The Role of Social Networks &
Alternative Media in the Field of Drugs

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Introduction

Nowadays social networks and alternative media occupy a huge part of our lives. According to STATISTA, a German statistic agency, the predictions are that in 2021 more than 3 billion people will be using social networks. (1) Compared to world population which for March, 2020 is 7. 7 billion the number of social network users is nearly half that figure. (2) A recent research of Pew Research Center measured that the number of adults using social networks in the USA has jumped ten times between 2005 and 2015 – from 7% to 65%. Still the most likely users are the young adults. In 2015 in the USA 90% of people between 18 and 29 years old were on social networks. (3) Almost all NGOs use social networks to advocate human rights and raise awareness on topics ignored by mainstream media. In crisis citations, social networks have proven to be an extremely effective tool for spreading information, obtaining funding and etc. After the catastrophic earthquake in Haiti in 2010, the Red Cross received US$8 million in donations, in just 2 days. That is just one example of how powerful of a tool social networks can be to mobilize support. (4) And still the role of social networks can be underestimated.

For the purposes of this paper, the term social networks comprises the most popular platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Flickr, Snapchat and etc. There is no clear cut definition for alternative media, and, as it would be hard to list everything that this term encompasses, I will classify all sources other than mainstream media as alternative media.

Threats

On the topic of drug and alcohol usage social networks and alternative media have a contradictory role especially amongst adolescents and young adults.

Misleading information

The fact that everyone has the freedom to express their opinion freely on different online platforms leads also to the publishing of a lot of misleading and incorrect information. That causes a serious problem for many teenagers who predominantly or exclusively use social networks and alternative media to inform themselves. They can build fake expectations towards the effects of a particular drug, or alcohol usage and that can lead to dangerous misuse. According to Kara Bagot, M.D., a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Rady Children's Hospital-San Diego, misleading information can even be the cause for a teenager to try drinking or taking drugs for the first time. She explains that a large part of misinformation comes from using search engines or social networks to research substances. "They are frequently directed to other sites, forums or chats that have inaccurate or misleading information on drugs. Studies have found that incorrect information increases the risk of adolescents trying substances they may not otherwise have tried." (5)

Peer pressure

Teen peer pressure is big enough issue, regardless of social networks use. But when combined, social networks and peer pressure can be extremely harmful. According to a Pew Research Center study 59% of teens have been bullied online. (6) This clearly shows the scale of the problem. Studies have found that as many as 75% of teens felt pressured to drink alcohol and use drugs after seeing their friends post these activities online. (7)

Perception of risk

There is currently a concerning amount of inappropriate ads in social networks, images and videos that suggest the consumption of alcohol is acceptable before or during sport activities. One example is of an Australian beer company posting an image of a diver drinking the beer underwater with sharks and in another Instagram video there is a mountain biker who consumes a beer and carry on riding. (8) This irresponsible advertising is just a single case of promotion of dangerous behavior. The results can be life-threatening since it is highly likely that social networks users do not double-check the reliability of the information with a second source. According to a WHO (World health organization) report reducing the impact of marketing, especially among young people and adolescents, is an important objective for reducing harmful alcohol use. (9)

Famous people and influencers promoting an unhealthy lifestyle as "cool and fun"

Research has shown that social influencers post a lot of alcohol-related posts on social networks and these posts have been proven to increase drinking behaviors. (10) Not only influencers, but also celebrities sometimes tend to use their social networks profiles irresponsibly. Many famous figures regularly post stories about being drunk or under the effect of drugs in their profiles. They make jokes about their condition and create unrealistic perception about the consequences of drug or alcohol usage. Some of the many examples are Black Shelton who proudly posts on Twitter: "I'm still so drunk right now I just dialed 911 and shouted

Help!!!! Why is Wednesday spelled like that?!!!" or Sam Smith who just announces "Drunk tweeting". (11) This trend is more observable in the USA and it is true that in Europe there are a lot of influencers promoting a healthy lifestyle. But the fact that we live in a globalized world, results in an inevitable connection between those influences. Especially when it concerns social networks. Many teenagers following the profiles of their favorite celebrities and influencers perceive their behavior as cool and as an example to follow.

Popular culture influences promoted by alternative medias- rap music and ecstasy, rap music and "purple drank"

One example in popular culture are rap songs mentioning drugs in their lyrics. A recent study analyses the trends in ecstasy use before and after hip hop songs start embracing the drug in rap culture. The observations point that before the 90s ecstasy was perceived mainly as a rave drug and was mostly equated with sharing an experience of love, dancing and freed behavior. In hip hop culture, however these experiences are reduced to sexual pleasure without any emotional connection. Female rap artists also sing about the use of ecstasy to enhance their sexual experiences. Rap music depicts other risky behaviors in association with using ecstasy, such as engaging in casual or paid sex, swallowing ecstasy pills with hard liquor, and drug binging. Another consequence according to the same research is the widening of the public who might be interested in using this drug. While previously a very limited number of people were taking ecstasy in a closed circle, with the embracement of hip hop culture, ecstasy has become a popular and "cool" drug for a much larger audience. That creates a huge threat for teenagers who wants to follow the trends and fit in. They are pushed into risky behavior without accessing any reliable information concerning the matter. (12)

Another example of the negative influence of hip hop culture in this domain is the **Lean**, also known as purple drank, which is a concoction of cough syrup, soda, hard candy, and, in some cases, alcohol, originating in Houston, Texas. Rappers (and Justin Bieber) have been singing its praises in songs, although some of them have had seizures due to its usage, or have died because of its consequences. The popularized misuse of cough syrups containing codeine reached such levels that *Actavis* — considered by 'Lean' users to be the best brand available — was withdrawn from the market.

Tips on how to use social networks and alternative media in a positive way

Despite all these threats, social networks and alternative media can also be a powerful tool for prevention, better access to help and research on the matters of drug and alcohol use.

Social networks as a tool to access information for research

Some researchers have already developed methods to extract data from social networks that can be very useful for analyzing trends of drug usage. Social networks contain a lot of information and can be used as an additional data source for analysis of social processes – especially processes that are hard to observe in real world like spread of interest and the attitude of society towards drug use. For example one research describes the development of a novel semantic web platform called PREDOSE (PREscription Drug abuse Online Surveillance and Epidemiology), which is designed to facilitate the epidemiologic study of prescription (and related) drug abuse practices using social networks. PREDOSE uses web forum posts and domain knowledge to facilitate the extraction of semantic information from User Generated Content (UGC), through combination of lexical, pattern-based and semantics-based techniques. (13) Another group of researchers developed an algorithm known as Automated Social Media Intelligence Analysis (ASMIA) - which they then applied to understand how social networks are being utilized in illicit drugs trade, especially advertising and distribution. This methodology helps identify individuals and organizations trading illicit drugs on social networks platforms. (14)

Social networks and alternative media can be used as a tool to reach hidden populations and promote a healthy lifestyle

Many Organizations have realized that, by using these platforms they can reach out to people much easily. Dianova Portugal for example were able to reach out to 40.063 young adults, adults, teachers, parents, students between 2009 and 2017 through the *Mocktail* initiative, which aimed to educate youth and adults and bring about more awareness to the dangers of alcohol and substance abuse as prominent risk factors for road accidents, absenteeism, attention deficit disorders and school dropout.

Using alternative media the Energy Control project of the Spanish Ngo ABD (Asociación Bienestar y Desarrollo) started a website aiming to facilitate the access of drug users to information and advice, raise awareness and involve nightlife professionals (owners, organizers, employees, etc.) in reducing the risks associated with drug use. They also collect information about the illegal drug market and alert consumers early about the presence of adulterated products that pose a risk to their health, and implement personalized attention services. (15)

Social networks as a tool to end stigma

Although social networks can contribute a lot to the increase of drugs usage and distribution they can also challenge the stigmatization of people with drug use disorders. Social networks enable individuals to bring personal experience into the public domain with the potential to affect public attitudes and mainstream media. Research has already showed positive effect towards the role of social networks in ending stigma towards people with mental health issues and it is observable that the same mechanisms work in the sphere of drug

abuse. (16) By firstly giving a human face to a problem, which is not the objective of mainstream media and secondly giving a voice to the people.

Documentaries

The existence of social and alternative media has contributed a lot for the easier access to very different information. Short documentaries that provide realistic and scientifically proven information on drug and alcohol usage can be a very accessible source of reliable facts for teenagers and young adults who do not spend much time gathering information from mainstream media. This group is currently the most vulnerable and it is important that tools which can be embraced by the youth are used,so they can have an actual effect. Documentaries like the videos of *VICE* have huge audiences and bring to them facts in an interesting easily assimilated way. "Vice News Tonight" which is their segment on the traditional media HBO draws more than 500,000 people for each episode. More than 3 million watch the longer-format Friday night show. A considerable number are millennials. (17) That illustrates the powerful impact that alternative media now has. Their videos on drugs tackle issues like the opioid crisis, the real effects and damage that a particular drug can have,drug distribution and etc.

Conclusion

The fact is that social networks and alternative media occupy a huge part of our lives and we still have not learnt how to use them for our better good and not for harm. Despite all the threats that we can currently identify social networks and alternative media can be extremely useful tools. We can use them to fight against stigma towards people with drug use disorder, to mobilize support and reach bigger audiences for NGO initiatives. We can also use social networks as a source of information for research, while influencers and celebrities should be encouraged to promote a healthy life style in their profiles and use social networks **responsibly**. Alternative media resources, which present information responsibly can be a way to speak to the youth about the dangers that different substances hide in a language that they will understand.

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