

Use of social media and messaging platforms to purchase illicit drugs, among a sample of people in Australia who regularly use ecstasy and/or other illicit stimulants, 2023

Haniene Tayeb, Cate King, Amy Peacock, Monica Barratt, and Rachel Sutherland

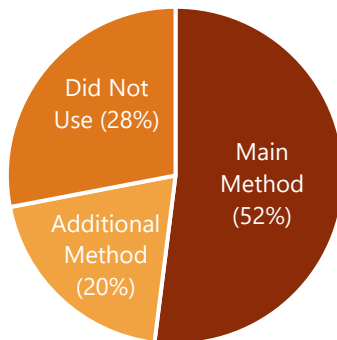
This report was prepared by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney

For further information: h.tayeb@unsw.edu.au



Data was collected as part of the Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS). Annual interviews were conducted with people residing in Australia who used ecstasy and/or other illicit stimulants monthly or more frequently and were aged 18 or older.

Key Findings



72% of the 2023 EDRS sample used social media/messaging platforms to arrange the purchase of drugs in the past year.

28% of participants who used social media/messaging platforms to arrange the purchase of drugs did so via an unknown dealer.



Among participants who used social media/messaging platforms to arrange the purchase of illicit substances, Snapchat, Facebook, and Wickr were the dominant platforms used.



44% of participants who arranged the purchase of drugs via social media/messaging platforms reported that the person they arranged obtaining drugs from had advertised the sale of illicit drugs on these platforms.

Introduction



The use of social media and messaging apps as a platform for buying and selling drugs has increased in recent years. This rise can likely be attributed to the convenience offered to buyers where, unlike cryptomarkets or the surface web, these platforms seamlessly integrate with existing social media platforms and require less technological expertise (1). Moreover, in comparison to conventional "street-level" markets, some of these platforms promote greater security via encrypted communications, claiming anonymity as a part of the transaction process (2,3). These platforms, however, present potential risks. For example, mechanisms to regulate sellers are limited (4), notable discrepancies have been found between perceived and actual security of information exchanged through these apps (5), and vendors may utilise these platforms to advertise illicit substances that have potentially greater risks (6).

The Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System has been monitoring the use of social media and messaging platforms to arrange the purchase of illicit drugs for a number of years, however to-date, it remains unclear as to what extent participants are using these platforms to communicate with existing networks (e.g., friends, known dealers) or new networks (e.g., unknown dealers/vendors). This bulletin aims to identify: (a) the use of social media and messaging platforms to arrange the purchase of drugs; (b) the platform/s being used; and (c) who drugs are being obtained from, and if this person is advertising the sale of illicit drugs via these platform/s.

Methods

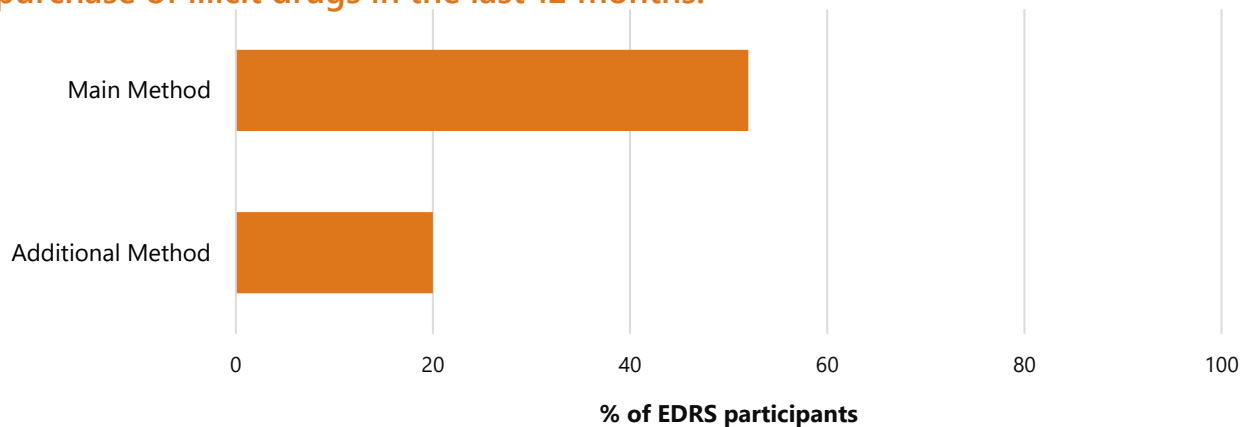


Data were collected in 2023 as part of the Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS). Interviews were conducted with 708 people residing in Australian capital cities who used ecstasy and/or other illicit stimulants on a monthly or more frequent basis and were aged 18 or older. Interviews were carried out face-to-face (41%), via telephone (44%), and through videoconferencing (15%). Refer to the [EDRS Background and Methods](#) (7) and [National 2023 EDRS report](#) (8) for further details.

The EDRS collects a wide range of individual-level information, including demographic and health characteristics as well as patterns of drug use. From 2019, participants were asked how they had "arranged obtaining illicit drugs" in the past 12 months, with one of the response options being 'social networking/messaging apps' (hereafter referred to as social media/messaging platforms). Additional questions were added in 2023 to capture the platform/s used and who drugs were obtained from (see Appendix). To examine the aims of this bulletin, descriptive statistics were applied.

Results

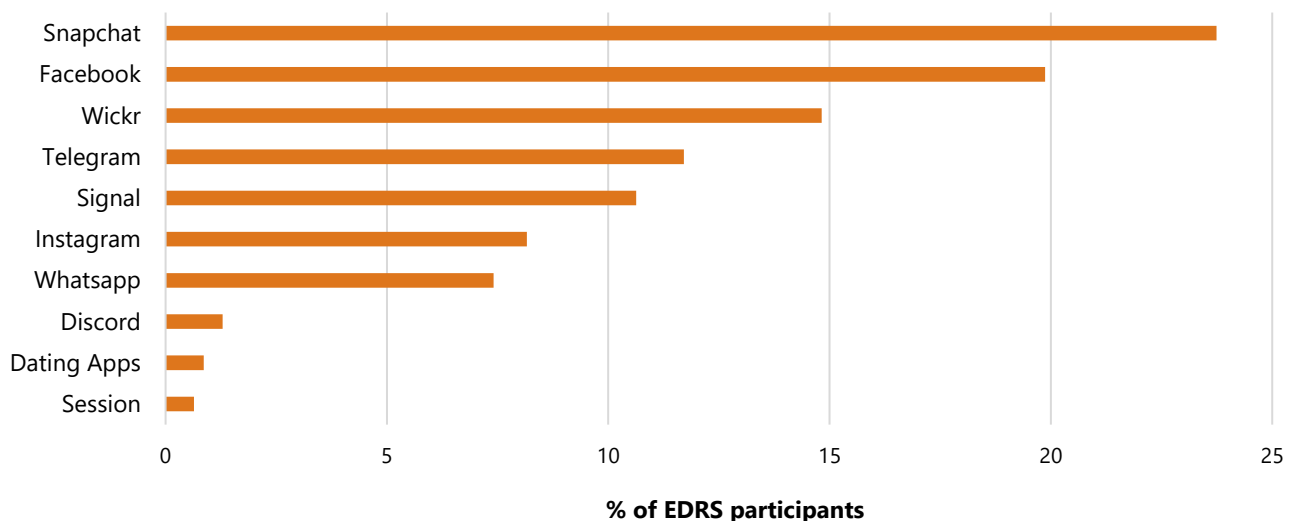
Figure 1. The use of social media/messaging platforms as a method to arrange the purchase of illicit drugs in the last 12 months.



Note. Among those who responded (N=686).

Half (52%) of participants reported social media/messaging platforms as their main method to arrange the purchase of illicit substances in the past year. When accounting for diversification in purchasing methods, with 70% of the 2023 EDRS sample using multiple methods to arrange purchasing illicit drugs, we found that a further 20% of participants used social media/messaging platforms in addition to their main method (Figure 1).

Figure 2. Name of social media/messaging platform used to arrange the purchase of illicit drugs in the past year.



Note. Among participants who reported social media/messaging platforms as a method used to arrange the purchase of drugs in the past 12 months and responded (N=492), with multiple responses allowed. Axis has been reduced to 25% to improve visibility of trends. Threema, Wire, Reddit, and Youtube have been suppressed as less than 5 respondents reported using these applications.

Among those who arranged the purchase of illicit drugs via social media/messaging platforms in the past year and responded (n=492), the most frequently used platforms were Snapchat (23.7%), Facebook (19.9%), and Wickr (14.8%) (Figure 2). Diversification in platforms was also present in this sample, with 63% of respondents reporting using more than one platform.

Figure 3: Source when arranging the purchase of illicit drugs via social media/messaging platform.

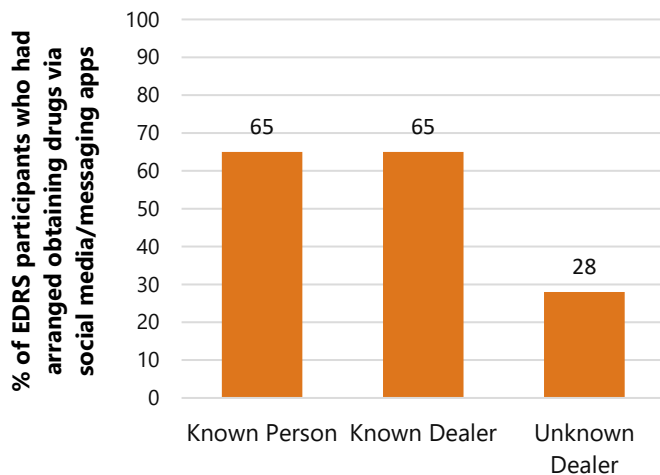
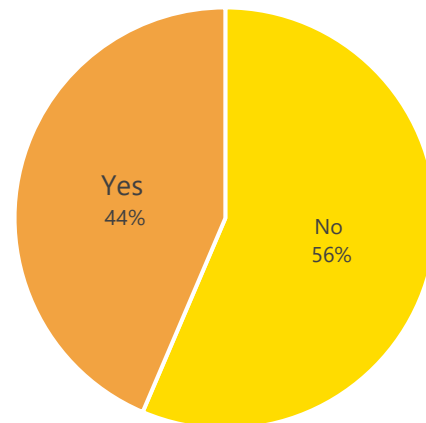


Figure 4: Did source advertise the sale of illicit drugs via platform?



Note. Among participants who reported social media/messaging platforms as a method used to arrange purchasing drugs in the past 12 months and responded (N=495), with multiple responses allowed. Known person=friend/partner/relative/colleague etc.

*Among participants who reported social media/messaging platforms as a method used to arrange purchasing drugs in the past 12 months and responded (N=490).

Among those who arranged the purchase of illicit drugs via social media/messaging platforms in the past year and responded (n=495), 28% reported that they sourced their illicit substances from an unknown dealer/vendor (Figure 3). Among those who arranged purchasing illicit drugs via social media/messaging platforms in the past year and responded (n=490), 44% reported that the person that they arranged drugs from advertised the sale of illicit drugs on these platforms (Figure 4).

Discussion

A large proportion (72%) of EDRS participants reported that they had used social media and/or messaging platforms as a method to arrange the purchase of illicit drugs in the year preceding interview. Among these participants, Snapchat, Facebook and Wickr were the most widely used platforms, with most participants using more than one social media/messaging platform, and the majority obtaining drugs from a known person (e.g., friend) or known dealer. These findings are broadly consistent with those of van der Sanden et al (1), who also found that Facebook, Snapchat and Wickr were the most commonly used platforms to buy/sell drugs among their New Zealand sample, with participants using a median of two (and up to five) platforms. Interestingly, van der Sanden et al (1) found that in the context of social supply, platform 'choices' were not explicitly made but rather channelled through platforms already in use within the social group, whereas in the context of more 'commercial' transactions, sellers exercised considerable influence in directing buyers towards a particular platform.

Although not explicitly studied in the current study, existing research suggests that widespread use of social media platforms to obtain drugs may be due to the benefits of convenience and perceived security (1,2,3). There are, however, potential risks that also need to be considered. In particular, there is an absence of mechanisms for regulating suppliers or facilitating buyer feedback, including a lack of built-in features to verify the authenticity or reliability of suppliers (2,4). This is particularly concerning when considering interactions with unfamiliar vendors. In the current bulletin, 28% of those who had used social media/messaging platforms to arrange the purchase of illicit drugs in the past year reported that they had

done so via an unknown dealer. The absence of regulation and feedback mechanisms may heighten the risk for these individuals, as they have less reliable means to assess the quality or safety of the products they are purchasing.

Further, these platforms provide a new market for vendors to advertise illicit drugs beyond cryptomarkets or the surface web, reaching a greater audience of individuals who may have otherwise remained unexposed (6). Our findings suggest that sellers may be utilising this network. That is, among those who had used social media/messaging platforms to obtain drugs in the past year, a substantial proportion (44%) reported that the person they obtained drugs from had advertised the sale of illicit substances on these platforms. By increasing the ease of accessibility to buyers, it is possible that some people who use drugs may experiment with new forms of illicit drugs that have the potential to cause greater harm.

As technology continues to develop and integrate into everyday life, it is likely that social media and messaging platforms will remain a dominant market for illicit drugs. It is therefore crucial to closely monitor the dynamics of social media use to identify and address emerging risks effectively.

References

1. van der Sanden R, Wilkins C, Rychert M, Barratt MJ. 'Choice' of social media platform or encrypted messaging app to buy and sell illegal drugs. *The International Journal of Drug Policy*. 2022 Oct 108;103819–103819. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2022.103819>
2. Moyle L, Childs A, Coomber R, Barratt MJ. Drugsforsale: An exploration of the use of social media and encrypted messaging apps to supply and access drugs. *The International Journal of Drug Policy*. 2019 Jan 63; 101–110. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2018.08.005>
3. Barratt MJ, Lamy FR, Engel L, Davies E, Puljevic C, Ferris JA, Winstock AR. Exploring Televend, an innovative combination of cryptomarkets and messaging app technologies for trading prohibited drugs. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*. 2022 Feb 1:231. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2021.109243>
4. Bancroft A, Reid SP. Concepts of illicit drug quality among darknet market users: Purity, embodied experience, craft and chemical knowledge. *International Journal of Drug Policy*. 2016 Sep 25;42 – 49. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2015.11.008>
5. Décary-Héту D, Aldridge J. Sifting through the net: Monitoring of online offenders by researchers. *European Review of Organised Crime*. 2015 Jan 2(2);122-41.
6. Bakken SA, Demant JJ. Sellers' risk perceptions in public and private social media drug markets. *The International Journal on Drug Policy*. 2019 Nov 73;255-262. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2019.03.009>
7. Sutherland R, Karlsson A, King C, Uporova J, Chandrasena U, Jones F, Gibbs D, Price O, Dietze P, Lenton S, Salom C, Bruno R, Wilson J, Grigg J, Daly C, Thomas N, Radke S, Stafford L, Degenhardt L, Farrell M, & Peacock A. Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) Interviews 2023: Background and Methods. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney; 2023.
8. Sutherland R, Karlsson A, King C, Uporova J, Chandrasena U, Jones F, Gibbs D, Price O, Dietze P, Lenton S, Salom C, Bruno R, Wilson J, Grigg J, Daly C, Thomas N, Radke S, Stafford L, Degenhardt L, Farrell M, & Peacock A. Australian Drug Trends 2023: Key Findings from the National Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) Interviews. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney; 2023. DOI: 10.26190/1qta-pe36

Appendix

Item	
(1)	In what ways have you arranged obtaining illicit drugs in the last 12 months? (2019-2023)
(2)	What social networking or messaging apps have you used to arrange the purchase of illicit drugs in the last 12 months? (2023)
(3)	Thinking specifically about the times you arranged the purchase of illicit drugs via social media and/or messaging apps in the last 12 months, from whom did you obtain these drugs? (2023)
(4)	Did this person/s advertise the sale of illicit drug/s on these social media/messaging apps? (2023)
(5)	What is the MAIN way that you have arranged the purchase of illicit drugs in the last 12 months? (2019-2023)

Funding and Copyright

Funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care under the Drug and Alcohol Program ©NDARC, UNSW SYDNEY 2024. This work is copyright. You may download, display, print and reproduce this material in unaltered form only (retaining this notice) for your personal, non-commercial use or use within your organisation. All other rights are reserved. Requests and enquiries concerning reproduction and rights should be addressed to NDARC, UNSW Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia via drugtrends@unsw.edu.au.

Recommended Citation

Tayeb H, King C, Peacock A, Barratt MJ, Sutherland R. Use of social media and messaging platforms to purchase illicit drugs, among a sample of people in Australia who regularly use ecstasy and/or other illicit stimulants, 2023. Drug Trends Bulletin Series. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney; 2024.

Acknowledgements

- The participants who were interviewed for the EDRS in the present and in previous years.
- The agencies that assisted with recruitment and interviewing.
- The EDRS is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care under the Drug and Alcohol Program.

Participating Researchers and Research Centres



- Dr Rachel Sutherland, Antonia Karlsson, Julia Uporova, Olivia Price, Cate King, Haniene Tayeb, Professor Louisa Degenhardt, Professor Michael Farrell and Associate Professor Amy Peacock, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales, New South Wales;
- Joanna Wilson, Dr Campbell Aiken and Professor Paul Dietze, Burnet, Victoria;
- Sophie Radke and Associate Professor Raimondo Bruno, School of Psychology, University of Tasmania, Tasmania;
- Dr Jodie Grigg and Professor Simon Lenton, National Drug Research Institute and enAble Institute, Curtin University, Western Australia; and
- Catherine Daly, Dr Jennifer Juckel, Dr Natalie Thomas and Associate Professor Caroline Salom, Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland, Queensland.