LUNDS UNIVERSITET
Socialhögskolan

The Other(ed) World:

Discourses Negotiating Prohibition, Identity, Trust and Motivation in a Darknet Drug Market Platform Community

Alexander Danielsson

Master thesis SOAM21

VT 2026

Supervisor: Björn Johnson

Abstract

Drug use is governed today by a global prohibition regime that medicalizes and criminalizes people who use drugs, producing marginalization, risk environments and illicit markets. In parallel, digital platformization has enabled darknet cryptomarkets to reorganize drug distribution and create new social contexts in which drugs, markets and users are discursively constructed. This thesis examines how actors on a Swedish-language darknet cryptomarket present and understand themselves as drug users and market participants, how they construct drugs and markets, and how these constructions relate to prohibition and platform capitalism.

Based on a netnographic corpus of forum posts and vendor pages from one market, analyzed with discursive psychology and interpretative repertoires, the study identifies buyer and vendor repertoires, subject positions and prohibition-effects repertoires that together show how identities, trust and motivation are constructed under a criminalizing, platform-mediated regime. Trust appears as a relational accomplishment, grounded in evaluations of vendor motivation, quality and care as much as in technical or economic performance. Cryptomarket forums function as partial counterpublics where subordinated drug-using identities can be articulated and defended, yet prohibitionist discourse and platform logics continue to shape interaction. The thesis argues that cryptomarkets are sites where prohibition and platform capitalism both constrain and enable drug market practices and identities, and where people who use drugs discursively imagine and enact “better” markets, with implications for debates on drug policy and social work practice.

Table of contents

Introduction....1
Problem Statement....1
Aim....3
Research questions....3
Background (structural contexts)....3
Global drug prohibition....4
Drug market structures under prohibition....5
A critical perspective on prohibition....6
Platformization, drugs and darknet cryptomarkets....7
Platform capitalist infrastructure....7
Digital platforms, drug distribution and the emergence of cryptomarkets....8
Literature review....10
Literature search and selection....10
Cryptomarkets as hybrid political market communities....10
Demographics and drug consumption patterns....11
Darknet drug diffusion: benefits and harms....12
Violence and personal safety....12
Quality, harm reduction and pricing....13
Drug diffusion and market resilience....13
Trust in cryptomarkets....14
Situating the present study and research gap....15
Theoretical framework....17
The position and basic assumptions of social constructionism....17
Social constructionism and discourse analysis....18
Discourse, identity, interpretative repertoires, and orders of discourse....19
Interpretative repertoires....19
Orders of discourse and the micro-macro link....20
Prohibition and platform capitalism as orders of discourse....20
Method....21
Methods and methodological considerations....21
Participation....22
Naturally occurring data....22
Ethical considerations....23
Researcher reflexivity....25
Entering the field....25
Data collection and lurking....26

Analytic procedure....26
Validation....28
Methodological reflections and limitations....28
Analysis....29
Market overview....29
Cryptomarket actor self-presentation repertoires....30
Your personal relationship with drugs (introductory vignette)....31
Buyer self-presentation repertoires....34
Discovery repertoire....34
Compatible life repertoire....35
Therapeutic use repertoire....36
Troubled use repertoire....38
Leisure, pleasure and normalization repertoire....39
Vendor self-presentation repertoires....41
Trusted Elder....42
Psychedelic Saviour....43
Motivation as a discursive theme....44
The blackmail letter....45
Crystalline Crusader....46
Banned Scammer....48
Discussion....50
Cryptomarket subject positions....51
Trust and motivation as discursive performance....53
Prohibition-effects repertoires in cryptomarket discourse....56
The double life repertoire....57
Surveillance awareness and evasion repertoires....58
Institutional critique repertoires....59
Cryptomarket community counterpublic repertoire....61
Conclusion....65
Implications for social work, drug policy and future research....66
References....67
Appendices....74
Appendix A - Vendor threads and post quantities....74
Appendix B - Other forum threads and post quantities....75
Appendix C - Buyer self-presentation repertoires....76
Appendix D - Vendor self-presentation repertoires....77
Appendix E - Cryptomarket subject positions....78
Appendix F - Prohibition-effects repertoires....80

Introduction

Problem Statement

Drugs have been part of human culture for millennia, fulfilling social, medical and recreational purposes (Daniels et al., 2021, p. 2; Courtwright, 2012, p. 17). In the contemporary era, drug use is governed through a global prohibition regime that seeks to control consumption and reduce harm, but that also medicalizes and criminalizes drugs and people who use them. This contributes to stereotyping, marginalization, risk environments and illicit markets controlled by criminal organizations (Daniels et al., 2021, p. 2; Taylor, 2016, pp. 453–454, 460; Johnson, Richert & Svensson, 2023, pp. 210-211, 243, 354–356).

Digital platformization, underpinned by platform capitalism, means that drug markets, like many others, have increasingly moved online, with drugs now available at all levels of the internet (Srnicek, 2017; Childs & Bernot, 2024, pp. 150–151; Tzanetakis & Marx, 2023). Within this landscape, the darknet, an obscured part of the internet set apart by a focus on anonymity and encryption, has become a key arena for illicit digital drug markets, where so-called cryptomarkets facilitate the trade of controlled substances (Aldridge, Stevens & Barratt, 2017; Bancroft, 2019; Childs & Bernot, 2024, Tzanetakis & South, 2023).

Cryptomarkets reshape how drug distribution is organized and create new social contexts where drug market actors can present and understand themselves, and in which drugs and markets are discursively constructed, while still operating in relation to global prohibition and offline drug markets (Aldridge, Stevens & Barratt, 2017; Bancroft, 2019). In cryptomarket forums, vendors and buyers construct identities, motives and evaluations within a digital cultural context structured by prohibition, but used to resist it, offering opportunities to examine how drug users and sellers understand themselves and their practices under these conditions (Barratt & Aldridge, 2016; Masson & Bancroft, 2018; Maddox, 2020).

Research has mapped cryptomarket history, volumes, substances, user demographics, and associated harms and benefits (Aldridge, Stevens, & Barratt, 2017; Barratt, Ferris, & Winstock, 2016; Horobets, Reznik, Denysenko, & Kravchuk, 2024), and described how these

markets combine features of illicit drug markets with features of legal e-commerce platforms under platform capitalism (Barratt & Aldridge, 2016; Childs & Bernot, 2024; Srnicek, 2017), while users often frame cryptomarkets as safer than offline markets in terms of violence, risk of arrest and drug quality (Aldridge et al., 2017; Barratt et al., 2016; Bancroft, 2022). Studies have also examined how trust is built and maintained in cryptomarkets, highlighting the role of reputation systems, repeat interactions and moral framings of cryptomarket actors' motivations (Aldridge et al., 2017; Bancroft, 2019; Masson & Bancroft, 2018; Childs & Bernot, 2024). However, fewer studies have examined how buyers and vendors discursively construct drugs, drug use and themselves as market actors in detail, and how such constructions relate to prohibition discourses and platform logics. This limits our understanding of how participants themselves imagine and enact drug markets under prohibition. Viewing cryptomarkets as a site where forum talk constructs identities and market motives, this study seeks to generate knowledge that can inform debates and extend prior research to benefit the communities it affects.

That prohibition rests on partially taken-for-granted assumptions about drugs and their users is arguably problematic, as it informs drug policy interventions that then typically build on pre-existing stereotypes, legitimized as 'objective' through politically motivated research (Tupper, 2012, pp. 479–480; Pereira & Carrington, 2015). For social work and drug policy, it therefore matters how cryptomarket actors themselves construct drugs, drug use and "good" or "bad" markets, because such constructions may reinforce or challenge dominant images of drug use and substance use disorder, inform how people navigate risk and harm, and indicate how prohibition is lived and negotiated in practice (Daniels et al., 2021, p. 3; Taylor, 2016, p. 460; Johnson, Richert & Svensson, 2023, pp. 243, 354–356).

Understanding these discourses can contribute to more nuanced debates about regulation, social work and healthcare practice and the social consequences of current drug policy (Taylor, 2016, p. 460; Johnson et al., 2023, pp. 354–356). It may also support harm reduction initiatives and treatment, and promote more nuanced public and professional understandings of drug use (Daniels et al., 2021, p. 3; Johnson et al., 2023, pp. 354–356).

Aim

Rather than mapping or measuring cryptomarket activity, this study aims to explore how actors on a Swedish-language darknet cryptomarket present and understand themselves as drug users and market actors, how they discursively construct drugs and drug markets, and how these constructions relate to the intersecting orders of discourse of prohibition and platform capitalism.

Research questions

1. How do buyers construct their identities and motives as drug users in forum discussions, and how are these constructions negotiated in relation to community norms and dominant discourses on drugs and drug use?

2. How do vendors' self-presentations in listings, profiles, forum posts and feedback relate to buyers' constructions, and what internal cryptomarket logics can be discerned in these interactions?

3. What do these constructions together reveal about how global drug prohibition and digital platform logics are negotiated, resisted or reproduced in cryptomarket discourse?

The first two research questions are addressed primarily in the analysis chapter, which examines buyer and vendor interpretative repertoires and foreshadows the subject positions they make available, while the discussion chapter synthesizes these findings in relation to the third question.

Background (structural contexts)

Before describing and discussing the field of research on cryptomarkets, I will briefly outline two structural systems that shape the conditions within which cryptomarkets operate; global drug prohibition and digital platform capitalism (platformization). These systems contribute to defining how illicit drugs, their users and drug trade are understood and governed in cryptomarkets. Prohibition provides defining perspectives on drugs and drug users, while platformization, through surges of technological innovation, has created new pathways for

drug distribution, pathways that emerge in response to, and in tension with, global prohibition. Together they constitute the discursive landscape against which cryptomarket actors construct themselves.

Global drug prohibition

To situate cryptomarkets, it is necessary to outline the historical emergence of the global drug control regime and its effects on drug users, illicit markets and risk environments.

Global drug prohibition arose from the convergence of colonialism, temperance moralism and the medicalization of substance use, with psychotropic substances such as opium, cocaine, cannabis, alcohol, sugar and coffee serving as central commodities as colonial powers enriched themselves through trade monopolies, taxation and forced labour while colonized populations bore the social costs (Courtwright, 2012, p. 17; Virk, 2024, p. 465; Dertadian, 2024, p. 2; Daniels et al., 2021, p. 2). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, temperance advocates and social reformists framed intoxicants as causes of "crime, moral decay and social disorder," and addiction became medicalized and associated with racialized "others" portrayed as hedonistic, socially inadequate personalities (Virk, 2024, p. 465; Dertadian, 2024, p. 6; Alexander, 2008, pp. 30–32).

These currents crystallized in early international control efforts (the 1909 Shanghai Opium Commission, the 1912 Hague Convention and the 1914 US Harrison Narcotics Tax Act), which laid the groundwork for the UN conventions that provide "the legislative bedrock for contemporary global drug control" (Courtwright, 2012, pp. 19, 22; Taylor, 2016, p. 453; Virk, 2024, pp. 464–466). Within less than a century, drugs shifted from central colonial commodities to being constructed in the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (1961) as a "serious evil linked to personal degradation and social disruption" (Daniels et al., 2021, p. 2). Two further conventions followed, the Convention on Psychotropic Substances (1971) and the UN Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1988), on which contemporary international drug policy still rests. States joining these treaties, including most countries of the world, and all EU members, undertake to criminalize the production, distribution, possession and sale of listed substances for non-medical or non-scientific purposes (Johnson et al., 2023, pp. 210–211). The conventions provide no scientific definition of "narcotic drugs;" such substances are simply those listed in the UN

schedules, reflecting mid-twentieth-century social and cultural practices rather than pharmacological evidence (Taylor, 2016, p. 454).

Because violations of the conventions carry no severe sanctions, national implementations vary considerably (Johnson et al., 2023, pp. 210–211), from Portugal's decriminalization of all drugs and Germany's cannabis legalization to Sweden's criminalization of personal use. This shows that prohibition is not a monolithic order of discourse, but a contested framework articulated differently across national contexts, even though "no single jurisdiction has completely decoupled itself from the prohibition model" (Taylor, 2016, p. 454). The EU drugs strategy, built on these conventions, focuses on reducing drug availability through law enforcement, reducing demand through prevention and treatment, and reducing drug-related harms (Johnson et al., 2023, pp. 213–214). Swedish drug policy goes beyond what the UN conventions and EU strategy require, occupying a stricter position, defined by the political goal of a "drug-free society," the criminalization of personal use introduced in the 1980s, and compulsory treatment of individuals with substance use disorder (Edman & Olsson, 2014).

Drug market structures under prohibition

Bancroft (2022, p. 671) describes two broad drug distribution types: 1) social supply, where drug distribution relies on reciprocity and sharing amongst friends and acquaintances, and 2) transactional commercial supply, where relationships are mediated by market logics and profits while sometimes validating "predation and exploitation." Barratt, Ferris and Winstock (2016, p. 25) place these on a continuum of open and closed markets. Social supply typically occurs within closed structures such as private pre-arranged meetings, whereas the open markets of transactional commercial supply take the form of unplanned street deals between strangers, although illegal street deals can also occur between people who know each other.

Open markets are more susceptible to violence, and because illicit markets lack protective legal systems, systemic violence often marks dispute resolution and reputation maintenance, particularly in socio-economic strata where violence is a more common conflict-resolution strategy, even if it is not prevalent in all illegal drug markets. Law enforcement efforts risk exacerbating instability and violence by displacing sellers and buyers from their usual arenas, often pushing open markets into more closed forms (Barratt, Ferris & Winstock, 2016, pp. 24–25).

A critical perspective on prohibition

Prohibition limits supply and may reduce use, but it also contributes to illicit markets and organized crime (Johnson et al., 2023, p. 243). Empirical studies indicate that tougher legislation in general, and the criminalization of personal use in particular, have not produced clear or consistent reductions in substance use disorders (Jacobsen, 2019, p. 387; Estrada, Stenström & Tham, 2023). Instead, substance use disorders have increased by 45% worldwide over the last decade, and only one in five individuals with drug-related disorders receive treatment (Zhang et al., 2024).

Criminalization has negative effects beyond pharmacological harm: it stigmatizes drug use as deviant and serves to "dehumanize and marginalize" communities who use drugs, disproportionately harming already marginalized groups (Daniels et al., 2021, p. 3). Criminal conviction can carry consequences for education, employment and housing, often representing "a far greater harm to a person's future wellbeing than the drugs themselves" (Taylor, 2016, p. 460). Prohibition pushes drug trade underground, creating conditions that increase harm, violence and risk environments, including unknown substance contents, unsanitary injecting conditions and needle sharing, while stigma, discrimination and fear of authorities discourage help-seeking and are associated with poorer mental and physical health (Taylor, 2016, p. 460; Rhodes, 2002; Strike & Watson, 2019, p. 90; Kappel et al., 2016, p. 2; Ahern, Stuber & Galea, 2007, pp. 188–189, 194–195; Johnson et al., 2023, pp. 354–356).

These historically produced constructions of drugs and their users as deviant, criminal or diseased constitute an order of discourse that shapes the social identities available to people who use drugs within the prohibitionist regime, which is rooted in colonial trade, racialized medicalization, temperance moralism and othering (Courtwright, 2012; Daniels et al., 2021; Dertadian, 2024; Virk, 2024; Taylor, 2016). The prohibitionist order of discourse is one of the macro-level frameworks against which cryptomarket actors position themselves, but it also intersects with a second order of discourse, platform capitalism, whose consumerist and entrepreneurial logics organize how cryptomarkets function as platforms (Srnicek, 2017; Hine, 2015; Childs & Bernot, 2024; Tzanetakis & Marx, 2023). These orders of discourse structure the discursive space within which cryptomarket buyers and vendors construct themselves and their practices. Against this backdrop of prohibition-generated market

structures and risk environments, cryptomarkets emerge as a technologically mediated alternative.

Platformization, drugs and darknet cryptomarkets

This section outlines the digital infrastructure and platform logics that structure darknet cryptomarkets and considers how the process of platformization shapes the discursive resources available to cryptomarket actors.

Platform capitalist infrastructure

The internet has become so embedded in everyday life that we no longer 'go online'; we 'stay connected,' as digital infrastructure is woven into social life and physical objects (Hine, 2015, pp. 32–33). The invisible structuring power of taken-for-granted infrastructures, encodes choices, priorities and surveillance that position some people as norm and others as marginalized, while obscuring the technologies that "enable the diverse forms of data circulation, accumulation, and communication" (Hine, 2015, pp. 9, 46–47).

As digital data has become "an embedded part of the capitalist era," digital platforms like Google, Apple, Amazon and Meta now constitute the dominant infrastructural and economic models of the web, restructuring communication and consumption, opening new pathways for exchange, including drugs (Childs & Bernot, 2024, pp. 150–151, 153). Srnicek (2017, pp. 5–6) conceptualizes this as platform capitalism: large companies build digital platforms, collect data on how people use them, and turn this data into profit and market power. In this process of platformization, user activity itself becomes a commodity, and a small number of platforms dominate their markets through monopolies and network effects (Srnicek, 2017, pp. 5–6, 43–48). Rather than neutral intermediaries, platforms position themselves "between users" as "the ground upon which their activities occur," and act as "extractive apparatus[es] for data" (Srnicek, 2017, pp. 43–48, 75–76), echoing the colonial exploitations underpinning drug prohibition. Through their "core architecture" they govern participation, deciding which users and activities are made visible, with consequences for how marginalized actors, including people who use drugs, can appear and interact in digital spaces (Hine, 2015, p. 12).

As prohibition pushes people who use drugs and drug markets out of public arenas, these dynamics render darknet infrastructures increasingly significant as spaces where behaviours not sanctioned elsewhere become possible.

Digital platforms, drug distribution and the emergence of cryptomarkets

Throughout the history of illicit drug trade, technologies have increased efficiency and reduced distribution risks, and the internet has continued this development (Childs & Bernot, 2024, pp. 150–151, 155). The clearnet, the publicly accessible surface web, hosts public web pages and e-shops selling mainly (semi-)legal, not yet classified substances and prescription drugs. The deep web, familiar to everyday users through password-protected social media and e-commerce platforms, also enables drug trade, for example in Facebook groups and via Instagram and Snapchat accounts. These alternatives are widely accessible but offer limited security (Childs & Bernot, 2024, pp. 150–151, 155; Srnicek, 2017).

Beneath the surface lies the darknet. It conceals the location and identities of its users and is inaccessible through conventional browsers, requiring the Tor network and browser, an open-source anonymizing software. The darknet provides an infrastructure for the 'safer' trade of illicit goods (Tzanetakis & South, 2023, pp. 7–8), and cryptomarkets operate as anonymous digital marketplaces openly dealing in illicit drugs within this space. They are hosted and owned by administrators and populated by anonymous vendors and buyers, resembling conventional digital platforms. Actors use encryption, such as the Pretty Good Privacy (PGP) standard and encrypted third-party apps, for anonymous communication, and finalize transactions through cryptocurrencies to remain untraceable. They often add VPN services to further obscure internet traffic, evading prohibitive control, while utilizing external delivery systems to physically distribute goods (Aldridge, Stevens & Barratt, 2017, p. 789; Bancroft, 2019, p. 3; Maddox, 2020, pp. 24–26; Horobets, Reznik, Denysenko & Kravchuk, 2024, p. 605).

Although the darknet acts like a reaction to the increased datafication and surveillance in platform infrastructures, cryptomarkets do not function independently of platformization principles. They utilize features and design choices, affordances, of mainstream platforms to reshape how exchanges are organized as "user behaviour and platform features co-evolve as

they are shaped by sociopolitical forces and power dynamics within the platform ecosystem" (Childs & Bernot, 2024, pp. 157–159).

The first cryptomarket, Silk Road, was founded in 2011 and demonstrated that "user friendly interfaces can allow the widespread browsing of drug suppliers" while "customer reviews of products and vendors can facilitate trusting environments," especially when combined with cryptocurrencies and escrow payment systems, where a third-party holds funds during transactions to "minimize anxieties about exchanging with scammers or law enforcement" (Childs & Bernot, 2024, pp. 151-152). Market administrators handling disputes, rating and reputation systems, are other common affordances used to determine the reliability of suppliers as customer ratings make poor performance visibly detrimental (Srnicek, 2017, pp. 76–79).

Cryptomarkets fit Srnicek's (2017, pp. 75–76) category of "lean platforms," where administrators provide intermediary infrastructure without producing or selling anything themselves, while taking commission on transactions (Aldridge, Stevens & Barratt, 2017, p. 791; Bancroft, 2019, p. 3). As illicit drug markets become platformized, "illicit drug supply [is] conforming to the technological features of platforms" (Childs & Bernot, 2024, p. 157).

Essentially, cryptomarkets utilize the logics and affordances of licit digital platforms to create and maintain a functional illicit digital environment by controlling platform features and ownership of data analytics (Childs & Bernot, 2024, pp. 158–159).

Platformization organizes the discursive space of cryptomarket forums and reviews, where most of the data for this study is produced, by shaping what cryptomarket actors say, and how, through affordances; reputation systems, community norms and service logics. Together, these elements constitute a second order of discourse, that of platform capitalism, supplying consumer, professional, entrepreneurial and service repertoires through which cryptomarket actors articulate market-mediated identities and relations. In the analysis, prohibition and platformization are approached as intersecting orders of discourse that provide repertoires and categories for cryptomarket talk.

Literature review

This section surveys research on darknet cryptomarkets as drug distribution environments and platform-mediated communities. It outlines who uses cryptomarkets, what substances are traded and how online and offline markets intersect, and then reviews studies on perceived benefits and harms of cryptomarket use, including violence, quality and diffusion, and examines work on trust, governance and reputation within platform logics. Together, these strands provide the empirical and conceptual context for identifying the research gap that this study addresses.

Literature search and selection

The literature review draws primarily on peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books identified through searches in Google Scholar and publisher databases (e.g. Taylor & Francis, Sage, Wiley, and ScienceDirect). I used combinations of keywords such as “drug policy,” “prohibition,” “darknet,” “dark web,” “cryptomarket,” “darknet drug market,” “online drug market,” “illicit drug market,” “digital drug market,” “social media,” “platform,” “platformization,” “platform capitalism,” “colonial,” “counterpublics,” and “community.” From this initial pool, I prioritized recent empirical and theoretical work on darknet cryptomarkets, platform capitalism and the social consequences of drug prohibition, and followed citation trails and recommendations from key articles and on databases to identify additional relevant sources.

Cryptomarkets as hybrid political market communities

Most digitally literate individuals with the necessary technological resources can access darknet cryptomarkets (Maddox, 2020, p. 26; Munksgaard & Demant, 2016, pp. 77–78), but cryptomarkets do not depend solely on digital infrastructure and technical know-how. Research shows that they blend online and offline processes in a hybrid model of digital and physical environments and tools, including social media apps, digital currency, postal services and physical drug markets (Childs & Bernot, 2024, pp. 150–154). Masson and Bancroft (2018, pp. 78–79, 82) define cryptomarkets as hybrid market communities based on shared interests, experience and motivation, meaning that besides being marketplaces for illicit drugs, they also constitute spaces where activities are driven by desires for social relationships, status and community membership. Their interview study shows a moral

economy of exchange in which non-economic motivations and justifications are central to shaping cryptomarket actors' behaviours and moral positioning.

Keeping members participating in such spaces requires generating personal or political commitment (Masson & Bancroft, 2018, p. 79), and these communities also exist in a political dimension established by the politically motivated foundation of Silk Road (Barratt & Aldridge, 2016). The founder, Ross Ulbricht, alias Dread Pirate Roberts (DPR), was a self-proclaimed "radical libertarian revolutionary," and Silk Road has been described as "a domain of activity for marginalized populations who prefer high-choice drug access," promoting peer-to-peer architectures by enacting "security through technical designs" that avoid centralized control and the "regulatory powers of the state" (Maddox, 2020, pp. 24–25). This provides cryptomarkets with inherent social and political purpose, acting as a site for community activism, a virtual place where social and political structures like prohibition can be opposed in practice, besides being 'just' markets for illicit substances (Barratt & Aldridge, 2016, p. 3; Masson & Bancroft, 2018).

Demographics and drug consumption patterns

While most cryptomarket users have experience in physical markets, the share of Global Drug Survey respondents who reported using cryptomarkets grew from 4.7% to 15% between 2014 and 2020 (Horobets, Reznik, Denysenko & Kravchuk, 2024, pp. 602–603; Bancroft, 2022, p. 673). In the European Web Survey on Drugs, 7.7% of respondents reported using cryptomarkets as a drug source, and most also used other supply sources (Karden & Strizek, 2022, pp. 2–6).

The Global Drug Survey profiles cryptomarket users as younger (24 vs. 40 years), more often male (87% vs. 67%), and more active in the clubbing scene (Masson & Bancroft, 2018, p. 80). Barratt, Ferris and Winstock (2016, p. 26) add that in their research population, 91.5% identified as white, 55% were in paid employment, 35% were students, and 84.8% had completed secondary school, including 38% with a university degree. The European Web Survey on Drugs (2017–2018) reinforces this profile and finds that darknet users had used a greater variety of substances over their lifetime than non-darknet users (Karden & Strizek, 2022, pp. 2–6).

Cannabis, MDMA and psychedelics are identified as the most commonly purchased substances, alongside prescription medications; harder drugs associated with problem use are present but less common (Aldridge, Stevens & Barratt, 2017, p. 792; Barratt & Aldridge, 2016, p. 2; Barratt, Ferris & Winstock, 2016, p. 28). Use tends to be "occasional or recreational in nature," though "some dependent and potentially problematic use" is also documented (Barratt & Aldridge, 2016, p. 2). Bancroft (2022, p. 673) characterizes cryptomarket users as tending towards the "psychonaut" profile, meaning "those who use drugs for self-exploration," though Barratt, Ferris and Winstock (2016, p. 26) also note that "there are many self-identified dependent and addicted [people who inject drugs] who find the predictability, professionalism and stability of supply a significant benefit."

Cryptomarkets thus remain a small part of the overall illicit drug market. Their users largely resist the stereotypical categorization that prohibition discourse produces and as cryptomarket purchases require "technological resources and skill, and purchases many days in advance of intended consumption," it may not suit "many people with the most problematic patterns of drug use" (Aldridge, Stevens & Barratt, 2017, pp. 792–793). The result is a redistribution of harm; digitally literate users reduce "some of the collateral harms of the illicit drug market" (Childs & Bernot, 2024, p. 163), while more marginalized individuals remain in physical markets where risk and systemic violence are concentrated, a process likened to gentrification (Bancroft, 2022, pp. 673–674).

Darknet drug diffusion: benefits and harms

Cryptomarkets are dependent on offline drug markets and affected by the same global and local factors, but their features reshape the perceived benefits and harms of drug purchasing compared to offline settings (Barratt & Aldridge, 2016, p. 2).

Violence and personal safety

Rather than the insecurity and violence characteristic of physical markets, cryptomarkets emphasize "conflict resolution, cooperation and professionalism" (Bancroft, 2022, p. 674), relying on market relationships built on quality, competition, safety, trust, and "reputation, displayed materials and socially remote interactions" (Bancroft, 2022, p. 673). By bypassing face-to-face exchange through delivery systems, cryptomarkets reduce much of the violence associated with offline markets, since physical intimidation is unavailable in digital

environments; vendors instead depend on customer service and dispute resolution, providing an "independent governance structure" (Barratt, Ferris & Winstock, 2016, p. 25).

Cryptomarket buyers report "fewer threats to personal safety and violence than reported in connection to sourcing through known dealers, strangers and even friends," while evidence regarding rip-off risks is mixed (Aldridge, Stevens & Barratt, 2017, p. 791; Barratt, Ferris & Winstock, 2016, p. 27). Barratt, Ferris and Winstock (2016, pp. 28–29) find that violence increases with market openness, cryptomarkets representing the lowest levels of violence and the highest degree of closedness. Non-violent risks remain, however, including blackmail, fraud, cyberbullying and doxxing (gaining access to personal information and threatening exposure) (Barratt & Aldridge, 2016, p. 3). Survey respondents were also "three times more likely to report being caught by law enforcement in connection to their offline drug buying than reported for cryptomarket purchases" (Aldridge, Stevens & Barratt, 2017, pp. 791–792).

Quality, harm reduction and pricing

Higher drug quality is among the key reasons customers cite for cryptomarket use (Barratt & Aldridge, 2016, p. 2). Studies show that cryptomarket-sourced contents matched the advertised substance in 90% of samples, with purity substantially exceeding offline-sourced samples (Aldridge, Stevens & Barratt, 2017, p. 790). Reputation scores, reviews, forum discussions and vendor product descriptions give buyers more information and the ability to compare across vendors, reducing the information asymmetries inherent in illicit markets, potentially lowering prices while increasing the chance of products being sold as advertised (Bancroft, 2022, p. 673; Aldridge, Stevens & Barratt, 2017, pp. 790–792). Both recreational and dependent users engage in "rational consumer discourse" and "indigenous harm reduction" practices, sharing information about quality, safe use and dosing (Barratt & Aldridge, 2016, p. 2). Some studies also show, however, that cryptomarket drugs are not always more potent, easier to obtain or cheaper than in the face-to-face market (Masson & Bancroft, 2018, p. 79).

Drug diffusion and market resilience

The wide variety of substances offered provides "a new mechanism for the diffusion of specific drugs," and cryptomarkets may act as a "supply gateway" for individuals without access to traditional markets (Aldridge, Stevens & Barratt, 2017, p. 792). By analogy with

tobacco and alcohol, increased availability and reduced prices could increase prevalence, intensify use and widen drug repertoires, though these effects likely apply primarily to the substances that dominate cryptomarket selling (Aldridge, Stevens & Barratt, 2017, pp. 792–793). For many users, however, the appeal lies in perceived autonomy, predictability and moral community rather than cost alone (Masson & Bancroft, 2018; Aldridge et al., 2017).

Large-scale law enforcement busts and exit scams repeatedly interrupt cryptomarket activity, but new markets emerge quickly, use continues to increase, and disruption tends to displace activity rather than deter it, often pushing it back to more violent offline sources. Overall trust in cryptomarkets appears resilient to both law enforcement and internal betrayals (Van Buskirk, Bruno & Dobbins, 2017).

Trust in cryptomarkets

Despite their illicit nature, cryptomarkets are not lawless, but function through internal community regulation, "bounded by encryption [...], a clear value system and norms of behaviour being socially regulated amongst users and through the platform affordances" (Maddox, 2020, p. 26). Platform administrators thus do not merely host transactions but configure the rules and infrastructures through which community regulation is possible.

Drawing on Durkheim, discussing the nature of the social contract, Collins (2008, pp. 24–25) argues that purely rational actors seeking to minimize risk would resort to fraud and defection, making trust, rather than rational calculation, essential to social life. In cryptomarkets, trust is closely linked to social identity construction performed through discourse (Bancroft, 2019, p. 3; Lorenzo-Dus & Di Cristofaro, 2018, p. 609). Because illicit anonymous markets lack the legal institutions and accountabilities of open societies, cryptomarket affordances for community evaluation become central tools for signalling trust and managing risk: reputation systems, ratings, user feedback, escrow and forum discussions embed moral sanctioning and help markets operate reliably (Bancroft, 2019, pp. 3–4; Barratt, Ferris & Winstock, 2016, pp. 24–25).

"Trust signals are performances which are carefully selected by both sellers and buyers" to cope with "significant information asymmetry" (Masson & Bancroft, 2018, p. 83), and buyer-controlled behaviours such as repeat purchases (becoming a "regular") function as

important signals of reliability (Bancroft, 2019, p. 10; Maddox, 2020, p. 26). Datafication processes further "provide a way for dark web cryptomarket administrators to govern the behaviour of vendors on their platform" while underpinning feedback systems that highlight the centrality of trust (Childs & Bernot, 2024, pp. 150–154).

Of particular importance to this study are in-market discussion forums, where buyers and vendors negotiate trust and expose misbehaving actors (Masson & Bancroft, 2018, p. 83; Lorenzo-Dus & Di Cristofaro, 2018, pp. 611, 622), which is crucial since reliability can be impersonated (Moeller, 2023, p. 30). Lorenzo-Dus and Di Cristofaro (2018, p. 609) specify vendor trustworthiness as organized around three core dimensions: expertise, integrity and benevolence, signalled through lexical choices and evaluative stances that highlight product knowledge, honesty and care for customers and community. This model provides a key lens for the present study, examining how these qualities are performed through interpretative repertoires and subject positions rather than as isolated attributes. Bancroft (2019, pp. 10–14) further notes that trust in specific vendors "is in part a function of trust in the other people who also purchase that product or from those vendors," constituting the norms and values that define community membership and the boundaries of trustworthiness.

Bancroft (2019, p. 8) also emphasizes paradoxical trust dimensions. Cryptomarket actors often behave as if the market is already compromised, which is read as community solidarity rooted in shared marginalization under the global war on drugs. Trust-related affordances such as escrow present buyers with "lesser evils," requiring them to trust either the administrator or the vendor (Bancroft, 2019, pp. 4, 9–10) and vendors adopt "practices of self-branding, professionalization and engagement in digital environments," using logos and the language of professional team operations to generate a sense of security and trust (Childs & Bernot, 2024, pp. 159–160). Cryptomarket users thus combine community validation that develops over time with platform-based reputation mechanisms to build and assess trust (Masson & Bancroft, 2018, p. 81).

Situating the present study and research gap

Prior cryptomarket research has mapped user demographics, substances, harms and benefits, and analyzed platform governance and trust using surveys, transaction data and interviews. A smaller body of work examines how trust is discursively performed in cryptomarket

interactions, noting that vendors and buyers signal trustworthiness through competence, community norms and reputation management within platform constraints (Bancroft, 2019; Lorenzo-Dus & Di Cristofaro, 2018; Childs & Bernot, 2024). Some studies examine discursively constructed identities and related themes. Lorenzo-Dus and Di Cristofaro (2018) analyze Silk Road forum data to show how community members construct trust and identity through discourse, identifying expertise, integrity and benevolence as key dimensions and viewing trust as a function of identity positioning in a "community of commerce."

Masson and Bancrofts (2018) ethnographic interview study examine how users account for their actions and how morality is constructed in cryptomarket exchange, using the anthropology of markets rather than discourse analysis. Bancroft (2019) frames trust in cryptomarkets as discursively performed through cultural competence and shared community norms, while Maddox (2020) studies identity construction and moral frameworks through digital ethnography, examining language, narrative and positioning without employing a strict discourse-analytic method. Consequently, relatively few studies treat cryptomarket forums as sites where identities and motives are systematically constructed through language, and none situates their findings within a framework that explicitly connects prohibition and platform capitalism as intersecting orders of discourse.

This study addresses this gap by using a discursive-psychological, repertoire-based analysis of a Swedish-language cryptomarket forum to examine how buyers construct their identities and motives as drug users, how vendors present themselves and their businesses, and how these constructions together negotiate, reproduce or resist prohibitionist and platform logics in everyday forum talk. The nationally specific Swedish context, shaped by a strict prohibition model, adds a dimension absent from prior cryptomarket discourse research, though it is not treated as an exceptional or extreme case, and the study builds on Bancroft (2019) and Lorenzo-Dus and Di Cristofaro's (2018) findings that trust in cryptomarkets is discursively performed, extending this through an interpretive repertoire framework that connects these local performances to the macro-level orders of discourse of prohibition and platform capitalism.

Theoretical framework

This chapter begins with the basic assumptions of social constructionism as a philosophy of science, and then presents discourse analysis as a social constructionist theoretical and methodological package, with particular attention to the concepts that constitute the core of the analysis.

The position and basic assumptions of social constructionism

Social constructionism is a theoretical perspective seeking to reveal how taken-for-granted surface phenomena obscure how social reality is produced. It can be understood as a critical stance, a sociological theory, an ontological position and an epistemology, but across these registers its core premise is that social actions are not 'natural' but socially constructed through language, which also shapes knowledge and its production. Language is a social product created through human interaction, structuring our experience of reality (Sohlberg & Sohlberg, 2019, pp. 61, 66, 84, 91; Wenneberg, 2010, pp. 10–14).

Social constructionism assumes an idealist ontological origin, holding that what ultimately exists is non-material. Positions vary from views that accept an external physical reality but treat our knowledge of it as socially constructed, to radically idealist perspectives that deny an objective, uninterpreted social world (Sohlberg & Sohlberg, 2019, pp. 61, 66). This study follows a tradition that, regardless of one's stance on physical reality, adopts an ontological idealism about social reality: what people define as real can have real consequences, a logic captured in the Thomas theorem (Sahlin, 2013, pp. 135–137; Sohlberg & Sohlberg, 2019, pp. 66, 316).

Epistemology concerns how we understand, obtain and legitimize knowledge, and in social constructionism, what counts as knowledge about reality and society is not determined by neutral inquiry but shaped by social factors such as power and competing interests (Sohlberg & Sohlberg, 2019, p. 75; Wenneberg, 2010, pp. 80–81, 84–85). Since social position shapes perceptions of reality, and control over the production and distribution of ideas and norms helps justify the position of ruling classes (Sahlin, 2013, p. 141; Liedman & Linnell, 2003, pp. 110–115), this perspective examines taken-for-granted assumptions about knowledge and its production, here illuminating the position of cryptomarket actors in relation to prohibition

and platform capitalism, and how these structures both constrain and produce social identities and illicit markets.

These assumptions mean that I treat cryptomarket actors' self-presentations not as transparent reports of underlying 'true' identities, but as discursive constructions that draw on, reproduce and sometimes challenge wider systems of knowledge and ideology around drugs, drug users and markets. The study seeks to illuminate competing definitions of these fields, identities and social worlds, while recognizing that my position as researcher necessarily shapes interpretation and knowledge production.

Social constructionism and discourse analysis

Discourse analysis and social constructionism form part of a broader hermeneutic tradition of interpretation and understanding with roots in textual analysis (Sohlberg & Sohlberg, 2019, p. 308). Winther Jørgensen and Phillips (2000, pp. 10–12) describe discourse analysis as a philosophical, theoretical and methodological package with a social constructionist foundation built on four premises: (1) a critical stance towards "self-evident" knowledge; (2) the historical and cultural specificity of representations; (3) knowledge and understanding are created and maintained through social processes; and (4) a close link between knowledge and social action, as constructions of worldviews, knowledge and truth have real social consequences.

According to discourse theory, the meaning of social phenomena can never be definitively fixed, and discourse analysis studies the struggles over such definitions (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000, p. 31). Attempts to fix meaning seek hegemony, locking language into particular interpretations that come to define reality, while deconstruction shows that the same phenomena could be constructed differently, revealing taken-for-granted assumptions about our "natural" world (Sohlberg & Sohlberg, 2019, p. 311; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000, pp. 12–13, 56).

This is directly relevant to prohibition, which can be understood not as a neutral perspective on drugs, but as a hegemonic way of defining them and their users. Discourse can thus be defined as "a particular way of talking about and understanding the world," that presupposes that "our way of talking is not a neutral reflection of our surroundings, our identities and

social relations, but plays an active role in creating and changing them" (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000, p. 7). In this sense, discourse analysis is both a theory that stems from social constructionism and a method for social constructionist studies.

Discourse, identity, interpretative repertoires, and orders of discourse

A critical approach to discourse analysis views discourse and discursive practice as shaped by power relations and ideology, contributing to the constitution of social identities, social relations, systems of knowledge and meaning (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000, p. 73; Fairclough, 1992, p. 12). Potter and Wetherell (1987, pp. 95–101) review traditional theories of the self to show that "the self" is itself constructed in discourse; rather than a stable entity that can be objectively measured, it is assembled from available cultural resources and categories (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, pp. 108–109).

Categorization is "worked up in passages of discourse" and helps make sense of the social world, providing "building blocks" that organize discourse, justify hierarchies and accomplish goals, including stereotyping and discrimination (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, pp. 118–120, 136–137). Discourse is therefore understood as action-oriented: people use language to claim, explain, justify, excuse and blame, simultaneously defining the local context and expressing wider ideological purposes, both intended and unintended (Potter & Wetherell, 1988, pp. 168–171).

Interpretative repertoires

To conceptualize these linguistic building blocks, Potter and Wetherell introduce *interpretative repertoires* as culturally familiar ways of talking; coherent sets of terms, metaphors and figures of speech that speakers draw on when constructing versions of actions, selves and events. The functions of discourse are approached by examining variability in how phenomena are described in different contexts, treating variation as an index of function. By tracing regularities across this variation, analysis can highlight reproductions or resistances to established discourses (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, pp. 95–101; 1988, pp. 170–172). The analysis also draws on discursive-psychological work on discursive devices such as extreme case formulations, category entitlements, lists, narratives and contrast structures, which speakers use to manage accountability, stake and interest (Wiggins, 2017). These devices are

not analyzed as isolated units but as local realizations of wider interpretative repertoires, indicating how cryptomarket actors construct and negotiate identities, responsibilities and risk in their accounts, which are examined in sequence as actions in interaction rather than as isolated statements (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 1988).

In this study, these dimensions are central because the research questions concern how social identities related to drug use are discursively constructed in cryptomarket actors' self-representations and forum interactions, and how these identities are mediated through social relations that reproduce or reshape existing systems of knowledge and meaning. The central unit of analysis is the interpretative repertoire, identified in stretches of text (posts or sequences of posts) and examined in relation to the subject positions they make available to cryptomarket actors within larger structures (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 1988).

Orders of discourse and the micro-macro link

I draw on the concept of *orders of discourse* from the critical tradition to situate the repertoire analysis at the macro level, without adopting the full critical discourse-analytic framework. Orders of discourse are defined as "the totality of discursive practices within an institution or society" and are used to explore relationships between discursive formations within such orders (Fairclough, 1992, p. 43), while also emphasizing how texts are linked to their contexts and to other discourses (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000, p. 56).

Hence, repertoire analysis is used to connect micro-level forum talk and self-presentation in meso-level virtual communities with macro-level structures such as prohibition and platform capitalism, here treated as the broader discursive contexts within which these repertoires are produced.

Prohibition and platform capitalism as orders of discourse

Building on Fairclough's (1992, p. 43) concept of orders of discourse, I treat prohibition and platform capitalism as historically produced, technologically mediated discursive formations that structure the space in which cryptomarket actors construct themselves and their practices. They are not variables to be measured or theories to be tested, but macro-level frameworks whose repertoires, categories and taken-for-granted assumptions are reproduced, negotiated

or contested in actors' talk, orienting the analysis toward how global drug policy and platform logics are taken up, reworked or resisted in cryptomarket talk.

Prohibition functions as an order of discourse that provides the categories, identities and justifications available to, and resisted by, drug users and market actors; deviance, law, risk, drug policy, stigma, criminality, medicalization, science, substance use disorder (Taylor, 2016; Daniels et al., 2021; Courtwright, 2012; Dertadian, 2024; Virk, 2024).

Platform capitalism operates as a second order of discourse, supplying the consumer, entrepreneurial and service repertoires of quality, professionalism, customer service, trust, reputation and efficiency through which market relations are articulated in actors' talk and mediated by platform affordances (Childs & Bernot, 2024; Srnicek, 2017; Hine, 2015; Tzanetakis & Marx, 2023).

Method

Social constructionism, with its focus on how social realities and identities are produced in relation to social structures (Sohlberg & Sohlberg, 2019, pp. 311–312), provides the methodological point of departure for this study. Netnography is used primarily to generate and contextualize data, while discursive-psychological interpretative repertoire analysis constitutes the core analytic method.

Methods and methodological considerations

Ethnographic approaches are well suited to examine how social constructions are produced, utilizing fieldwork, observation, interviews and documents, enabling context-sensitive interpretation, typically proceeding abductively between emerging ideas and empirical material (Göransson, 2019, pp. 12–13, 16–17; Hine, 2015, p. 25). Netnography extends this interpretative practice to online settings (Kozinets, 2010, p. 56). Discourse analysis likewise resists a strict separation between data and interpretation, using close analysis of language to develop hypotheses about the purposes and consequences of discourse (Potter & Wetherell, 1988, p. 170). "Data" are thus treated as analytically identified discursive functions rather than raw text, which both shape and reflect researcher preconceptions, making reflexive contextualization a central responsibility (Sohlberg & Sohlberg, 2019, p. 313).

An “ethnography for the internet” follows connections between micro-level activities and macro-level phenomena, and I treat darknet cryptomarkets as a field shaped by local community logics and broader structures such as prohibition and platform capitalism, allowing micro-level forum talk to be related to wider online and offline systems, recognizing that “wider systems are meaningfully present on a local scale” (Hine, 2015, pp. 24–26).

Participation

Hine (2015) argues that researchers must reflect on what it means to ‘be online’ to grasp participation and knowledge production in digital ethnography, conceptualizing the internet as at once a place, a tool and a way of being that takes on different meanings in different settings, revealing how digital infrastructures shape what is taken for granted. Darknet cryptomarkets may embody all of these functions for users, enabling forms of expression and practice that are not available in offline or more visible online spaces. While some ethnographers stress active participation, others, particularly in digital ethnography, argue that participation can also take more passive forms such as “lurking,” reacting to content and using the same technologies and platforms as community members (Hine, 2015, pp. 27–29, 36, 43, 45; Masson & Bancroft, 2018, p. 80; Kozinets, 2010). Ethnographic principles therefore guide my use of covert non-participant internet-mediated observation, and I treat lurking and technical immersion as limited forms of participation that both inform my understanding of the field and serve as methods of data collection, while discourse analysis remains the main analytic method

Naturally occurring data

The choice of covert non-participant observation rests on a preference for naturally occurring data. From a critical perspective, interviews primarily reflect the interview situation and are shaped by expectations about what ‘should and could’ be said, whereas naturally occurring interaction is produced independently of the researcher’s presence. Following Silverman (as cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015, pp. 41–46), I treat forum posts as sequences of action in social interaction through which everyday processes of social construction can be “caught” and analyzed in context, which aligns with a discourse-analytic focus.

Ethical considerations

The methodological design of this study, planned and conducted in line with the ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (Association of Internet Researchers, 2020), was strongly shaped by ethical considerations. Because activities on the studied cryptomarket are illegal, there are ethical concerns about potential risks for unknowing participants, and my primary responsibility is to minimize the risk of identification and harm, such as arrest and prosecution (Barratt & Aldridge, 2016; Martin & Christin, 2016, p. 85). Although drugs are advertised openly and discussions about drug use and distribution occur freely on the forum, I assess this risk as relatively low, as users protect themselves through anonymizing technologies and pseudonyms; to minimize risk further, pseudonyms and the name of the market remain undisclosed, and Swedish-language quotes are translated into English while non-sensitive English-language posts are quoted verbatim.

Martin and Christin (2016, pp. 85, 88–89) highlight risks that research data or findings could be used in criminal investigations. This study does not estimate revenues, volumes or identify specific actors, and produces no information beyond what is publicly visible. I do not collaborate with law enforcement, and analysis focuses on discursive constructions rather than on mapping criminal activity, minimizing the risk that results could be used directly against market actors, although "highlighting previously unknown criminal trends both to the public and to law enforcement" could draw unwanted attention, "increas[ing] the likelihood of prosecution." Nonetheless, scientific knowledge about cryptomarkets can help counteract misinformation and contribute to a broader understanding of these markets and their users.

In ever-changing digital contexts, no single ethical framework fits all settings; the distinction between public and private spaces is central and structures responsibilities regarding observation, disclosure and informed consent. From a computer security perspective, publicly available data may be regarded as "amenable to study," while still subject to ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice; key considerations include accessibility or barriers to entry, potential benefits to the community and whether members are aware that "outside observers may be monitoring communications" (Martin & Christin, 2016, pp. 86–87).

That cryptomarkets operate on the darknet could constitute a barrier, suggesting that these spaces are private and require consent to be studied (Barratt & Aldridge, 2016). However, information can generally be considered public if barriers to entry are low, memberships reasonably large and members aware that outside observation might occur. In line with Martin and Christin (2016, pp. 86–87), I consider the studied cryptomarket forum a public domain: access requires only basic anonymizing tools, vendor pages and forums can be accessed without login, membership appears sizeable based on the number of active threads and contributors, and users are aware that external actors, including law enforcement, likely monitor their activity, shaping their behaviour.

Under these conditions, covert observation does not violate reasonable expectations of privacy, provided that data are handled to prevent identification and users are represented fairly. Obtaining informed consent from an entire anonymous online community is not straightforward, as forums consist of sub-groups with different interests and motives, and it is impossible to ensure that every individual has consented; covert observation in public online spaces does not require individual consent and avoids the deception sometimes used in participant ethnography to gain access (Martin & Christin, 2016, pp. 87–88). As long as the data cannot be used against actors, covert observation remains compatible with beneficence, whereas in more identifiable settings, such as non-anonymous social media with clearer barriers to entry, researchers would need to disclose their presence, obtain consent and undertake extensive anonymization, much of which is already performed by cryptomarket users themselves.

The collected material consists of publicly available forum posts and vendor pages and does not contain real names, addresses or other obvious personal identifiers. IP addresses and technical metadata were not collected, and I stored the excerpts needed for analysis on a password-protected device. In line with GDPR's principles of data minimization and purpose limitation, no additional identifying information has been gathered, and the data were used exclusively for this research project (Lunds Universitet, 2023). Given the absence of identifiers, the risk of identification remains low.

Researcher reflexivity

My experiences as a social worker and healthcare counsellor in opioid substitution treatment indirectly led me into the field of cryptomarkets. While opioid substitution treatment is a harm reduction intervention situated within prohibition and a medicalized view of drug use, my own stance is more critical: I do not treat drug use as a problem in its own right and understand substance use disorder as a complex interaction of social, structural and biological factors (Heilig, 2019, pp. 177–179; Bång et al., 2023, pp. 68–69, 72–80). From a social constructionist perspective, knowledge is socially situated, and researchers may be unaware of how their own position shapes which perspectives they adopt or ignore (Harding, 1993, pp. 54, 56). My position is structurally different from that of the community I study, making me an "outsider" in ways that both inform and complicate interpretation; my professional identity is partly constituted by the same prohibition structures I analyze, which may influence how I select and interpret data. Aware that my critical stance may add nuance but also risk romanticizing resistance, I seek to begin analysis from how actors construct their own positions, treating variability in their accounts as a key analytical resource while recognizing that my prior understandings of prohibition and platform logics still shape what I attend to in the material.

Entering the field

My entry into the virtual social world of cryptomarkets was guided by Kozinets's (2010) netnography, an ethnographic approach to online communities that focuses on sustained engagement with computer-mediated discussions and communal, meso-level dynamics (Kozinets, 2010, pp. 8–9, 56). This fits the focus on cryptomarket forums, which, as digital platforms, are situated between buyers, vendors and broader structures such as prohibition.

Before planning this study, while working in opioid substitution treatment, I followed drug-focused sub-forums on Reddit to access perspectives on patients' lives not visible in healthcare settings; this "pre-study" informed my interest in drug-using communities and naturally occurring online data, and through Luffarns blogg (the Bums Blog), a semi-ironic clearnet site about drugs and crime, I learned how to access darknet cryptomarkets (Luffarn, 2025). This insider-mediated entry initially shaped, but was later revised by, my research-based understanding of the cryptomarket community.

Data collection and lurking

The study focuses on the Swedish-language section of a darknet cryptomarket forum, delimiting data collection to a manageable scope. Data collection followed Kozinets's (2010, p. 61) flow of netnographic research, adapted for a discourse-analytic study. I conducted covert, non-participatory observation (lurking) from 25 January to 14 April 2026, using a VPN and the Tor browser to access the market. Initial undirected browsing familiarized me with the platform's structure and interactional norms, after which data collection became progressively more focused on areas relevant to my research questions.

The studied cryptomarket has an interface similar to contemporary e-commerce sites, with category-based product listings and vendor profile pages, as well as a multi-category forum, from which most of the data were collected. I focused on vendor profile pages and forum threads where vendors and buyers discuss vendors, products, risks, drug use and everyday market life, as these were most relevant to self-presentation, motivation, trust and relations to prohibition and platform affordances.

The "vendor discussion" subsection contained 122 threads, mainly vendor-initiated presentations with buyer responses on security, reliability and quality, forming the largest and most active part of the forum. Threads were sorted by number of replies, and the ten most active were selected as the primary vendor corpus, supplemented by additional threads chosen on the basis of vendor ratings, cross-references and thematic relevance. I selected the most active general discussion threads on drug use and market life ("Speed", "Cannabis", "Swedish discussion"), along with threads on operational security, harm reduction and a shorter thread, "Your personal relationship with drugs," which was directly relevant to identity and motivation. Across all included threads, there were 6,852 posts, of which 1,059 were collected for analysis, guided by relevance to self-presentation, motivations, trust, quality and references to prohibition and platform affordances. For an overview of the vendor threads and post quantities, see Appendix A, and for the remaining forum threads and posts, see Appendix B.

Analytic procedure

As the primary analytic framework, I employ Potter and Wetherell's (1987, 1988) concept of interpretative repertoires to examine patterned variability in how identities, drugs and markets

are talked into being, drawing structurally on previous discourse-analytic work on online drug forums (Ceuterick et al., 2021). To highlight identity and motivation as discursive practice, I examine how pre-identified orders of discourse related to prohibition and platformization are reproduced, transformed or contested in actors' talk, while remaining open to what actors themselves express. Following Winther Jørgensen and Phillips (2000, pp. 137, 142), the framework was developed in interaction with the empirical field, making explicit how the framework shapes the object and how the object shapes the framework; my prior constructions of prohibition and platform capitalism inevitably shape the interpretative work, and making these preconceptions explicit is part of the analytic transparency of the study rather than an attempt to claim neutrality. Within this framework, micro-level repertoires are related to Fairclough's (1992) orders of discourse, treating prohibition and platform capitalism as macro-level logics that shape how drug-related identities and markets can be constructed.

Analysis follows Potter and Wetherell's (1987, pp. 158–176) ten-stage framework in an abductive and iterative rather than strictly sequential manner. In practical terms, analysis proceeded in overlapping steps: identifying stretches of text where users described their relationship to drugs, themselves or the market; coding these passages for recurring ways of talking (for example, drug use as self-medication, as compatible with ordinary adult life, or as problematic), while attending to discursive devices, comparing patterns across the corpus to group them into interpretative repertoires based on their core functions in constructing identities and motives (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 1988; Wiggins, 2017). Coding was conducted inclusively, with naturalistic forum data minimizing researcher influence, while providing "the widest possible variation in accounts" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 162). An initial reading generated a provisional set of repertoires, and subsequent readings refined, split or discarded categories in light of further instances and counter-examples. Discursive devices such as contrast structures, extreme case formulations and shifts in footing were examined to trace how repertoires were enacted and subject positions constructed, showing how particular versions of vendors, buyers and markets were made to appear reasonable, factual or morally warranted (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 1988; Wiggins, 2017).

Validation

In line with Potter and Wetherell's (1987, pp. 169–176) criteria for evaluating discourse-analytic work, the analysis was guided by considerations of: (1) coherence, meaning that proposed repertoires accounted for both dominant patterns and deviant cases; (2) participants' own orientations, attending to how forum users themselves treated particular formulations as relevant or problematic; (3) problem generation, that is, the extent to which the analysis opened up new discursive questions and tensions; and (4) fruitfulness, in terms of the insights generated about cryptomarket identities, motives and market logics. These criteria informed iterative movements between corpus, coding and interpretation rather than serving as a separate validation stage.

Methodological reflections and limitations

This study is based on a limited subset of posts from one Swedish-language cryptomarket forum, and it is not possible to know how many market users participate in forum discussions or how those who post relate to the wider user population. The analysis therefore does not claim representativeness for all cryptomarket users or markets; the findings should be read as an in-depth case of how identities, motivations and trust are constructed in a particular setting, rather than as generalizable estimates of prevalence or attitudes. Forum participants likely constitute particular subgroups and cannot be treated as representative of all buyers and vendors, yet the material suggests considerable diversity in terms of experiences, motivations and positions, which strengthens its value for mapping available discursive resources. The focus of discursive psychology on how identities, motives and evaluations are performed in talk, rather than on whether they correspond to an underlying reality, partly mitigates the fact that accounts cannot be verified, though also constrains what can be said about users' biographies or material conditions beyond the discourse itself, and the anonymity of the material limits systematic intersectional analysis.

Most data was originally written in Swedish and translated into English for analysis and presentation. Translation obscures direct links between specific users and specific posts, which is ethically advantageous, but risks altering nuances of expression; some loss of linguistic specificity is inevitable, despite working back and forth between originals and translations during analysis. The covert netnographic design avoided disrupting the community and reduced ethical risks, but meant forum actors could not comment on or

contest interpretations. The analysis therefore reflects my position as a social worker and critical researcher situated within prohibition-shaped institutions, which may have sensitized me to certain themes, such as stigma, treatment avoidance and harm reduction, more than others.

Analysis

Analysis addresses research questions 1 and 2 by presenting the buyer and vendor interpretative repertoires and indicating the subject positions they make available to cryptomarket actors. Before presenting the analysis, a brief visual and descriptive overview of the market provides orientation and helps contextualize the subsequent repertoire analysis.

Market overview

The market looks modern and easy to navigate, visually close to contemporary e-commerce platforms, with a header bar for market, forum and account functions, a search box and drug category headers leading to sub-pages that also include harm reduction information and links to drug-testing labs. Shipping filters allow users to select origin and destination, and the landing page displays brightly coloured category icons followed by vendor product listings with photographs.

User profiles are sparse on the buyer side, typically containing only links to forum posts, whereas vendor profiles are considerably more information-dense, organized into tabs: “listings,” “reviews,” “about,” “terms and conditions” and “test4pay” (where buyers can independently test products and disclose results in return for compensation). The “about” sections read like company presentations that foreground professionalism, quality, innovation, security, customer service and experience. Vendor names add to a business-as-usual effect; many borrow directly from well-known Swedish chains and brands, quietly equating illicit substances with medicines and weekend leisure, even though candy, snacks and heroin occupy very different ends of that spectrum for many people.

The forum follows a conventional structure, with a left-column menu organizing categories such as ‘official,’ ‘vendors,’ ‘drugs,’ ‘knowledge,’ ‘darknet/tor,’ ‘regional’ and ‘general.’ Within this structure, activity clusters around official announcements, vendor discussion and

drug-specific sub-forums (for example ‘cannabis,’ ‘stimulants,’ ‘opiates’ and ‘harm reduction’), where users negotiate quality, risk and community norms.

In my material, the cryptomarket can be read as an online counterpart to offline marginalized drug scenes, but with distinctive affordances for risk management, information and community. Cryptomarket actors do not appear to be tucked away in the dark parts of the internet entirely by choice: many of their activities are directly or indirectly shaped by prohibition. The use of anonymous personas and encrypted spaces, discussions of stealth, delivery systems, harm reduction and best-use advice all reflect adaptation to a prohibitionist regime that pushes drug markets and people who use drugs into the digital shadows, while also suggesting that these virtual spaces differ in character from their offline counterparts.

In this relatively young market, which several users describe as the successor to a popular cryptomarket recently taken down by law enforcement, there is a clear sense of continuity and community as users and vendors recognize each other from previous markets and transactions. At the same time, most interactions centre on practical issues such as requests for substances, reviews and feedback on stealth, quality and customer service, indicating that everyday commerce and community building are closely intertwined.

Cryptomarket actor self-presentation repertoires

This section examines how cryptomarket actors present themselves as drug users and market participants through interpretative repertoires. It is organized in two steps. First, I analyze buyer self-presentations, identifying five repertoires through which users construct identities and motivations for drug use under prohibition. Second, I turn to vendor self-presentation and interactional threads, showing how vendors and buyers co-construct repertoires that foreground subject positions, trust and motivation.

The first part of the analysis focuses primarily on a self-presentational thread labeled “Your personal relationship with drugs,” to examine the interpretative repertoires through which cryptomarket actors account for their drug use. The thread contains only 26 posts, which limits its representativeness, but its explicitly performative and encouraging prompt activates discourses available for talking about drug use and possible motivations. While drug use across the forum is generally normalized and discussed mainly in terms of effects and quality,

this thread invites meta-accounts of use and is therefore treated as a strategic site for seeing how identities and motivations are discursively built. The aim is not generalization, but to map the repertoires available to cryptomarket actors when accounting for their drug use and to examine how they are deployed and combined.

I begin by presenting the initial post and some subsequent posts by the thread-starter (TS) as an introductory vignette of interpretative repertoires used to self-present and motivate drug use. Within a single turn, TS draws on multiple repertoires, occupies shifting subject positions, and explicitly invokes the contrast between the culturally available "drug addict" identity and the "functional average Joe," orienting to a recognizable repertoire rooted in prohibition discourse while both distancing from and conforming to it. Following Wetherell (1998), this can be seen as the practice of invoking social identities. As TS positions themself in relation to, and against, a recognizable cultural repertoire, they also make these repertoires of identity and motivation available as resources for subsequent posters. In doing so, they help set the discursive terms within which others can locate themselves, illustrating how social identities are interactionally produced (Wetherell, 1998; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; 1988).

The vignette illustrates the analytic logic of the section as a whole, in which stretches of naturally occurring forum talk are treated as units of analysis and examined for how they mobilize interpretative repertoires and subject positions. These local patterns are then traced across the wider corpus. Repertoires are treated as situational resources rather than fixed identity categories, meaning that subject positions are produced in and through discourse, and structural orders of discourse shape which combinations of repertoires become relevant and available. Following the vignette, each repertoire is examined in turn.

Your personal relationship with drugs (introductory vignette)

TS's initial post frames the thread as a revival of cryptomarket community culture. It encourages users to share information about themselves and their drug use.

"Those of us who have been around for a while remember the good old days in previous versions of [other cryptomarkets] where the forums stood at centre stage. To keep our

community alive I believe that authentic discussions with a grounding in reality that involve and bond individuals together are important parts."

TS emphasizes the communal function of cryptomarkets as they allow members to exist openly as drug users and frames the thread as a place where "people could share their own life experiences, such as how long you have been using, what you have used, whether you see it as a tool or an escape, what your occupation is and so on. Obviously do not go into details about yourselves, leave only general information that gives a vague indication of who you are."

This frames what counts as relevant self-disclosure and signals community awareness of external surveillance. Interaction should be guided by the reality that law enforcement, enacting prohibition, may be present, so information should be shared sparsely and with deliberate caution, indicating community and surveillance awareness repertoires. TS then contrasts their own drug use with the "stereotypical image society has of drug users as failed junkies" while assuming that "there are many ordinary people out there with a functioning life who use substances in secret." Secret substance use is, as we shall see, a recurring theme expressed through what I term double life repertoires. TS goes on to describe a pattern of sporadic drug use:

"[...]since the age of 15. Most of the time it has been confined to weekends but during certain periods use has been more frequent than that. It mainly concerns cocaine, amphetamine and benzo. Cannabis never appealed to me. Opiates and psychedelics I have not dared to try (but have come close)."

This positions TS as an 'ordinary,' long-term recreational user rather than an exceptional case, even though their preferred substances are not the 'classic' recreational drugs (usually cannabis or party drugs such as MDMA, and psychedelics). The account is then contrasted with information about occupation and other dimensions of drug use, contrasting illicit drugs with alcohol and providing motivation for these preferences:

"I worked for several years in various manual labour jobs before I started studying at university. For me drug use has meant recreation but also an escape from mental ill-health. I

have never been particularly fond of the alcohol high. Perhaps it is the feeling of being out of control. That is why I have used [other] substances instead."

In a subsequent post, TS elaborates further, presenting drugs as serving simultaneous purposes: amplifying "[…] things I find interesting," medicating an ADHD diagnosis, and showing how "amphetamine abuse escalated into a destructive lifestyle before I realized how it could be used constructively." TS constructs their turn toward illicit drugs partly as a product of a general disposition toward rule-breaking, readable as an implicit orientation against prohibition. The account then shifts toward self-medication and also draws on a troubled use repertoire by framing their use as part of a "destructive lifestyle." The contrast with alcohol as a legal, state-sanctioned intoxicant positions illicit drug use as a rational personal choice rather than deviance, drawing on what I term an institutional critique repertoire. So while use is initially framed as recreational, TS adds that drug use has at times served to alleviate mental health problems, but also as a means of exploring personal interests, indicating therapeutic and discovery repertoires. All this is contrasted with TS's status as employed or studying, implying a repertoire of a compatible life 'despite' sometimes destructive drug use. The account ends with a reflection on their drug use from a new vantage point "in the middle stage of life:"

"Experience and age have given me a respect and a more critical view of drug use. I am well aware of the risks it entails and therefore try to keep it at a 'healthy' level. I am gradually tapering down little by little with the hope of being free from it in the future."

Here TS indicates a problematic relationship with their preferred substances in expressing a wish to be "free" of them, invoking a troubled use repertoire.

In this vignette TS simultaneously draws on several repertoires to construct their relationship with drugs: *discovery*, *compatible life*, *therapeutic use*, *troubled use* and *leisure*, *pleasure and normalization*, presented in the next section. At the same time they invoke *double life*, *surveillance awareness and evasion*, *institutional critique* and *cryptomarket community prohibition-effects* repertoires that are synthesized in the discussion chapter. As other users begin to share their own experiences, these repertoires are reproduced, reworked and extended, illustrating how the opening post sets the discursive terms for the thread as a whole. The repertoires imply possible subject positions, examined later, but because they are

often mobilized simultaneously within a single account, the resulting positions are layered rather than clear-cut.

Buyer self-presentation repertoires

In the following subsections, I examine each repertoire in turn, showing how they are deployed and combined in buyer self-presentations. Appendix C contains a summary table of the buyer self-presentation repertoires.

Discovery repertoire

The discovery repertoire involves both curiosity about drugs per se and drug use as a tool for curious exploration, whether for introverted consciousness-expanding self-work or for focusing on personal interests. References to personal development and journeys, studying, curiosity, psychedelic culture, spiritual seeking and drugs as a way of concentrating and exploring interests characterize this repertoire. It often references stimulants and psychedelics and can be used to motivate use; “what made me fall in love with amphetamine is that it is just so DAMN fun with logic and problem solving,” “I started with cannabis partly because of curiosity,” “it’s about genuine curiosity,” and “deep diving” into interests.

The following quote illustrates the repertoire well, referencing both existential self-exploration and drug use as a cognitive tool for studying:

“The positive for me is that when drugs entered the picture they challenged me to work on myself. Especially if you walk around in the forest high on LSD you also start drawing parallels and connections to life's big questions. On top of that, the abstract stuff at university suddenly became completely comprehensible.”

The discovery repertoire is often combined with troubled use and therapeutic repertoires, as users describe how mental health issues and explorative use can lead to more problematic relationships with drugs: “I pushed the boundaries of what I handled so well [explorative/self-medicating amphetamine use], so that little by little, my expensive ADHD-medicine no longer worked and street speed and benzos entered the picture FAST as hell.” Metaphorical escalation narratives preserve a curiosity-driven, agentic identity while also explaining how use turned problematic. Discovery can thus function both as a motive for

drug use and as a resource for accounting for escalation, especially when combined with therapeutic and troubled use repertoires.

The discovery repertoire draws on several discursive devices. Users employ affect displays and emotion categories, expressing enthusiasm and emotional investment to manage identity, credibility and stake, for example through all-caps wordings and references to "falling in love" or having "so DAMN fun", which intensify and justify their claims. References to "falling in love" and "deep diving" also act as metaphoric formulations that support the curious, serious, invested identity conveyed by the repertoire. As accounts trace intentions, motivations and drug-use effects over time, narrative structures are used for accountability work and provide subject positions in which users assume responsibility for their use, even when combining the discovery repertoire with therapeutic or troubled use repertoires.

These combinations tend to legitimize or explain escalated use, creating understanding for such escalations while alleviating the burden of responsibility. Several formulations position users as educated and intellectually curious through footing devices with statements that allow users to distance their use from stereotypes of hedonistic or deviant drug use, overlapping with the compatible life repertoire.

Compatible life repertoire

This repertoire constructs drug use as compatible with conventional adult life through claims of stable forms of income, employment, accommodation and social relations, and descriptions of responsible use and 'ordinary life' accounts. It frequently appears alongside other repertoires as part of narrative structures in which users balance functional and troubled dimensions of their drug use.

Within this repertoire, drug use is framed as approached with respect and risk awareness. Users stress being "careful that use does not get out of hand – if you feel that a substance is taking over everyday life, you need to dial it back", and "not to get too hooked on any one specific thing" by "varying substances", using metaphors to highlight awareness of risk. One user explicitly links respectful use to awareness of drug-use stereotypes as they "[...] treat drugs with respect. That is to say, I make sure not to cross lines or make a scene."

Users often combine compatible life accounts with troubled use repertoires. Some use this combination to describe maintaining a functional life despite use they themselves recognize as potentially problematic:

“I took amphetamine as my first drug around 2005. Today I have a fairly extensive poly-substance abuse with a preference for everything psychedelic and mind-bending. Worked almost my whole life with a few rough patches over the years. Today I have a permanent position as a treatment assistant (oh the irony), education, decent car, house, family. Only a couple of souls know about my use.”

This user’s own use of the term “abuse” alongside functional life markers pre-emptively disarms normative criticism. The “oh the irony” remark functions as stake management, flagging reflexivity and heading off judgment, while both rejecting and reproducing prohibition stereotypes by embracing the “abuse” label yet insisting on a functional life. Others deploy the same combination as cautionary tales, describing shifts toward more "respectful" use to preserve their functional lives:

“I was about to lose everything, car, house, family, job. Everything was at risk. Now, five years later, I have a completely different approach to my use. I'm no longer chasing highs. I use low doses and switch substances sometimes to avoid falling into a deeply entrenched habit.”

Both accounts use the listing device: “car, house, family, job” and “treatment assistant, education, decent car, house, family” accumulating normality markers to make claims appear more complete and factual, emphasizing the contrast between what users have and what drug use puts at risk. The more ordinary markers are listed, the more convincing the claim to an ordinary life. The compatible life repertoire also frequently co-occurs with the double life repertoire, examined below as a prohibition-effect repertoire rather than a motivational one.

Therapeutic use repertoire

The therapeutic repertoire relates drug use to (mostly mental) health problems. Users refer to self-medication, taking drugs as substitutes or complements to prescribed medication, describing substances as “medicine” rather than drugs.

Some offer generalized community accounts, such as “we are all sick here, in need of medicine and repeat doses,” concurring with prohibitionist medicalized views of deviant drug use. Others disclose specific drugs of choice without formal diagnoses, as in “I have been a daily user of speed since a couple of years back, because of medical reasons,” or experiment with cannabis strains “good for sleep and calming down.”

More medicalized accounts invoke patient categories, for example: “I am a pain patient so only use tramadol and pregabalin, some prescribed for pain relief,” or people with ADHD explaining that access to medication has helped them avoid street amphetamine. Motivation is often framed through healthcare needs, where substances are recast as medicine and users as patients, but poor healthcare experiences also justify turning to drugs: “I wanted to switch off a bit from the hectic world I was living in at the time, and wasn’t getting any help from healthcare. The doctor’s words were, ‘try to think positive.’ That started my journey of trying more.”

The therapeutic repertoire frequently combines with the troubled use repertoire. One user narrative describes a background of social, medical and substance use problems, starting “far too young (around 14–15 years old),” becoming a polysubstance “abuser” and retrospectively thinking they “had GAD or something similar [their] whole life,” despite trying “CBT, SSRIs, therapy, etc.” and finding that nothing worked “in the long run,” ending with an extreme case formulation contrast of drug use as a choice “between suicide or benzo.”

The repertoire is also used to deter use, especially when health risks are high. When one user worries that cannabis no longer works and mentions antipsychotic medication, others respond with harm reduction advice: “you absolutely should not try to mix/use them together with 'just anything' [and] if you are being prescribed antipsychotics, you are doing everyone, including yourself, a big favor by sticking to your medication schedule and otherwise making sure to stay sober.”

Several discursive devices underpin this repertoire. Extreme case formulations and contrast structures (“suicide or benzo”; “we are all sick here”) dramatize risk, normalize the group’s condition and justify therapeutic use. Users repeatedly invoke medical categories and diagnostic labels, using patient categories as entitlements to speak authoritatively about needs and effects, positioning themselves within legitimate medical frameworks rather than as

irresponsible users. These collectivizing formulations build a mini ‘patient community’ frame, shifting drug use from individual deviance to shared condition. Life-history narratives and critiques of healthcare function as stake inoculation, showing users have ‘done their part’ with formal care, redistributing accountability to inadequate services and structural conditions, also invoking the institutional critique repertoire described later.

Crucially, these moves reframe ‘drugs’ as ‘medicine’ as the same substances are discursively repositioned from illicit drugs to quasi-pharmaceuticals, mobilizing prohibition’s own medical and scientific categories to legitimize drug use and present users as patients rather than offenders.

Troubled use repertoire

The troubled use repertoire emphasizes drug use considered problematic, referencing tolerance, withdrawal management, addiction, dependence, abuse, intravenous use, long histories with opioids and stimulants, and risks of “losing everything” in terms of functional life markers. It is sometimes negotiated or partially reframed through compatible life and therapeutic repertoires.

One young user foregrounds both social and biological aspects of substance use disorder in a narrative of escalating use and uncertain futures:

“I started smoking cannabis with my stepfather when I was 12 years old. Then when I was 15 I tried cocaine at a party and fell in love with it. So I have been snorting on a daily basis. Then when I was 19 a friend set up an injection. I loved the feeling of calm it gave me. After about 50 injections I started to feel the intense rush it gave. The 'kick' you get when the whole solution is in. Incredible feeling. So that is how I got hooked and still am. Today I am 20 years old and I do not know if I want to or can stop. I am dependent. My brain is screaming for more. We will see where it all ends up.”

Another user combines a troubled use repertoire with a fragile compatible-life repertoire:

“Today I have been taking benzo every day for about 3 years, amphetamine every day for 1.5 years and increasingly stronger opiates on top of that. I have a job, a place to live, I do not

think people would see yet that I am using as heavily as I am but that will probably come [...] so we will see how this ends."

By ending without resolution, these narratives foreground unpredictability and the ultimate stakes of problematic use; social collapse and death.

Troubled use often appears in combination with other repertoires, for example when leisure, pleasure and normalization provide nostalgic origin stories of recreational use, before dissolving into substance use disorders. One user contrasts an earlier party lifestyle concentrated in bar and club scenes with therapeutic self-medication and "addiction:"

"After having worked like an animal and played full-time step-dad, I now call myself an 'addict' self-medicating with a bit of everything. After having managed amphetamine use pretty neatly and flown under people's radar for the last 5 years, out of pure bloody self-preservation instinct, social benefits are now exhausted, the cops withdrew my drivers licence, I'm collecting welfare, arguing about diagnoses and custody while getting visits from the cops every other week. When it goes off the rails, it goes totally off the rails fast."

This repertoire is particularly heavy on metaphor and extreme case formulations which dramatize loss of control and intensify risk. Lists of consequences serve as corroboration by accumulation, now enumerating harms rather than normality markers, while explicit self-labels fix identity as troubled. Combined with stake inoculation and contrast structures, these devices do accountability work as accounts of prior self-control and competence soften blame for escalation, while the simultaneous maintenance of compatible life and troubled use repertoires signals awareness and concern rather than denial, negotiating the assumption of responsibility.

Leisure, pleasure and normalization repertoire

The main function of this repertoire is to frame drug use as sporadic, unproblematic and unremarkable, focused on positive effects and on drugs as stress relievers and mood lifters. It features 'soft,'party, discovery drugs such as cannabis, psychedelics and some stimulants, talk about effects, and descriptions of routine recreational use embedded in social rituals. While less prominent in the self-presentation thread, this repertoire appears in several

accounts, sometimes as a point of departure before troubled or therapeutic repertoires take over.

Drug use is often described in a normalized and undramatic manner, in much the same way people talk about alcohol or other legal substances. One user regards “cannabis more like going to an after-work drink and having a beer,” emphasizing that use should be sporadic, fun and joyful, “otherwise you get unpleasant experiences,” and adds being “more dependent on coffee and energy drinks (which are legal) than on drugs.” Emotion categories, contrast and a reversed minimization extreme case formulation work as stake management, while implicitly drawing on institutional critique repertoires. By contrasting illicit drugs with legal alternatives like alcohol, coffee and energy drinks, the user reorganizes the boundary between “drugs” and “legal substances” and frames the latter as more problematic.

Pleasure is further emphasized in an account of amphetamine use: “After some years with cannabis I met a person who introduced me to amphetamine. Boom! I had some crazy hot nights with that but it is not a drug that I play with light heartedly, withdrawals are tough.” The metaphorical affect display (“Boom!”) accentuates excitement, while acknowledging withdrawal introduces a pragmatic boundary to recreational use as it limits the pleasurable effects. Another user describes bringing psychedelics to a rave, “making many people extremely happy, making friends for life,” constructing drug use as a source of lasting bonds and shared ritual rather than individual deviance.

Leisure, pleasure and normalization combine with compatible-life repertoires in a cryptomarket veteran's narrative:

“I grew up in a small town with no contacts in that area. Everyone else mostly just wanted to drink themselves silly. The dark web became my 'salvation,' more specifically Silk Road.”

The religious metaphor of “salvation,” held at ironic distance with quotation marks, frames the market as a rescue from a hard-drinking culture. The user later emphasizes respectful and socially accepted use: “My family knows I smoke and is ‘okay’ with it. Working full time in industry, without saying too much”, foregrounding normalization over hedonism. “Without saying too much” functions as a disclaimer, acknowledging that disclosure needs to remain constrained and again hinting at institutional critique.

Through normalization devices, focus on pleasure, re-categorization of substances and contrast with legal drugs and local drinking cultures, this repertoire constructs drug use as an unremarkable lifestyle choice grounded in leisure and social normalcy rather than as a marker of deviance.

Together, these repertoires specify how cryptomarket actors construct identities and motivations for drug use under prohibition. The next section examines how buyers and vendors draw on and extend these repertoires in interaction to frame vendor identities and motivations.

Vendor self-presentation repertoires

The buyer self-presentation repertoire section above was organized repertoire-first, with each repertoire named, defined, and illustrated with quotes drawn from across the thread. This works because the buyer repertoires are primarily about individual motivation and identity, the interactional dimension is less central, and the repertoires are relatively self-contained. The vendor material is structurally different. Vendor repertoires are co-constructed with buyers in real time as trust is built and damaged through interaction, and the same vendor often deploys multiple repertoires simultaneously in ways that are difficult to separate. Therefore, a small number of vendors will be analyzed as cases, identifying which repertoires they draw on and how buyers respond, in order to preserve the interactional and relational logic and show how repertoires combine in practice. Where the buyer section establishes what repertoires look like in relatively isolated self-presentations, the vendor section shows what happens when repertoires are deployed strategically and interactionally.

In the vendor discussion part of the forum, vendors set up threads presenting themselves, encouraging customers to discuss experiences of perceived quality, stealth and customer service. This is an opportunity for vendors to market themselves, take requests, announce new products and construct a trustworthy persona. Vendor self-presentation repertoires, co-created with buyers, vary in how they construct trustworthiness, motivation and reliability but all draw on specific patterns of talk. The *professional entrepreneur* repertoire presents vendors as competent businesses focused on quality and customer service and translates platform capitalist logics into vendor self-presentation, as vendors appear as

customer-oriented enterprises managing ratings, brands and portfolios within a lean platform infrastructure. The *cryptomarket veteran* repertoire foregrounds long experience and survival across markets; the *therapeutic helper* repertoire frames sales as care or support for users' wellbeing; the *activist* repertoire casts activity as resistance to prohibition; the *substance specialist* repertoire emphasizes technical expertise, purity and product knowledge; and the *community builder* repertoire constructs the vendor as a participant in, and caretaker of, a shared market community. Of the ten most active vendors identified through the data collection process, four serve as analytical cases in the subsequent analysis.

Users in vendor discussion threads rarely produce full self-presentations as drug users; instead, buyers construct their identities relationally as customers navigating an insecure market in which vendors might appear as reliable alternatives, while simultaneously helping to construct the vendor's position. These repertoires can overlap in a single vendor, and usually do.

In the following subsections, I analyze the four vendors as cases, examining how they combine and negotiate these repertoires in interaction with buyers. See Appendix D for a vendor repertoire matrix.

Trusted Elder

Primary repertoires*: Cryptomarket veteran + Professional entrepreneur + Community builder*

This vendor describes themselves as "an old team operating online since 2018" who have "been in the game for a long while," promising thoroughly tested products "described as accurately as possible" so customers "always will know exactly what [they] are buying before it arrives," alongside discreet deliveries and professional customer service. The opening post in their vendor discussion thread invites critique and conversation or to "just chat like in the good old days." These accounts draw on cryptomarket veteran and professional entrepreneur repertoires that emphasize experience and customer service, while also invoking community builder repertoires. Together they reframe the long-term vendor–customer relation as partnership or friendship through a shared community-history footing.

Buyers amplify this framing. They describe feeling “seen” in a personal way, being “welcomed, asked how you are doing” in a manner that feels real rather than purely tactical. One buyer calls the vendor “genuine” and notes compensation for unsatisfactory orders; another reports having been a customer for over ten years and feeling “like close friends.” The tension between repertoires is explicitly articulated as a customer states: “Whether it's a sales tactic or they're genuinely like this (which it feels like they are), you'd really want to meet them IRL.” Achieving “green” status in cryptomarkets is equivalent to being reliable and trustworthy, and the Trusted Elder is dubbed “the greenest vendor of all time,” an extreme case formulation and assessment device. They are also praised for “A+” communication and “fantastic service.” In response, the vendor says such feedback is “greatly appreciated” and “motivation to do an even better job,” adding that “it isn't hard to fight for customer satisfaction when you love what you do,” a stake inoculation move that softens purely economic readings of their motivation while confirming their professional “green” status.

Analytically, what matters is not the individual praise but the quality of trust generated. “It feels safe now that [Trusted Elder] is here” goes beyond complimenting service, as the vendor becomes a symbolic anchor for market trustworthiness itself. References to Silk Road and long relationships on other markets locate “the greenest vendor of all time” within an authoritative historical lineage of reliability and trust, collapsing professional entrepreneur and cryptomarket veteran repertoires into something like a brand-as-institution in which the community builder repertoire is also central. Their mere presence signals safety and provides a proxy for platform legitimacy in a hybrid community market space with no legal infrastructure.

Psychedelic Saviour

Primary repertoires: *Therapeutic helper* + *Community builder* + *Activist* + *Substance specialist*

This vendor specializes in psychedelics and frames their market presence through community building, exploration and personal development rather than business and profit, viewing “psychedelic substances as something with the potential to help people transform their lives, explore themselves and grow as individuals.” They offer “a carefully curated selection” of psychedelics and “other rare gems” aimed at “first-timers” and “experienced psychonauts”

seeking “introspection, creativity, healing, expanding your horizons, or simply enjoying life’s moments,” positioning themselves as “here to help you explore in meaningful ways.” This draws on a therapeutic helper repertoire and repeatedly claims category entitlements as an experienced guide and caretaker, positioning the vendor as a therapeutic authority rather than a mere seller. Metaphors of “rare gems,” and “expanding your horizons” combine the buyer discovery repertoire with therapeutic and activist repertoires, casting drug purchases as self-development and exploration beyond the mundane world of prohibition. The vendor briefly invokes a cryptomarket veteran repertoire by referencing the “amazing community” on a previous market, “sharing, connecting and growing together as a collective,” while largely avoiding professional entrepreneur framing, which instead appears in buyer praise for quality, stealth, delivery and customer service: “really good vendor who has always compensated for any issues, quick communication, always perfect stealth and fast delivery times.”

The vendor discussion thread is framed as a space for trip reports, personal journeys, “good vibes, open minds and real conversations,” consolidating the caring community builder repertoire. Echoing the symbolic-anchor function seen in the Trusted Elder case, Psychedelic Saviour appears to have accumulated institutional trust, as buyers remark that “it bodes well that [Psychedelic Saviour] is [in this market].”

Two events in the thread stand out analytically: (1) a discussion on vendor motivation, and (2) a security issue in the form of a blackmail letter.

Motivation as a discursive theme

A user explicitly raises the question of vendor motivation, wondering whether psychedelic vendors are driven by something other than profit (prompted by a documentary on LSD). Another user cautions against assuming altruism, while the vendor replies that their operation is “clearly about more than moving product,” invoking an activist repertoire: “a passion for the substance, the psychedelic culture, and an understanding of what LSD can do for people seem to be stronger driving forces for most,” and they are “incredibly committed to providing people with high-quality products that enable positive transformations,” which is “why we have chosen to focus specifically on these types of products.” Buyers corroborate this. The original questioner notes that the vendor’s specialized range suggests they are not solely motivated by money, and another user writes:

“I can vouch for the fact that you genuinely care about your customers and help them find the right products for the right purpose. I bought from you for the first time four years ago, when I was at my deepest point of depression and close to ending my life. I got help with microdosing shrooms and 6 months later I was a changed person. Thanks for saving my life!”

This constructs a therapeutic, potentially life-saving narrative around drug use and the buyer–vendor relationship, directly activating therapeutic repertoires, supplying the vendor with motivations beyond profit. “A changed person” and “thanks for saving my life” are extreme case formulations that dramatize the impact of the vendor’s guidance, upgrading the helper repertoire into an almost clinician- or saviour-like subject position. The contrast between “moving product” and “positive transformations” downgrades profit and upgrades passion and care, while emphasis on “commitment” works as stake inoculation, pre-empting accusations of purely economic motives. Motivation thus becomes a collective object of discourse, doing trust-work by publicly negotiating the line between economic and altruistic drives.

The blackmail letter

Here, the vendor discloses a serious security breach in the vendor discussion thread:

“We have received reports that some customers have received letters demanding money and referring to previous purchases from us. I am currently investigating this and it unfortunately appears to be coming from a former employee of ours. If you have received such a letter, do not pay anything. We will handle it. Please feel free to send a PM with the contents of the letter and what the postmark says. We are working to resolve the situation and sincerely apologize for the concern this has caused. Do not hesitate to contact us privately if you have any questions.”

Customers respond with worry but also understanding, some stating they “do not hold a grudge” since the vendor is honest and transparent. Others invoke the cryptomarket veteran repertoire to contextualize the breach, noting that those who “have been in the game for a while” have seen similar events and that what matters is how they are handled. The vendor's response deploys stake inoculation and institutional-authority language borrowed from legitimate business crisis management, while accumulated relational trust absorbs what

would otherwise be a reputationally fatal event. The vendor is framed as reliable, communicative and caring, and even a major security problem does not immediately undermine their standing.

This case illustrates that relational understanding between established vendors and users can carry major security breaches if handled correctly, and that transparent communication plays a central role. Multi-repertoire trust built over time, partly grounded in constructions of vendor motivation as at least partly non-profit, can sustain serious security crises when managed through open communication, with the relational dimension compensating for what platform affordances cannot resolve.

Crystalline Crusader

Primary repertoires: *Substance specialist + Activist + Professional entrepreneur*

The Crystalline Crusader specializes in stimulants and constructs their identity around quality and purity discourse, positioning themself as a chemist-arbitrator of truth. Activist and professional entrepreneur repertoires appear in compressed form in their profile tagline: “fighting the war on drugs with a flow of high quality products,” where vendor activism is operationalized as quality politics rather than pure ideology or just business. Military metaphors align the vendor with resistance and moral struggle, repositioning commercial activity as collective action against prohibition, providing alternative business motivations. Professional entrepreneur and community builder repertoires combine in their claim to “see every delivery as an opportunity to build trust and care” and to be “your reliable partner all the way,” supplemented by scientific-medical authority discourse referencing their own “channel for import and checks through analysis,” ensuring that “what you buy is first-class product.”

Dense technical descriptions and references to lab analyses function as category entitlements to medical and technical expertise, constructing a substance specialist repertoire that distances the vendor from stereotypical dealers while invoking the medicalized and scientific discourse of prohibition. By describing products as uncut and lab-tested while engaging in forum discussions on purity, testing and stimulant myths, they mend trust by signalling credible motivations beyond profit. The focus on purity could be read both as a marketing

strategy and an implicit harm reduction move, assuring buyers that products are not cut with other substances, and therefore “better” and safer.

One satisfied customer looks beyond the business agenda, as they “get the impression that [Crystalline Crusader] is true to their principles and seem to be driven by other aims than just economic ones,” arguing that by supplying high-quality amphetamine, the vendor “enables the individual's right to make their own decisions,” especially for those “who actually use the substance for therapeutic purposes.” Drug use thus “becomes easier, more secure, and safer” and “sustainable over time,” as “the importance of the substance’s potency is crucial for those of us who already achieve the intended effect at low doses and wish to keep it that way.” This highlights harm reduction benefits, activates respectful use elements of the compatible life repertoire, and invokes the institutional critique repertoire, while functionally linking therapeutic, activist and substance specialist repertoires through purity guarantees.

Crystalline Crusader has a full score in the rating system, and early posts in the vendor thread (and several later ones) declare that this vendor “is always green!” with buyers recognizing them from prior markets, immediately performing trust-work. Buyers praise customer service, responsiveness, deliveries and stealth, drawing on professional entrepreneur repertoires.

The vendor frequently discusses the effects of pure versus cut stimulants using substance specialist repertoires, sometimes even in debate with other vendors: “Speed = amphetamine + caffeine. There is no way around or discussion about this fact; the only person who says otherwise has never sent anything for analysis in their life.” They dismiss an imagined experienced user's contrary view; “Sure, 'Joe' who has been IV-using since the 90s thinks he knows best, but every time we have compared with actual lab results, the assessment has never been anywhere near the truth.” Extreme case formulations combine with category entitlements to construct scientific authority and disqualify lay or experiential knowledge claims, positioning themselves as an authority. One buyer who used the market’s test4pay service confirms purity independently and writes: “thanks to [Crystalline Crusader] for being honest and selling a pure product. To make reasonable and health-promoting use possible, you need to be able to get hold of pure and reliable substances.” This account frames pure products as a prerequisite for safe use, enabled by the vendor, combining substance specialist, professional entrepreneur and therapeutic helper repertoires.

Most distinctively, the vendor invites buyers to participate in a crowdsourced quality surveillance project:

"We are now looking for some reliable buyers who will help us by purchasing small amounts of various substances from different vendors and then sending their goods to a lab to see the exact purity of what they sell. This will give a more nuanced picture of the situation regarding the actual standard on the market, particularly for speed."

In return, participants "learn how to send goods to a lab and exactly how the process works, which will make you a spokesperson on the market." This positions buyers as research collaborators and "spokespeople" and extends the vendor's identity beyond sales and harm reduction into a market reform project, combining specialist, activist, therapeutic, professional and community builder repertoires. Crystalline Crusader proposes that this will "change the overall picture and culture of the market in terms of what sellers can get away with," building trust by contrasting themself with the "lies and deceit" of other vendors while promoting high quality and transparency. Customers respond positively:

"It feels wonderful to find a supplier who has chosen quality over price. There is a lot of cheap stuff here on the market, but with your products you still save in the end since it takes so little to achieve the desired effect. At the same time, you know that this is as pure as it gets. You do not have to worry that some greedy idiot has cut it with some crap."

Here, the vendor is explicitly contrasted with "greedy idiot[s]" and framed as a professional expert supplier whose higher prices are motivated by purity in a market with "insanely unstable quality in general."

Banned Scammer

Primary repertoires: *Professional entrepreneur* + *Cryptomarket veteran*

Branding themself "an established supplier with documented experience from [other cryptomarkets]" focused on "consistently delivering high-quality products" with the aim of becoming "a market leading actor within this segment," this vendor's first post draws on professional entrepreneur and cryptomarket veteran repertoires, the same discursive building

blocks used by well-regarded vendors, deployed to establish legitimacy from the outset. The vendor's name references a Swedish pharmacy chain and its customer care policies, further aligning them with respectable commerce.

The thread initially resembles those of reputable vendors, but reputational collapse follows allegations of selective scamming and multiple vendor profiles. One early accuser builds a narrative of trust breakdown, detailing how platform affordances were used preventively:

"I chose traceable delivery so there wouldn't be any dispute but the package got no further than the collection point where it was handed in [...]. After sluggish contact [...] [t]hey offered me shipping and 50% back, got the feeling they wanted it to go to auto-release of escrow but I extended it every time. These guys are red-flagged for me and I cannot recommend them to anyone."

The account works as stake management and signals awareness of platform governance; the buyer presents themself as responsible and risk-aware while constructing the vendor as untrustworthy. Being "red-flagged" performs a formal community sanction as the user can no longer recommend the vendor. As accusations accumulate, another user applies textual forensics: "Surely no one can have missed that the forum thread heading is identical, down to the closing period, to [another vendor], so the obvious question is, is this [other vendor's] side account?" The evidence is purely formal, but framed as something obvious to everyone, recruiting collective scrutiny and casting the poster as vigilant rather than merely disgruntled. This kind of policing of vendor identity illustrates how trust governance operates discursively, as community members enforce authenticity norms through close reading of vendor texts.

Administrators eventually ban the vendor, stressing that they "don't tolerate any kind of scamming, and that applies to everyone, no matter how many sales they have or how many customers they haven't scammed." Buyers respond positively, praising "active admins actually working to keep the market a safer place for us buyers," noting that scams are "taken seriously and also removed from the marketplace," and thanking admins "for protecting the people here and offering a safer, trusted marketplace." The decision is celebrated as "fact-based firm-hand decision making at its finest," expected to help the market "grow even faster" through "trust and honesty." Administrative action is thus constructed as community

care, and trust in the platform is rebuilt through visible enforcement, particularly salient because other tools (ratings, escrow, forum talk) had already failed.

A new user, scammed before the ban, explains that as a newcomer they "wouldn't stand a chance in a dispute" and therefore chose not to raise one, to avoid tainting their account, and apologizes for this choice. The apology performs community solidarity and prevents criticism for inaction, while the explanation shows dispute mechanisms being assessed through individual cost–benefit calculations. Forum norms expect members to warn and protect each other, but internalized platform logics make account reputation a resource to be protected, revealing a structural power asymmetry in which governance favours established actors.

The Banned Scammer case shows how professional entrepreneur and cryptomarket veteran repertoires can be performed inauthentically to build a false sense of trust. It underscores the limits of discourse-based trust signals and raises questions about the conditions under which platform affordances fail, while highlighting that repertoires are not underlying traits or fixed identities but performances designed to signal trustworthy personas, making visible the fragile, performative character of trust.

The buyer and vendor sections show how interpretative repertoires are used to construct identities, motives and vendor–buyer relations under prohibition and platform logics, and how trust emerges as a discursive performance built through overlapping repertoires and platform affordances that can also be mimicked. Across buyer and vendor repertoires, perceived vendor motivation (care, quality, resistance) emerges as a central dimension of trust performance beyond technical and reputational factors. In the following discussion, I step back from these detailed cases to examine how broader subject positions, trust, motivation and prohibition-effects repertoires emerge in the corpus as a whole.

Discussion

In this chapter, the findings are discussed in relation to the research questions, the prohibitionist and platform-capitalist orders of discourse outlined earlier and prior research on cryptomarkets. The discussion primarily addresses research question 3 by synthesizing how the interpretative repertoires mapped in the analysis and the subject positions that emerge

from them negotiate, reproduce or resist these orders of discourse, and by outlining implications, limitations and directions for social work and further research.

At the first level, the study identifies buyer and vendor interpretative repertoires that structure talk about drug use, market participation, business relations, motivation and trust on a darknet forum that, like the 'shady backstreets' and closed-off apartments of offline markets, operates beneath the surface level of the internet while enabling alternative articulations of drug use and trade (Bancroft, 2022). At a second level, the analysis traces a smaller set of subject positions and prohibition-effects repertoires across this material.

In the buyer material, the analysis shows how cryptomarket actors discursively reframe "the drug user" under prohibition. Rather than inhabiting a singular stereotype, like that of the failed "junkie" invoked in the "Your personal relationship with drugs" thread, users draw on discovery, compatible life, therapeutic, troubled use, and leisure, pleasure and normalization repertoires to present themselves as curious psychonauts, functional adults, self-medicating patients and, at times, genuinely problematic users negotiating a stigmatizing regime. Interview and survey research portrays cryptomarket users in general as relatively more educated, digitally literate and often oriented towards recreational or psychonaut-type use, and as part of a broader "gentrification" of drug markets (Aldridge, Stevens & Barratt, 2017; Barratt, Ferris & Winstock, 2016; Masson & Bancroft, 2018). This analysis adds interactional detail to those portraits by showing how such positions are discursively assembled and how problematic use and dependence are narrated alongside more functional and recreational use.

Cryptomarket subject positions

Across the material, four recurring subject positions for cryptomarket actors emerge at the intersection of prohibition and platform discourse, produced through combinations of buyer and vendor repertoires. These positions do not cover all drug-use repertoires; for instance, troubled use appears mainly in individual self-presentations and is reworked into other positions as biographical experience, veteran knowledge, background to self-medication or a risk dimension in otherwise compatible life narratives. Appendix E shows a table of the identified cryptomarket subject positions.

These positions are analytical constructs derived from recurring configurations of repertoires across buyer and vendor interactions, rather than fixed identity categories or directly reported self-descriptions. They represent patterns identified across the corpus rather than positions actors themselves explicitly name and result in relatively broad identity positions; the informed *cryptomarket veteran* who evaluates other actors against prior market experience and long-term relationships, providing experience based credibility that stabilizes trust; the *therapeutic patient/helper* who depends on, or provides, means of self-medication and/or high-quality substances for reliable dosing; the *activist* who frames their purchasing and distribution of drugs as resistance to prohibition; and the *drug knowledge and substance specialist* who leverages accumulated experience, knowledge and practice of drug use, like experiential and chemical testing practices, to assess effects and quality, and therefore also reliability and trust. What distinguishes these as subject positions rather than repertoires is that they involve a relatively stable configuration of identity, credibility and relational stance that actors occupy across interactions, rather than a single discursive move deployed in a specific context. For instance, the therapeutic patient/helper position emerges where buyers draw on therapeutic use repertoires, framing drug use as self-medication, and encounter vendors who deploy therapeutic helper repertoires, constructing their role as care rather than commerce, as illustrated in the Psychedelic Saviour case. This does not mean that an actor always or exclusively occupies a single position; the same person may move between positions across threads or even within a single post, and many actors combine elements of several positions simultaneously. Rather, these are recurring configurations that become recognizable and credible within the community, available to be taken up and performed in relevant interactional contexts.

These subject positions extend the earlier repertoires by tracing how therapeutic, discovery, normalization, troubled and compatible life talk is reshaped through platform logics and motivational self‑presentation (Srnicek, 2017; Childs & Bernot, 2024). While professionalism and entrepreneurial branding are central to how vendors are presented, these remain market‑facing repertoires rather than distinct subject positions, and they primarily inflect how other positions are realized within platform capitalist logics where consumer and seller are more or less obvious and unavoidable positions to take. The cryptomarket subject positions refine survey‑based portraits of cryptomarket users as psychonauts, rational consumers, dependent users and harm reduction‑oriented buyers by showing how such identities are interactively constructed rather than pre‑existing traits (Bancroft, 2022; Barratt & Aldridge,

2016; Barratt, Ferris & Winstock, 2016). Identities are co-constructed by combining buyer and vendor repertoires in relation to both prohibition and platform logics, as actors simultaneously present themselves as knowledgeable, experienced market insiders, self-medicating patients and people who both oppose and conform to oppressive structures and stereotypes through market-mediated behaviours. The subject positions are the discursive sites where the macro-orders of discourse associated with prohibition and platform capitalism become visible and 'embodied' in everyday cryptomarket talk and trust performances.

Trust and motivation as discursive performance

This section examines how buyer and vendor repertoires combine to organize trust and motivation in the market, in ways that address the research questions as a whole. Platform affordances, quality claims, forum communication and vendor self-presentations function as tools through which trust is performed rather than guaranteed, and rating systems, reviews, purity testing and vendor discussion threads operate as platformized reputational infrastructures that shape how trust can be signalled and evaluated (Bancroft, 2019; Childs & Bernot, 2024).

The Banned Scammer case shows that repertoires associated with trust and reliability can also be performed inauthentically, rendering trust precarious, making its maintenance depend on active discursive work. When platform affordances like escrow fail, community evaluations become particularly significant, since "trust signalling performance is necessary to be recognized as a legitimate actor" and forum discussions emerge as the most reliable source of trust assessments, given that ratings and reviews are more easily faked (Bancroft, 2019, pp. 3, 10). Vendor–buyer relationships therefore depend not only on technical affordances but also on forum discourse to establish trustworthiness, and communication perceived as genuine can, at least temporarily, compensate for deficits in quality or security (Masson & Bancroft, 2018).

Trust performance is not unidirectional. Buyers also perform trustworthiness through security compliance, repeat-purchase signals, constructive forum contributions and the willingness to praise or sanction vendors, upholding community security norms. The cryptomarket veteran and drug knowledge and substance specialist subject positions show that experienced buyers accumulate discursive authority that vendors actively court, and trust in vendors partly

depends on trust in the community of buyers around them, making buyer credibility a resource in the reputational infrastructure (Bancroft, 2019, p. 10) Discursive investment in the community beyond transactions functions as buyer-generated trust, and buyer identities and motives appear as negotiated through trust performances shaped by cryptomarket norms and by contrast to prohibition stereotypes, rather than as fixed traits (Masson & Bancroft, 2018; Lorenzo-Dus & Di Cristofaro, 2018).

Vendor repertoires build trust in different ways, often in interaction with buyers, as self-presentation and assessment combine in discursive trust performances. This confirms and extends research on how trust is produced among illicit actors and on cryptomarkets as hybrid market–community spaces (Bancroft, 2019; Masson & Bancroft, 2018). The triple structure of trust as expertise, integrity and benevolence identified by Lorenzo-Dus and Di Cristofaro (2018) in darknet discourse is supported and shown to be performed through combinations of repertoires rather than single acts.

This points toward motivation as essential in signalling trust. Vendor motivation; loving their jobs, prioritizing customer service, raising substance quality, opposing prohibition or helping users explore and heal, matters to buyers when evaluating trustworthiness and deciding on repeat purchases (Masson & Bancroft, 2018, pp. 80–84; Bancroft, 2019, p. 4). Beyond product quality, users value how vendors treat customers, whether they "appreciate that the drugs they are selling can make people's lives better," and seek reliable one-to-one bonds (Bancroft, 2019, p. 10). The repertoire analysis shows how this motivation is performed and evaluated in vendor self-presentation and buyer assessment: motivation beyond profit is treated as evidence of genuine commitment and trustworthiness, and mutual investment in partnership generates positive feedback loops, with buyers endorsing vendors who exceed expectations while moderators mediate accumulating complaints (Bancroft, 2019, pp. 10–14).

As the reluctant new user in the Banned Scammer case suggests, buyers also internalize platform logics, weighing the cost of a failed dispute against potential benefit (Childs & Bernot, 2024; Srnicek, 2017). Vendor self-presentations are strategically assembled from multiple repertoires to signal trustworthiness, and internal community logics reward motivation beyond profit as well as reliability (Masson & Bancroft, 2018). Trustworthiness, then, appears not as a single act but as an ongoing discursive accomplishment, built across interactions, mediated by platform affordances, and is treated here as something performed

through interpretative repertoires; in doing so, the study specifies how expertise, integrity and benevolence are assembled across vendor repertoires and how buyer subject positions sustain and contest them (Lorenzo-Dus & Di Cristofaro, 2018; Bancroft, 2019).

These trust performances crystallize in the four subject positions outlined above, which mobilize different combinations of experience, care, resistance and expertise in making trust and motivation credible. In identifying the repertoires and subject positions through which such investment is performed, and what happens when it falls apart, the study adds detail to existing accounts of trust in cryptomarkets Bringing together the cryptomarket actor repertoires, subject positions and the analysis of trust performances shows how cryptomarkets operate as a platformized moral economy in which trust is at once instrumental, moral and relational as identities are enacted in discourse and evaluated through platform affordances and community norms (Bancroft, 2019; Masson & Bancroft, 2018; Childs & Bernot, 2024; Lorenzo-Dus & Di Cristofaro, 2018).

The finding that perceived vendor motivation beyond profit is central to trust performance can be read as a form of resistance to platform capitalist logic enacted from within its own framework. Platform capitalism installs profit-maximization as the rational default, and its affordances; ratings, reputation systems, and escrow, are designed to optimize commercial reliability (Srnicek, 2017). Yet cryptomarket actors redirect these same infrastructures toward the evaluation of moral character, care and ideological commitment, rewarding vendors who credibly perform non-commercial motivations. This does not escape platform logic, as such performances ultimately generate loyalty, repeat purchases and commission revenue, but it does indicate that actors partially contest the purely transactional subject positions that platform capitalism makes available, assembling a moral economy (Masson & Bancroft, 2018) that sits in tension with, while remaining embedded in, the platform capitalist order of discourse.

One user (from a vendor thread) sums up the community dynamics of vendor-buyer trust relations under digital platforms and prohibition:

“The best thing to do is to be honest with customers. Cheating customers is very short-sighted. A customer you are honest with often becomes a regular, and then you earn more money from that customer than if you rip him off and he never buys from you again.

Sellers and buyers should instead stand together against the state and the idiots who think Sweden's drug policy is good. The only reason the state can go on doing all the evil shit it does is that most people are short-sighted and do not understand that loyalty to other ordinary people is something that also benefits themselves."

This quote ties the moral economy of trust and motivation directly to shared opposition to prohibition within the platform community, locating trust work within a wider political project, positioning the forum as central to it. Trust and motivation thus also shape how users narrate life under prohibitive criminalization and set the stage for the prohibition-effects repertoires discussed in the next section

Prohibition-effects repertoires in cryptomarket discourse

The material reveals an asymmetry between prohibition and platform capitalism that reflects a difference in how the two orders of discourse operate within actors' talk. Prohibition is manifestly present as users explicitly narrate, contest and account for its effects in their forum posts. Platform capitalism is more structurally constitutive as it shapes the conditions under which actors can speak, the formats available to them and the discursive resources, repertoires, categories and framings, through which subject positions are realized, without being named or resisted as such. Fairclough (1992, pp, 69, 71-73, 88-89, 92-93, 117, 124) distinguishes between discourse that is manifestly present in texts and discourse that operates at the level of social practice, shaping the conditions of production rather than appearing as explicit content. As Hine (2015, pp. 9, 46–47) notes, infrastructures of this kind exercise their structuring power precisely through their taken-for-grantedness, encoding priorities and surveillance while remaining largely invisible to those they organize. That cryptomarket actors draw fluently on entrepreneurial, consumer-service and reputational vocabularies without framing these as ideological is itself evidence of how thoroughly platform logics have been naturalized, and this difference in visibility between the two orders is a finding in its own right, though one that also reflects my closer attunement to prohibition-related themes, as noted in the reflexivity section. That said, the analysis also shows how platform logics can be partially contested from within, a dynamic examined in the preceding section on trust and motivation.

In this section, I turn to repertoires that render the effects of prohibition visible, speaking most directly to the third research question. The repertoires examined in the buyer section are primarily motivational and identity constructing and tell us how cryptomarket actors account for and make sense of their drug use. As they combine and interact with vendor repertoires, subject positions emerge as a product of discourse interplay. By contrast, this second cluster of repertoires is better understood as communicating the effects of prohibition: the discursive traces of living under a criminalizing regime. These repertoires primarily narrate what prohibition does to the people it governs, how it shapes their social lives, their relationships to institutions and their need for community. They describe how people talk about what prohibition does and four repertoires revealing the effects of prohibition in actors' accounts are identified hereafter; the *double life* repertoire, a *surveillance awareness and evasion* repertoire, an *institutional critique* repertoire, and a *cryptomarket community counterpublic* repertoire.

The double life repertoire

Cryptomarket actors describe the double life required by drug users under prohibition as more harmful than the drug use itself. One user states that their "entire adult life has involved constant lies and a life in hiding in order to maintain use," adding that they have "constantly lived under pressure to keep up a sober facade," and that "the lying is horribly heartbreaking, sometimes worse than withdrawal and the associated angst." The metaphorical framing device "a life in hiding" names concealment as the dominant organizing principle of adult life, emphasized by emotion category devices and extreme case formulation that compare lying to withdrawal symptoms. The harm constructed here is not physical but chronic, social and psychological.

This exemplifies stigmatization effects, as chronic stress from anticipated rejection and discrimination leads to isolation while harming well-being (Ahern, Stuber & Galea, 2007, p. 188). Goffman's (1963, pp. 1–5, 42, 73–75) account of stigma as a discrediting categorization of social identity that reduces life chances closely aligns with these accounts of concealment and "passing," managing undisclosed discrediting information, is framed as necessary to avoid such treatment. One user presents the hassle of passing as the primary negative consequence of drug use, ahead of any health concern: "the negative is really that I have had to live a 'double life' and deceive my loved ones with polished and convincing lies in certain

contexts." A third user's account of the same dynamic is self-aware and darkly comic: "I almost forgot to mention that I actually have work, accommodation, and functional relationships with friends and family. I guess I am pretty good at getting my act together when I have to, hiding being high all hours of the day." The "I almost forgot" construction becomes a minimization device that positions the double life as so normalized that it barely warrants mention, itself a striking prohibition effect. That this same user also draws on both troubled and therapeutic repertoires, as quoted in the corresponding sections above, illustrates how the compatible life and double life repertoires do not require 'functional' drug use to operate: concealment becomes necessary regardless of how problematic the use is, as all illegal drug use is constructed as problematic, deviant and stigmatizing under prohibition.

The double life is stigma management in practice: passing as 'normal' in mainstream life while concealing the discreditable attributes of drug use. These examples show, in the words of Goffman (1963, p. 73-75) that "even where an individual could keep an unapparent stigma secret, he will find that intimate relations with others, ratified in our society by mutual confession of invisible failings, cause him either to admit his situation to the intimate or to feel guilty for not doing so." The double life repertoire co-occurs frequently with the compatible life, troubled use, therapeutic use, surveillance awareness and institutional critique repertoires, as users who construct themselves as functional, ordinary members of society simultaneously disclose that this ordinariness is a performance sustained through concealment. The repertoires are in tension but mutually constitutive; compatible life, both as a repertoire and in practice, requires "passing" because prohibition constructs all drug use as deviant, regardless of actual use, aligning with Becker's (1963/2006) view of deviance as socially produced.

Surveillance awareness and evasion repertoires

Prohibition does not only produce concealment in private life; it also shapes discursive practice within the forum itself. The thread-starter in the vignette, inviting users to share their experiences, adds the caveat that they should "leave only general information that gives a vague indication of who you are," because interaction must account for the possibility that law enforcement may be present. The user asking about LSD vending motivation similarly emphasizes that no one should reveal any sensitive information and that the questions should not be interpreted as soliciting it. These caveats function as stake management and disclaimer

devices, presenting the user as security conscious and disavowing any intent to solicit incriminating information. This shows that users are aware that revealing vulnerable information can jeopardize the security of specific vendors, their customers and the market as a whole, extending earlier observations that cryptomarket communication is shaped by ever-present enforcement risk (Barratt & Aldridge, 2016; Martin & Christin, 2016).

Conversations are thus held under the looming threat of prohibition enforcement, revealing the external pressure it exerts, while users simultaneously adhere to internal cryptomarket norms that emphasize security (Maddox, 2020; Childs & Bernot, 2024), effectively prompting each other to communicate as if someone from the outside is listening (Martin & Christin, 2016), and encouraging not only the use of anonymization technology but also anonymization discourse. Even in this relatively "safe" discursive space, the prohibitive order permeates and constrains what can be said and how, much like how prohibition encroaches physical spaces (Taylor, 2016; Daniels et al., 2021). Users operate under partial disclosure as a survival strategy, sharing enough to participate authentically in community life but not enough to become identifiable (Martin & Christin, 2016). Pseudonymity is therefore not simply a technical feature of the platform; it is a prohibition effect that shapes the entire discursive situation. The operational-security vocabulary of stealth packaging, encryption, anonymous browsing and untraceable payments forms an evasion repertoire that would be unnecessary in a licit market (Aldridge, Stevens & Barratt, 2017; Martin & Christin, 2016). In this respect, prohibitionist and platform logics meet, as the same infrastructure that enables anonymity and trade also demands constant self-policing of what can be said (Srnicek, 2017; Hine, 2015).

Institutional critique repertoires

The double life and surveillance awareness repertoires extend into institutional critique directed at prohibition, law enforcement and healthcare settings where concealment carries particular consequences, and they relate closely to both buyer and vendor therapeutic repertoires. One user writes:

"A parallel life? Completely. I am extremely careful about who I talk to. If I am asked in healthcare it is always a blank no to everything," explaining that "ending up in addiction treatment is the last thing you want. Then you fall between the cracks in everything."

This is followed by accounts that construct the marketization and rigidity of Swedish mental healthcare as structural failures and frame continued concealed drug use as a more rational option than treatment, using extreme case formulations and metaphors to dramatize the critique. This connects directly to the therapeutic, activist and specialist repertoires, as users who self-medicate with illicit drugs do so partly because formal care is experienced as unavailable, inadequate or actively dangerous to access, and cryptomarket vendors knowingly fill this gap by opposing prohibition and supplying quality drugs (Barratt & Aldridge, 2016; Aldridge, Stevens & Barratt, 2017; Masson & Bancroft, 2018). Healthcare concealment is thus not individual dishonesty but a rational response to a system that criminalizes and stigmatizes rather than supports (Taylor, 2016; Daniels et al., 2021).

Other accounts extend the critique to prohibition itself, for instance describing the state alcohol monopoly as "criminal dealers of poison" and stating that "thanks to reliable vendors" on cryptomarkets, alcohol is no longer needed. Vendors like the Psychedelic Saviour and Crystalline Crusader explicitly draw on activist and institutional critique repertoires, presenting their businesses as more than commercial operations and as forms of resistance to prohibition, which contributes to nuanced constructions of market motivation and trust while inhabiting the political resistance dimension of cryptomarket activity (Masson & Bancroft, 2018; Bancroft, 2019).

In this way, the analysis adds to research on cryptomarkets as sites of political activity, activism and resistance by showing how these practices are performed in everyday discourse (Maddox, 2020; Barratt & Aldridge, 2016) and concretely illustrates how the prohibitionist regime outlined in the background chapter operates as a stigmatizing and discriminatory order of discourse. The institutional critique repertoire thus develops a discourse in which criminalized drug users are shown to rationally avoid treatment and other formal services they experience as punitive rather than supportive, again emphasizing the stigmatizing and discriminatory effects of prohibition (Taylor, 2016; Daniels et al., 2021).

Cryptomarket community counterpublic repertoire

The prohibition-effects repertoires converge in the cryptomarket community forum, which stands out, against the isolation and concealment of the double life and surveillance repertoires, as a space for articulating institutional critique.

Following Fraser (1990, p. 67), cryptomarket forums can be read as counterpublics: "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses" and formulate "oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs." As Venema (2024, p. 232) notes, contemporary public life consists of multiple, uneven publics in which dominant arenas "reflect social inequalities, constituting a hegemonic public at large." For criminalized drug users, whose identities are marginalized, racialized and stereotyped as deviant others in these prohibition-shaped publics (Courtwright, 2012; Virk, 2024; Dertadian, 2024; Daniels et al., 2021; Alexander, 2008), the forum offers a rare space to speak in their own voice and experiment with alternative understandings of themselves and their practices (Fraser, 1990, p. 68). In this sense, the cryptomarket community repertoire reworks the double life, surveillance and institutional critique repertoires into a shared counterdiscourse about what prohibition does to the lives of people who use drugs.

Counterpublics function both as "spaces of withdrawal and regroupment" and as "bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). Cryptomarket actors draw on the repertoires and subject positions identified in this study to expand their discursive space, and the community forum becomes important as a place where identities not accepted elsewhere can be expressed and developed, partially, potentially and temporarily alleviating the stigmatization and marginalization produced by prohibition (Courtwright, 2012; Daniels et al., 2021; Ahern, Stuber & Galea, 2007).

The same user who described their parallel life and institutional critique ends their post by praising the community:

"I like meeting open-minded people. Those who have encountered life's sharp edge also have a certain authenticity and understanding that many lack. It's always fun to meet people from the other world."

The metaphorical phrase “the other world,” which inspired the title of this thesis, condenses the double life and counterpublic dynamics traced throughout the analysis and constructs the forum as a distinct social space with its own moral authority, populated by people othered by prohibitive perspectives, whose experiences of marginalization are framed as a source of understanding unavailable in mainstream society.

In the “Your personal relationship with drugs” thread, several users emphasize the importance of the community, prompted by the thread starter framing the forum as what keeps the community alive, particularly for marginalized ‘outsider’ communities that have no equivalent space in public life (Becker, 1963/2006). Vendors also draw on this repertoire by referencing chatting “like in the good old days,” emphasizing community aspects and wanting to build an “amazing community” by “sharing, connecting and growing together as a collective” based on the shared cultural values of the counterpublic. One user calls the opportunity to write about their experiences “the closest thing to therapy you get in this damn region,” while another states that “this thread is like therapy,” using metaphors to highlight the positive effects of inclusive community activity while implicitly delivering institutional critique by contrasting community support with the lack of help available in prohibition-shaped healthcare.

Contrasting “tragic” drug use with a “warm sense of belonging” in the cryptomarket community, one user stresses the rift between drug use and normalcy. Another user responds that even though it might be tragic, they have built “a nice community for broken, lost, lonely, bored, crazy individuals drawn to drugs for some reason,” and goes on to praise the inhabitants of these communities as “helpful, genuinely nice people,” adding that it is a relief to know such communities are populated by “relatively normal people.”

These accounts highlight the social importance of the forum while also showing that it always sits in contrast to what is considered “normal” within prohibition, as the forum is constructed as “the other world” yet populated by “normal people” Ahern, Stuber and Galea (2007, pp. 188–189) frame stigma as “a characteristic of persons that is contrary to a norm of a social unit,” where a norm is “a shared belief that a person ought to behave in certain ways at a certain time.” They distinguish devaluation, which occurs “when illicit drug users think that most people believe common negative stereotypes,” from alienation, “the internalization of

the views expressed in those stereotypes." Cryptomarket actors both relate to and internalize prohibition stereotypes, and the forum at least partially constitutes a space where rejection and renegotiation of stereotypical drug use identity is possible, providing a rare discursive arena in which stigmatized drug-use identities can be articulated, affirmed and politicized against prohibition, even as participation is constrained by surveillance risks and the need for anonymity; the same structures that mark them as outsiders (Fraser, 1990; Venema, 2024; Becker, 1963/2006; Ahern et al., 2007). The community counterpublic itself becomes part of the trust infrastructure as trust in vendors depends on, and reinforces, trust in a stigmatized but knowledgeable peer collective (Bancroft, 2019, p. 10; Masson & Bancroft, 2018, pp. 81–83). In line with research that describes cryptomarkets as relatively "gentrified" spaces, this counterpublic is also selective. It is more accessible to comparatively resourced, online-oriented users, while marginalized and severely dependent users might remain concentrated in offline markets where violence, instability and institutional oppression are more common (Aldridge, Stevens & Barratt, 2017; Bancroft, 2022; Childs & Bernot, 2024).

But, while this counterpublic rejects and negotiates prohibition, the repertoire analysis shows that it is itself also bound by it. Users are reminded not to disclose identifying information, pseudonyms are obligatory, and the openness of the forum is overshadowed by the ever-present possibility of surveillance and law enforcement and cryptomarket actors themselves sometimes employ prohibition discourse to frame drug use. The cryptomarket community thus offers a release from the double life as a space where a "discreditable" identity can be partially disclosed without full social sanction (Goffman, 1963, pp. 1–5), but it cannot dissolve the structural conditions that produced that double life in the first place, as prohibitionist institutions create deviance by marking such actors as outsiders (Becker, 1963/2006). It is worth noting that this counterpublic is itself made possible by the platform capitalist infrastructure it partially resists as the anonymizing technologies and platform affordances that structure cryptomarket interaction constitute the conditions under which drug-using identities can be articulated and defended (Maddox, 2020; Childs & Bernot, 2024). Platform capitalism thus functions not only as a constraining order of discourse but also as the technical and organizational precondition for the counterpublic space it simultaneously shapes (Srnicek, 2017; Hine, 2015). This points to a doubly constitutive relationship: prohibition and platform capitalism together produce the counterpublic that negotiates and partially resists them (Fraser, 1990; Bancroft, 2019), while the counterpublic's activity, the forum posts, community norms and trust performances that populate it, sustains

the platform infrastructure (Childs & Bernot, 2024; Srnicek, 2017; Masson & Bancroft, 2018).

These repertoires show that cryptomarket discourse does not simply reject prohibition; it reproduces core assumptions, reshapes them into rational-consumer and therapeutic narratives, and occasionally openly opposes them via normalization, activist and community repertoires, while also reproducing prohibition's core values through troubled use repertoires and scientific and medical discourse, all enacted through and shaped by the platform infrastructure. While Goffman (1963) and Becker (1963/2006) illuminate how stigma and deviant labels are socially assigned and managed, Scheff (1990, pp. 4, 15) shows how shame functions as a threat to social bonds and motivates efforts to restore them, a dynamic visible in how cryptomarket actors seek recognition and community in a virtual counterpublic space where their stigmatized identities can be partially disclosed. The cryptomarket community can thus be read as an outsider group that develops its own moral understandings of drug use, partially countering but also reproducing prohibitionist discourses. As the prohibitionist order of discourse permeates even the space constructed to resist it, it provides only a partial semi-reliable oasis of refuge through trust mediated by community norms and platform affordances, rather than an actual virtual sanctuary. Prohibition and platform capitalism are then not only backgrounds against which actors speak; they are constituted in the speaking.

The prohibition-effects repertoires help explain why trust and motivation are central in cryptomarket interaction. The double life and surveillance awareness repertoires show how prohibition produces chronic risk and concealment, making institutional trust fragile, pushing actors towards anonymous, peer-regulated spaces. Institutional critique repertoires clarify why vendors who frame their motivation in terms of care, quality and resistance to “bad policy” are seen as trustworthy helpers rather than mere profiteers. The cryptomarket community repertoire and counterpublic framing show that trust in vendors is tied to trust in the community as a whole, where shared experiences of stigma and marginalization under prohibition are recognized and affirmed (Masson & Bancroft, 2018; Bancroft, 2019; Barratt & Aldridge, 2016).

Conclusion

This study explores how actors on a Swedish-language darknet cryptomarket present and understand themselves as drug users and market participants, how they discursively construct drugs and markets, and how these constructions relate to prohibition and platform capitalism.

Research questions one and two are addressed through the buyer and vendor repertoire analysis, while the third is addressed in the discussion of prohibition-effects and counterpublic dynamics. The analysis shows that buyer and vendor repertoires, subject positions and prohibition-effects repertoires together map how cryptomarket actors construct identities, trust and motivation under a criminalizing regime in a platform-mediated virtual space. Prohibition and platform capitalism do not only shape how drugs and cryptomarkets are talked about, but also provide the technical and organizational conditions that make this form of drug market possible. These two orders of discourse do not operate independently but are mutually constitutive: together they produce the cryptomarket counterpublic that partially resists them, while that counterpublic's activity simultaneously sustains the platform infrastructure it inhabits.

Beyond extending existing research, this study makes three connected contributions. First, it indicates how cryptomarket actor discourse produces subject positions through interpretative repertoires and introduces prohibition-effects repertoires as a way to trace the discursive consequences of criminalization. Second, it clarifies how trust is performed in interaction by highlighting that perceived vendor motivation is central to trust performance, as buyers evaluate not only *what* vendors deliver, but *why*. Credibly signalling commitment beyond profit and towards care, quality or resistance tend to be treated as more trustworthy. Third, it suggests that cryptomarket forums function as partial counterpublics where criminalized drug-using identities can be voiced and negotiated, even as prohibitionist discourse continues to structure the space.

These contributions point to a broader finding: that cryptomarkets are sites where the interplay of prohibition and platform capitalism simultaneously produces and limits the spaces in which people who use drugs imagine and enact “better” markets. Trust in this space

is not only a technical or economic problem but a moral and motivational one, performed through repertoires that draw on and contest both orders of discourse.

Implications for social work, drug policy and future research

The prohibition-effects repertoires and counterpublic dynamics show that many harms described by cryptomarket actors are social and institutional rather than purely pharmacological. Double life, surveillance awareness and institutional critique repertoires depict treatment avoidance and distrust of healthcare as rational responses to criminalization, institutional failure and stigma rather than simple unwillingness to accept help.

The othering processes identified in the prohibition-effects repertoires are not merely discursive; they also carry affective weight. Scheff (1990, pp. 4, 15) argues that maintaining social bonds is a primary human drive and that shame and pride signal their status: shame indicates threatened or broken bonds, whereas pride reflects intact ones. A Swedish analysis of opioid-related deaths highlights that many people avoided seeking care, identifying a subgroup who had relatively stable everyday lives but little or no contact with healthcare or social services during their last year of life, indicating shame and fear of stigma as barriers (Johnson et al., 2024). This suggests that harm reduction-oriented, low-threshold and non-stigmatizing services are crucial for reaching people whose drug use remains hidden and for addressing risk environments, everyday stigma and institutional mistrust.

The surveillance awareness and institutional critique repertoires suggest that current services fail to meet users where they are, a core harm reduction principle identified by the WHO, the UN and harm reduction scholarship, which call for user-friendly, community-based, low-threshold services and peer outreach (Kappel, 2016; Degenhardt et al., 2023; WHO, 1986; Rhodes, 2002; Ball, 2007). Harm reduction principles have been adopted in drug-related social work and healthcare, for example in opioid substitution treatment, syringe exchange, drug consumption rooms, naloxone distribution and Housing First programmes, which share ethical commitments to meeting people where they are, reducing harm and addressing structural inequality (WHO, 1986; Rhodes, 2002; Ball, 2007; Pauly, Reist, Belle-Isle & Schactman, 2013).

The analysis also indicates that social workers and other professionals can learn from the kinds of peer support, practical knowledge-sharing and relatively non-moralizing talk that users co-produce in these forums, in line with harm reduction and risk environment research that highlights peer-based, low-threshold and non-judgmental settings as key to reducing drug-related harms (Colledge-Frisby et al., 2023; Kappel et al., 2016; Rhodes, 2002; WHO, 1986).

This points to the need for greater awareness among social work and healthcare practitioners of how prohibition shapes the social construction of drugs and people who use them, and for more nuanced ways of describing and talking about drug use. It ties prohibition as a structure of control to the discourses that shape and constrain how treatment and social work practice are developed and articulated. This study aims to contribute to such nuance, grounded in the language that people who use drugs themselves employ when accounting for their practices, and to a more reflective research practice that resists reproducing stigmatizing discourse. Future research could compare cryptomarket forums across policy contexts, including jurisdictions with more permissive drug policies, to examine whether prohibition severity shapes the prohibition-effects repertoires identified here. Comparative work that includes offline drug market settings would also help clarify who remains excluded from the partial counterpublic that cryptomarkets provide, and what discursive resources are available to more marginalized users who cannot access it.

References

Ahern, J., Stuber, J., & Galea, S. (2007). Stigma, discrimination and the health of illicit drug users. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence, 88*(2–3), pp. 188–196.

Alexander, B. K. (2008). *The globalization of addiction: A study in poverty of the spirit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Aldridge, J., Stevens, A., & Barratt, M. J. (2017). Will growth in cryptomarket drug buying increase the harms of illicit drugs? *Addiction, 112*(5), pp. 789–796.

Association of Internet Researchers. (2020). *Internet research: Ethical guidelines 3.0*. Association of Internet Researchers.

Ball, A. (2007). HIV, injecting drug use and harm reduction: A public health response. *Addiction, 102*(5), pp. 684–690.

Bancroft, A. (2019). Producing trust among illicit actors: A techno-social approach to an online illicit market. In M. Tzanetakis & N. South (Eds.), *Digital transformations of illicit drug markets: Reconfiguration and continuity* (pp. 1–17). Bingley: Emerald Publishing.

Bancroft, A. (2022). Potential influences of the darknet on illicit drug diffusion. *Current Addiction Reports, 7*(3), pp. 263–270.

Barratt, M. J., & Aldridge, J. (2016). Everything you always wanted to know about drug cryptomarkets but were afraid to ask. *International Journal of Drug Policy, 35*, pp. 1–6.

Barratt, M. J., Ferris, J. A., & Winstock, A. R. (2016). Safer scoring? Cryptomarkets, social supply and drug market violence. *International Journal of Drug Policy, 35*, pp. 24–31.

Becker, H. S. (1963/2006). *Utanför: Avvikandets sociologi*. Lund: Arkiv förlag.

Bång, C., Borg Skoglund, L., Bratt Becker, L., & Kristoffersson-Rosin, I. (2023). *Beroende i praktiken: Förstå, bemöta och samverka*. Stockholm: Natur & Kultur.

Ceuterick, M., Christiaens, T., Creupelandt, H., & Bracke, P. (2023). "And they slept happily ever after": Online interpretive repertoires on the use of benzodiazepines and Z-drugs. *Health, 27*(6), pp. 1194–1212.

Childs, A., & Bernot, A. (2024). The platformisation of illicit drug markets: How datafication, technological affordances and platform-mediated labour reconfigure drug supply. *Crime, Media, Culture, 21*(2), pp. 151–165.

Collins, R. (2008). *Den sociologiska blicken*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Colledge-Frisby, S., Webb, P., Wheeler, A., Ottaviano, S., Cunningham, E., Hajarizadeh, B., Leung, J., Peacock, A., Vickerman, P., Farrell, M., Dore, G., & Degenhardt, L. (2023). Global coverage of interventions to prevent and manage drug-related harms among people who inject drugs: A systematic review. *The Lancet Global Health, 11*(5), pp. e659–e672.

Courtwright, D. T. (2012). A short history of drug policy, or why we make war on some drugs but not on others. In J. Collins (Ed.), *Governing the global drug wars* (LSE IDEAS

special report SR014, pp. 3–14). London: London School of Economics and Political Science.

Daniels, C., Aluso, A., Burke-Shyne, N., Koram, K., Rajagopalan, S., Robinson, I., Shelly, S., Shirley-Beavan, S., & Tandon, T. (2021). Decolonizing drug policy. *Harm Reduction Journal, 18*(1), 120.

Degenhardt, L., Webb, P., Colledge-Frisby, S., Ireland, J., Wheeler, A., Ottaviano, S., Willing, A., Kariouz, A., Cunningham, E., Hajarizadeh, B., Leung, J., Tran, L., Price, O., Peacock, A., Vickerman, P., Farrell, M., Dore, G., Hickman, M., & Grebely, J. (2023). Epidemiology of injecting drug use, prevalence of injecting-related harm, and exposure to behavioural and environmental risks among people who inject drugs: A systematic review. *The Lancet Global Health, 11*(5), pp. e673–e692.

Dertadian, G. C. (2024). The coloniality of drug prohibition. *International Journal of Drug Policy, 126*, 104368.

Edman, J., & Olsson, B. (2014). The Swedish drug problem: Conceptual understanding and problem handling, 1839–2011. *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs, 31*(5–6), pp. 503–526.

Estrada, F., Stenström, A., & Tham, H. (2023). *Bruk och straff – en ESO-rapport om kriminaliseringen av narkotikakonsumtion* (ESO-rapport 2023:10). Stockholm: Elanders Sverige AB.

Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text, 25/26*, pp. 56–80.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Göransson, K. (2019). *Etnografi: Sjösätt, navigera och ro i land ditt projekt*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Harding, S. (1993). Rethinking standpoint epistemology: What is “strong objectivity”? In L. Alcoff & E. Potter (Eds.), *Feminist epistemologies* (pp. 49–82). London: Routledge.

Heilig, M. (2019). *Beroendetillstånd*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Hine, C. (2015). *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, embodied and everyday*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Horobets, N., Reznik, O., Denysenko, S., & Kravchuk, I. (2024). Digital markets: Dynamics and ethical considerations of online drug sales via cryptomarkets. *South Eastern European Journal of Public Health, 22*(2), pp. 600–612.

Jacobsen, K. H. (2019). *Introduction to global health* (3rd ed.). Burlington, MA: Jones & Bartlett Learning.

Johnson, B., Richert, T., & Svensson, B. (2017). *Alkohol- och narkotikaproblem* (1. uppl.). Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Johnson, B., Andersson, L., Jacobsson, H., Khoshnood, A. (2024). Patterns of care contacts in the final year of life among opioid overdose fatalities in southern Sweden: A latent class analysis. Harm Reduction Journal, 21, 186.

Karden, A., & Strizek, J. (2022). The potential for using web surveys to investigate drug sales through cryptomarkets on the darknet. In European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (Ed.), *Monitoring drug use in the digital age: Studies in web surveys* (EMCDDA Insights series). Lisbon: EMCDDA.

Kappel, N., Toth, E., Tegner, J., & Lauridsen, S. (2016). A qualitative study of how Danish drug consumption rooms influence health and well-being among people who use drugs. *Harm Reduction Journal, 13*, 20.

Kozinets, R. V. (2010). *Netnography: Doing ethnographic research online*. London: SAGE.

Liedman, S., & Linnell, B. (Red.). (2003). *Karl Marx: Texter i urval*. Stockholm: Ordfront.

Lorenzo-Dus, N., & Di Cristofaro, M. (2018). "I know this whole market is based on the trust you put in me and I don't take that lightly": Trust, community and discourse in crypto-drug markets. *Discourse, Context & Media, 21*, pp. 1–12.

Luffarn. (2025, July 13). *Stora Darknet-guiden: Lär dig TOR och marknadsplatserna* [Blog post]. Luffarn's blogg. Retrieved 26 January 2026, from https://www.luffarn.com/darknet-guiden-en-djungel-med-knarkhandel-och-arligt-uppsat/

Lunds universitet. Samhällsvetenskapliga fakulteten. (2023). *Riktlinjer för hantering av personuppgifter i examensarbeten vid Samhällsvetenskapliga fakulteten* [Guidelines for the handling of personal data in degree projects at the Faculty of Social Sciences]. Lunds universitet.

Maddox, A. (2020). Disrupting the ethnographic imaginarium: Challenges of immersion in the Silk Road cryptomarket community. *Journal of Digital Social Research, 2*(1), pp. 20–38.

Martin, J., & Christin, N. (2016). Ethics in cryptomarket research. *International Journal of Drug Policy, 35*, pp. 84–91.

Masson, K., & Bancroft, A. (2018). Nice people doing shady things: Drugs and the morality of exchange in the darknet cryptomarkets. *International Journal of Drug Policy, 58*, pp. 78–84.

Moeller, K. (2023). Trust in cryptomarkets for illicit drugs. In M. Tzanetakis & N. South (Eds.), *Digital transformations of illicit drug markets: Reconfiguration and continuity* (pp. 29–45). Bingley: Emerald Publishing.

Munksgaard, R., & Demant, J. (2016). Mixing politics and crime: The prevalence and decline of political discourse in cryptomarkets. *International Journal of Drug Policy, 35*, pp. 77–83.

Pauly, B., Reist, D., Belle-Isle, L., & Schactman, C. (2013). Housing and harm reduction: What is the role of harm reduction in addressing homelessness? *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 24(4), 284–290

Pereira, M., & Carrington, K. (2016). Irrational addicts and responsible pleasure seekers: Construction of the drug user. *Critical Criminology, 24*, pp. 379–389.

Potter, J., & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitudes and behaviour*. London: SAGE.

Potter, J., & Wetherell, M. (1988). Discourse analysis and the identification of interpretative repertoires. In C. Antaki (Ed.), *Analysing everyday explanation: A casebook of methods* (pp. 168–183). London: SAGE.

Rennstam, J., & Wästerfors, D. (2015). *Från stoff till studie: Om analysarbete i kvalitativ forskning*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Rhodes, T. (2002). The "risk environment": A framework for understanding and reducing drug-related harm. *International Journal of Drug Policy, 13*(2–3), pp. 85–94.

Scheff, T. (1990). *Microsociology: Discourse, emotion and social structure*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Sohlberg, P., & Sohlberg, B.-M. (2019). *Kunskapens former: Vetenskapsteori, forskningsmetod och forskningsetik* (4. uppl.). Stockholm: Liber.

Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Taylor, S., Buchanan, J., & Ayres, T. C. (2016). Prohibition, privilege and the drug apartheid: The failure of drug policy reform to address the underlying fallacies of drug prohibition. *Criminology & Criminal Justice, 16*(4), pp. 452–469.

Tupper, K. (2012). Psychoactive substances and the English language: "Drugs", discourses, and public policy. *Contemporary Drug Problems, 39*, pp. 461–492.

Tzanetakis, M., & South, N. (2023). Introduction: The digital transformations of illicit drug markets as a process of reconfiguration and continuity. In M. Tzanetakis & N. South (Eds.), *Digital transformations of illicit drug markets: Reconfiguration and continuity* (pp. 1–12). Bingley: Emerald Publishing.

Tzanetakis, M., & Marx, S. A. (2023). The power of digital platforms: What do darknet drug platforms have in common with platform giants? In A. Maurer, S. Nessel, & A. Veira-Ramos (Eds.), *Economic sociology in Europe: Recent trends and developments* (pp. 49–69). London: Routledge.

United Nations. (1961). *Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961*. New York, NY: United Nations.

United Nations. (1971). *Convention on Psychotropic Substances*. New York, NY: United Nations.

United Nations. (1988). *United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances*. Vienna: United Nations.

Van Buskirk, J., Bruno, R., & Dobbins, T. (2017). The recovery of online drug markets following law enforcement and other disruptions. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence, 173*, pp. 159–162.

Venema, N. (2024). Counterpublics and structural change in media and politics: A theoretical framework on transformations within a long-term historical perspective. *Javnost – The Public, 31*(2), pp. 231–252.

Virk, G. S. (2024). The expansion of global drug trade: Historical milestones, colonialism, prohibition, and ongoing challenges. *Journal of East-West Thought, 14*(2).

Wetherell, M. (1998). Positioning and interpretative repertoires: Conversation analysis and post-structuralism in dialogue. *Discourse & Society, 9*(3), pp. 387–412.

Wiggins, S. (2017). *Discursive psychology: Theory, method and applications*. London: SAGE.

Winther Jørgensen, M., & Phillips, L. (2000). *Diskursanalys som teori och metod*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

World Health Organization. (1986). *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion: First International Conference on Health Promotion, Ottawa, 21 November 1986*. Geneva: World Health Organization.

Zhang, S., Qi, X., Wang, Y., & Fang, K. (2024). Global burden of drug use disorders by region and country, 1990–2021. *Frontiers in Public Health, 12*, 1470809.

Appendices

Appendix A - Vendor threads and post quantities

Vendor	Posts in thread	Posts collected
Vendor 1	929	24
Vendor 2	863	22
Vendor 3	778	18
Vendor 4	490	42
Vendor 5	369	56
Vendor 6	317	54
Vendor 7	284	76
Vendor 8	242	33
Vendor 9	232	27
Vendor 10	210	61
Total	4,714	413

Appendix B - Other forum threads and post quantities

Thread	Posts in thread	Posts collected
Your personal relationship with drugs	26	26
Speed	316	111
Cannabis	346	93
Swedish discussion	1,009	166
Trackable/seizure of goods	272	103
Stimulants: days of reckoning	105	96
Heroin, knowledge and opinions	39	29
Harm reduction: home testing	8	8
Harm reduction: lab testing	17	14
Total	2,138	646

Appendix C - Buyer self-presentation repertoires

Repertoire	Core function	Key discursive features
Discovery	Motivates drug use through curiosity, exploration and self-development.	Affect displays, intellectual footing, metaphors of depth/journey, narrative accounts of experimentation and interests.
Compatible life	Constructs drug use as consistent with functional adult life.	Lists of normality markers, before/after contrasts, respectful-use framing, stake management.
Therapeutic use	Frames drug use as self-medication for mental or physical health.	Medical category entitlement, healthcare critique, extreme case formulations, patient positioning.
Troubled use	Accounts for problematic, dependent or escalating use.	Escalation narratives, loss listings, dramatizing, metaphors, accountability.
Leisure, pleasure and normalization	Frames drug use as recreational, unremarkable and socially accepted.	Comparison with alcohol/legal substances, affect displays, normalization devices, social ritual framing.

Appendix D - Vendor self-presentation repertoires

Repertoire	Core function	Trusted Elder	Psychedelic Saviour	Crystalline Crusader	Banned Scammer
Professional entrepreneur	Constructs legitimacy through business professionalism, service quality and reliability	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cryptomarket veteran	Claims credibility through long-term market presence and community history	✓	✓	—	✓
Therapeutic helper	Frames vending as care, healing or personal development rather than commerce	—	✓	✓	—
Activist	Positions vending as political resistance to prohibition	—	✓	✓	—
Substance specialist	Establishes authority through technical knowledge, purity discourse, lab-testing and specialization in specific drug categories	—	✓	✓	—
Community builder	Constructs vendor-buyer relation as partnership, friendship or shared community	✓	✓	✓	—

Appendix E - Cryptomarket subject positions

Subject position	Core orientation	Buyer side: typical stance and credibility basis	Vendor side: typical stance and credibility basis
Cryptomarket veteran	Evaluates vendors, buyers, reliability and trust through prior market experience, continuity and long-term relationships.	Positions self as experienced actor who has "been around since [old market]", cites years of trading, cross-market recognition and repeat purchases/sales to stabilize trust claims.	Positions self as long-standing actor ("in the game since…", references to earlier markets), uses historical continuity and large client base to claim reliability and predictability.
Therapeutic patient/helper	Approaches substances and distribution through self-medication, symptom management and reliable dosing.	Draws on health narratives, diagnoses, failed healthcare and purity concerns; emphasizes dosing reliability and long-term symptom management (e.g. microdosing, ADHD, depression).	Frames vending as care or support ("helping people transform", "saving lives"), stresses purity, lab-testing and careful dosing as enabling safe therapeutic use, claiming quasi-clinical or helper authority.
Activist	Frames purchasing, vending and endorsement as resistance to prohibition and support for "better" markets.	Uses anti-prohibition talk, criticizes Swedish drug policy, calls for loyalty to "honest" vendors and solidarity between "ordinary people" against the state; treats buying and endorsing as political acts.	Frames vending as political resistance ("fighting the war on drugs", "standing up to bad policy"), emphasizes honesty, quality and safety as activism; aligns commercial practices with a broader project of reforming or bypassing prohibition.

Drug knowledge and substance specialist	Assesses vendors and products through accumulated knowledge of effects, purity, testing and dosage.	Mobilizes lab results, testing practices, technical comparisons and harm-reduction advice; evaluates vendors through detailed purity discourse and experiential expertise.	Claims substance specialist status through lab-testing, technical language and myth-busting; uses expertise and data to correct lay knowledge, set quality standards and discipline other vendors.

Appendix F - Prohibition-effects repertoires

Repertoire	Core function	Key discursive features
Double life	Narrates concealment, deception and stigma as central harms of living under prohibition.	Metaphors of hiding and parallel lives, emotion categories, extreme case formulations, minimization devices.
Surveillance awareness and evasion	Accounts for the need to communicate cautiously under the threat of law enforcement and exposure.	Partial disclosure, warnings against oversharing, pseudonymity, operational-security language, evasion vocabulary.
Institutional critique	Constructs prohibition, healthcare and related institutions as inadequate, punitive or harmful.	Healthcare critique, anti-prohibition formulations, metaphors of bureaucratic rigidity, reframing self-medication as rational.
Cryptomarket community counterpublic	Frames the forum as a partial refuge where stigmatized identities can be expressed and recognized collectively.	Community metaphors, therapeutic metaphors, outsider/world-building language, contrasts with “normal” society.