Capstone Project

The Glorification, Normalization and Accessibility of Drugs through Social Media

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Abstract

The present study aims to identify if, and what effect social media has on the glorification, normalization, and accessibility of drugs. This possible effect is researched through a literature review in combination with the collection of data through six semi-structured interviews. Firstly, a framework for accessing the influence of social media on behavior is established. Next, the glorification of drugs on social media is researched within the literature, along with the accessibility of drugs through social media, to create a solid foundation for the research. Whereafter, the collected data is analyzed and discussed in combination with the established framework and literature. To create a comprehensive overview of the effect of social media on the glorification, normalization, and accessibility of drugs. The findings of this research suggest that there is a direct link and effect between social media and the glorification, normalization, and accessibility of drugs. Therefore, the results of this research could possibly be used by policymakers to tackle the problems addressed in the research and present in our current society.

Clarifactory Note

This research is mainly focused on hard drugs, even though alcohol and soft drugs will be mentioned in this research, the focus lies on hard drugs. The term "Drugs" in this research refers to hard drugs. And if soft drugs or alcohol are mentioned, those will be stated by their classification as such.

In this research, the terms "young people" and "adolescents" specifically refer to individuals aged 13-20. This age group is most significantly impacted by social media, which plays a major role in their daily lives and continues to heavily influence them. (Orben et al., 2022)

Research Motivation and Connection to the Sustainable Development Goals

Research motivation

This research was created by the researcher due to his personal experience and interest in the subjects. The researcher is twenty-one years old and sees an increase in drug use and the normalization of it all around him. With of the increasing usage and normalization of drug usage in social circles and nightlife, he noticed the dialogue surrounding the topic was changing as well. He noticed the normalization and glorification of illegal substances online, along with an increase in accessibility. This research stems from the curiosity of the researcher as to how these two are intertwined and connected.

Connection to the Sustainable Development Goals

Since the researchers' program for the bachelor's degree: Global Responsibility and Leadership (GRL) at the University of Groningen is linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations, a connection between both the SDGs and the research will firstly be established to provide additional motivation and justification for the research.

The problem presented in the research: "the effect of social media on the glorification, normalization, and accessibility of drugs" is linked to multiple SDGs. SDG 3, SDG 16, and SDG 17. The link between the topic and the SDGs will be explained in the following section.

SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being

The connection between SDG 3 - "Good Health and Well-being" and the effect of social media on the normalization, glorification, and accessibility of drugs is multifaceted and profound. The promotion and normalization of drug use and abuse on social media can cause people to experiment with or use illegal substances (Sznitman & Taubman, 2016). This directly impacts both the mental and physical health and well-being of a person. It also undermines efforts to promote a healthier life.

Social media often romanticizes drug use, leading to increased substance abuse, particularly among youth, which contradicts SDG 3.5's target to prevent and treat substance abuse (United Nations, 2015). This exposure also contributes to mental health issues and misinforms public health perspectives (Murray et al., 2020). To uphold the goals of SDG 3, these problems must be addressed by policies, regulations, and public health campaigns.

SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

Sustainable Development Goal 16 stands for the provision of justice for all, inclusive societies, and the creation of accountable and effective institutions. This is undermined by the glorification, normalization, and accessibility of drugs through social media by fostering environments of crime, violence, and illegality.(UNODC, 2020) Drugs are illegal, the promotion and usage of such substances can normalize it. Resulting in the normalization of illegal activities, and promoting the drug trade. Destabilizing communities and fueling organized crime (UNODC, 2020). The usage of drugs also directly

goes against the current international laws, regulations, and institutions combatting these issues. As previously stated in SDG 3, these issues must be addressed by policies and regulations in order to solve them in a successful manner.

Introduction

New challenges and implications for public health have been presented by the intersection of social media and drug markets (Kerr et al.,2005). This consequently results in a transformation of the landscape of substance abuse and its societal perception. The dissemination and acquisition of drugs used to be relatively contained and monitored historically, due to their foundation of operation in physical spaces and through discrete networks of communication (Johnston et al.,2001). However, social media platforms and the internet have revolutionized these dynamics. Resulting in communication, influence, and an increased level of access to illegal substances and drug trade (Lavorgna, 2016).

By focusing on interdiction and punitive measures, the war on drugs in the late 20th century focused its efforts on disrupting the distribution and consumption of illegal substances (Gray, 2010). Due to innovation and adaptation of new ways to communicate, the drug trade and use persisted, despite these efforts. Online forums and marketplaces emerged and provided novel avenues for drug distribution in the early 2000s (Hall & Antonopoulos, 2016). These platforms allowed for a degree of anonymity and reach for users while buying and selling substances that were previously unattainable (Aldridge & Décary-Hétu, 2014).

Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram began to gain traction, eventually becoming indispensable in people's daily lives, at the same time as these dark web marketplaces. These platforms are characterized by their openness and widespread accessibility, unlike previous secretive internet marketplaces for drugs, and offer a fertile ground for the spreading of trends and cultural norms, including those related to drug use (UNODC, 2023). In the early 2010s, social media began playing a pivotal role in shaping public attitudes and behaviors towards substance abuse. The potential for social media to further impact drug-related behavior was amplified by the rise of the influencer culture (Oksanen et al., 2021). The content on their lifestyle choices, including drug use, shared by these influencers, often glamorized, is shared with their followers (UNODC, 2023). The attitudes and behaviors of their audience, particularly younger users, are often influenced by this portrayal, whether accidental or intentional (De Jans, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2019). The promotion of content that gets significant attention is often promoted by the algorithm-driven nature of social media, designed to maximize user engagement. This can contribute to a cycle of normalization and glorification by showing drug-related content, such as the consumption of drugs at parties, to larger audiences. Desensitization and

altered perceptions of risks associated with drug use can be created by the pervasive presence of such content (Sunstein, 2018). Among adolescents and young adults, the normalization of drug use on social media is particularly concerning. Drugs can be made to appear more socially acceptable and less risky online by the exposure to substance use imagery and discussions which can shape the perception of the user (Parker, Aldridge, & Measham, 1998). The interactive and participatory nature of these social media platforms facilitates a further embedding of these behaviors in social networks by giving validation to drug-related content such as likes, shares, and comments (Cavazos et al., 2015).

The prevalence and impact of drug-related content on social media has been highlighted by several empirical studies. As researched by Cavazos et al., (2015) posts on social media platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram, often portray drug use in a neutral or even positive context. Content on social media that depicted alcohol use was directly associated with an increased likelihood of the consumption of alcohol among adolescents, as researched by Primack et al., (2018). Drug use, and alcohol abuse, behaviors can also be indirectly influenced through the shaping of cultural and societal norms by social media.(Sudhinaraset et al., 2016) An environment where illegal substance abuse is increasingly seen as normative behavior is created through the portrayal of drug use by influencers and celebrities, coupled with the engagement-driven algorithms of social media (UNODC, 2023). The stigmas associated with drug use can be reduced by this shift in perception which makes individuals more likely to regularly use and experiment with drugs (Room, 2005). A comprehensive understanding of how social media influences drug-related behaviors and attitudes is necessary when understanding the implications of this shift (Fuller et al., 2024).

This research will explore the complex dynamics at play, examining not only the content and platforms but also the psychological mechanisms through which social media impacts users. This basic understanding is crucial for later research which can focus on developing effective interventions and policies to mitigate the adverse effects of drug glorification and normalization in the digital age.

Literature Review

Establishment of a Theoretical Framework

In order to create a comprehensive understanding of the influence of social media on the glorification, normalization, and accessibility of drugs, a framework of social science theories is created. The framework will be based on the social learning theory, the normalization theory, and the communication theory.

Social Learning Theory

When researching the effect of social media on the glorification, normalization, and accessibility of drugs, Albert Bundura's social learning theory (1986) provides us with a theoretical lens that is

particularly useful. According to this theory, people learn from other individuals by observing them. Especially, those they look at with high regard, such as role models, friends, family, or peers. With their vast reach and interactive nature, social media platforms are powerful channels for observational learning (Bingham & Conner, 2010) Drug use, often portrayed in a normalized or glorified manner by peers, friends, and sometimes even celebrities or influencers, is not uncommon on these platforms. The portrayal of illegal substances in this way, can according to Bundura's theory, lead individuals, especially those vulnerable to such influences, to imitate and replicate those behaviors. The social learning theory has three key components:

1. Observational Learning

The concept of observational learning is central to the Social learning theory. This is where individuals learn by watching the behavior of others and the outcomes of such behaviors. When applied to drug use, resulting in the possible observation and learning of drug-related behavior by individuals. They do this by observing peers, family members, or even media figures (Bandura, 1986).

2. Imitation and Modeling

People are more likely to copy behaviors that are performed by individuals who are perceived as attractive, similar, successful, or admirable, according to the social learning theory (Bundura, 1986). In the context of social media, this is particularly relevant. Where drug-related behavior is often demonstrated by influencers, celebrities, and other powerful models (Cox & Paoli, 2023). Leading to the potential emulation of these behaviors by their followers and admirers.

3. Reinforcement and Punishment

The concepts of reinforcement and punishment are also introduced by Bandura, which influence the likelihood of a behavior to be created. Where positive reinforcement, such as social approval, the increase in social status, or in the case of social media: likes, shares, and comments, can encourage the use of illegal substances. While the visibility of punishment, such as legal consequences and health consequences can deter the usage of illegal substances (MacCoun, 1993). However, the behavior is more likely to be adopted if the negative consequences are less visible or downplayed in media representation (Bandura, 1986).

Social learning theory provides a lens within the framework for understanding how drug use behaviors can be learned and perpetuated through social interactions and media exposure.

Normalization theory

When trying to understand how social media influences the glorification normalization and accessibility of drugs, the normalization theory also provides a helpful lens. According to this theory, when behaviors, including the abuse of illegal substances, are perceived as common and acceptable, they become normalized and are often integrated into everyday life (Parker et al., 1998). By constantly

exposing users to drug-related content, social media plays a big role in shaping perceptions and behaviors surrounding this subject (McCulloch & Furlong, 2019).

According to the normalization theory, the acceptance of drug use rises as it increases within a population. So the more people use drugs, the more accepted it gets. In contexts where drugs are used recreationally and have become a routine part of social activities, this is particularly evident. For example: In the UK in the 1990s, the usage of ecstasy was widely observed among youth, and the usage of such substances was integrated into leisure and social settings (Parker et al., 1998). Consequently, this leads to a "social acceptance" of the illegal substances. The theory also states that when cultural institutions, such as in this case nightlife facilitators, begin to accommodate drug use as it becomes more common (Parker et al., 1998). Including changing the public discourse, and media portrayals, and even going as far as legal and policy frameworks. The depiction of drug use in a less stigmatized and more normalized way, by media representation, plays a big role in influencing public attitudes and perceptions toward drugs. According to Parker et al. (1998), drug use has become normalized within the mainstream youth culture. Peer networks, where drug use is accepted and sometimes encouraged, facilitate this integration by making it a part of socializing and identity formation (Jackson et al., 2018).

Since its creation, normalization theory has been applied to various contexts beyond the UK and different types of drug use. Researchers have examined how the theory applies to different substances, social groups, and cultural settings. For instance, studies in North America and Europe have found similar patterns of normalization with substances like cannabis, where increased legalization and medical use contribute to changing social norms (Hathaway et al., 2011). The theories' application to different substances, social groups, and cultural settings has been examined by researchers. Similar patterns of normalization have been found in studies of North America and Europe. Where societal norms were changed due to legislation and medical use of previously illegal substances (Hathaway et al., 2011). In order to consider the role of digital environments in the normalization process, the theory has been expanded. Due to their vast reach and influence, social media platforms play a critical role in the normalization of drug use. The facilitation of rapid and widespread availability of drug-related content by social media resulted in the increased visibility and ubiquitousity of illegal substances (McCulloch & Furlong, 2019).

Furthermore, the theory has been expanded to consider the role of digital environments in the normalization process. Social media platforms, with their vast reach and influence, play a critical role in normalizing drug use among youth.(Jackson et al., 2018) These platforms allow for the rapid and widespread dissemination of drug-related content, making drug use more visible and seemingly ubiquitous (Burgess et al., 2021).

Communication Theory

Communication theory seeks to understand how information is received, transmitted, and interpreted between and within social groups and individuals (Mortensen, 2017). It does this by encompassing a wide range of frameworks and models. Theories that explain how interpersonal communication and media shape behaviors, attitudes, and social norms are central to this understanding. The communication theory helps the understanding of, in the context of drug use, how messages are disseminated and the influence of these messages on public perceptions and behaviors.

The key theories and models of the communication theory when assessing the influence of social media on the glorification, normalization, and accessibility of drugs are the following:

1. The Transmission Model

The transmission model focuses on the process of sending a message to a receiver through a channel (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). This model can be applied to the understanding of how, through various media channels, including social media, information about drugs is transmitted.

2. Uses and Ratifications Theory

This theory states that in order to meet each individual's needs and desires, such as information, entertainment, and social connection, they seek out media to meet these desires. When a scope towards drug use is applied, curiosity, desire for social acceptance, or the desire for social acceptance might be the reasons for individuals to seek out media that portray substance abuse in a positive light (Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1974).

3. Agenda Setting Theory

This theory, proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, suggests that media tell people what to think about rather than what to think. Media coverage and social media trends can, by highlighting certain aspects of drug-related culture, change the public discourse by highlighting certain aspects. And thereby, influencing the normalcy and perceived importance of issues created by the usage of illegal substances (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

4. Framing theory

The framing theory is developed by Erving Goffman (1974), which researches the effect of the presentation of information on perceptions and interpretations. The framing, or portrayal, of drug use by the media as a part of youth culture, or as a criminal issue e.g. a public health crisis, can have a heavy impact on policy creation and public attitudes toward drug-related issues.

A lens of the framework for understanding how social media influences the glorification, normalization, and accessibility of drugs, attitudes, and behaviors surrounding substance abuse is

provided by the communication theory. A pivotal role in shaping perceptions is played by social media in particular. The normalization of drug-related content can occur by the media's framing and frequency of the content. Resulting in the possibility of such behavior to be more common and acceptable (Orsini, 2017). The glamorized portrayals of drug use by influencers and celebrities can decrease the perceived risk and increase the desirability of such behavior for example (Moreno et al., 2012). The role of interpersonal communication in spreading drug-related content is also highlighted by the communication theory. This content, spread by the media can be counteracted or reinforced by family conversations, social interactions, or peer discussions. The reinforcement of normalization of drug use within a social group can be reinforced by frequent positive talk about drug use for example (Sussman & Ames, 2001).

By enabling user-generated content, the rise of social media platforms has transformed the landscape of communication, by bypassing traditional media gatekeepers, the democratization of content creation allows everyone to contribute to the discourse surrounding the usage of illegal substances (Naab & Sehl, 2017). The communication model is made more complex by the usage of hashtags, stories, and viral videos, which have the ability to spread information fast and thereby influence perceptions.

Collectively, these theories underscore the multifaceted ways in which social media contributes to the normalization and increased accessibility of drugs (McCulloch & Furlong, 2019) By exposing individuals to drug-related content, providing social reinforcement, and creating a sense of social pressure, social media platforms can shape perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors related to substance use, particularly among young people who are more susceptible to peer influence.(Gallegos et al., 2021) Drug use can become normalized by repeated exposure to such content, making it seem like acceptable behavior.

The Glorification and Normalization of Drugs on Social Media

The lenses of visual appeal and peer pressure play a significant role in shaping behavior and perceptions when it comes to the glorification of drugs through social media, making it a multifaceted phenomenon. With their emphasis on visual content, social media platforms provide an ideal environment for drug-related content to be spread and imagery that glorifies substance abuse to reach vulnerable audiences, such as adolescents and young people (Kazemi et al., 2017). Aesthetically appealing images and videos that depict the use of drugs by influencers, big accounts and celebrities are often portrayed as exciting, glamorous, and desirable. By the use of high-quality photography, filters, and engaging storytelling, this visual appeal is enhanced even further. This glamorous depiction can diminish the consequences and make drug use seem more attractive than it is in reality (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2016). The desensitization of audiences to the risks associated with substance abuse can occur through constant

exposure to so such content. Resulting in it being viewed as a normalized part of everyday life. The interactive nature such as likes, comments, and shares available on social media further reinforces this normalization. This encouragement serves as social reinforcement of the behaviors, encouraging individuals to engage in, or even escalate their drug use (Nesi et al., 2017).

Another critical factor, peer pressure, is amplified through social media in this digital age. Social media facilitates a space where peer norms and behavior are constantly observable and reinforced, the greatest users of these platforms, adolescents, are highly susceptible to this peer influence (Gallegos et al., 2021). An increase in drug use can be attributed to the desire to fit in and be accepted by one's social circle, especially when one observes their peers doing the same. Studies by Ohannesioan et al.,(2017) and Vanucci et al., (2019) have shown that experimentation with drugs is more likely to occur if adolescents see their peers posting about it on social media. By its abilities of constant pressure, availability, and its larger audience, this new digital peer pressure can be more insidious and persuasive than traditional forms of peer pressure. A sense of approval and validation can be created through the social reinforcement provided by likes and comments on drug-related content (Nasralah, et al., 2020) Making engagement in similar behavior more attractive to adolescents (Pilkington, 2007). A powerful mechanism is created for the glorification of drugs on social media by the combination of visual appeal and peer pressure. The social reinforcement by peers provides the motivation for engagement in such behavior, and the visual appeal makes it look desirable. For adolescents, this dual influence can have significant psychological and behavioral consequences (Pilkington, 2007). Desensitization to potential risks and consequences associated with substance abuse can occur through constant exposure to drug-related content. Resulting in a higher likelihood of experimentation and eventual addiction by weakening the perceptions of drug use as a harmful or dangerous activity (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2016; Nesi et al., 2017).

Peer pressure's widespread effect and the visually appealing nature of drug-related information are what propel the glorification of drugs on social media. Together, these elements normalize drug use and give the impression that it is more desired and acceptable, especially for young people (Jackson et al., 2018). To effectively address the detrimental effects of social media on drug use habits, it is imperative to comprehend these pathways in order to design solutions (Seo & Ray, 2019)

The Increased Accessibility of Illegal Substances through Social Media

Driven by the evolution of online drug markets, the accessibility of drugs through social media is becoming a growing concern. The anonymity and inherent privacy these platforms offer make them very attractive (Aldridge & Decary-Hétu, 2015). The landscape of drug distribution has been transformed by social media, making it far easier for individuals to access these illegal substances. The unique characteristics of social media, which include the ability to easily reach a big audience, the provision of

anonymity, and the use of interactive and visual content have facilitated this transformation (Trottier, & Lyon, 2013).

These are all characteristics that were not available in the traditional drug markets. The barriers to accessing drugs have been significantly lowered by the manner in which the online drug market operates on social media (Buxton & Bingham, 2015). Traditional drug markets often require personal connections and physical presence, while online markets on social media allow users to connect with drug dealers from the comfort of their own homes.

When looking at the impact on young people, they are more likely to use social media and are more susceptible to influences, this ease of access is particularly concerning (Jackson et al., 2018). Social media platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram have been shown by research to commonly be used for drug sales. The features of these platforms to connect with potential buyers and advertise their products have been taken advantage of by drug dealers (Demant & Aagesen, 2024; EMCDDA, 2023).

In fact, challenges like the accessibility of drugs through social media platforms is further enhanced by the anonymity and privacy provided by these platforms. The creation of anonymous and use of pseudonyms, which is facilitated by those platforms, creates increased difficulty for law enforcement to track and identify individuals involved in these drug-related transactions (Jardine, 2021). The use of encrypted messaging apps such as Telegram and Wickr provides an additional layer of security, allowing users to conduct transactions and communicate without fear of detection (UNODC, 2023). A sense of security and anonymity is created, which can in turn also encourage individuals to engage in drug-related activities.

When examining the way these platforms are used to advertise and market drugs, their role in facilitating drug trade also becomes evident (Van Hout, & Bingham, 2014). By using visually appealing content, such as photos and videos to showcase products, dealers try to attract buyers. By sharing this content in private groups or through direct messages increases the difficulty for moderators to detect such content and remove it. The efforts to monitor and regulate drug-related content on social media are also made more difficult by the use of code language and emojis (Kim et al., 2017). By providing personal recommendations and responding to inquiries in real time, the interactive nature of social media also allows dealers to create relationships with potential buyers.

Research has shown that the accessibility of drugs through social media is not limited to a specific type of substance. A wide range of drugs, including ecstasy, cocaine, and prescription medications are available for purchase on social media platforms (Demant & Aagesen, 2024; EMCDDA, 2023). The likelihood that people will find and buy drugs that meet their personal demands and preferences is increased by the diversity of the available drugs. Drug use can further be incentivized by the competitive nature of drug markets, lowering prices and raising the quality of the products due to

multiple dealers competing for customers (Buxton & Bingham, 2015). Consequently, this leads to further incentivization of drug-related transactions.

The evolution of online drug markets and increased anonymity and privacy offered by platforms make the accessibility of drugs thorugh social media a complex issue. The way drugs are advertised, sold, and marketed has been transformed by social media, making it much easier for people to access illegal substances. A comprehensive approach is required to address the challenges posed by online drug markets, which are created by this increased accessibility. The risk associated with the accessibility of drugs thorugh social media can be mitigated by understanding the dynamics of the online drug market and by the implementation of effective strategies to monitor and regulation.

Methodology

Approach and Ethical Considerations

In this research, data is collected through a qualitative research method. Interviewing six Dutch people, originating from the north of the Netherlands. Permission to use the data from the interviews was asked when soliciting participants and reconfirmed before the interviews commenced. Both verbal and written permission for the usage of the data is ensured. The participants all come from the birth years 2002 until 2004 ensuring that no participants under eighteen were interviewed. Due to the sensitive and illegal nature of this research topic, all participants were told beforehand that strict anonymity would be handled to ensure their safety. The interviewees were told that they were recorded, and they all agreed beforehand on the terms of the interview. The participants were told that refusal to answer some of the questions was allowed if they did not want to answer. The sample size was relatively small due to the limited willingness of potential participants to cooperate in such research. As told to the participants, all audio fragments were deleted after the transcription of the interviews. Every interviewee must remain anonymous, and as a result, no private information about the participants will be revealed in the study report. Every participant will get an invitation to a private, semi-structured interview that takes place in a safe location and strictly in person.

The interviewees all stated before the interviews they preferred to be interviewed in Dutch. So the interviews were done in Dutch to remove the language barrier. By doing the interviews in Dutch the language barrier sometimes posed by English interviews was removed. This allowed for a better understanding of the questions and therefore a more detailed and successful collection of data.

The interviews consist of roughly 32 questions divided into ten topics. Those topics are:
1. Demographics and Social media use
2. Content of social media

3. Influence of social media

4. Exposure to illegal activities

5. Perception of influence of drugs related content on social media

6. Personal experience with and access to drugs

7. Drug use among youth

8. Normalization of drug use

9. The connection between social media and drugs

10. Possible prevention and solutions

All topics have two or three sub-questions. Allowing for very detailed interviews and data collection. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, questions could be differentiated in relation to each interview. This also allowed the researcher to skip questions if they were previously answered in connection to other topics or questions and to create questions during the interview to apply to the specific interviews.

Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate the possible effects social media has or can have on the normalization, glorification, and accessibility of drugs. Current research shows the negative effects of drugs on youth as well as the increase in drug usage. It also shows the impact social media can have on people. This research seeks to find out if both topics are inherently connected and what effect they have on one another.

The following questions are fundamental to this research:

- Does social media have an influence on the glorification, normalization, and accessibility of drugs?
- What is the effect of social media on the glorification, normalization, and accessibility of drugs?

Sampling and Data Collection

As previously mentioned, the participants for this research were found through the researcher's social network. The purposive sampling method was used, which involved reaching out to possible participants with experience with the illegal substances. After that, the snowballing method was applied to find more participants. The snowballing method, also known as snowball sampling, is a non-probability sampling technique where existing study subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances. This resulted in a diverse, yet well-informed sample population. Six willing participants were found all stemming from the birth years of 2002 until 2004. Ensuring a minimal age of twenty, and therefore "adulthood" of the participants in order to be included in the study.

Data analysis

As stated before, the participants were invited to face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. The audio was recorded by the "dictafoon" app on the iPhone. The audio fragments were transcribed by a website called: "otter.ai". This website allows a user to upload their audio fragment and transcribe it for them into a document, which is then later used for analysis. The questions and their respective answers were coded to create a more comprehensive and structured analysis of the interviews. A deductive coding approach was used for this process. Where the codes were allocated to important topics from the literature review as well as those previously mentioned in the interview guide, for a smoother connection between the literature and the collected data. As the transcripts are analyzed, every code is examined in relation to the theory and conclusions of the literature it contributes to, as well as the other transcripts.

Results and Discussion

In this segment, the data collected in the interviews is put into infographics for a more comprehensive and easy understanding of the data. The infographics are divided into the ten designated topics mentioned in the methodology. After that, the results of the data will be discussed in combination with the previously established framework and literature.

Results

topics/interviewee	1	2	3
Demographics and Social Media Use	20 years old Daily usage, 2-4 hours	20 years old Daily usage, 2-3 hours	21 years old Minimum of 2 hours
Content of Social Media	Communication with friends Graphic content	Funny videos, memes, etc. Informatic videos Communication with friends	Finance, politics, and sports-related content Communication with friends
Influence of Social Media:	Staying in contact with friends Uses it as a distraction	Influence on consumer behavior communication	Believes social media is an important tool for communication. Both personal and professional

Exposure to Illegal Activities and Substances:	Crashes People under the influence of substances	Drug trade, fake money. People under the influence of substances	Intimidation, violence Sees drug and substance abuse frequently.
Perception and Influence of Drugs related content on Social Media:	Finds it problematic when such content is widely accessible, potentially influencing perceptions and behaviors.	Sees the humorous side rather than the negative aspects of substance use in social media content	Think responsibility for vulnerable audiences also lies with the guardian of those audiences. Thinks graphic and illegal content is a problem
Personal Experience with and access to Drugs:	Only soft drug usage Frequent consumption of alcohol Friends who consume/use, origin unknown	Hard and soft drug usage Friends who consume/use Access through social media platforms	Three years clean Frequent usage of both hard and soft drugs Dealers through social media platforms
Drug Use Among Youth	Observes increase, attributes it to age and circumstances Finds it only problematic when bad consequences occur	Recognizes drug use as a significant issue among youth. Sees an increase surrounding his job and in nightlife in general	Noticed increasing drug use among friends and acquaintances, seeing it as a growing problem. Notices negative effects among peers and in nightlife in general.
Normalization of Drug Use	Views it as being normalized by increased usage of friends and attempts of legalization by governmental bodies.	Sees drug use becoming normalized due to increased visibility and accessibility	Believes normalization of drug use through social media and social circles leads to increased usage.

		Believes the issue is more about the normalization of drug use rather than the ease of accessibility	
	Sees this normalization as a problem due to the effect it might have on others		
The connection between Social Media and Drug Use	Thinks there is a connection between the two. Thinks the accessibility and normalization of drugs on the platforms might be reasons for people to try drugs	Thinks social media contributes to the normalization of drug use as more people encounter it online Acknowledges a connection between social media exposure and drug normalization, particularly among younger and more impressionable users	Social media can spark interest in drugs, downplay negative effects, and normalize usage, potentially increasing the number of users. Concerned about the broader societal impact, especially among impressionable individuals.
Prevention and Solutions	Advocates for legalization but finds trouble where to draw the line in terms of substances. Argues that by legalizing, safety is increased and moderation.	Supports the idea of regulating and legalizing certain drugs to control their distribution and use	Finds it challenging to suggest effective solutions; believes strict prohibition can sometimes increase allure. Legalization might send the wrong message, making it seem less harmful. Acknowledges the complexity of the issue with no clear optimal solution.

topics/interviewee	4	5	6
Demographics and Social Media Use	20 years old Daily usage, 3-4 hours daily	20 years old Multiple hours per day	21 years old Daily usage, 4-6 hours daily
Content of Social Media	Football and fashion-related content Music and personal content	Memes, funny videos, etc Also about the (ab)use of drugs Communication tool	Content of friends, memes, funny videos, etc. Professional and informal communication tools
Influence of Social Media:	feels that social media has a minimal influence on their daily life and social interactions.	Sees it as a big influence on their social life due to the communication standard of today's society	They believe social media has an influence on them. Consciously as well as unconsciously.
Exposure to Illegal Activities and Substances:	Car crashes, graphic content. Sees people under the influence of substances	Murder, graphic content Sees substance abuse frequently	Crimes and illegal activities. No disclosure in detail of those activities. Frequently encounters people under the influence.
Perception and Influence of Drugs on Social Media:	Thinks it has an influence on (ab)users when risks are shown Believes related content stems from countries with less rules	Believes it might be stimulative and inviting to people inexperienced with these subjects. and substances	Perceives it as dangerous and possibly influential for children/youth and argues for age restrictions on substance-related content Also notes videos of addiction and risks of substance abuse can deter people from substance

			abuse
Personal Experience with and access to Drugs:	Only soft drugs

Has friends who use hard drugs but has his boundaries. The origins of the substances are unknown. | A lot of experience with different hard rugs and other substances

Got access to the drugs via social media dealers and friends. | Frequent usage of hard rugs. However, it is limited to festivals and parties

Shares information and content of his abuse with friends. Because they believe it to be safer in case of emergencies.

Gets access through friends, acquaintances, and social media |
| Drug Use Among Youth | Acknowledges that drug use among youth can be problematic if boundaries are not respected.

Also believes the usage of hard drugs under 28 to be a big problem

Believes that occasional use in controlled environments like festivals is acceptable, noting the presence of medical support. | Does not believe their, and their friends' usage to be an issue due to the fact that he believes it doesn't affect their daily lives. Even though they dropped out of school.

Believes it is a problem among youth or people vulnerable to addiction.

When underage, hard drugs were more easily accessible than alcohol. | Believes substance abuse among youth to be a big problem.

Has seen friends and acquaintances get addicted and their respective consequences.

Knows the risks of addiction himself. |
| Normalization of Drug Use | Feels drug use is becoming more normalized in the Netherlands, partly due to the country's liberal stance and | Sees drugs becoming more normalized. Sees it greatly in the nightlife scene and personal social circles. | Thinks the "taboo" surrounding drug usage has been broken, largely by social media, resulting in normalization. |

	infrastructure for safe drug testing	Thinks accessibility is the greatest issue.	
Connection Between Social Media and Drug Use	Thinks that social media could influence drug use depending on the nature of the content people are exposed to. Believes seeing people under the influence in videos might deter some from drug use, but acknowledges the potential for the opposite effect.	Believes promotion, normalization, or even glorification of substance abuse through social media has a big impact on youth. Also emphasizes the ease of access to substances due to dealers operating through social media.	Thinks the increased accessibility of drugs through social media is the greatest issue. The ease and anonymity in particular. Sees glorification and normalization of drugs on different social media platforms. Promoting substance abuse.
Prevention and Solutions	Struggles to identify ways to counteract this normalization, recognizing the complexity and potential for increased black market activity if stricter prohibitions are enforced.	Has no idea on how to solve these issues due to the anonymity, speed, and ease of the online drug market.	Believes the accessibility can be tackled by increased monitoring from the government. Even though that would breach some privacy standards.

Discussion

Social media's role in shaping behaviors and norms cannot be exaggerated, especially when one is researching its impact on the accessibility of drugs. Social media platforms facilitate the almost instant exchange of information and communication, and with that, accidentaly create ways and opportunities where drug-related content can be spread (Gallegos, 2021). According to the Social Learning Theory, individuals get and create behaviors through the observation of others, especially when these behaviors are viewed as rewarding or beneficial (Bandura, 1977). This theory helps explain how social media can have an influence on drug use behaviors, as platforms sometimes display images or narratives that glorify

or normalize substance use and abuse, presenting it as a normal and attractive behavior (Gallegos et al., 2021).

When looking at data interviewee 3 notes this, stating, "No, I don't think children should be allowed to see this. Or ex-addicts. This could have a terrible influence on them". This statement by one of the participants emphasizes the widespread reach and availability of drug-related content on these platforms, underscoring an important risk: the potential for such visibility of content to normalize drug use among easily influenceable people. The accessibility of drugs is further facilitated by the networking capabilities of social media, where users can easily come into contact with dealers or other people facilitating the drug trade, resulting in the creation of a dangerously easy method of access to illegal substances (Moyle et al., 2019).

Multiple interviewees state their experience of coming into contact with dealers via Snapchat or WhatsApp. In response to the question of how they acquired the illegal substances, for example: interviewee 2 stated: "Yeah, mainly through social media". This showcases the integration and usage of social media into the drug trade, creating a dangerous ease of access that aligns well with the Communication Theory. This theory states that media can be used to have an influence on audiences' attitudes and behaviors through the spreading of specific messages and symbols (McQuail, 1983). In the context of social media and drug accessibility, the platforms do not only act as means of communication but also as facilitators of trade that can lead to the buying and selling of illegal substances and drug use (Lavorgna, A. 2016).

The lens of the normalization theory can slo be applied when viewing the glorification of drug use on social media, the theory states that certain behaviors become normalized through large depictions and acceptance within popular media (Parker et al., 1998). Social media platforms, which are largely based on user-generated content, have become generalized places for the normalization of illegal behaviors, such as: being under influence, crimes, and drug use. "Yeah and if not the usage of drugs, then the jokes about abuse or the promotion of it."(interview 3). This phenomenon is made worse by the visibility and apparent approval (likes, shares, comments) that such content receives, creating the alleged perception that drug use is common, acceptable, or even desirable.(Van Hout & Bingham, 2013).

The comment of interviewee 6, in particular, corresponds with the normalization theory: "Yes, especially XTC or 3MMC, you know, things you do at a festival. Like alcohol for example". Shows the mixed messages and the increased normalization surrounding the usage of drugs, which can be received via social media. This refers to seeing drugs used in festive or social settings showcasing how social

media can alter people's perceptions of drug use as just another part of partying, going out, or other leisurely activities. Such portrayals of illegal substances can alter and/or diminish the perceived risks associated with drug use, misleadingly presenting it as a harmless thing to improve your social experiences, setting it on the same basis as alcohol (Jackson et al., 2018). Rather than actions and behavior with potentially serious health implications and legal consequences.

Furthermore, the Normalization Theory is supported by the manner in which drug-related content is curated and shared among peer networks, as stated in interview 5: on social media, effectively normalizing these behaviors through repeated exposure. As another respondent described, " I think that at a younger age, it's different. Because I'm twenty myself, so I'm a bit wiser and can make my own choices in this matter. But I mean, if you have a boy or girl who is sixteen or seventeen and he knows what's going to happen, and the only things he sees are drug-related things, maybe that will attract him more to using drugs or wanting to fit in. Maybe that also plays a role."(interview 5). This acknowledgment of social media's influence particularly on younger, impressionable users highlights the critical role of peer influence in the normalization process. It showcases the risk of portraying drug usage as something "cool" or "you need to do to fit in". Young users are especially susceptible to adopting behaviors modeled by peers or influencers whom they admire and wish to look like or behave like.

As explained by the communication theory, social media also facilitates channels for communication which play into this normalization. The theory suggests that the media does not only send out information but also creates and shapes cultural norms (McQuail, 1983). The never-ending loop of interaction and feedback between individuals in social media reinforces and broadens the normalization of drug use, which could lead to a potential increase in the substance abuse rate of viewers. Especially, those who view these actions and behaviors as endorsed by their social surroundings.

The communication theory takes it a step further, it emphasizes that the media has a great role in creating and altering the symbols and messages that define society's norms and values (McQuail, 1983). The influence of social media exceeds beyond just the accessibility and normalization of drugs. With the communication theory, it's argued to directly create and alter perceptions and behaviour through its continuous engagement and interaction (Craig, 1999), According to this theory, next to serving as an informational channel, social media plays a significant role in the social construction of reality by affecting how drugs are seen and used in various groups and communities.

The data collected by the interviews gives multiple strong implications of this process: "you can see a lot of different things on the platforms, like tips when using substances and such. So I think there is

a big connection, certainly with obtaining it. "(interview 6). In this statement the dual role of social media is highlighted. It doesn't only showcase drug use, it also openly provides information on the usage and acquirement of illegal substances. These dialogues can strongly normalize the illegal process of requiring drugs, potentially resulting in decreased perceivable risks, legal- and physical barriers. Which may encourage experimentation with - or drug use among naive and inexperienced people unaware of the consequences.

Next to the normalization - and the communication theory, the influence of social media on drug-related behavior can also be explained by the Social Learning Theory. This argues that people learn through the observation of others, through behavior on social media as well as outside of media influences such as: social interactions and experiences (Bandura, 1997). On platforms such as Instagram or TikTok viewers can see behavior surrounding drug use and abuse as socially rewarding or acceptable. This could lead to observational learning and the replication of these behaviors. For example: the usage of drugs is quite often glorified surrounding music festivals and parties. These experiences are shared on social media and can encourage viewers to replicate these behaviors in order for them to try to create a similar "euphoric experience" or "great time".

The normalization of the use of illegal substances, as stated previously, is created by the abundance of substance abuse-related content on social media. With the repeated exposure of people to such content, the abnormality and "taboo" surrounding drugs diminishes and a view of social acceptance grows(Bancroft, 2009). This is also reflected in the interview data. With statements such as: I think it's getting more normal because more and more people do it." (interview 2) and "No, because the wrong side isn't really shown very much. No. It's first presented more as something jovial about people at festivals. (interview 2)". Such normalization can influence youth culture, which is highly susceptible to online trends, by altering the social fabric surrounding these topics (Jackson et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Significant shifts in attitudes and behavior of modern society surrounding drug use have been caused by the pervasive influence. This research has delved into the intricate dynamics surrounding the glorification, normalization, and accessibility of drugs through social media. Showcasing the many implications of this phenomenon. It started with the creation of a framework founded in social science theory, in order to understand the reasoning behind the observed behavior. After that, this research has elucidated key factors contributing to the glorification of drug use and its normalization within online communities. By analyzing the impact of peer pressure, the visual appeal, and the accessibility of drugs

on these platforms, key factors of normalization and glorification of drugs in social communities have been identified

The application of Social Learning Theory highlights the role of observation and imitation in the spread of drug-related behaviors through social media (Bandura, 1977). Normalization Theory explains how repeated exposure to drug content can desensitize individuals to its risks, fostering a culture where drug use is seen as commonplace and even desirable(Parker et al., 2002). Communication Theory sheds light on the persuasive tactics employed in drug-related content, further elucidating how these platforms shape individual and collective attitudes toward drug use (Bandura, 2001). tactics used in drug-related content on social media, this research has highlighted the ways in which social media platforms influence individuals' attitudes and behaviors regarding drug use.

Peer pressure plays a significant role in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors regarding drug use on social media (Pilkington, 2007). Individuals can be led to engage in behaviors they would normally avoid, such as drug use, by their desire to fit in and the constant exposure to drug-related content. Social media platforms often facilitate the buying, selling, and distribution of drugs, making it easier for individuals to obtain illicit substances (Moyle et al., 2019). The anonymity and reach of these platforms create opportunities for drug traffickers and dealers to target potential buyers. This increased accessibility not only contributes to the prevalence of drug use but also complicates efforts to regulate and control the distribution of drugs.

A significant evolution in the landscape of substance abuse is presented with the integration of the drug market into social media (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011). Serious public health challenges, particularly for young and impressionable users can be posed by the normalization and glorification of drug use on these social media platforms. To address these issues, it is highly important that researchers, policymakers, and public health officials collaborate in order to keep up with the constantly evolving social media platforms. To create policies and insights from other research and studies to combat these negative influences of drug-related content on social media.

Limitations and Implications for Further Research

Limitations of the Research

This research was limited due to the small number of participants who were willing to participate in the research. This also created the limitation of the locality of the data. All participants stemmed from the north of the Netherlands, therefore, limiting this research and its findings to the north of the Netherlands as well. All participants stemmed from the birth years 2002 until 2004. Resulting in a sample population of between the twenty and twenty-two years old. This allowed me to gain data on the perspective of young adults, the target group of this research. However, I did not gain access to the data of

the older generations and their perceptions of this problem. this was due to the time constraint on this project and the sensitive topic of the research. As well as the recognition that the older generations have not implemented social media to the extent this generation has. For ethical reasons, a younger sample population was avoided, due to the previously stated high impressionability of the younger individuals. As previously stated, the participants came from the social connections of the research, which is another limitation of the research, due to the possible creation of bias.

Implications for Future Research

Future research on this topic has a lot of possibilities and implications. Examining demographic differences can yield a more thorough knowledge of the ways in which social media influences drug glorification, normalcy, and accessibility across various age groups. This method can assist in determining which age groups are most susceptible to these impacts by illuminating how these influences differ across older generations, young adults, and adolescents.

Effective intervention and preventative strategies might potentially be the subject of future study. Through the analysis of effective ways to minimize dangerous behaviors, academics can suggest optimal approaches for lessening the adverse effects of drug-related information on social media. This information is essential for creating drug-use prevention educational initiatives and public health campaigns.

Furthermore, governments can benefit from an awareness of the long-term repercussions of drug glorification, normalization, and accessibility through social media. This data might be used by legislators to create rules that restrict harmful information and encourage safer online spaces. All things considered, further study can not only improve our understanding of the direct effects of social media on drug use but can also direct long-term plans to prevent substance misuse and safeguard public health.

International applicability for the research

Despite the fact that the participants in this study are from the northern Netherlands, the problems of drug normalization, accessibility, and glorification are global. These events transcend national borders and are influenced by global cultural, social, and economic influences. Widespread normalization and accessibility are influenced by social media influence, international drug trafficking, and media depictions, impacting a variety of demographics globally. Knowing these problems in a localized setting might help highlight the need for comprehensive, cross-border policy responses by exposing the connections between drug-related problems in various cultures and offering insights into global trends.

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Appendix

1. Original dutch interview guide

Hou oud ben je?

Maak jij gebruik van sociale media? En zo ja, van welke platvormen?

Besteed je veel tijd aan de eerdergenoemde soicale mediaplatvormen?

Welke platvormen gebruik je meer en minder?

Hoe veel tijd besteed je gemiddeld aan sociale media?

Wat voor inhoud/ content is het meest voorkomend op deze sociale media?

Wat voor inhoud/ content deel jij vooral op sociale media?

Heeft sociale media een grote invloed op jou en je (sociale) leven?

Denk jij dat sociale media problemen kan veroorzaken?

En zo ja, waarom? En wat voor problemen?

Zie je wel een illegale dingen voorbijkomen op sociale media? Bvb: misdrijven, of andere illegale activiteiten? En zo ja, wat voor?

Zie je wel eens mensen onder invloed op sociale media?

Wat voor middelen hebben deze mensen gebruikt denk je?

Kom jij wel eens drugs of het (vermoedelijke) gebruik van drugs of andere illegale substanties tegen?

Wat vind jij er van dat dit soort beelden op sociale media worden gedeeld. Toegankelijk voor iedereen?

Heeft dit ook invloed op jou perceptie tegenover drugs en andere illegale substanties?

Waarom wel/niet?

Denk je dat dit ook invloed heeft op de perceptie van andere mensen die dit soort beelden tegenkomen?

Wat voor invloed denk je dat dit heeft? En waarom?

Heb jij zelf wel eens drugs of andere illegale substanties gebruikt?

Wat voor substanties zijn dat?

Zo nee, ken jij mensen die wel eens illegale substanties gebruiken/ hebben gebruikt?

Heb je hier ook beelden van gedeeld? Bv met vrienden.

Wat voor invloed denk je dat dit had op de mensen waarmee jij deze beelden hebt gedeeld?

Hoe heb jij/ je kennis de illegale substanties verkregen voor gebruik?

Vermoed jij dat dit veel op dezelfde manier gebeurd? Waarom wel/niet?

Vind je (toenemend) drugsgebruik een probleem onder jongeren?

Merk jij er zelf ook iets van, in je kennis/vriendenkring of in andere omgevingen? En zo ja, wat merk je?

Denk je dat drugs en andere illegale substanties steeds normaler worden? Zo ja, waarom?

Denk je dat te normalisatie of de makkelijke beschikbaarheid het grootste probleem is?

Heb je ideen hoe dit voorkomen/tegengegaan kan worden?. En waarom?

In jouw woorden, bestaat er een verband tussen sociale media en drugs (gebruik)? En waarom

Heb jij nog vragen voor mij of over het onderzoek?

2. English translation of the interview guide

Here is the translation:

How old are you?

Do you use social media? If so, which platforms?

Do you spend a lot of time on the aforementioned social media platforms?

Which platforms do you use more and less?

How much time do you spend on average on social media?

What kind of content is most common on these social media?

What kind of content do you mainly share on social media?

Does social media have a significant impact on you and your (social) life?

Do you think social media can cause problems?

If so, why? And what kind of problems?

Do you ever see illegal activities on social media? For example: crimes or other illegal activities? If so, what kind?

Do you ever see people under the influence on social media?

What substances do you think these people have used?

Do you ever come across drugs or the (suspected) use of drugs or other illegal substances?

What do you think about such images being shared on social media, accessible to everyone?

Does this also affect your perception of drugs and other illegal substances?

Why or why not?

Do you think this also influences the perception of other people who come across such images?

What kind of influence do you think this has? And why?

Have you ever used drugs or other illegal substances yourself?

What substances are those?

If not, do you know people who have used illegal substances?

Have you shared images of this as well? For example, with friends.

What influence do you think this had on the people you shared these images with?

How did you/your acquaintance obtain the illegal substances for use?

Do you suspect this happens a lot in the same way? Why or why not?

Do you think (increasing) drug use is a problem among young people?

Do you notice it yourself, in your acquaintances/friend group or in other environments? If so, what do you notice?

Do you think drugs and other illegal substances are becoming more normalized? If so, why?

Do you think normalization or easy availability is the biggest problem?

Do you have ideas on how this can be prevented/combated? And why?

In your own words, is there a connection between social media and drugs (use)? And why?

Do you have any questions for me or about the research?