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Research Paper

Digital figurations in the online trade of illicit drugs: A qualitative content analysis of darknet forums

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This article analyses the factors of trust, logistics, and conflict on darknet markets (DNMs) and forums that are dedicated to selling illicit drugs. The analysis is conducted by utilising Elias (1978) theoretical concept of 'figuration,' which refers to the communicative constellations that eventuate between actors.
Methods: A qualitative content analysis was applied to a sample collected from darknet forums related to darknet markets, independent forums with trade sections, and separate vendor shops. The main categories trust, logistics, and conflict are analysed, and certain subcategories are also explored, including operational security (opsec), vouching, and shilling. These terms are commonly used to describe the trading of drugs on the darknet.
Results: Users of DNMs and forums discuss vendors, their products, and security-related features. Vouching and shilling are attempts to strengthen trust, logistics are used to secure the trade, while conflicts reflected in forum discussion threads often arise when logistics fail. Logistics may fail due to different reasons and actors involved in the associated figurations. The (anticipated) presence of actors in disguise is crucial for all of the main categories.
Conclusion: Notions of trust, logistics, and conflict express attempts to cope with or circumvent risks imposed on users of DNMs by other users (e.g., scamming) or law enforcement (e.g., the interception of packages). Due to the illicit nature of the trade, these notions have to be constantly negotiated through digital communication.

Introduction

Darknet markets (DNMs) have become steady suppliers of many kinds of mostly illegal goods and services, especially illicit drugs (Aldridge & Décary-Hétu, 2014; Barratt, 2012; Barratt, Ferris, & Winstock, 2014; Martin, 2014b, 2014b; Soska & Christin, 2015; Broséus et al., 2016). On DNMs, vendors may offer goods and services, and buyers may choose from these offers and pay with cryptocurrencies, e.g., Bitcoin (BTC). Orders are shipped using postal services, and attempts are made to conceal the content of the packages. Throughout the text, we use the term 'cryptomarkets,' as defined by Barratt and Aldridge (2016), when referring to integrated markets that offer certain services for their users (e.g., escrow and standardised rating systems). However, this definition does not cover darknet forums that have trading sections and separate vendor shops. Thus, we also use the term 'DNM(s).' The general structure of the drug trade on the darknet is associated with higher availability (Barratt, Lenton, Maddox, & Allen, 2016) and reduced risks for buyers regarding drug quality on one hand (Aldridge, Stevens, & Baratt, 2017; Caudevilla et al., 2016; Bancroft & Reid, 2016), and exposure to violence and law enforcement on the other (Barratt, Ferris, & Winstock, 2016). This situation has been described as being shaped by responsibility and intellect of users (Van Hout & Bingham, 2014). However, malicious acts of hacking, theft, and scamming have been described as well (Moeller, Munksgaard, & Demant, 2017).

However, DNMs are much more than simple click-to-buy platforms that offer certain advantages to customers. They are also consummative zones and conceptual entities (Hunsinger, 2015) that are defined by knowledge, information sharing, and economics as much as by crime and criminalisation. Thus, DNMs connect all participants in a way that differs extensively from traditional methods of illicit drug trading (Tzanetakis, Kamphausen, Werse, & von Laufenberg, 2016). Even though participants are anonymous, geographically dispersed, and communicate solely through encrypted messages and forum discussions, they form a consummative community that is based on support, mutuality (Ladegaard, 2017a), and 'constructive activism' within 'a more permissive digital reality' (Maddox, Barratt, Allen, & Lanton, 2016, p. 1). Nevertheless, little is known about the specific sociological basics of illegal drug trading under these circumstances. How do people know they can trust each other? What logistics are used to successfully

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place and sell an item or make and receive an order? Moreover, how are conflicts resolved within a community of peers who do not really know each other?

Operators of cryptomarkets often offer discussion forums to users (both sellers and buyers). These forums cover most of the topics related to the goods and services traded on cryptomarkets. However, the forum is usually dedicated to drugs and includes threads created by vendors that promote their supplies and engage with customers. There are also forums that are unrelated to a certain cryptomarket but offer a trade section within the forum. These forums often do not have the tools that are common to cryptomarket functionality, such as standardised rating systems, escrow services, and support tickets. As a result, such forums are even more reliant on vendor threads (e.g., for advertising sales on the vendors' side and posting reviews or ratings on the buyers' side) and administrator and moderator participation (e.g., maintaining the forum and responding to users' requests).

A common research method used to analyse darknet forums that conduct drug trading is a qualitative analysis. An analysis such as this allows for an understanding of the sociological and criminological aspects of this community (e.g., Morselli, Décary-Hétu, Paquet-Clouston, & Aldridge, 2017; Ladegaard, 2017a). In some cases, a qualitative analysis has also served as the basis for follow-up interviews with those who participate in the darknet community (Bancroft & Reid, 2016; Van Hout & Bingham, 2013).

In this article, we describe and analyse the factors of trust, logistics, and conflict on DNMs (Tzanetakis et al., 2016). This analysis is based on the sociological concept of figuration. Thus, our contribution to the existing body of literature on darknet drug- trading includes insights into risk-taking and risk-avoidance by DNMs users. Furthermore, we analyse examples of how conflicts emerge and are settled, and we refer to the role of law enforcement (Décary-Hétu & Giommoni, 2016; Ladegaard, 2017b; Van Buskirk et al., 2017; Van Wegberg & Verburgh, 2018) as a hidden actor in the figuration. As a result, we show how the factors of trust, logistics, and conflict are linked to the specifics of clandestine digital communication.

Social figuration

Vendor threads offer insights into the structure of the drug-trade and the beliefs (i.e., values, opinions, and expectations) of the participants. Social roles can be identified, and participants seem to act according to these roles. The typical roles comprise operators (i.e., admins/mods), vendors, and buyers, and together they form a social 'figuration' (Elias, 1978) that is digitally mediated. By 'digitally mediated,' we refer to the social functions of the internet (i.e., hardware and software in use by humans) that resemble the basic sociological notion of social figuration. The theoretical concept of social figuration aims to define what is 'between' social actors, just as the internet is physically between them: 'If four people sit around a table and play cards together, they form a figuration. Their actions are interdependent' (Elias, 1978, p. 130). Social figuration is therefore a concept that relies on the dynamics between social actors and the roles they occupy. It does not rely on individualistic or even egocentric views of how individuals and society are interrelated. Therefore, these dynamics constitute the relationship between individual and society (i.e., individuals in figuration are society). It is important to note that this concept is neither behaviourist nor constructionist; it does not frame behaviour as solely individual, nor does it rely on objectivations. As such, it is a theoretical sociological concept that stands on its own but is open to both normative (i.e., structural, systemic) and interpretative (i.e., understanding, interactionist) sociological theories. This view is influenced by the earlier works of Elias, particularly his understanding of the civilising process as a combination of both psychogenetic and sociogenetic development (Elias, 2000). Elias developed a preliminary version of the concept of social figuration in The Society of Individuals, published in 1939, then proceeded to formalise the concept in The Established and the Outsiders, published in 1964. In 1970, he finalised the concept in What is Sociology? A particular aspect of social figuration is the use of personal pronouns; language itself offers a grammatical basis for understanding figurations. This is exemplified when third-person pronouns are used, and someone 'who temporarily or permanently stands outside the communicating group is referred to' (Elias, 1978, p. 123). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Elias links the concept of figuration to what we might call 'a network-figure' (Elias, 1991, p. 25), thus anticipating the digitally mediated network-figures of current times.

The focus of the research presented here is on the aforementioned dynamics between various actors on DNMs in relation to three main categories – namely, trust, logistics, and conflict (Tzanetakis et al., 2016) – and the meaning that digital mediation has for them. All three actors (i.e., the operator, vendor, and buyer) are placed 'around the table,' and all three categories analysed here are relevant for them when 'playing cards.' Overall, applying the concept of social figuration to anonymous social relationships on the darknet offers new insights into the trading of illicit drugs on DNMs, especially due to its anti-behaviourist and anti-constructionist position that excludes the psychological deficit approach to drug use and the penal ascription of responsibility. The concept of figuration is related to neither pathologisation nor criminalisation. While the pathologisation of drug use can be ignored for the research presented here, the criminalisation of drugs and its effects on drug users and traders can be explained. Law enforcement is a hidden actor in figuration, causing its adversaries to adapt to its actions, even potential or alleged actions. For example, such actions may be the closure of DNMs, interception of packages, sting operations and controlled buying of drugs, and malicious forum posts and ratings in order to disrupt a vendor's reputation (Markopoulos, Xefteris, & Dellaroca, 2015).

Method

In the course of a German–Austrian research project on drug dealing and organised crime, we conducted a qualitative analysis of sources (i.e., user posts and threads), stemming from five different cryptomarket forums (i.e., Abraxas, Agora, Dream Market, Nucleus, and Outlaw), a darknet forum dedicated to psychedelic drugs and, to a lesser degree, separate vendor shops.[1] Enghoff and Aldridge (2019) have highlighted the value of data such as this for drug research. A sample was selectively collected from June 2015 to March 2016 by browsing, reading, identifying, and saving sources related to trust, logistics, and conflict. The sample was coded according to these basic categories. No keyword search was used, and the admins of the forums were not contacted in order to gain permission, because sampling was retrospective. This method is different to the method used by Van Hout and Bingham (2013), who did not only observe existing forum threads but also began their own threads and invited users to partake in online qualitative interviews.

Additionally, the sample was coded alongside common idioms used by the participants of the analysed figuration. These idioms included operational security (opsec), stealth, shilling, vouching, and doxing. The relevance of these terms became clear while coding the basic categories. For some of these terms, a keyword search was conducted within the existing sample. Examples in relation to these terms and their meaning for the users of DNMs and forums were identified and are explained in the results section. Most of the examples were found in threads dedicated to specific vendors. For reasons of anonymisation, such quotes are labelled throughout the text of this article and marked

[1] We do not mention the name of the psychedelic drug forum here, as unlike the forums related to the named cryptomarkets, it is still operating. Please see Martin and Christin (2016) for a general description of ethics in cryptomarket research.

with the initials of the vendor's alias, including an indication as to whether the vendor or one of their (potential) customers is speaking. No aliases of customers are used, and typos and other mistakes in the quotes were left uncorrected.

When collecting the various sources and coding the sample, various methodological difficulties arose that highlighted the limitations of the research design. Some of these methodological difficulties are inherent to online qualitative research in general (Welker et al., 2010). Sources may contain seemingly relevant information but cannot be verified by the researcher; users might post false or misleading information (e.g., when rating a vendor or their product); and sources are often transitory, nonlinear, and hyper-textual, which means they may look different over time because content was added or deleted. Relevant sources might also be missed because they are hidden behind a hyperlink or other information. Resources might even disappear completely (i.e., deleted), as occurred with the forum of 'Evolution' marketplace which was completely taken offline while collecting the sample. Some interesting data that had been identified but not yet saved was lost because of this. Another limitation is that users' postings contain discursive and narrative elements that are often based on their beliefs and values, and users sometimes seem to tell a fictional story. Although this might be a relevant finding in itself, such elements are difficult to interpret.

More specific limitations are linked to the selective sampling process that uses predefined categories. This type of data collection might miss relevant information that may become interesting during the process of coding the sample, as was the case with some important subcategories (e.g., vouching and shilling). Even though identifying such subcategories is a result of the research itself, their analysis is bound to a sample that was collected without prior knowledge of their importance. Thus, findings might be limited to just some of the relevant data concerning these subcategories. Finally, the translation of two quotes from German means that they might be ascribed a slightly different meaning.

Results and discussion

In this section, the results of our analysis will be explored and discussed with a particular focus on the factors trust, logistics, and conflict, including relevant quotes from our sample.

Trust

The best way for a vendor to gain the trust of potential customers is to have high ratings in the standardised rating system of the cryptomarket. This rating system often consists of a five-star scale and the ability of buyers to write short review comments. The results of this rating system can usually be found on the vendor's profile page, together with current offers and a description of the vendor (provided by the vendor) (Tzanetakis et al., 2016). In order to gain trust, vendors should be polite and responsive when contacted via encrypted messages or the forum, provide reliable information about their products and terms of trade, and ship their goods quickly. If sellers do not act according to these informal rules, they are at risk of losing orders, because a customer's willingness to purchase a product from them is reliant on the level of trust they have. As a result, a seller's reputation can generate trust and influence the decisions of a potential customer in terms of whether to buy or not. A good reputation promotes cooperation (Przepiorka, Norbutas, & Corten, 2017) and increases loyalty (Décary-Hétu & Quessy-Doré, 2017). Finally, a good reputation also increases the vendor's revenue (Nurmi, Kaskela, Perälä, & Oksanen, 2017).

The following example shows that reputation-damaging behaviour may cause potential customers to refrain from ordering. This quote, taken from a forum with a section dedicated to trade, is from a vendor who has accused the forum admins of reading their personal messages in order to contact their customers with competing offers for the same product (LSD):

> A warning to our customers. Please do not message us on here. Someone within the admin is reading our messages and your information is at risk (TG vendor).

The following angry and offensive accusations might deter potential customers, as one forum user states:

> You have decent product, shipping and price but you are personally ruining your reputation with others and making many reconsider if doing business with you is worth the hassle (TG customer).

This example shows how essential personal behaviour is in building one's reputation on a forum. However, it also highlights that the operators of a DNM and the services they offer can be subject to mistrust. Unlike two-party seller–buyer relationships in traditional offline drug markets, selling and buying drugs on the darknet is a figuration of at least three parties: operators (admins/mods), vendors, and buyers (Tzanetakis et al., 2016).

During the process of coding the sample, it became clear that there were at least two strategies used by vendors in order to gain and maintain trust: vouching and shilling. A clear sign of trust is vouching for the trustworthiness of other people or for the quality of their products:

> But the top product in my opinion is the H no.3. Really super quality! I even vouch for this (Dq4321 customer) (Translated for this study).

However, such attempts to express and strengthen trust may also be acts of shilling. Vendors who use secondary accounts or ask their friends to vouch for them try to create a trustworthy reputation. This can be done reactively in order to protect themselves from claims that they are scammers. It can also be done proactively as a marketing trick to strengthen their reputation and attract new customers, or as a malicious competitive practice in order to damage the reputations of other vendors.

> Wish TG would just post as their account again. Would clear this up very quickly instead of using 'shill' accounts (TG customer).
> I hope you are not meaning me. You're way of the mark if you do. […] Honestly, you are wrong if you think im TG (TG customer).
> We think the same people are using shills to convince people it is us shill attacking all our competition. We suspect this is to convince all the LSD vendors to distrust us and stay away from us and our low prices. We are not shilling here or on Reddit even though it looks like we have a shill army. Someone has put a lot of effort into discrediting us with shills and anti-shills. We have no time to sit all day on the computer, we are far too busy working on customers orders (TG vendor).

Overall, our analysis of social figurations on darknet forums shows that trust is actively generated or disrupted between operators, vendors, and buyers. Furthermore, we found that, in addition to standardised rating systems, vendor threads are principal players in the gaining and losing of trust. The gain and loss of trust in these threads also includes the use of certain communicative strategies, such as shilling and vouching. In the following section, it is clear that establishing trust and building a good reputation is closely related to logistics: The operational connection of acquiring and losing customers by gaining and losing trust is an example of how decision-making on one side is determined by previous engagement on the other side (Luhmann, 1988; Tzanetakis et al., 2016).

Logistics

The most common term in relation to logistics is operational security (opsec). This term describes all measures used to protect the trade against the interception of law enforcement. Both the digital and material world are subject to this; indeed, these two worlds are linked,

because digital communication must result in the actual shipping of goods. Thus, the digital mediation of drug deals needs to stand the test of time and space in the real world. If it does not, the logistics have failed. As a result of this, vendor threads on darknet forums often centre on logistics, influencing perceptions of both reliability and reputation.

When beginning a thread, vendors need to introduce themselves and their business:

> BE crew is looking for some serious bulk (2500+ pills, 50 g Cocaine, 500 g MDMA or 2500 g Speed upwards+!) buyers for every kind of drug!!
> Orders ABOVE $10.000 can also be shipped form the Netherlands and Belgium domestically!
> Located in Australia or other high risk countries? No problem for $250 extra fee we arrange the best NINJA stealth you have ever seen so far with refund service etc.
> We can arrange real cheap prices - send us a PM for more information!
> 100% ESCROW + FAST DELIVERYGERMAN crew + GERMAN place of business
> There is no need to drive your packages through the border as all of the NL vendors do - security first! (BE vendor).

This vendor clearly describes their terms of trade by giving information on updates, goods in stock, shipping, refunds, terms and conditions, and their presence on other markets. Additionally, the vendor posts their Pretty Good Privacy key to encrypt messages that potential customers may want to send.

An important aspect of logistics is the vendors' decision as to whether or not to exclude certain destinations. Some vendors ship worldwide, while others do not. International shipping is riskier (Décary-Hétu, Paquet-Clouston, & Aldridge, 2016), so vendors often restrict their sales to selected countries or only ship domestically (Demant, Munksgaard, Décary-Hétu, & Aldridge, 2018; Tzanetakis, 2018). In part, this is reflected in the buyers' decision to order from international or domestic vendors. Domestic ordering is often safer due to the sanctity of the mail, while international orders must pass through customs.

> Everyone knows that any person could ship domestically without any type of stealth at all, just a letter with some drugs inside and it is still going to arrive because it is domestic (Ag vendor).

Even though this quote might be exaggerated (buyers also expect stealth when ordering domestically), it shows the differences in risk perception when sending or ordering internationally or domestically.

When ordering online, providing the correct address is a necessity of logistics on DNMs. Mistakes in communicating and handling the address might lead to a failed trade.

This example is taken from the thread of a Dutch bulk-supplier of ecstasy. The vendor uses an odd example for the address: Mario Götze is a famous German football player, and 'Mannschaft' is the German word for 'team'. Nevertheless, there are two mistakes in this example (a misspelling of 'Mannschaft' and the country written in capital letters). Mistakes made by customers when providing their shipping address might arouse suspicions of the package's contents (resulting in loss through interception) or result in the package being returned to sender. Either scenario may elicit law enforcement operations.

Vendors must also handle the addresses of their customers with care:

> Im fuming the address he's sent it is not mine, its a place a mate works part time and part of his job is sorting the mail for the various units so he can grab the odd parcel and get away with not having to open it in front of people.
> He's gone up the fucking wall with me as you can imagine because he's not there all the time and if this comes in the name thats on it they'll know something is up for sure for obvious reasons, the owners no doubt will call the police and all sorts.
> It really is fucking crazy behaviour, in all my time buying no one ever done this, its ruining peoples lives plus if the police get called theres all sorts of shit will go down.
> If it was a mistake i'd be pissed off BUT i ASKED on more than one occasion not to send anything. I just cant believe someone would be this fucking stupid over 7 g.!!!!!! (MrM customer).

Even worse for customers are shipping records and customer databases kept by some vendors. If this information becomes accessible to law enforcement, a series of investigations may follow. This might lead to raids, charges, and penal sentences, as seen from independent reports on such incidents (e.g., Deepdotweb, 2017). An example from our sample, a German forum user, states:

> Had a police raid today Was totally surprised by this […] In the search warrant, they wrote something of 8 deliveries 5 g each in the first half of 2014
> So I asked
> The police officer said they caught a seller in summer 2014 who had a list of customers and that this list currently is worked with nationwide […]
> WHAT IS this SHIT about, I'm a super-cautious man because of this asshole im registered now […]
> Just stop keeping lists of customers!! […] (German customer of a previously caught vendor.) (Translated for this study).

Interestingly, other users do not immediately believe claims presented above. They suspect fearmongering by law enforcement officials and are not convinced unless the first user unveils the vendor's name. This is a clear example of the anticipation of law enforcement as a hidden actor in the figuration: Users expect other users to be officers who may try to disrupt the trust embedded in the actors and structures of DNMs, in this case by denying claims about failed logistics and its negative results.

Once a shipment is on its way, it is at risk of being detected by law enforcement or postal workers. As a result of this, various measures are taken to conceal the illicit goods in envelopes or packages that appear inconspicuous. As mentioned before, stealth is one of the most important factors of logistics because it is directly linked to the risk of detection by law enforcement, like most offline activities of vendors, e.g. visiting post offices or post boxes, and buyers, i.e. receiving packages (Aldridge & Askew, 2017). Thus, expectations of proper stealth techniques influence a buyer's decision in terms of whether to purchase from a vendor, as this example shows:

> How is your stealth? (SS customer).
> yes. ill ship anywhere worldwide. my stealth is excellent. double vacuum sealed (washed) goods, wrapped in 4 peices of card and shipped in a plain white envelope with a printed address. it looks like a business letter (SS-vendor).
> Stealth sounds great for shrooms and deem, however for weed MBBs are necessary. Metal Barrier Bags, the gold standard in material to ship drugs in (SS customer).

Effective stealth is of such importance that it forms part of the vendor rating buyers leave on the standardised rating system of a DNM and on the vendor's feedback thread.

Other forms of logistics are related to sales and products: freebies, overweight, advertisements, and lottery and promotion sales (Tzanetakis et al., 2016). When collecting the sample for this research, we visited a separate vendor shop for alprazolam. There was an advertisement offering a 25% discount for customers who buy outside of DNMs and finalse early (FE, which means paying in advance without using escrow services).

> We understand you will want to use a market escrow until you trust us enough to choose to FE. Once you are comfortable with our service. Please consider a deal direct with email and get 25% off any

current market price! (TV vendor, separate shop).

We marked the text of the entire site for saving and used the copy and paste function to transfer the text to our database. When we did this, a hidden text was unveiled:

> Secret 25% off Coupon code:- TV18[…]MO1
> Quote this code on any market and get 25% off your [purchase] (TV vendor, separate shop, code made unusable).

This 'coupon' was hidden because it was written in white letters on a white background so that it could only be read when marking the text. Users of DNMs fetishize hiddenness (Hunsinger, 2015). In terms of anonymity, stealth, and internet security, this is a necessity of logistics. In the case of the coupon presented above, it may be regarded as a 'reward' for those customers who found the code, and thus, as a stimulus to place an order.

Furthermore, the logistics of the darknet drug trade also affect the traditional market. Retailers and minimally commercial suppliers might use drugs from the darknet for distribution in traditional markets:

> I would say for instance you buy a quarter from here, resell 7 × 0.8′s at £100 and make 1.4 g free to sniff, or even sell the other .4 for another £50 so you've a gram of as strong as we're getting these days coke, and keep the £300-400 profit. Pretty easily done without large scale dealing (MrM customer).

DNMs make drug retailing on traditional markets slightly easier (Aldridge & Décary-Hétu, 2014, 2016). As our example shows, this is true for both irregular small-scale dealers and user-dealers.

These are only some examples of the role logistics plays on DNMs. Overall, logistics are optimised to reduce the risk of detection by law enforcement and strengthen perceptions of trust, reliability, and reputation in order to increase sales, revenue, and income for the vendors' and, via trading fees, for the operators. Failed logistics can lead to the adaption and elaboration of methods currently in use. This was the case when multi-signature escrow was introduced on some markets after the operators of a leading market exit-scammed (Deepdotweb, 2015; Motherboard, 2015). Furthermore, failed logistics can trigger discussions and conflicts about the trade, as we will see in examples in the next section.

Conflict

The examples from our sample presented below follow the process that defines a figuration, as described by Elias.

> Then something from one passes into the other. It is assimilated into his or her individual structure of ideas. It changes this structure, and is in its turn modified by being incorporated into a different system. The same applies if opposition arises in a conversation. Then the ideas of one party enter into the inner dialogue of the other as an adversary, and so drive on his thoughts (Elias & Scotson, 1994, p. 24–25).

The dynamics outlined above can be demonstrated in previous analyses of conflicts during drug transactions on cryptomarkets. Morselli et al. (2017) describe conflict management on DNMs. They identify the determinants of conflicts, channels of reaction to them, and coping strategies. The determinants comprise failed transactions, scams, bad market management, unfair and competitive practices, social interactions, and law enforcement activities. The channels of reaction to these sources of conflict comprise direct contact, support tickets addressed to mods/admins, complaints in the forum, or low ratings in the automatic feedback system of the DNM. Strategies to solve negative claims comprise tolerating or avoiding them, ostracism, third-party interventions, negotiation, and threats.

Some of these conflicts arise from failed logistics. When analysing the examples of conflict in our sample, it became clear that in some cases, it was not possible to determine the true cause of the conflict. Some possible events that may lead to conflict include the following: packages that do not reach their destination were never shipped because the vendor was a scammer; packages were intercepted by law enforcement or stolen by postal workers; packages arrived, but the customer lied about them in an attempt to scam the vendor; and competing vendors sent false claims about missing packages. This is why we believe the term 'failed logistics' is more reliable when describing cases of conflict that cannot be clearly ascribed to one of the more detailed determinants of conflict on DNMs. Additionally, it became clear that channels of reaction might shift, in our case from a discussion in the forum to behind the scenes, where admins made decisions about banning and unbanning the vendor. Furthermore, various strategies of resolving conflicts might apply to single cases, shifting from tolerance or negotiation to ostracism or threats.

One source in our sample reflected a conflict between an established Dutch vendor and some of their customers from the United Kingdom, who claimed that their drugs, mainly cocaine, did not arrive.

> I had over a dozen successfully transaction then with MrM. I expected to get my order last Thursday as order had been marked shipped Tuesday but nothing arrived till now. Bit worried (MrM customer).
> I am in a similar boat in that i ordered a week past thursday and has not dropped yet…Hopefully just issues with the mail…Its the not knowing if drop compromised thats the biggest pain…Positive thinking..It will come as will yours! (MrM customer).
> Yeah same. I imagine it's royal mail being a turd (MrM customer).

The customers had not yet made any accusations; they merely say that they are missing their orders. The vendor answers by pointing out their practice of sending the parcels, implying that the shipments were sent:

> Mate, all the orders are sending out within 24 h from Monday till Friday. If your order is accept (because we do not accept all FE orders), this mean your order is going to be dispatching within 24 h. Hope this information is clear for now, Thanks mate's (MrM vendor).

From this point on, a conflict develops and evolves. The vendor insists that they sent the orders, while the customers become angry about the allegation that they might be scammers. In turn, they blame the vendor. As quoted above, something passes from one to another, drives their thoughts towards opposition, and manifests in verbal accusations. The vendor behaves similarly in response and a conflict arises between them. As defined by Elias, this is a social figuration of actors who occupy social roles.

Throughout the development of this conflict, the truth became impossible to ascertain. Various approaches were used in an attempt to solve the issue. Both the customers and vendor first tried to negotiate in a calm manner. However, the negotiations failed. Following this, threats and offences arose, as well as interventions by the forum admins. The conflict begins with the vendor threatening to publish the addresses of the customers, a process known as 'doxing':

> It regards all fuckers and issuing buyers. . . . . I don't care who you are….but it is now official. Monday office time I will broadcast the addresses on here or on deepdotweb! Before I do so I will check BTC's are released. So it's (read as you are) all up to admin VRC his decision. If he cares about you guys….he will release ….if he doesn't care ……he may have the BTC's…..the rest will follow and you'll find out the consequences very soon. i lost already….now itś the turn of who caused this. What goes around will come around! (MrM vendor).

The customers instantly teamed up against these threats; even those who were not primarily engaged in the conflict angrily expressed their concerns.

> Doxx customer adress is the WORST thing someone can do on ALL the DN. Even if it's just a threat, nobody would even mention to have that idea (MrM customer).
> If this guy did threaten to release people's info he should be banned/deleted instantly, keeping people's info saved is one thing but threatening to release it is something else. Anyone compromising the security of any customer/vendor or even this site should be outcasted imo (MrM customer).
> Please ban m. he threaten dox on everyone
> He is scumbag to do this to users it something le would carry on
> He also is a crazy person not sending packs and threating to publish buyer addresz. VERY VERY WRONG. If he do this one time he will do again
> Keep safe guys, give no informations to M he fucked in the head (MrM customer).

The vendor was banned from the marketplace but not from the forum. The customers continued to argue with the vendor, but the vendor did not publish their addresses. Instead, the vendor accused the admins of scamming them because their Bitcoin wallet on the DNM was affected by the ban. None of the admins or mods reacted to this. Surprisingly, after a few days, the vendor's ban was removed without any explanation.

> I've just logged on to MrM's profile page here and it looks like he is finally" unbanned". Excellent news if so. Nothing on his "actual offers" page yet though." (MrM customer).

The conflict then ends with a simple order:

> Welcome back MrM, dont forget to behave yourself (MrM customer).

It remains unclear as to who wanted to scam whom, or if the packages were stolen or seized. However, unbanning a vendor who threatens to dox their customers is a rare event on DNMs. What is also noteworthy is the fact that no customer addresses were published.

Overall, our case proves that determinants of conflict on DNMs cannot always be clearly identified. We also highlight that channels of addressing conflicts might shift, and various strategies to resolve a conflict may be applied to single cases. The figuration is, at least to a certain degree, susceptible to failure. This highlights the functional limits of digital mediation and the potential presence of hidden actors.

Conclusion

Our conclusion aims to explain the meaning of trust, logistics, and conflict on DNMs by making use of the sociological concept of figuration. This understanding of how people come together as a group that is characterised by what is happening between them helps us understand the individual and structural character of the drug trade at once, thus making single-handed ascriptions of meaning irrelevant. The concept is able to explain the dynamics and processes of the drug trade, including the risks inherent in it. Thus, the concept of figuration explains the emergence of a darknet community that is dedicated to buying and selling drugs, the obstacles it faces, shifting relations within the community (including both positive and negative developments), and the roles of supporters and adversaries. Furthermore, it is possible to identify the effects of external risks imposed on this community by drug prohibition and law enforcement.

The figuration is not only digitally mediated: It also adapts to the actions of hidden actors with aims that are contradictory to the aims of the other participants in the figuration (Décary-Hétu & Giommoni, 2016; Ladegaard, 2017a; Van Wegberg & Verburgh, 2018). The presence of this actor in disguise is almost certain, but their specific actions, both online and offline, are unpredictable. One major case that can be identified retrospectively is 'Operation Bayonet,' where Dutch law enforcement took over the Hansa market and ran it is a honey pot (Van Wegberg & Verburgh, 2018).[2] Because of one actors' disguise, the other actors/parties may doubt each other's integrity as a consequence. It is this constellation that leads to the main characteristics of trust, logistics, and conflict on DNMs, subsequently causing an evolving process of adaptation to the risks of law enforcement, scams, hacking, etc. Visibility on the market / in the forum, in contrast to invisibility through anonymity and various measures of operational security, are logical expressions of a digitally mediated social figuration that aims to supply illegal drugs. This supply network is designed in order to avoid risks imposed on users by users and circumvent existing laws and previously utilised law enforcement tactics. The overall capacity to adapt to and recover from disruption in the long term is high (Duxbury & Haynie, 2018; Van Buskirk et al., 2017). However, we also showed that under the existing conditions of prohibition, these figurations are fragile and may be distorted by (anticipated) law enforcement activity, chance, or inadvertence of any of the parties involved. Future qualitative research into offline and online drug trade might include the theoretical implications of the concept of figuration, particularly including the specific role of actors in disguise.

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[2] A honey pot is a sting operation by law enforcement in order to provoke criminalised activity and simultaneously produce evidence that can be used in courts, thus jeopardising the rule of law. Therefore, it is considered unconstitutional in some countries.

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