



## Research paper

## Non-medical use of prescription drugs among illicit drug users: A case study on an online drug forum

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The non-medical use of prescription drugs is a growing phenomenon associated with increasing health-related harms. However, little is known about the drivers of this process among illicit drug users. Our aim is to show how the qualities of pharmaceutical drugs, pharmaceutical related knowledge, online communities sharing this knowledge and medical professionals mediate and transform the consumption behaviour related to pharmaceutical drugs.

**Methods:** The data consist of discussion threads from an online drug use forum. Using actor network theory (ANT), we analysed translations that mediate the online user community's relationship with pharmaceutical drugs.

**Results:** Differences in experienced drug effects are explained both as a process of 'learning' and as differences in brain chemistry at the receptor level. Both science- and experience-based information are shared on best practices to optimise use, avoid adverse health effects and maximise the experience of intoxication. The expanded context of doctors' practices places stress on the medical framework for drug use. Our analysis shows how the non-medical use of psychoactive pharmaceuticals relates to joint, medicalised ideas of bodies as sites of medical experimentation, as well as to the collective process of constructing 'pharmaceutical competences' in user networks. Understandings of intoxication have increasingly been permeated with the pharmacological and scientific logic of knowledge.

**Conclusion:** The forum works as a platform for harm reduction inspired exchange of knowledge. However, the user community's knowledge sharing practices can generate a shared perception of a sufficient or even superior drug use experience and knowledge. This may lead to overdoses and other risky behaviour, and thereby contribute to increased harms related to non-medical use of prescription drugs.

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## Introduction

Researchers have identified the non-medical use of pharmaceutical drugs as a significant and expanding phenomenon in Western countries (Fischer & Argento, 2012; Larance et al., 2011; Wilkins, Sweetsur, & Griffiths, 2011). The trend seems to be related to the growing importance of pharmaceuticals in people's everyday lives (Abraham, 2010). In medical sociology, the issue has been discussed in terms of pharmaceuticalisation, a process by which human conditions are increasingly transformed into opportunities for pharmaceutical intervention. According to Williams, Martin, and Gabe (2011), pharmaceuticalisation is a complex and dynamic sociotechnical process that goes beyond the

expanding drug markets and reconstruction of health-related problems. Pharmaceutical drugs are increasingly being designed for 'healthy' individuals to improve their quality of life, and pharmaceutical solutions are actively sought for a variety of personal problems previously considered to be non-medical (Williams et al., 2011). While developments in the pharmaceutical industry have helped to reduce human suffering, the expanding use of pharmacotherapy, new indications for prescribing pharmaceutical drugs, pharmaceutical diversion and illegal online marketplaces have led to increased availability of psychoactive prescription drugs in Western societies (Bell & Figert, 2012; Maxwell, 2011; Barratt, Ferris, & Winstock, 2014). These developments have resulted in a growing number of people suffering from problems related to non-medical use of pharmaceutical drugs (Fischer & Argento, 2012; Uosukainen et al., 2013).

This case study aims to shed light on the factors behind the non-medical use of prescription drugs by examining illicit drug use and the role of pharmaceuticals in Finland's current drug scene. The

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Finnish case is particularly interesting: while the level of non-medical use of pharmaceutical drugs has been relatively low among the general population (Hakkarainen, Karjalainen, Ojajarvi, & Salasuo, 2015), psychoactive prescription drugs have replaced some of the classic narcotics among illicit drug users. For instance, since the early 2000s, buprenorphine has replaced heroin as the main problem opioid (Varjonen, 2015). Growing non-medical use of psychoactive prescription drugs has led to a greater demand for treatment, but the most serious consequence has been the increase in pharmaceutical-induced deaths. Prescription opioid-related deaths have risen steeply, especially in the United States and Australia (Paulozzi et al., 2012; Rintoul, Dobbin, Drummer, & Ozanne-Smith, 2011). In Finland, opioid deaths have mainly occurred in the context of the polydrug use of buprenorphine, benzodiazepines and alcohol (Häkkinen, Launiainen, Vuori, & Ojanperä, 2012). In addition to opioids, other pharmaceutical drugs have contributed to the fatal poisonings of drug users (Rönkä, Karjalainen, Vuori, & Mäkelä, 2015).

A growing body of research has responded to the growth in pharmaceutical-related harm, investigating the prevalence of the non-medical use of pharmaceutical drugs and the related dependence and mortality of users (e.g. Fischer et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2013; Uosukainen et al., 2013; Zamparutti, Schifano, Corkery, Oyefeso, & Ghodse, 2011). A handful of qualitative inquiries have also shed new light on the dynamics between macro-level developments in drug markets and micro-level practices and beliefs related to non-medical use of pharmaceuticals. These studies have mainly focused on non-medical use of prescription stimulants and cognitive enhancement (Bell, Partridge, Lucke, & Hall, 2013; Vrecko, 2015), as well as non-medical use of prescription drugs among subgroups, such as men who have sex with men and injecting drug users (Keckojevic, Corliss, & Lankenau, 2015; Lankenau et al., 2012). Lovell's (2006) ethnographic study regarding the pharmaceutical leakage of buprenorphine treatment has highlighted the need to study new drug use networks, including how the products are distributed and how user knowledge is formed based on new 'pharmaceuticalised' drug scenes. Moreover, Lovell (2006) and other researchers (Quintero, Peterson, & Young, 2006; Vrecko, 2015) have suggested that elaborate qualitative approaches are essential for understanding the national particularities and processes from which population-level trends emerge. To understand the macro-level patterns of global and national drug diversion, research should address the everyday actions and understandings of user groups receiving and seeking pharmaceutical solutions for both medical and non-medical purposes.

The starting point for our study is that the increased availability of psychoactive pharmaceuticals only partially explains their growing popularity and the increasing harm related to it among illicit drug users. The study scrutinises a Finnish online peer-to-peer network of people interested in and using illicit drugs. Following the principles of actor network theory (Duff, 2011, 2015), we approach 'pharmaceuticalised drug scenes' as a phenomenon which is produced by an assemblage of actors involved in the non-medical use of pharmaceutical drugs. This assemblage does not constitute only of drugs and users, but involve actors such as medical doctors and institutions, pharmaceutical related information sources, online communities, equipment and so on, which mediate and enable the drug-use experience (Duff, 2011). We argue that micro-level research on user scenes is essential when it comes to understanding the current dynamics of pharmaceutical use, and most importantly, the increase in pharmaceutical-induced deaths. Our aim is to show how the qualities of pharmaceutical drugs, pharmaceutical related knowledge, online communities and medical professionals mediate and transform the consumption behaviour related to pharmaceutical drugs (Duff, 2012). Our

research questions are as follows: (1) how are the effects of pharmaceuticals perceived in the user network? (2) What kind of knowledge community shares and values in relation to pharmaceutical use? (3) How does the network view their relationship with medical professionals? We argue that non-medical use of pharmaceuticals and online knowledge-sharing practices can generate a phenomenon among the user community that we call a competence fallacy—a heightened sense of control when experimenting with pharmaceutical drugs.

## Methodology and data

The emergence of the internet in the 1990s provided a new platform for drug-related social interaction through social media and discussion forums. These venues have made it possible for drug users to easily find like-minded people interested in sharing their thoughts and expertise. People who use drugs are not easily involved in studies due to the illicit and generally stigmatised nature of drug use. There is also a marginalised sub-population of users who are hard to reach: they do not necessarily have any contact with authorities, practitioners or other user circles. For these reasons, we have chosen to employ an online source – a discussion forum for drug users – to reach also users who may have been 'hidden' from other types of research designs (Miller & Sönderlund, 2010).

At the beginning of the study, we identified online forums discussing pharmaceutical use and different drug combinations. We chose an active, self-organised forum for further analysis (hereafter referred to as 'Dopeinfo'). Established in its current form in 2005, the forum is an informal site for all kinds of drug-related discussions. The forum is divided into two parts, one for general discussion and the other for discussion on specific drugs and their uses. Drugs are further divided into different sections based on groups, such as psychedelics, stimulants and empathogens. These are classes of drugs with similar chemical structures and effects. The moderators keep track and edit the forum if necessary. General topics include both broad drug-related discussions, such as the half-life<sup>1</sup> of different drugs and dangerous polydrug combinations; however, they also include more personal discussions concerning mental and physical health issues, families and relationships.

There is no systematic information available regarding forum members' characteristics. Some assumptions can be made based on references members make to their age and gender in the discussions. The age range seems to vary from upper secondary school pupils (16–18 years old) to young middle age (30–40 years old), and males seem to form the majority of participants. This finding aligns with previous research into the demographics of drug users and online drug forums (Baggott, Erowid, Galloway, & Mendelson, 2010; Chiauuzzi, DasMahapatra, Lobo, & Barratt, 2013). The community involves people who are users (both recreational and those reporting drug-related harm) and who are interested in drugs. According to latest published user statistics, including both members and 'lurkers' – those reading the messages without registering – there were approximately 550,000 visits on the site from 2011, of which approximately half were unique visits from different IP addresses. The site has approximately 2500 registered members.

Reading the forum does not require registration, and the contents are easily accessible and publicly available. We consider the contents as a 'text' from a public medium, and for this reason, the approval of an ethics committee was not obtained. However,

<sup>1</sup> A half-life is the time it takes for a substance to lose one-half of its pharmacological activity.

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