

Sharing Identity Information on Dark Web Drug Boards



Maria Hakalahti and J. Tuomas Harviainen

Abstract This chapter uses Elfreda Chatman’s concept of small worlds and Reijo Savolainen’s concept of Way of Life to examine identity information sharing on a Finnish Dark Web drug trading image board. Based on a curated set of posts, it shows how people’s identity information sharing on such anonymous fora often centres around issues of trust and safety. The chapter discovers that like other small world virtual communities, these too are of information poor environments, where some participants are seen as outsiders and some as insiders, based on factors such as age, ethnicity, and information sharing.

Keywords Information practices · Information sharing · Dark Web · Drug trading · Image board

1 Introduction

This chapter examines the ways in which information practices take place on Dark Web image boards related to drug trading. The Dark Web is the visual part of the larger ‘darknet’ or ‘dark net’, a mostly non-indexed section of the World Wide Web, which requires specially configured browser software, such as the Tor browser, in order to be used [1]. Within the Dark Web, people can access spaces intended for e.g., whistleblower data dumps, support groups, hidden democracy movement discussions, the sharing of child exploitation images, and so forth [2]. Yet their most commonly known use is online drug trading. The most famous of these sites was the original Silk Road (2011–2013; see e.g., [3]), but many others have existed since. The Internet, particularly its Dark Web sections, has become an increasingly important channel for drug trading [4]. This is not, however, the whole picture, as for example social media

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O. L. Madge (ed.), *New Trends and Challenges in Information Science and Information Seeking Behaviour*, Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems 193,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-68466-2_5

platforms on the indexed Clear Web, and various instant messaging systems, are also utilised by some user segments for both drug trading and drug-related information sharing [5–7].

Drug trading sites on the Dark Web can be roughly divided into two types: cryptomarkets and image boards, which may in some cases overlap. On the former, people make mail-order purchases by using cryptocurrencies, while using usernames to hide their actual identities, and can leave seller and/or buyer ratings [8; see also 9]. On the latter, they either state their purchasing needs, or what drugs they have available, and then set up face to face (f2f) sales via an instant messaging software such as Wickr or Telegram [10–12]. Image boards may sometimes also contain mail order sections, but that is not their primary function, and they may include discussion threads related to other crimes or the drug-using lifestyle (see [13] for examples). Likewise, some cryptomarkets have featured discussion forum like sections.

Traffic on both types of drug trading sites is pseudo-anonymous, due to the Tor (The Onion Router) technology. Originally developed for secure military communication, Onion Routing has expanded to various areas of clandestine interaction. Very roughly put, the core idea is that Tor traffic takes place in a manner in which layers of information are ‘peeled’ at each step of the way, so that at most points only the preceding and the next router are known and can be traced (for technological details, see e.g., [14]). However, this does not, guarantee complete anonymity. If, for example, the police seize a drug trading site’s main server, or if someone owns enough computers in the volunteer network supporting Onion Routing, it is possible to track down individual users. People nevertheless use these sites, particularly cryptomarkets, because they think that making purchases on them is safer than f2f dealing, due to the possibility of supposed anonymity and the possibility to pay with e.g., Bitcoin [15, 16].

Because of the expected anonymity issues, our focus here, in this chapter, is especially on the sharing of personal information on drug-related Dark Web image boards (Internet forums that are based on initial image postings, but which also contain discussions; for example, *4Chan*). On cryptomarkets, people may deal with physical mailing addresses, while trying to minimise the risk of detection [17]. On image boards, they can remain slightly more anonymous, but need to risk meeting a dealer or client (or a robber) face to face. They, therefore, prefer local trades by local partners, and can set several criteria (e.g., age, ethnicity) as pre-requisites for the meeting [12]. There is also the difference in that whereas cryptomarkets are typically business-to-business, i.e., sales for further distribution [18], image boards can include very minor sales [13]. On image boards, the traders post instant messaging service (in Finland, typically Wickr) usernames, either in the seller’s advertisement, or as buyers under an advertisement, and then move their further discussion to that more secure platform. Wickr names, for instance, are unique and cannot be re-registered, but a user may have more than one such username [12]. A seller’s reputation [19], community recommendations [20] and risk perceptions by all parties [21] therefore become the central elements for determining information sharing’s source reliability. Here, we examine identity information issues (including doxing, the revelation of

personal identity information without consent), as examples of information sharing on a local image board.

2 Methodology

Earlier research on Dark Web drug trading focused on topics such as market availability [22], the technologies involved (e.g., [14]), or criminology [23]. For an information studies contribution, many of those discussions are relevant, but would be unnecessary forays in a book chapter like this. Some earlier points, despite coming from very different disciplinary backgrounds, are however highly relevant here. For example, Nurmi et al. [19] and Bakken and Demant's [21] work on seller reputations, Gehl's [1] book on Dark Web fora, and Childs et al.'s [24] research on 'direct dealing', are all of interest to information scholars.

This area of information practices has so far been addressed mainly with three concepts: *disnormative information* [25], *Dark Knowledge* [26], and *Dark Web authenticity* [1]. Here, we argue that these three concepts are interconnected. Access to disnormative information (information that may not be illegal, but goes against social norms or values) becomes a user's Dark Knowledge ('an epistemology that acknowledges both alternative knowledge and ways of knowing which are cognizant of the moral and ethical positioning of each' [26]). Having Dark Knowledge, in turn, makes users seem credible, reliable and in-the-know on drug-related discussion fora [5], and makes them authentic members of the community (as per [1]). Similar findings have already been made decades ago, in offline contexts (see e.g., [27]).

We approach this topic as a combination of the *everyday-life information seeking model* (ELIS) of Reijo Savolainen [28, 29], particularly the idea of a *Way of Life*, and the *small worlds* framework of Elfreda Chatman's [30, 31]. As with Chatman's observed communities of community outsiders and female prisoners, here, too, people have a situation which sets them apart from the conventions and practices of the surrounding world, and as with Savolainen's *Way of Life*, building upon Bourdieu's [32, 33] concept of *habitus*, drug use may become a defining, internalised set of practices which affects everyday life, including the involved information practices (see [13]). Furthermore, people act as a type of efficiency community, when possible, by sharing useful information (as per [34]).

The data was gathered by using web scraping software. This is a contested approach, but also one considered amongst the most non-intrusive, alongside just lurking and observing, as far as Dark Web fora are concerned (e.g., [35, 36; see also 37, 38] for especially important counterpoints). This aspect is very important when studying disnormative information, as the anonymous or pseudo-anonymous participants on these fora are often members of vulnerable populations. At the same time, the approach contains several potential problems, especially regarding software configuration and optimal query formation. For example, Dolliver [39] gathered data

on the drug trading site *Silk Road 2*, but faced severe critique on the accuracy of the material [40–42; see also [43]].

For ethical reasons, this chapter uses a curated sample of 175 forum posts out of a total data set of roughly 9,300 on a Finnish drug trading image board. The reason for this selection was that of getting a randomised time period for data collection, and opting for a slice of what could be considered a ‘typical’ amount of data on the site at a given time. As the site destroys all but the last 150 posts on each of its areas, this can be considered representative (see [13]).

Despite the board being image-based, only text was used, so as not to harm the subjects of the investigation. The posts were then screened from a set of threads and manually coded separately by both authors. Identity-related information was counted in direct, strong indirect, and indirect forms. For security reasons and GDPR compliance, all real names were removed from the data set before the analysis. Some indirect types of data were also excluded, as for example owning a driver’s license, or having a credit rating, being alone insufficient as potential identifiers. Eventually, 25 accepted categories were identified, based on a second coding done by Hakalahti [44] (Table 1).

The ‘identity’ category contained, for example, the revelation of unreliable identifying marks of the seller (but not a name), as well as posts stating that someone else was a troll. And since the image board in question contained both location-based (e.g., ‘Helsinki’) and content-based (e.g., ‘hormones’) areas, only posts which clearly stated that a person lived in an area were counted. Therefore, many posts of the type ‘good speed available in Kallio. W: [Wickr username]’ went into the discarded category. (All quotes and categories here were translated from Finnish by Harviainen.)

Table 1 Data categorisation

Accepted categories	Discarded categories
Name	Wealth and clean credit rating
Gender	Driver’s license or driving skill
Age	Status on the job market
Ethnicity	Clean criminal records
Identity	Experience in growing or selling drugs
Address-related information	Experiences of using drugs
Shared Wickr usernames	Other life experiences
Appearance and physical characteristics	Non-close relationships
Sexual orientation	Values, attitudes and opinions
Personal relationships and family	Ideologies
Profession and field of business	
Car license plate numbers	
Health and control over life	
A crime or the sentence of a crime	
Other personal records	

3 Findings

Of the eventually curated 175 examined posts, taken from location-based areas and ‘work’, 136 contained identity information sharing, 48 contained information needs relating to identity, and six contained information needs relating to the selling of identity information. Some of these existed in the same overlapping posts and topics. The most commonly shared identifiers were gender (27.9%), age (21.3%) and ethnicity (19.1%). These too, at times, overlapped and, therefore, the total percentages exceeded 100% (see Table 2). Seven categories of sharing motives were identified: (1) Demonstrating trust or distrust, (2) employment and earning money, (3) trolling and provocation, (4) warning others about a person, (5) reaching a person, (6) selling and buying narcotics, and (7) other motives.

The ‘work’ thread proved an exception to the common sharing patterns, as people there advertised their skills, or sought employment. This is to be taken in the context that this was nevertheless a drug forum and therefore the work being sought or offered was mostly of the illegal kind, such as fraud, drug sales, or prostitution (which is legal in Finland, but profiting from someone else’s prostitution is not). Mentions of age and gender were usually in a typical format, regardless of the job type. For example, *‘a twentysomething dude with credit rating still intact’*.

As noted in the earlier research (e.g., [12], these forums are also actively racist. A statement of being a native Finn, and only dealing with other native Finns, was quite common. This, combined with ethnic stereotyping and vulgar racial slurs, indicates

Table 2 Shared information types

Type of information shared	n	%
Gender	38	27.9
Age	29	21.3
Ethnicity	26	19.1
Wickr-username (for identifying someone or establishing trust)	21	15.4
Area or address	19	14.0
Other topics	14	10.3
Appearance and physical characteristics	10	7.4
Identity	9	6.6
Health and control over life	8	5.9
Name	6	4.4
Profession and field of business	5	3.7
Relationship and family	5	3.7
A crime or the sentence of a crime	4	2.9
Car license plate	4	2.9
Sexual orientation	3	2.2
Total	136	149.1

that some members of the community see ethnicity as a reliability factor usable for establishing trust. Certain ethnicities were considered as especially unreliable, while others, such as Swedes or Estonians got no mentions in warnings.

All this emphasizes the ways in which people on this anonymous site appeared to share information first and foremost for the purpose of establishing trust, or warning about those who, in their opinion, were not worthy of it. Nevertheless, in this sample, this directly appeared in just 36% of the 136 sharing posts. For example, Wickr usernames of others were mostly disclosed for the sake of identifying treacherous individuals, for example: *'wickr username [Wickr username]—clearly a Rat'*. Likewise, address-related sharing followed the same principle: *'I've only lived in Turku for a short while, so I'm not known'* or *'Lives in Pähkinärinne, a total rat'*. Some of the posts implied knowledge of exact addresses of others, such as *'Cheater I luckily know where you live hahahaha ive followed you to your building door'*. An example of a complex message could be found here, containing both a work offer and the naming of an individual, plus the personal information of having a restraining order regarding the named individual:

easy job, good pay!

Get from apartment X from person Y my laptop and phone. You will get paid at the same place, as also my stash is there! I'd gladly pay the slut a visit, but due to a R.order the end result is not nice.

An interesting case from the 'Other' category included something very rare on the site: an email address. Given how this was in a post by two gym-going 16-year-olds offering debt collection services, this can be suspected as being a lack of experience. Since the post likewise could be trolling (14% of sharing posts were clearly identifiable as such), the motives are left unknown. Other identity details in the same category were a rare hobby, and a religious conviction. Real names were rare, but doxing at times took place, as did threats of knowing some username's real identity.

Family situation sharing typically included a mention of one's spouse, and thus like some work applications formed somewhat of an exception to the idea of sharing for trust, but the category also contained some cases where for example a 'known rat's' wife was named. Sexual orientation was mentioned both by people looking for company or customers, and as a slur on members of minorities.

Marketing identity information for money was rare, but took place, for example:

For sale two [ethnic slur] rats. One is about 185 cm really thin and the other 170 cm maybe 16 years and 20 years. These [ethnic slur] have been ratting on the board already for a long time. I will sell this both 200e.

This type of sharing serves both the financial interests of the sharer, but also functions as community policing within a disnormative small world. People who had been, in turn, cheated in deals sometimes posted their information needs, promising payment in return for finding the offending party. In those cases, they too would often share the Wickr names, as a form of warning.

Users shared much more information about others (61% of posts, than of themselves (41.2%). This is understandable, given the way people on the site want to protect their own identities.

4 Discussion

The data shows clear signs of information poverty (as per [30]), but not a completely small world situation, in which people involved in the drug subculture would reject certain information sources (as per [45, p. 31]. On the contrary, participants on image boards like this appear to take pride in their ‘outlaw’ status, same as some of Becker’s [27] informants did. This reflects the ways in which drug use has become a Way of Life for many (as per [28; see also [13]). Nevertheless, the social norms of the community (as per [45; see also [46]) define many of the information practices on the forum. This is particularly interesting since in many ways, disnormative information effectively becomes the community’s normative information, reflecting several points from Haasio [25], Burnett and Lloyd [26] and Gehl [1].

As Chatman [45] pointed out, a small world is not only a limitation on what kind of information is welcome, but also, it favours of certain familiar (‘insider’) sources over others. It would be easy to claim that this is the avoidance of cognitive dissonance (as per [47]) by avoiding conflicting information, but we believe that this explanation is insufficient. The Way of Life of these drug users makes them, as Chatman [45] noted, use their everyday experiences and common wisdom as the baseline for evaluating what information is accepted and what is possibly appended to existing knowledge structures. On this particular board, ethnicity, age and showing expertise in how one trades and for how often one uses drugs (see [12]) determines who gets to be one of the respected insiders.

5 Conclusions

Members of this community both help and protect one another, but also fear and distrust each other at the same time. The analysed posts implied this tension, and earlier research suggests that they navigate this borderline constantly, especially if they are daily users of drugs. The site’s anonymity makes identity information sharing a powerful tool in many cases, but it may, for example in the case of minors, lead to their ostracism from the rest of the community. The way in which the practices on the site reflect a small world points towards a shared core understanding of the common Way of Life, yet also towards people recognising individual-level differences in habitus, and trustworthiness of that habitus.

In sharing information, the users of the image board are also showing a sense of a disnormative community, where Dark Knowledge, especially on who can be trusted and who cannot, grants status and may also lead to better deals for the individual

in-the-know. Many of the users will, despite setting up face to face deals via Wickr, never know most of the other community members behind the numerous Wickr usernames. This is, as Gehl [1] points out, a core part of the ideology of the Dark Web. The identity information sharing, while seemingly altruistic, in fact protects also the sharer in the long run, as long as it is not too common.

Acknowledgements This research was partially supported by Academy of Finland grant 329342-5, Extremist Networks, Narcotics and Criminality in Online Darknet Environments.

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