Research Paper

Exploring the relationship between online buyers and sellers of image and performance enhancing drugs (IPEDs): Quality issues, trust and self-regulation

Katinka van de Ven\textsuperscript{a,}\textsuperscript{*}, Rosa Koenraadt\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a} National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales, 22-32 King St, Randwick NSW 2031, Australia
\textsuperscript{b} Willem Pompe Institute for Criminal Law and Criminology, Utrecht University, Boudewijnstraat 6, Utrecht, 3512 BW, The Netherlands

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 5 February 2017
Received in revised form 25 August 2017
Accepted 11 September 2017

Keywords:
IPED
Image and performance enhancing drugs
Doping
Lifestyle drugs
Weight-loss drugs
Sexual enhancers
Online drug markets
Online pharmacies
Surface web and dark web

A B S T R A C T

Background: Online drug markets are expanding the boundaries of drug supply including the sale and purchase of image and performance enhancing drugs (IPEDs). However, the role of the internet in IPED markets, and in particular the ways in which these substances are supplied via the surface web, has rarely been considered. This article examines the online IPED market in order to inform drug policy and to provide a nuanced understanding of retailers involved, particularly exploring the relationship between buyers and sellers.

Methods: This paper is based on two extensive research projects conducted in the Netherlands and Belgium. The first project focuses on muscle drugs and is based on 64 IPED dealing cases, semi-structured interviews with authorities (N = 32), and dealers (N = 15), along with an analysis of 10 steroid-selling websites. The second research project primarily focuses on weight loss drugs and sexual enhancers in the Netherlands, and relies on interviews with authorities (N = 38), suppliers (N = 30), and consumers (N = 10), analysis of 69 criminal case files, and an online analysis.

Results: In the literature, the illicit online sale of IPEDs is generally associated with illegal online pharmacies that try to mislead buyers. While confirmed in our research, we also illustrate that there are online suppliers who invest in customer relationships and services, and that users are aware of the illegal nature of their business. These e-vendors incorporate a ‘social supply business model’ by providing the best possible service to their customers and attempting to minimise risks in order to attract, satisfy and maintain customers.

Conclusion: As it is likely that users will continue to make use of the internet to order IPEDs, regardless of closing down selling websites, it is first of all important to counteract these online sources by educating all types of consumers and providing harm reduction services.

© 2017 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Introduction

It has been well established that the internet is an important facilitator of illicit drug markets (EMCDDA, 2016). The development of online markets has revolutionised the communication, advertisement and trade of illicit drugs, and has opened the market up to a wider user audience. The illicit market for image and performance enhancing drugs (IPEDs), such as diet pills, self-tanning injections and muscle-building drugs, is no exception (Antonopoulos & Hall, 2016; EMCDDA, 2016; Evans-Brown, McVeigh, Perkins, & Bellis, 2012; Koenraadt & de Haan, 2016; Lavorgna, 2015). Indeed, the Internet is a popular method to purchase or sell IPEDs, and some even suggest that the Internet might have become the primary means for buying and offering these substances (i.e. Cordaro, Lombardo, & Cosentino, 2011). Despite this change, studies that examine the production and distribution of enhancement drugs primarily focus on the supply through offline, physical spaces as opposed to online markets (Antonopoulos & Hall, 2016; Coomber et al., 2015; Fincoeur, van de Ven, & Mulrooney, 2014; Koert and van Kleij, 1998; Kraska, Bussard, & Brent, 2010; Maycock & Howat, 2007; Paoli & Donati, 2015; Van de Ven, 2016; Van de Ven & Mulrooney, 2017). To date, the role of the surface web in drug markets, and particularly the ways in which IPEDs are supplied via the surface web has rarely been considered (Lavorgna, 2016).
Further, most research on online drug markets focuses not on the surface web but rather on the sale of drugs via the dark web (Barratt, Ferris, & Winstock, 2014; Buxton & Bingham, 2015; Van Hout & Bingham, 2013), the use of cryptomarkets for trading drugs (Aldridge & Décary-Hétu, 2016; Martin, 2013, 2014), the sale of illicit medicines through online pharmacies (Di Nicola et al., 2015; Hall & Antonopoulos, 2015; Koenraadt & de Haan, 2016) or the sale of novel psychoactive substances (NPSs) through the surface web (EMCDDA, 2016). Yet, the ease with which IPEDs can be marketed, distributed and accessed over the internet has resulted in a growing public health and criminal justice challenge for law enforcement agencies, policymakers and health care providers — a challenge about which little is known. In order to inform drug policy and practice it is therefore important to develop a nuanced understanding of the role of retailers involved in the illicit supply of IPEDs on the surface web. This article’s examination of the relationship sellers and buyers form and develop within this illicit market will contribute to this discussion. Specifically, we explore the online supply of three types of IPEDs via the surface web: muscle drugs, weight-loss drugs and sexual enhancers.

The use of drugs for performance and image enhancement has been firmly recognized as a public health concern (McVeigh, Evans-Brown, & Bellis, 2012). While there is wide range of IPEDs, the most commonly researched substances are anabolic-androgenic steroids (henceforth, steroids) that are used to increase muscle mass/strength (i.e. Chandler & McVeigh, 2013; Sagoe, Molde, Andreassen, Torsheim, & Pallesen, 2014), prescription stimulants to lose weight (i.e. Benson, Florý, Humphreys, & Lee, 2015; Jeffers, Benotsch, & Koester, 2013) and sexual enhancers to boost sexual experience (i.e. Apodaca & Moser, 2011; Koenraadt, 2012, 2013). Research also shows that users often combine these three types of enhancement drugs (Bates & McVeigh, 2016; Sagoe, Torsheim, Molde, Andreassen, & Pallesen, 2015). It has been shown that, in general, the quality of illicit IPEDs is quite poor (Graham et al., 2009; Venhuis et al., 2009), while the physical and psychological health risks also depend on the specific IPEDs used separately or in combination (for overview see Grundlingh, Dargan, El-Zanfaly, & Wood, 2011; Kanayama, Hudson, & Pope, 2008; Kaufman et al., 2015; Venhuis et al., 2009).

Adding to the IPED issue are the diverse classes of drugs controlled under discrete and disparate legislation, which complicates the administration of laws that govern the illicit IPED market. A large proportion of IPEDs are medicines that can be sold legally with a prescription and illegally through both (online) pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical sources. In the Netherlands and Belgium, for instance, IPEDs are controlled as different classes and schedules of drugs, under different forms of legislation (for example in the Netherlands there is the Medicine Act (1963); Economic Offences Act (2001); Opium Law (1976)). Sometimes the police are charged with enforcing regulations, while the Health Care Inspectorate is expected to take the administrative lead with regard to other regulations. It is therefore not always easy to draw a clear line between what is legal and what is not. As such, the internet offers a unique point of access for the sale of IPEDs where it blurs the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate supply (Walsh, 2011).

On the surface web, a large variation of online platforms exists through which IPEDs can be purchased and supplied (Cordaro et al., 2011; Hall & Antonopoulos, 2015; Koenraadt & de Haan, 2016; Wassink, Coumans, & de Hon, 2010). In much of the literature, the online sale of IPEDs is generally associated with online pharmacies (OPs) (i.e. Di Nicola et al., 2015; Hall & Antonopoulos, 2015; Lavorgna, 2015). Di Giorgio (2011) distinguishes between three different types of online pharmacies: (1) ‘legal online pharmacies’, which are licensed for selling pharmaceuticals online; (2) ‘fake online pharmacies’ that pretend to sell medicines but do not deliver; and (3) ‘illegal online pharmacies’ that are unlicensed yet offer medicines for sale. The business plans of both fake and illegal online pharmacies are usually described as being reliant on deception and fraud in order to turn a profit, and their webpages generally attempt to mimic those of legitimate online pharmacies by providing, for example, scientific information on medicines and displaying photographs of health professionals (Di Nicola et al., 2015). Although Di Giorgio’s classification is important for understanding different types of OPs, a closer examination shows that a wider range of sites cater to the needs of IPED consumers. In addition, Di Giorgio’s typology does not distinguish between websites that sell products of perceived good or bad quality. Instead a report of the Home Office on the NPS market distinguishing between ‘ghost websites’ (GWs) and ‘quality websites’ (QWs). Ghost websites advertise goods and take money, but usually have no intention of delivering a product (of good quality) (Home Office, 2014: 11). Di Giorgio’s fake online pharmacies are included within this category, but ghost websites are not limited to portraying themselves as online pharmacies. Opposite to ghost websites, quality websites are more reliable in terms of delivering orders and offering a complete ‘customer experience’ (vouchers to promote products, providing a rating opportunity, etc.). These quality websites share similarities with Di Giorgio’s illegal online pharmacies as they operate without being licenced, but again are not limited to mimicking legitimate online pharmacies. In this article, we show that the distinction between GWs and QWs is well applicable to the IPED trade.

Research on physical, offline IPED markets, notably the one related to weight-lifting subcultures and steroids, has shown that dealers are generally not described as ‘real dealers’, either by users or by the dealers themselves. Instead, they are often seen as suppliers who want to help friends and acquaintances to reach their fitness goals (Coomber et al., 2015; Fincoeur et al., 2014; Kraska et al., 2010; Maycock & Howat, 2007; van de Ven & Mulrooney, 2017). Many of these illicit steroid markets are based upon friendships and social networks, and are akin to ‘social supply’ rather than being commercial in nature (Coomber et al., 2015). For example, Van de Ven and Mulrooney (2017) describe IPED dealers as often ‘over-socialized’ into the structure and culture of bodybuilding and following the ‘cultural scripts’ that come with their group affiliation. Many of these dealers maintained that they supplied IPEDs in order to provide a good service and ‘clean products’ to their bodybuilding community or to help friends and fellow athletes to reach their training-related goals. In addition, a large share of the socially oriented dealers involved in weightlifting cultures are aware of the know-how and the language of the environment (high cultural knowledge), have a high status within the community and offer a host of ‘supplementary services’ that might include providing nutritional advice, setting up training and IPED cycling schedules, and giving suggestions regarding post-cycle treatment (Coomber et al., 2015; Kraska et al., 2010; Maycock & Howat, 2007; van de Ven & Mulrooney, 2017).

However, internet suppliers cannot ‘over-conform’ to these cultural norms, as there often is no personal contact with the buyer. Online suppliers therefore need to adopt other strategies to build a trust relationship with their customers. A socio-economic approach to illicit drug markets (i.e., Jacques, Allen, & Wright, 2013; Moore et al., 2005) can therefore provide a useful window to examine the online IPED market. Here, the dealing of illegal goods and services is described in the context of demand and supply, and financial considerations are the basis for the creation and the measure of success of drug dealing networks (i.e. Adler, 1993; Gottschalk, 2009; Reuter, 1985; Smith, 1975, 1985). When examining traditional marketing literature in relation to legal online markets, we see that trust relationships between consumers
دریافت فوری متن کامل مقاله

امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات