’m looking for some high ;) I’m not crazy... just desperate :’(*”“ Online drug sales in Finland rarely happen outside of the darknet, and the buyer is immediately advised to check out cryptomarkets: *‘You have to use [darknet forum]. My English is not that good. But google it. There is info. (...)’*. Discussion forums or websites offer large amounts of necessary and useful information to actors in cryptomarkets. A buyer received the following response after reporting in a discussion forum that a seller scammed him.

Welcome to the forum. [Seller name] has for a long time been listed as a warned seller. He started threatening other sellers and [his] own customers. He has also made death threats and has threaten[ed] to contact acquaintances. If you want to keep buying on darknet, then I recommend you to read here in the forum.

The quick sharing of information on forums and in social media groups functions as a feedback system that pressures sellers to offer a high level of service. If customers are not treated well, they will quickly spread word about which sellers not to trust. It is easy to inform the online community if a buyer has been scammed or treated badly in any way. These systems work as security for the anonymous markets. Knowing how to handle customers and staying informed about feedback are basic types of social capital that sellers in online markets need. At the same time, buyers need a similar type of insight to avoid falling for a dishonest seller against whom others have warned. On cryptomarkets, there is also a more formal feedback system with scores, which has had consequences for sellers (Tzanetakis et al., 2016). The Swedish Facebook market tried to copy such a system, where sellers and buyers are marked red (negative) or green (positive) based on others’ experiences.

This is how it is done on the market. If you’re green, you are cool; but if you’re red, you’re dead. Green means trustworthy and so on, red means scamming. Red can also mean you’re a cop. (Seller/buyer 15)

Such marks spread quickly in forums and on the market sites, which pushes both parties to behave accordingly. Sellers commonly offer free samples, a new shipment or a refund if a customer is not satisfied. Buyers represent a large part of online drug markets, and the possibility to spread rumours and feedback about sellers quickly holds great power.

In social media drug markets, where the dealing takes place online but the trade itself is face-to-face, knowing how to behave correctly also extended to offline meetings. In some countries, sellers were expected to be social and invest time and effort in offline interactions to build a trustworthy relationship: *‘(...) then we meet. I get the product and he gets the money. Normally we go for a walk, have a smoke and talk for a while’* (Buyer 47). Differently from both Sweden and Denmark, buyers and sellers in Iceland want the shortest possible meetings, which often takes place as this seller described: *‘We meet, exchange money and product, then we go our separate ways’* (Seller 105). Knowing how to behave according to subcultural expectations is important to gain enough respect within a drug market to achieve success.

Manoeuvring digital platforms securely and successfully

In online drug markets, staying safe and secure does not regard knowing where to run, who to talk to or what stories to tell. Here, it is rather about manoeuvring one’s use of technology in the most secure ways. Whether something is secure seemed to be quite subjective when talking to our interviewees, and the use of mainstream social media platforms was often rationalized with the advantage of already having familiarity with the communication platforms. There are several advantages to using common social media platforms for illegal activity, some of which are tied to security, as a Norwegian buyer expressed (Buyer 75).

Everyone uses social media, and it’s not anything specific only [drug] sellers use, which makes it harder for the police. Let’s say the police are going through the phone of a suspected seller. If the suspect has 4–5 encrypted chat apps and hidden messages, it makes him even more suspected, but apps like Snap, Insta, Face[book], etc. are much more normal and they don’t create suspicion of anything illegal going on. It’s also maybe easier for some people, and...everyone has it. More or less, everyone uses social media, which means that customers have everything they need in order to contact a seller. To be honest, I see very few cons of using social media.

The participants of such markets express confidence in using social media platforms, despite the known risks of their lack of security. Their knowledge of how to manoeuvre and manipulate the

platform, such as by using certain search words to find drugs or nicknames to hide their drug-related posts, was more important. On Facebook, one of the tactics was to keep back-up accounts.

Interviewer: Do you ever change your fake profile?

Interviewee: I use 5 different FB profiles at the moment, but I have one I use the most.

Interviewer: Why so many?

Interviewee: If one of them is banned, I just go to the next one. Most dealers just have one or two. You have to play by Facebook's rules, the group can get a block, and all of the group's members get blocked a couple of days—first one day, then three and then permanently. (Seller 54)

It is quite a process to create a Facebook profile, especially a fake one: *'It is really difficult to set up a fake profile on Facebook nowadays because Facebook demands ID or a telephone [number], which you really don't want to state if you're selling, but it's just a hassle'* (Seller 43). It is also necessary to have a certain level of technical capacity to do it securely.

Another technical manoeuvre was balancing the use of various platforms or digital tools for different needs and doing security measures such as deleting applications or messages: *'I had two devices. One I used for checking advertisements and the other I used to agree on the dealing. And I always deleted Wickr before the meeting'* (Seller/buyer 11). Another used online anonymity to pretend his business consisted of a team on different applications: *'What happens is someone sends me as a lead, that is to say as a contact for drugs. I tell them, for example on Snap, to contact 'somebody else,' which is me on Wickr, and then we meet'* (Seller 82). Not least important is staying aware of new developments.

Facebook was a safe place back then. You didn't need encryption or code words at all. You had a Facebook account that customers added and wrote open[ly] about what they wanted. (...) We constantly developed and shared new strategies in our networks. We exchanged information and improved it. And I got to hear about Telegram in the same moment that it was released. It quickly got popular in all networks and it became a standard to send encrypted [messages] through Telegram instead of Facebook. In recent years, it has changed to Wickr. (Seller 54)

Interviewees expressed a need to engage in encryption to stay anonymous and secure from law enforcement. Using Wickr, Telegram and WhatsApp for encrypted personal communication was common, and it was common in Sweden to use a VPN to hide one's location when entering

Facebook and other clear web platforms. Buying or selling on cryptomarkets is more advanced because it demands a certain knowledge of not only encryption but also how to handle cryptocurrency. It was common to spend months reading and preparing for such a buy or sale, as this Danish buyer explains.

As I said, I read a whole lot on the different forums to be sure I did it safely and correctly. I downloaded TOR and made a user on Silk Road. Afterwards, I got some bitcoins through a Danish bitcoin site. I made a wallet and ‘tumbled’ my bitcoins, after which they were sent to Silk Road. I made a PGP key and sent my address and bitcoins to the chosen vendor. (Seller/buyer 17)

This process was easy to some, while others chose to avoid it and preferred social media. As found in previous research (see van Hout and Bingham, 2014), using cryptomarkets often included an extra interest in computers and technology, with interviewees expressing that, *‘I’m a bit of a nerd with a flair for computers’* (Seller/buyer, 18) and *‘(...) An interest [in] computers and the darknet often comes hand in hand’* (Buyer 92). Participants must choose on what level of security they want to be; however, manoeuvring the digital platforms of choice in some way is necessary.

Conclusion – Digital capital in drug dealing

The use of digital tools and online platforms to deal and buy drugs has introduced a new set of technology-related skills necessary for participants to succeed. Street culture and networks are still important in online drug markets; however, now sellers and buyers must have a certain level of technological competence in mastering the digital tools at play, as well as a certain cultural capital, which also affects what is considered correct behaviour and ways to communicate. We define this as digital capital. Technological skills, formal digital cultural competencies and informal digital cultural competencies form the level of such capital. The ability to master these and constitute capital explains potential success, for example, the use of emojis, how to stay anonymous, where to find the right information and how to ask the right questions.

All online or digital drug markets require digital capital. Instead of being a separate drug market-related subcultural skill, competencies tied to the technological or digital contexts of dealing drugs relates these illegal markets to more general cultural values, particularly digital

capital. The use of the applications might differ because drug activities often take place more secretly than most other day-to-day activities do. However, basic knowledge of how to build a profile, attract viewers, post a message and so on is necessary for both. It would be impossible to partake in any such market without knowing how to handle a mobile phone, smartphone or computer. The participants would also not identify the digital platforms as possible ways to deal drugs if it were not for an extended knowledge of the platforms' use and function. Digital capital also includes a cultural understanding of how to act a certain way within the online setting, which we also find related to more mainstream expectations.

When such general competencies become important in illegal drug markets, it allows people who deviate from the subcultural street values to succeed. Formal cultural capital (education) holds more importance in online markets compared to street markets (see Sandberg & Pedersen, 2011). In social media markets, this is visible through the importance of writing grammatically correctly in one's profile, public drug posts and private messages. Writing correctly establishes trust and leads to an increase in buyers who are willing to buy. A higher digital capital is also important when the dealer tries to balance publicity with security and encryption. In cryptomarkets, a formal educational background in IT is a huge advantage because this gives the individual some skills, for example, to handle the operational security and understand the mechanisms at play. This makes possible succeeding in drug markets within an online context without being embedded into street culture or having the right social capital. Instead, having the right technological skills might result in as much success.

Despite the growing value of technological and digital competencies, we did see several ways they connect to street cultural knowledge. One example is the use of emojis, which requires an informal digital cultural capital tied to the subculture. Using emojis to signal various forms of drugs demands a high embeddedness into drug culture and online drug lingo. It also relates to subcultural expectations to the appropriate amount of emojis in use. In addition, the use of online platforms to deal and buy drugs highly depends on local culture, both when regarding to street, drugs and nationality. The use of specific social media platforms to deal and buy drugs varied across the countries, which seemed to coincide with larger cultural values, such as the preferred social media for everyday communication, as well as perceptions of risk of law enforcement and national drug consumption culture. We also saw national differences in the communication forms in the markets, such as the number of emojis that were socially accepted or required in

drug postings. In other words, cultural values were important on many levels that all demanded certain drug-related knowledge and competency to succeed.

Even though the potentially global aspect of social media drug markets seems to depend highly on local culture, we did see that these markets have become melting pots for various users and dealers. Digital/online platforms become online spaces where buyers and sellers from different social groups meet to trade illegal drugs. There are market participants underscoring their street competencies, which can be seen as part of a street habitus based on experiences from class-based exclusion in the mainstream society (Shammas & Sandberg, 2016). In contrast, online markets also consist of more middle-class buyers and sellers who have higher standards regarding grammar and profiles, and who possibly rather look for values tied to mainstream entrepreneurial and capitalistic spirits (Mohamad & Fristvold, 2010). Online platforms then become a space where the participants can explore new market connections easier and even new markets in forms of drug types. For example, online markets make it easier for middle-class buyers to buy (possibly cheaper) drugs from street vendors, while buyers without any social network to buy from could now choose between a wide selection of sellers. Therefore, to some degree, digital markets overstep traditional classed categories of drug dealers by becoming a space where both dealers with low cultural and economic capital and dealers with higher capitals participate.

However, despite being melting pots for various forms of drug dealing with the potential for participants to remove themselves from earlier drug market structures, the participants prefer values with which they are familiar. This coincides with Jacques and Wright's (2015) study of middle-class drug dealers where the participants preferred staying with the same network connections despite other possibilities. With Bourdieusian theory, one could argue that people's original habitus is so strong in setting certain preferences that the drug market participants remain within the same social group in online, open markets, despite the new opportunities. Their values, expectations, needs and so on are already set based on their early experience. The way market participants carry with them certain dispositions for skills from the outside affects the online drug markets. However, one could also question whether the new, online market context modifies the participants' already existing habitus because of spending time in the field. The way the digital context of interacting changes the basis of communication from being about oral and face-to-face interaction to textual might mean that street-based dealers lose out in online

markets because of their lack of cultural capital (education), thus re-asserting a stratified class structure even in illicit markets.

The parameters of digital capital identified within the study are important to understanding changes within drug markets. However, more important than being identified as digital capital, the introduction of technological competencies as a highly valued capital in illegal markets introduces a shift in drug dealers and buyers' skill sets. From being a field, as Bourdieu would term it, that is all about subcultural street values or suburban social networks (Shammas & Sandberg, 2016), drug markets are now increasingly introducing rather mainstream values of not only technological education but also general education. However, this does not imply that technical competence is enough to succeed – it is still important to know how to communicate in ways tied to drug dealer-specific capitals. Digital and online drug markets are where subcultural and mainstream values meet, and where street capital, social capital and digital capital all are important. The combination of these three forms of capital within one market allows actors other than those with high street or social capital to succeed. Now, actors with technological skills enter the market with power as well. Therefore, online drug markets could become marketplaces that unite a broad spectrum of drug users and dealers. However, it takes time to change embodied expectations and values, and people's early experiences continuously shape their preferences and choices. This leads to questioning whether the digitalization of illegal drug markets will actually lead to changes in market composition via merging several drug markets to the same platform because the people within the markets will continue to prefer the same values and competencies as they did previously. A concept such as digital capital can provide new valuable insights to criminology that allow discussing illegal activity in a wider context including mainstream values that could be as important as street values.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone who provided feedback throughout the various stages, and especially the reviewers and Editor who really helped us improve the paper.

Declaration of interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Aldridge J and Askew R (2017) Delivery dilemmas: How drug cryptomarket users identify and seek to reduce their risk of detection by law enforcement. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 41: 101-109. doi:10.1016/j.drugpo.2016.10.010
- Aldridge J and Décary-Héту D (2016) Hidden wholesale: The drug diffusing capacity of online drug cryptomarkets. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 35: 7–15. doi:10.1016/j.drugpo.2016.04.020
- Anderson E (1990) *Streetwise: Race, class, and change in an urban community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Anderson E (1999) *Code of the street: Decency, violence, and the moral life of the inner city*. New York/London: WW Norton & Company.
- Bancroft A and Reid PS (2016) Concepts of illicit drug quality among darknet market users: Purity, embodied experience, craft and chemical knowledge. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 35: 42–49.
- Barratt MJ and Aldridge J (2016) Everything you always wanted to know about drug cryptomarkets* (*but were afraid to ask). *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 35: 1–6. doi:10.1016/j.drugpo.2016.07.005
- Bourdieu P (1979) Les trois états du capital culturel. *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 30(1): 3–6. <https://doi.org/10.3406/arss.1979.2654>
- Bourdieu P (1984) *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. USA: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu P (1986) The forms of capital. In: Richardson J *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, pp. 241–58
- Bourdieu P (1990) *The logic of practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu P (1993) *Sociology in question*. London: Sage.
- Bourdieu P (1998) *Practical reason*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourgois P (2003) *In search of respect: Selling crack in El Barrio* (Vol. 10). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu P & Wacquant LJ (1992) *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago press.

- Childs A, Coomber R, Bull M, & Barratt, MJ (2020) Evolving and diversifying selling practices on drug cryptomarkets: An exploration of off-platform ‘direct dealing’. *Journal of Drug Issues*, 50(2), 173-190.
- Cyr D (2013) Website design, trust and culture: An eight-country investigation. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*, 12(6): 373–385.
- Demant J and Bakken SA (2019) Technology-facilitated drug dealing via social media in the Nordic countries. Background paper commissioned by The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA). Lisboa: EMCDDA.
- Demant J, Bakken SA, Oksanen A and Gunnlaugsson H. (2019) Drug dealing on Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram: A qualitative analysis of novel drug markets in the Nordic countries. *Drug and alcohol review*, 38(4): 377–385.
- Fleetwood J (2014) *Drug mules: Women in the international cocaine trade*. London: Springer.
- Fuchs C (2007) *Internet and society: Social theory in the information age*. New York: Routledge.
- Garcia AC, Standlee AI, Bechkoff J and Cui Y (2009) Ethnographic approaches to the Internet and computer-mediated communication. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 38: 52–84. doi:10.1177/0891241607310839
- Gilbert M (2010) Theorizing digital and urban inequalities: Critical geographies of ‘race’, gender and technological capital. *Information, communication & society*, 13(7): 1000-1018.
- Graham M and Dutton WH (eds) (2019) *Society and the internet: How networks of information and communication are changing our lives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Groshkova T, Stoian T, Cunningham A, Griffiths P, Singleton N and Sedefov R (2020) Will the current COVID-19 pandemic impact on long-term cannabis buying practices? *Journal of Addiction Medicine*, 14(4): e13–e14.
- Hall A and Antonopoulos GA (2016) *Fake Meds Online. The Internet and the Transnational Market in Illicit Pharmaceuticals*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, UK.
- Hardy RA and Norgaard JR (2016) Reputation in the Internet black market: An empirical and theoretical analysis of the Deep Web. *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 12(3): 515–539.
- Henson B, Swartz K and Reynolds BW (2016) #Respect: Applying Anderson’s code of the street to the online context. *Deviant Behavior*, 1–13. doi:10.1080/01639625.2016.1197682

- Hillebrand J, Olszewski D and Sedefov R (2010) Legal highs on the Internet. *Substance Use & Misuse*, 45(3): 330–340.
- Hsieh JP-A, Ra, A and Keil M (2011) Addressing digital inequality for the socioeconomically disadvantaged through government initiatives: Forms of capital that affect ICT utilization. *Information Systems Research*, 22(2): 233–253.
- Ilan J (2013) Street social capital in the liquid city. *ethnography*, 14(1): 3-24.
- Jacques S and Wright R (2015) *Code of the suburb: Inside the world of young middle-class drug dealers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Julien C (2015) Bourdieu, social capital and online interaction. *Sociology*, 49(2): 356–373.
- Keipi T, Kaakinen M, Oksanen A and Räsänen P (2017) Social tie strength and online victimization: An analysis of young people aged 15–30 years in four nations. *Social Media+ Society*, 3(1). doi: 2056305117690013.
- Kozinets RV (2015) *Netnography*. Wiley Online Library.
- Kvasny L and Keil M (2006) The challenges of redressing the digital divide: A tale of two US cities. *Information Systems Journal*, 16(1): 23–53.
- Lane, J (2019) *Digital street*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Martin J (2014) *Drugs on the dark net: How cryptomarkets are transforming the global trade in illicit drugs*. Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Miller H, Thebault-Spieker J, Chang S, Johnson I, Terveen L and Hecht B (2016) ‘Blissfully happy’ or ‘ready to fight’: Varying interpretations of emoji. Paper presented at the Proceedings of ICWSM.
- Mohamed, A. R., & Fritsvold, E. D. (2010). Dorm room dealers. In *Dorm Room Dealers*. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Moyle L, Childs A, Coomber R and Barratt MJ (2019) # Drugsforsale: An exploration of the use of social media and encrypted messaging apps to supply and access drugs. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 63: 101–110.
- Munksgaard R (2021) Trust and exchange: The production of trust in illicit online drug markets. Doctoral dissertation, School of Criminology, Université de Montréal.
- Nurmi J, Kaskela T, Perälä J and Oksanen A (2017) Seller’s reputation and capacity on the illicit drug markets: 11-month study on the Finnish version of the Silk Road. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 178: 201–207.

- Oksanen A, Miller BL, Savolainen I, Sirola A, Demant J, Kaakinen M and Zych I (2021) Social media and access to drugs online: A nationwide study in the United States and Spain among adolescents and young adults. *European Journal of Psychology Applied to Legal Context*, 13(1): 29–36.
- Park S (2017) *Digital Capital*. London: Palgrave Macmillian UK.
- Resnick, P (2001) Beyond bowling together: Sociotechnical capital. *HCI in the New Millennium*, 77: 247-272.
- Sandberg S (2008) Street capital: Ethnicity and violence on the streets of Oslo. *Theoretical Criminology*, 12(2): 153–171.
- Sandberg S, & Fleetwood J (2017) Street talk and Bourdieusian criminology: Bringing narrative to field theory. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 17(4), 365-381.
- Sandberg S and Pedersen W (2011) *Street capital: Black cannabis dealers in a white welfare state*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Shammas VL, & Sandberg S (2016) Habitus, capital, and conflict: Bringing Bourdieusian field theory to criminology. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 16(2): 195-213.
- Sterne J (2003) Bourdieu, technique and technology. *Cultural Studies*, 17(3–4): 367–389.
- Stratton G, Powell A, & Cameron R (2017) Crime and justice in digital society: Towards a ‘digital criminology’?. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 6(2): 17.
- Thornton S (1995) *Club cultures: Music, media, and subcultural capital*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press.
- Tzanetakis M, Kamphausen G, Werse B and von Laufenberg R (2016) The transparency paradox. Building trust, resolving disputes and optimising logistics on conventional and online drugs markets. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 35: 58–68.
- Van Hout MC and Bingham T (2014) Responsible vendors, intelligent consumers: Silk Road, the online revolution in drug trading. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 25: 183–189.
- Wacquant L (2002) Scrutinizing the street: Poverty, morality, and the pitfalls of urban ethnography. *American journal of sociology*, 107(6), 1468-1532.
- Wall D (2007) *Cybercrime: The transformation of crime in the information age*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Yar M and Steinmetz KF (2019) *Cybercrime and society*. London: Sage.