

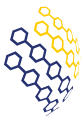
Part of the Toolbox on

# PARTY DRUGS AND CRIME



## Darknet drug markets

The criminal business  
process explained



**EUCPN**  
EUROPEAN CRIME PREVENTION NETWORK

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The main goal of this paper is to clarify the topic of (darknet) drug markets and party drugs by revisiting drug market stereotypes, by viewing illegal drug markets from an economic perspective and by zooming in on the important aspect of darknet drug markets and their criminal business process.

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**All the papers which make up the EUCPN toolbox on party drugs and crime are available for download at**

<https://eucpn.org/toolbox-partydrugsandcrime>.

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# **PREFACE**

This paper forms part of the EUCPN Toolbox published on the occasion of the Croatian Presidency of the EUCPN, which has opted to zoom in on the prevention of party drugs.

The main goal of this paper is to clarify the topic of (darknet) drug markets and party drugs by revisiting drug market stereotypes, by viewing illegal drug markets from an economic perspective and by zooming in on the important aspect of darknet drug markets and their criminal business process.

This paper is one of four parts of the toolbox in the topic of party drugs and crime.

- Party drugs and crime: understanding the phenomenon
- Party drugs and crime: effective approaches
- Darknet drug markets: the criminal business process explained
- Darknet drug markets: recommendations drawn from a barrier model



DARKNET DRUG MARKETS

# AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The reality of drug markets can be viewed as a continuum that is more varied than commonly assumed. It is therefore fruitful to revisit some drug market stereotypes. Strongly hierarchical drug markets are rather atypical for drug markets. Drug markets more often take the form of horizontal structures that consist of a wide range of individuals who move freely across the supply chain. Additionally, with regard to the persons involved, it is important to remember that offenders are not outsiders. They are part of society and transcend all demographics and their role in the drug trade is often easily fitted in their everyday (conventional) lives.



The criminal business process behind darknet drug markets roughly consists of the four consecutive steps of (1) setting up a marketplace, (2) running a marketplace, (3) selling drugs and (4) shipping drugs. Several players, from a developer and a managing administrator to a moderator who helps with maintenance and supporting customers, are involved in setting up and running a marketplace.

In so far as the actual selling of drugs is concerned, the main motives of vendors to sell drugs on darknet markets are the stability of the business channel and the lack of physical contact. The online vendor is less dependent on social network connections than an offline trader, however a good reputation remains important, because the buyer not only functions as a customer, but also provides feedback on the purchases made. This feedback, which often forms part of discussions on forums, is one of the elements that influence the purchase decision of a buyer. Additionally, research stresses the importance of trust between vendors and buyers on darknet drug markets.

In a final step, the drugs need to be shipped. This involves a transition from online to offline activities, as the actual purchased goods need to change hands from vendor to buyer. Before transportation, the suspicious physical appearance of drugs needs to be concealed. To do this, drug traders can rely on several suppliers of legal goods and services, such as a company that supplies envelopes for stealth packaging. Online sales and transportation via postal and parcel services are inseparably linked. Facilitating the illegal trade, public or private postal and parcel services and legal and illegal courier services carry out the actual delivery.

After having described the overall picture and criminal business process of darknet drug markets, the next step is to identify promising possibilities for preventative actions. A barrier model is a method of mapping a complex form of crime in a transparent manner. It identifies the steps criminals have to take to be able to commit a crime, as well as which parties and opportunities are involved. By creating a barrier model, it is possible to determine what barriers can be set up by public and private partners to effectively disrupt the work of the criminals.

**1. SETTING UP MARKETPLACE**

**2. RUNNING MARKETPLACE**

**Facilitators**

Developers  
Administrator  
Internet Service Providers

Administrators  
Moderator  
Web designer

**Opportunities**

TOR encryption software  
Decentralised markets

TOR encryption software  
Virtual offender convergence setting

**Signals**

Lifestyle mismatching income

Lifestyle mismatching income

**Partners**

Internet Service Providers

Internet Service Providers  
White hats

**Barriers**

Scientific research

3. SELLING DRUGS		4. SHIPPING DRUGS	
	<p>Moderator Vendors Buyers Cryptocurrency exchangers</p>		<p>Supplier of stealth packaging (Il)legal courier services Public postal services Private parcel delivery services Food delivery services Encrypted communication services</p>
	<p>TOR encryption software Freely accessible Culture of trust Community Prohibition of drugs</p>		<p>Sophisticated concealment Increase of parcel shipment</p>
	<p>Lifestyle mismatching income</p>		<p>Frequent ordering of consignments Modified delivery vans Increased use of bitcoin ATMs</p>
	<p>(Cryptocurrency exchangers)</p>		<p>Supplier of stealth packaging Legal courier services Public postal services Private parcel delivery services Food delivery services Customs</p>
	<p>Proactive online investigations Continuous observations</p>		<p>Educate law enforcement, customs and postal services Extend competences of postal services Inform and call-to-action of - courier and food delivery companies - social media and encrypted communication companies - stealth packaging companies - internet service providers Implement licensing regulations</p>

After applying this method to darknet drug markets, there are two domains of action and two target groups that appear to be promising in the prevention of and fight against the illegal trade in synthetic drugs through darknet drug markets.

**1. To enhance the capacities of government authorities in order to increase chances of detection**

- Create a legal framework that allows law enforcement to proactively investigate online
- Build an up-to-date body of knowledge based on continuous observations on darknet drug markets
- Educate law enforcement, customs and postal services about the latest developments
- Extend the competences of postal services to intercept and inspect suspicious items
- Encourage further scientific research into drug sources, links to offline markets, illicit money flows and the roles of organised crime in relation to darknet drug markets

**2. To engage suppliers of legal goods and services in setting up barriers that impede the criminal business process**

- Inform and call courier and food delivery companies to action concerning their role in delivering drug packages to their final destination
- Inform and call social media and encrypted communication companies to action concerning their role in facilitating communication and the coordination of the shipment of drug packages to their final destination
- Inform and call stealth packaging companies to action concerning their role in concealing drug packages so they can pass through customs and other checkpoints
- Inform and call internet service providers to action concerning their role in hosting darknet drug markets
- Implement licensing regulations applicable to suppliers of legal goods and services who consciously contribute to the criminal process

# 01

# ILLEGAL DRUG MARKETS

01

## 1.1. Drug market stereotypes revisited

In order to understand drug markets, we need to let go of some of the images depicted by entertainment media and the news. The cliché concerning the demographics of drug offenders and drug users is that these are social outsiders operating in the margins of society.<sup>1</sup> Although some regions in Europe are implicated in Mafia-like drug markets, this is rather rare. A strongly organised and hierarchical drug market with one major drug lord at the top tends only to apply in the case of plant-based drug products in Latin America, for example.<sup>2</sup> Besides, a monopoly position like this, only endures until large cartels are dismantled. Afterwards, the resulting power vacuum is quickly filled by other smaller organisations.<sup>3</sup>

The reality of the drug market should be viewed as a continuum that is more varied than commonly assumed. New empirical research and large crime surveys suggest that drug consumers, sellers, transactions and the drug market itself exist within all strata of society. Self-use surveys reveal drug use across all demographics and friends, family and acquaintances are identified as important drug sellers.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, there is a highly diverse “silent majority” of drug offenders that stay below the law enforcement radar.<sup>5</sup> The reality of drug markets, as has been exposed step by step by scientific empirical research, often does not correspond to its depiction in the media and in law enforcement approaches. One could state that criminal policy and law enforcement agencies focus on a selection of that reality. This selective focus can be legitimate, as choices must be made, for example to focus on phenomena that are causing most harm.<sup>6</sup> Illicit drugs have been known to provide the financial foundation for street gangs and organised

criminals, cause severe public order problems and consume criminal justice resources.<sup>7</sup>

Another aspect of the stereotype concerns the rigidity and hierarchical structure of drug markets. Research suggests that individuals move between different supply chains, distribution levels and drug categories with a high degree of freedom. This does not take away from the fact that dealers tend to specialise in one substance.<sup>8</sup> Criminals involved in synthetic drugs work together in a flexible temporary structure, depending on the needs and opportunities that exist at that moment.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, instead of a strong hierarchy, drug markets take the form of horizontal structures consisting of a wide range of individuals that do not correspond with the drug kingpin profile.<sup>10</sup> The variety among these actors also implies that they do not necessarily share motivations, values or lifestyles.<sup>11</sup> They do not appear to be a “homogeneous evil entity”.<sup>12</sup> Drug offenders are not outsiders to society, but often lead a conventional life and do so not only as a front. They are committed to both their legitimate and criminal function.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, and of importance to this paper, the logistical process, from distribution to retail level sales, proves to be more easily fitted into their daily lives than one would expect. Several authors point out that dealing at retail level, for instance, is rather uneventful and part of everyday life. The tasks that need to be performed are rather simple, so the dealer does not need any particular skills. The transaction itself happens in a calm atmosphere and is accompanied by small talk. Because of the laidback nature of these activities, these easily stay out of sight of law enforcement.<sup>14</sup>

Aside from the fact that illicit drug trafficking in general is an important source of money for criminal groups<sup>15</sup>, there is a discrepancy in the profit margins for whole-sale distributors and especially runners and retail dealers as reflected in stereotypes versus reality. Although the profits are relatively high compared to the effort and working hours put in, the incomes generated from drug running and sales is used mostly for the purpose of holidays, covering fixed costs or starting up a company.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, although drug markets cope in similar ways with the challenges related to the criminal sphere, it is important to remember that the legal context and cultural concepts mean that drug markets vary from country to country.<sup>17</sup>

## 1.2. Illegal drug markets versus conventional markets

In any given market a certain degree of stability is favourable in order to maximise profits. From an economic perspective, illegal drug markets are similar to legal markets because they are likewise susceptible to standard economical concepts such as demand, supply, prices, competition and predictability. However, because of the criminal component, there are several elements of instability that stand in the way of profit maximisation. For example, the constant threat of law enforcement is a challenge that offenders need to cope with. The security of a criminal business process is more important than its efficiency. Whereas a legal market competes by optimising the business process to lower the costs, an illegal market needs to prioritise combating the imminent threat of law enforcement above (cost) efficiency. In other words, in the case of illegal drug markets, reducing the cost of distribution equals avoiding law enforcement intervention.<sup>18</sup> Other examples of elements of uncertainty concern the quality of the drug products or the trustworthiness of the drug trading partners.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the presence of destabilising elements, illegal drug markets do not collapse. Research has identified how illegal drug markets cope with the standard economic concepts and attempts to neutralise destabilizing elements as much as possible.<sup>20</sup> The relatively high price of illegal drugs is a good illustration. The business process is impacted by the criminal nature of the business itself, as a sort of risk premium needs to be calculated during price setting. Drug markets differ from each other, consequently the price of illegal drugs varies in time and place.<sup>21</sup> For example, the street value of an ecstasy tablet is between 2 and 5 euros in the Netherlands, 13 euros in Sweden and 20 euros in Australia.<sup>22</sup> Price variation can be explained first and foremost by the extent of law enforcement activities on the one hand and by the dynamic that exists between buyers and sellers on the other hand. More on the distribution level than on retail level, steady payments, large quantity purchases and repeat business lead to better prices.<sup>23</sup>

In conventional markets, cooperation is of lower importance than price and competition. Nevertheless, it appears that good governance of transactions leads to a win-win situation. Parties find out-of-the box solutions and they share private information that is not available to the other parties. Within illegal drug markets, especially on a distribution level, it pays to invest in a good reputation and goodwill. Even though this demands resources, drug offenders have good reasons to do so. First, in contrast to legal markets, drug offenders cannot rely on contracts, law enforcement or courts to enforce deals made. Second, a good network is crucial

as criminals cannot simply advertise their services or goods. Third, maintaining good relations diminishes the need to spend resources to replace business partners. Finally, a good reputation, large purchases and good creditworthiness lead to better prices. Overall, drug distributors who have a long-term vision and therefore have good social relationships with their partners, experience more security, have lower working costs and can invest their resources in cooperative sales.<sup>24</sup> It appears that within a stable drug market, the use of violence is rather limited because most drug networks know and acknowledge each other, which leads to a relatively peaceful coexistence. The arrival of new players, without such knowledge, may lead to an imbalance and violence.<sup>25</sup>

Surely, alongside a cooperative strategy, drug offenders also have a violent strategy that enables them to cope with the obstacles of an illegal drug market. Criminological research shows that, especially on retail level, a violent reputation is used to prevent conflict. Nevertheless, there are drawbacks to using violence. It creates enemies and it attracts the attention of law enforcement. Social network analysis has shown that interventions by the criminal justice systems lead to imbalances within illegal drug markets, which might lead to a spiral of violent retaliations.<sup>26</sup>

### **1.3. Growth of online drug markets**

EMCDDA warns that drug markets are increasingly digitally enabled. Not only are the surface and darknet markets used for online drug sales, social media and mobile communication apps are employed for this purpose.<sup>27</sup> As long ago as 2006, a concern was expressed that the internet was playing a role in the supply and promotion of drugs in dance music and other recreational settings.<sup>28</sup> While the proportion of online drug market operations remains relatively modest, it is the fast pace at which it is increasing that is worrying. Especially when contrasted to the fact that the traditional drug trade only increased slightly.<sup>29</sup>

One way to explain the attraction of the internet is the lower level of risk compared to traditional drug trading. Anonymity is the common factor that gives rise to that reduction in risk. There is less risk of getting caught by law enforcement. Additionally, the risk of rip-offs decreases because payments via darknet markets are typically happening by means of crypto-currencies.<sup>30</sup>



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Nevertheless, there is a specific downside to darknet markets for buyers, as they have to share a delivery address. This puts the buyer in a situation vulnerable to doxing – the practice of publishing identifying information about an individual, consequently exposing someone to fraud, blackmailing and detection by law enforcement.<sup>31</sup>

Illicit drugs have been sold online since the inception of the internet. The earliest alleged online drug transaction was an exchange of cannabis between university students in the United States. Darknet markets, or cryptomarkets, as we know them today, came into being in 2010.<sup>32</sup> The fact that illicit markets on the deep web differ from conventional web shops on the surface web in terms of working methods, does not mean they are less resilient. Despite the successful takedowns by law enforcement or exit scams leading to a closure, new markets are established quickly. For example, only a short time after Silk Road was taken down in 2013, Silk Road 2.0 was launched. After another successful raid by law enforcement in 2014, Silk Road 3.0 was created.<sup>33</sup>

It is expected that the attractiveness of online drug markets will not waiver and that online drug markets will disrupt traditional drug markets in the same way that online shopping has disrupted retail markets for legitimate commodities. This will especially be the case when the darknet becomes even more accessible to new consumers and not only to the customers that find their way there today.<sup>34</sup>

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## Surface web – deep web – dark net

The content that we visit on the internet on a daily basis is part of the surface web. It is easily accessible through common search engines. This only makes up 4% of the total online content. 96% cannot be accessed that easily and is called the deep web. Web pages that require a username and password are a concrete example of this. Within the deep web there is content that is even less accessible, because it is intentionally hidden. This is called the dark net. One needs browser technology such as TOR (The Onion Router) to surf the darknet. This will ensure users' anonymity.<sup>35</sup>

It is estimated that two thirds of the illicit goods sold on darknet markets are drugs.<sup>36</sup> Of all drug items *offered* on online drug markets, there is predominance of those drugs that are typically associated with recreational or party use such as cannabis, ecstasy and psychedelics.<sup>37</sup> In term of online drug *sales*, it is the category of stimulant drugs such as (meth) amphetamine, MDMA and MDA (excluding cocaine) that represent the majority in terms of volume.<sup>38</sup> Although opioids are not absent from online drug markets, the category represents only a fraction of its offline market share, heroin having the second largest share in the global drug market. A possible explanation might be that buying from online drug markets requires some planning, which is less compatible with consumers who are depending on daily use (e.g. heroin) or have a chaotic lifestyle. Also, buyers from online drug markets confirm the predominance of recreational drugs.<sup>39</sup> Even though they can be categorised under recreational use, there is only a limited availability of NPS on the darknet. A possible explanation is that because of their 'legal' status, they are readily available on the surface web.<sup>40</sup>

The darknet drug market mainly fulfils the role of a retail sales channel, meaning they sell directly to consumers. The opportunities provided by the internet barely influence the process steps of producers, middlemen and large importers.<sup>41</sup> There

is a limited presence of (pre)precursors on this channel. The production process appears to be provided through established links between OCGs.<sup>42</sup> The darknet does appear to play a role in mid-level distribution in connection with MDMA and opioids. Nevertheless, large-volume sales for wholesale purposes are rather uncommon on the darknet.<sup>43</sup>

It is worth mentioning that the overall link between traditional OCGs and the darknet markets remains unclear. What is their role with regard to the production, trafficking or distribution of the illicit drugs sold online?<sup>44</sup> Although further research into this question is needed, it has been stated that there is a dynamic relationship between online and offline organised crime. What is more, the relationship varies from OCG to OCG. Some OCGs embrace the opportunities that the internet offers to lower their risks and to enhance efficiency. Others, especially mafia-types, are rather reluctant to change and limit the use to communication in order to avoid wire-tapping.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, based on case studies, it has been concluded that no distinction can be made between so called traditional OCGs that want to capitalise on ICT opportunities and OCGs that exclusively operate online. In addition, the intertwinement between the online and offline world and activities is pointed out.<sup>46</sup>

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## Impact of COVID-19 on drug markets

Europol reports that darknet drug markets gain relevance as a retail sales channel due to COVID-19. It is deemed likely that newly adapted behaviour such as making use of home deliveries, which is increasing for individual transactions, will carry through on the longer term. Even though the way the trend presents itself varies across countries, buying drugs happens increasingly with the support of internet services. In some cases this is expressed in the use of mobile apps, in other cases the darknet market and even others the use of surface web shops.<sup>47</sup>

# 02 DARKNET DRUG MARKETS

The ways in which party drugs are made available to users highly depends on the psychoactive effects, consumption patterns and the extent to which the drug is embedded in particular subcultures and social contexts.<sup>48</sup> A home delivery service is for instance a popular retail sales method for cocaine, whereas ecstasy is most often sold at the party location. Furthermore, dealers appear to be individuals working in temporary collaborations. In the early days of party drug use, dealers were in most cases idealistically motivated, however nowadays, there is a shift towards dealers driven by profits. On top of that, social contacts are very important within this market, as users often buy from friends and acquaintances. That is the reason why retail dealers and other supply players are often locals and not outsiders, as seen in other drug markets.<sup>49</sup>

The synthetic drug world as a whole has great capacity for innovation. Not only does this become apparent at product level, but also on a logistical level. Whenever trading routes are closed, new international contacts are made and new routes are established. As will be explored here, innovations also manifest themselves in the role played by the internet. Again, this relates not only to production, but also to distribution and retail sales of the end product.<sup>50</sup>

## 2.1. Setting up a marketplace

Just as any conventional website, the website of an online drug marketplace needs to be developed and maintained. The profile of a *developer* is a young male with strong IT-skills who works on a freelance basis.<sup>51</sup> Web design companies might also be called upon to design professional market sites for vendors.<sup>52</sup>

The *administrator* ranks highest and has full access to the infrastructure of the illegal market.<sup>53</sup> He decides what happens on the marketplace. This includes the

authorisation of accounts, the creation of new product categories and permitting or banning of certain products. Most importantly, he ensures effective shielding.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, this person functions as the treasurer of cryptocurrency and is rewarded for this managerial role in the form of a commission for each sale that is finalised.<sup>55</sup>

Not only do *internet service providers* offer internet access to their customers, but also host domain names. Online marketplaces take advantage of being hosted through a server located in a country where different, less stringent drug laws are in force. This is highly relevant especially in the case of NPS.<sup>56</sup>

How do administrators, developers and moderators establish collaboration? Felson introduced the term 'offender convergence settings', referring to the physical location in which criminals meet. This can be extended to a digital environment. Forums and websites with encrypted access provide opportunities for establishing new criminal contacts. These virtual places are used to meet, recruit and trade criminal services. Nevertheless, research shows that physical convergence settings also continue to play a role because existing social ties remain relevant.<sup>57</sup>

## 2.2. Running a marketplace

One step below on the administrator in the hierarchy, is the *moderator*. Assisting with low-level website maintenance and customer support is part of the moderator's tasks, therefore some technical skills might be required. Unlike the administrator, a moderator does not have full access to the website infrastructure. As compensation for his/her efforts, a moderator might receive a salary from the administrator.<sup>58</sup>

## 2.3. Selling drugs

The *vendor* sells illegal goods to customers through their own seller page and the *buyer* or customer purchases these goods or services, but also provides feedback on the purchases made and may discuss this on forums.<sup>59</sup> The profile of vendors on online drug markets is one of a relatively young, intelligent and IT-savvy man who, in most cases, is employed or receiving an education. Most vendors originate

from the Anglo-Saxon or Western European regions.<sup>60</sup> The vendor is in most cases a lone wolf. Only when the operation becomes very successful and the number of transactions require the help of others is a small team formed.<sup>61</sup> The vendor's motives for selling drugs online are the stability of the business channel, an opportunity to circumvent legislative controls on substances, a lack of physical interaction and the freedom to arrange his/her 'working hours' without the risk of users contacting them at inappropriate moments. Although a general libertarian philosophy among vendors is reported, there is a shift towards a more profit-oriented trend.<sup>62</sup>

Even though the profile and motives run parallel, their operations behind the scenes are very diverse. Some are established middlemen with an offline drug selling experiences and good relationships with importers, while others are completely new to the drug trade, e.g. someone who sells home-grown cannabis or a pharmacist who illegally sells prescription drugs from his pharmacy. Because of the ease with which some can enter the online drug markets, if they are sufficiently IT-savvy, the online vendor is less dependent on the social network connections that are crucial for someone in the offline drug trade.<sup>63</sup>

Similar to the variation in the background and demographic of drug users, there is no typical profile of *buyers*. Once someone is technologically literate, and therefore able to use a computer without effort, it is not hard to access the darknet as the information needed is freely accessible.<sup>64</sup> As far as the profile of users is concerned, evidence shows that these mostly are recreational users with the resources and the time to purchase online and wait for the delivery. They tend to use on weekends or in recreational settings and see themselves as part of a 'party culture'. This sales channel is less suited to those with a more impulsive user-profile and would prefer to buy straight from a dealer, having more control over timing.<sup>65</sup> The main motives for buying via darknet markets are personal safety and the perceived smaller risk of being detected by the law enforcement agencies, the anonymity, which allows them to minimise the impact on their professional life, better-quality drugs, a wider variety of products and the opportunity to buy from highly rated vendors.<sup>66</sup>

## **A. Access**

The very first step to an online drug transaction is access to the darknet. Darknet markets make use of anonymisation software such as 'Tor'. Consequently, thanks to this software, darknet markets offer a global customer base to vendors and a global supply of drugs to buyers under the comfortable cloak of anonymity. Once having

downloaded the software, users can surf to vendor pages. These can be found through the use of a built-in search engine such as ‘Grams’, or lists of Tor addresses on surface web pages. Before accessing and browsing a vendor page, the user needs to create a free account or get access through an invitation, as some markets are invitation-only.<sup>67</sup>

## B. Purchase decision

The next step towards a concrete drug sale is the purchase decision by the buyers. In general, buyers base this decision on several sources such as feedback from other users, account pricing, ‘trip reports’, vendor reputation, whether the stealth method for shipping was satisfactory and product details found on Wikipedia, PubMed or Google Scholar.<sup>68</sup> Research stresses the **importance of trust** in these transactions. Users of darknet markets are expected to leave feedback regarding the quality of the product, service, delivery and so on. On the darknet, and on the surface web, there are several chatrooms and forums where users discuss with each other and ask questions. This is where the reputation of vendors is built. It takes a vendor with a trustworthy reputation less effort to attract new customers and buying customers are willing to accept early finalisation (see further). Buyers and vendors tend to build strong relationships with one another. Once the trust is established, they scale up the number of transactions and, sometimes, the volumes.<sup>69</sup>

*“The levels of protection and the quality of what’s on there, the quality of the service, the negotiations if something goes wrong, you can go into resolution mode, if something doesn’t turn up or if you don’t get exactly what you ordered as described in the article. On the whole because there is a level of accountability. . .there is a greater safety purchasing from ‘Silk Road’ because the level of self-reporting. If people get something they don’t like, they will kick up a fuss. The vendors, if they are reputable vendors, they will give the person a refund and say ‘I am very sorry don’t let this mar our relationship’.”*

Quote from interview with Silk Road user by Hout, M. C. V., & Bingham, T. ‘Silk Road’, the virtual drug marketplace: A single case study of user experiences. *International Journal of Drug Policy* (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2013.01.005>

Nevertheless, there are trust issues. Observers have identified a trend towards increasing distrust as a consequence of security failures and scams. Even though only a minority of vendors scam, the feedback system can be manipulated. A vendor can make himself appear to have served other buyers and to be trustworthy by creating a series of accounts that give a positive rating. This is called 'padding feedback'. In other cases vendors might actually sell and ship good quality drugs and drive up their rating. Once their reputation is very good, they scam users for their bitcoins when they have finalised early.<sup>70</sup> Apart from individual vendors, entire darknet drug markets might also scam their customers through 'exit scams'. Additionally, this trend of increasing distrust must be viewed in the context of an ideological shift away from libertarian beliefs towards a more commercial mind-set.<sup>71</sup>

### **C. Agreement**

Having decided what to buy and from whom, an agreement has to be made between the vendor and the buyer. Communication regarding the specific transaction takes place via the direct messaging system of the given darknet drug market. Whenever issues need to be discussed that are relevant to the entire market community, the available fora are the most suitable places.<sup>72</sup>

### **D. Payment**

Once an agreement has been struck, the next step is payment. Darknet drug market users tend to pay using cryptocurrencies, such as Bitcoin. Security, anonymity for all parties and the use of a decentralised architecture are the reasons for its popularity. The payment is not a simple one-way transaction from buyer to vendor. The buyer is required to pay upfront. The money is then held in deposit, also called 'in escrow', by the market administrator. This system allows for two things to happen. First, the administrator can calculate the commission fees he will take and secondly, any possible dispute can be resolved before money is handed over. Indeed, payment is only released to the vendor once the buyer is satisfied with the product received and has finalised the sale.<sup>73</sup> In cases in which there is a good relationship between buyers and vendors or vendors who have a good reputation, they can request early finalisation.<sup>74</sup>

*Bitcoin exchangers* facilitate this step in the process as they convert fiat currencies to virtual currencies and convert between two different virtual currencies. This service is



legitimate on its own, however it also exists within the illegal economy and is taken advantage of by cybercriminals.<sup>75</sup> Not only does it allow them to complete illegal transactions, but it additionally allows them to launder cryptocurrencies through exchangers, as a result of which becomes very challenging for law enforcement to trace the initial illegal transactions.<sup>76</sup>

*"Similar to the offline world, there are potential risks of third parties stealing the crypto currency held in escrow. This has happened in the case of the so-called 'Evolution exit scam', in which the site's administrators suddenly took their market offline and stole users' currency kept in their escrow accounts. Multi-signature escrow, a cryptographic tool that is now offered on some cryptomarkets, avoids some of the scam risks for both vendor and buyer associated with centralised escrow."<sup>77</sup>*

## 2.4. Shipping drugs

Once an online transaction is successfully finalised thanks to software, which provides anonymity and a certain extent of safety, the actual purchased goods need to change hands from vendor to buyer. In this step, there is a transition from online to offline activities. A shipment of drugs can be successful if the true content of the package is concealed and if the package is correctly transported and delivered to the buyer. Some suppliers of legal goods and services are important facilitators in this step.

### A. Concealment

Aside from the fact that drugs are illegal, the content of the package needs to be concealed because the physical appearance of drugs, such as tablets, powder, or

herbs arouse suspicion. A specific example of a supplier of legal goods and services that facilitates the illegal trade in this regard is a company that supplies envelopes used for stealth packaging, which are crucial to hide shapes that might arouse the suspicion of customs and postal services.<sup>78</sup> Some methods of concealment are vacuum sealing, using professional looking envelopes, inserting DVD cases, sending small quantities at a time or using a fictitious or real logo of third parties on the envelop such as UNICEF, which inspires trust, or an online retailer for example.<sup>79</sup>

*“I sit at home and wait for the postman to turn up and say good morning to him and shake his hand and thank him for bringing the post to me. I had a lovely experience when I purchased some LSD off a German chap, he actually sent me a Christmas card with a message in there, the LSD was hidden behind one of the glued pieces on the card, I actually had to contact him to thank him for the Christmas card, and ask where is the LSD, he told me to look harder in the card, then I found what I was looking for. . . Some of the packaging is incredible so not to draw the attention of the postal service or customs.”*

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Quote from interview with Silk Road user by Hout, M. C. V., & Bingham, T. ‘Silk Road’, the virtual drug marketplace: A single case study of user experiences. *International Journal of Drug Policy* (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2013.01.005>

## **B. Transport**

Online sales and distribution via postal and parcel services are inseparably linked. Facilitating the illegal trade, public or private postal and parcel services and legal and illegal courier services carry out the actual delivery.<sup>80</sup> The conventional services are not aware of the content of the packages they are delivering.<sup>81</sup> Vendors like to further enjoy their anonymity and avoid going to the post office in person to hand over the package. Instead, they might use couriers.<sup>82</sup> In one case, Dutch vendors would lower the risk of detection by crossing the border to Germany in order to ship from there because Germany arouses less suspicion as a country of origin than the Netherlands.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, buyers are encouraged to order from countries with a reputation of attracting domestic private and commercial traffic such as the USA and Canada, to the detriment of countries with a bad reputation of exporting drugs. All

of these steps are taken in order to mislead the authorities that inspect packages.<sup>84</sup> Additionally, vendors take into account the perceived efficiency and intensity of law enforcement action in a given country.<sup>85</sup>

Further, in order to protect the identity of the buyers, in some cases the parcels are sent to anonymous post office boxes or automated booths designed for self-service parcel collection.<sup>86</sup>

COVID-19 is having an impact on the transport of drugs. An Interpol alerts shows the innovative tendency of drug markets. Police in Ireland, Malaysia, Spain and the UK reported the use of food delivery services to transport drugs during COVID19-lockdowns. In some cases, dealers would falsely disguise themselves as food delivery drivers, in other cases legitimate food delivery drivers would deliver the drugs for financial gains.<sup>87</sup>

Another upcoming method is dead drops. Although dead drops are not a new method of distributing drugs, it has been increasingly implemented recently in a wider range of countries. After the buyer has transferred the funds to the seller, the seller goes and hides the drugs at a secret hiding place. Then, via encrypted communication channels such as Telegram, Wickr or Signal, the coordinates and description of the exact location are shared. The buyer and seller must reside relatively close to each other as they have to travel to the same place.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, there are legitimate companies that offer ICT that specifically shields communication from the authorities. Such a company is trusted and well-known amongst criminals.<sup>89</sup>

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Even though one of the advantages of an online market is that one can sell and buy worldwide, domestic sales (within the continent) play an important role in darknet drug markets. An explanation for this can be found in the aforementioned importance of vendor reputation in the darknet eco-system. Wanting to maintain good reviews, vendors are reluctant to sell and ship drugs to certain destinations which are perceived to have a higher risk of detection. The United States, Canada, Finland and Australia (in the case of packages originating from the Netherlands) are the countries towards which vendors have a reluctant attitude.<sup>90</sup>

# CONCLUSIONS

This paper aimed to clarify the topic of (darknet) drug markets and the criminal business process behind them. The reality of drug markets can be viewed as a continuum that is more varied than is commonly assumed. Some drug market stereotypes were therefore revisited and we learned that strongly hierarchical drug markets are rather atypical for drug markets. They are rather horizontal structures that consist of a wide range of individuals who move freely across the supply chain. Additionally, with regard to the persons involved, it is important to remember that offenders are not outsiders. They are part of society, transcend all demographics and their role in the drug trade is often easily fitted in with their daily (conventional) lives.

The criminal business process behind darknet drug markets roughly consists of the four consecutive steps of (1) setting up a marketplace, (2) running a marketplace, (3) selling drugs and (4) shipping drugs. Several players are involved in setting up and running a marketplace from a developer and a managing administrator to a moderator who helps with maintenance and supporting customers.

As far as the actual sale of drugs is concerned, the main motives for vendors to sell drugs on darknet markets are the stability of the business channel and the lack of physical contact. An online vendor is less dependent on social network connections than an offline trader, however a good reputation remains important. Because the buyer does not only function as a customer, he/she also provides feedback on the purchases made. This feedback, which often forms part of discussions on forums, are one of the elements influencing the purchase decision of a buyer. In addition, research has underlined the importance of trust between vendors and buyers on darknet drug markets.

In a final step, the drugs need to be shipped. This involves a transition from online to offline activities, as the actual purchased goods need to change hands from vendor to buyer. Before transport, the suspicious physical appearance of drugs needs to be concealed. In order to achieve this, drug traders can rely on several suppliers of legal goods and services, such as a company that supplies envelopes for stealth packaging. Online sales and transport via postal and parcel services are inseparably linked. Facilitating the illegal trade, public or private postal and parcel and legal and illegal courier services carry out the actual delivery.

After describing the overall picture and criminal business process of darknet drug markets, the next step is to identify promising possibilities for preventive actions. This topic forms the focus of *'Darknet drug markets: recommendations drawn from a barrier model.'*

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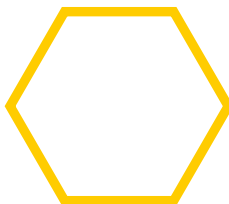


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