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## MEDICAL CANNABIS INDUSTRY AND THE REFRACTED PUBLIC OF POLISH DRUG USERS FORUM

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### Aim and Background

Intersections of digital spaces and illicit drugs have been slowly coming to the forefront of criminology or sociology (Barratt, 2011). As drug users and vendors alike use surface, deep, or dark web to go about substance-related activities, enhancing digitally their activity, some interesting phenomena arise at the intersection of the two domains. Managing visibility, stigma or trust, and the physical embeddedness are at the core of this transdisciplinary scholarship (Tzanetakis & South, 2023). In this paper we analyze Polish drug forum users as refracted public (Abidin, 2021) to illuminate accommodation of the medical cannabis industry in the social worlds of cannabis users. Their digital presence “below the radar” contributes to the changing landscape of cannabis use at the intersection of emerging industry, upcoming possible reforms and user cultures in transition.

Drug users benefit from the affordances of the digital sphere to connect, maintain their otherwise spoiled identities, search for information that is scattered across the web, and spread it. Simultaneously, these conditions of the networked spaces (boyd, 2010) are challenging due to the very reason that brings users together: stigmatized or illegal activity. Their drug-related presence disrupts the public/private binary. Drug forum users discuss highly personal issues that require trust and sensitivity and urge them to remain hidden in plain sight to avoid context collapse, yet maintaining visibility (Marwick & boyd, 2014).

Emerging cannabis industry materialized through legislative changes initiated in the 21st century in countries such as Uruguay, Canada or the US. It started to coexist with illegal cannabis markets, well established globally. The legislation shifts also produced tensions and contradictions in the process (Wheeldon & Heidt, 2022). Amid many of

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them are the discrepancy between the cannabis users' experiences in the countries where very little loosening happened and the liberalizing vanguard, that is very well accessible through global media, migration flows, and digital interconnectedness. In the meantime, the medical cannabis regulation started to happen, even among the more conservative states. It introduced both different perspectives on the illicit drug that gained a new social meaning as a healing substance and a different industry that populated—to some extent—the formerly gray zone of illegal supply.

This paper looks at the discussions of Polish drug forum users who exercise anonymity to produce knowledge about and access to cannabis and facilitate its use at the slow waning of prohibition. It does so by analyzing how the emergence of the medical cannabis industry has been accommodated within the social world of cannabis users online. It also tracks the discursive reception of the emergence of the CBD industry within online drug discussions. Last, but not least, it studies the convergence of self-care narratives within the cannabis social worlds with the medicalization and self-healing stories underpinning the two industries.

Medical cannabis was introduced in 2017 in Poland, disrupting conservative attitudes towards cannabis and drugs in general (Wagner et al., 2021). It also quivered the illicit supply of cannabis bringing alternative access to the substance to the black market reliant users. Simultaneously, a low THC cannabis product, the cannabidiols (CBD) emerged in a gray-zone between the illicit drugs and alternative medicine, herbal healing or therapeutic self-care use (Fortin et al., 2023).

The cannabis use itself started undergoing differentiated normalization within the cannabis social world (Wanke, 2023), bringing more heterogenous and reflexive social constructions of this drug use to the growing number of Polish users caught between liberalization in various Western countries, permissive global cannabis culture and local conservative backlash and harsh legal regulations (Wanke et al., 2022). The subcultural nature of the cannabis social world, together with the fact that the users are scattered around the country, contributed to the emergence of digital spaces where drugs are discussed and the social world thrives below the radar amid societal negligence or stigma (Bilgri, 2018).

## **Methods**

The study relies on qualitative thematic analysis of the content of the biggest and arguably the oldest Polish surface web drug forum. This study draws on more than 8000 forum posts selected in a purposive sampling procedure. 15 cannabis related threads spread across the whole spectrum of issues, ranging from the quality of substance, setting of use, side effects, dependency, or medical cannabis were selected. The time span runs through two decades of online discussions, from 2000 to early 2023. The data was semi-open-coded according to the pre-conceptualized categorization key. Primary categories included complication of cannabis praise, cannabis user reflexivity, and grass-roots harm reduction. All of these were cross analyzed with medical or self-care narratives.

## Results

The results reveal that there has been a widespread subcultural accommodation of medical cannabis. Users anticipated its introduction in the hope of gaining access to legal supply. Digital publics serve as bulletin boards about availability in selected pharmacies, a backchannel about the quality of the product and repository of tips and recommendations about obtaining the prescription thus “hacking” the medical supply industry.

At the same time, we observed an emergence of self-care and reflexive cannabis narratives, where traditional cultural framing of the substance as source of fun and pleasure (Sandberg, 2013) has converged with medical purposes narrative. Imposing self-regulation of use, experimenting with tolerance, acknowledging one’s harmful use, anticipating or counteracting potential harms, and caring for others are all present. Last but not least, mental health and other issues are addressed actively in the discussions and the ways of using cannabis to tackle them are offered. Additionally, we discovered peer harm reduction information in this forum.

Convergence with the emerging cannabis industries is apparent, as these below the radar publics actively discuss quality of product, growth and distribution. They accumulate knowledge and know-how for the consumers that is otherwise lacking due to the unregulated or illicit nature of the cannabis market in Poland.

## Conclusions

The application of the refracted public model illuminates how the user imposed transience of the forum enables its public existence and discoverability for users scattered around the country and keeping their drug identity low key. The discussions they engage in are decodable only to those who operate within the cannabis social worlds and these conversations are insider based (Abidin, 2021). These conditions allow for the otherwise illicit and restricted content to surface and resonate.

At the intersection of the institutionalized healthcare industry and the cannabis social world, an interesting tension occurred that blurred the boundaries between medical and other purposes of use. It can be called the “medicalization of the revolt” (Pedersen & Sandberg, 2013), as the previously counter-cultural meanings inside the firmly detached social world underwent transformations to adhere to expert language about and specialist framing of cannabis use for medical purposes. This happened to gain social legitimation and counteract stigma (Reiman et al., 2023). This process is messy and far from being complete (Reid, 2023), yet requires drifts between private and public.

Looking at what the digitally enabled discussions reveal sheds light on the possible social accommodation of cannabis once the governing bodies decide to regulate it. The affordances of internet discussion forums (Davis & Chouinard, 2016; Ronzhyn et al., 2023) and their vernacular adaptation by the drug users allowed us to study their social worlds operating below the radar of public interest (Abidin, 2021).

## Data Availability

The data underlying this article are available on Zenodo under the following DOIs: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10810251>.

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