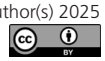
CMC

Ghosted by the drug trade: A digital ethnography of absence, ethics, and epistemic friction on Tinder

Crime Media Culture
1–13


Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/17416590251406464
journals.sagepub.com/home/cmc


Piotr Siuda[1]

Abstract

This Research Note reflects on a digital ethnography project that set out to explore whether, and in what ways, dating app Tinder is used in the online drug trade. Despite a carefully crafted 6-month study involving ethically transparent research profiles and off-platform recruitment attempts, no direct contact with drug vendors was established, and no explicit traces of illicit activity were observed. Rather than treating this outcome as a failure, the project is reframed as a site of methodological and epistemological inquiry rooted in digital ethnography, with particular attention to the challenges of conducting reflexive fieldwork in obscured, platform-mediated environments. It highlights the tensions—epistemic frictions—between researcher visibility, platform affordances, and the deliberate opacity of illicit economies. The Note details the initial research design and subsequent methodological pivots while reflecting on failure, ethical transparency, and how absence can become a meaningful object of analysis. It offers insights into how digital ethnographers might respond reflexively to inaccessible digital fields and develop strategies for engaging with phenomena that resist capture. Crucially, it argues that absence should not be read merely as methodological failure but as a reflection of how disciplinary assumptions and platform-specific affordances shape what can, and cannot, be known.

Keywords

online drug trade, dating apps, Tinder, failed research, digital fieldwork, hidden digital markets, research ethics, platform design, reflexive methodology, absence as data

[1]Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland

Corresponding author:
Piotr Siuda, Faculty of Cultural Studies, Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Jana Karola Chodkiewicza 30, Bydgoszcz 85-064, Poland.
Email: piotr.siuda@ukw.edu.pl

In theory, it should have worked
When research meets a wall

This Research Note recounts a qualitative research endeavor that did not unfold as intended, yet yielded valuable methodological insight. The inquiry adopts the lens of digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016) to explore not only a hidden phenomenon but also the structural and ethical contours of digital fieldwork. Initially designed as an exploratory study of illicit drug trading on the dating platform Tinder, the project gradually evolved into a reflexive investigation of the methodological, ethical, and infrastructural constraints that shape research in hidden digital environments. While no empirical data were gathered regarding the phenomenon itself, the unfolding process revealed a series of epistemic frictions—moments when transparency, ethics, and platform affordances collide (see Childs and Bernot, 2025, on how platforms' technological affordances shape illicit drug markets).

Drawing on this experience, the Note traces both the original research design and the adaptive strategies implemented in response to failure, ultimately framing absence as a site of methodological inquiry. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions about how digital ethnography can meaningfully engage with the invisible, the inaccessible, and the speculative.

Situating the inquiry: Platforms, markets, and assumptions

While this study focused specifically on dating apps, the phenomenon of online drug trading is far broader and has evolved significantly over the past decade, with particular interest given to cryptomarkets—anonymous platforms formed on the dark web (Barratt and Aldridge, 2016), social media (Bakken and Harder, 2023), or messaging apps, such as Telegram (Dewey and Buzzetti, 2024). Overall, the research concentrated on how the substances are being advertised and discussed (Siuda et al., 2024), the types of substances traded (Sudan et al., 2023), and the general communication strategies and cultures of online drug trading (Martin, 2019).

This research deliberately set out to explore dating apps as potential venues for drug-related activity—an area that remains significantly underexplored within studies of online drug markets. Existing studies have shown that platforms such as Grindr—a popular app among LGBT users—are used to facilitate chemsex among men who have sex with men (MSM). Chemsex, defined as the use of psychoactive substances in sexualized contexts, has gained prominence, particularly within the gay community, where apps like Grindr serve as platforms for meeting sexual partners and accessing drugs (e.g. Wang et al., 2020).

While existing research has demonstrated a clear link between dating apps and chemsex practices among MSM, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the extent to which these platforms are used for actual drug trading. Specifically, there is a lack of systematic studies exploring whether apps like Grindr facilitate or stimulate drug distribution, how frequently such transactions occur, and what communication strategies or coded language users may employ to bypass platform moderation.

Similarly, no solid research exists on other, more extensive, mainstream dating apps such as Tinder, despite studies suggesting their use in drug trading (van der Sanden et al., 2022). For instance, van der Sanden et al. (2022) noted the limited presence of dating apps like Tinder and Grindr in their study of drug-related communication platforms in New Zealand, highlighting this

gap as an area requiring further investigation. This observation was echoed in Moyle et al.'s (2019) international online survey of 358 drug users, where only 14 respondents reported using Tinder to obtain illegal substances. Furthermore, none of the in-depth qualitative interviews conducted in the same study confirmed such use. This gap also highlights a broader issue: expectations of finding drug-related activity on Tinder are often shaped by insights from other digital contexts, such as cryptomarkets, Telegram, or Snapchat, where visibility is structurally higher. Assuming that similar forms of trade should appear on Tinder risks overlooking how its specific affordances may obscure, rather than facilitate, such practices—a tension explored further in later sections.

From media narratives to research questions

In contrast to the limited academic attention, mainstream media repeatedly highlight Tinder as a platform used for illicit drug transactions (Brown, 2018; Shamani, 2021; Urodov, 2017; ZB, 2025). Journalists emphasize that dating app mechanisms differ from those known to cryptomarkets or social media. Media sources often suggest that users identify potential vendors by swiping through profiles and attempting to interpret ambiguous visual or textual cues (Borromeo, 2016). Among these clues could be emojis such as "snowflake" for cocaine or "leaf" for marijuana, and coded phrases like "PNP" (party and play; Fuller, 2024). The press outlets describe users who employ selective communication strategies to limit interactions to trusted acquaintances or regular clients, or who openly offer drugs—raising concerns among law enforcement (Nichol, 2016) about the growing popularity of this method, especially among youth (Dazed, 2016; ReConnect, 2021).

Despite the scarcity of systematic academic research, media narratives consistently frame Tinder as a platform for drug distribution. This disjuncture served as a starting point for the present study. Conducted as a digital ethnography, it aimed to shed light on how dating platforms are used for drug-related exchanges, with particular attention to communicative practices, cultural aspects of this trade, including the meanings ascribed to it, and comparisons with other platforms.[1]

Methodologically, while the study was primarily designed to explore the presence of drug trading on Tinder, it gradually evolved—as previously noted—into an experiment in adapting digital ethnography to ambiguous online environments. It revealed—confirming earlier suspicions—that such inquiries inevitably test the boundaries of transparency, informed consent, and ethical visibility within algorithmic platforms that are inherently unsupportive of academic contact.

Designing the perfect swipe

Initial design: ethics, transparency, and platform affordances

The research was part of a larger project dedicated to the drug trade online in Poland (Siuda, 2025; Siuda et al., 2025; Siuda and Matuszewski, 2025; Wanke et al., 2025a, 2025b). In this context, the research team explored Polish-language Tinder to reach drug-related content and users who had encountered sales offers and those who were actively engaged in such activities themselves. The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines covering both the process of recruiting respondents and data processing methods, outlined in various papers on ethical issues of researching drug trading

online (Harviainen et al., 2021). It also employed general ethical solutions—for example, Taylor and VandenBroek's (2025) penciling method for images downloaded from the internet. All these will be discussed in more detail later. The guidelines applied were approved by two Internal Review Boards: the School of Social and Political Science IRB at the University of Edinburgh (approval ID: 288628) and the Faculty of Cultural Studies IRB at the Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland. A key concern was how to ensure full anonymity and how to eliminate any potential risks for participants.

Two profiles were created on Tinder—one by a female researcher and one by a male researcher—to increase interaction and to try to avoid the platform's algorithmic limitations. The accounts were set up on two separate devices, used exclusively for the study, with freshly reset operating systems and phone numbers purchased specifically for research purposes, as Tinder requires registration with a valid phone number. Profile photos were explicitly marked as research-related for transparency, with the "Scientific Research" phrase indicating that the profile was not for private use. In addition, all photos were carefully selected to appear natural yet professional, without suggesting romantic intentions or raising suspicions about their authenticity.

The profile descriptions were equally precise, indicating the research purpose and emphasizing the voluntary and anonymous nature of participation. Importantly, the bios never suggested that the researchers were seeking to buy substances, which would have contradicted the ethical approval. Instead, they clearly identified the accounts as academic. They invited both individuals who had engaged in drug-related exchanges on Tinder and those who had merely encountered traces of such activity (e.g. emojis, announcements, or images). This implied an expectation that some users might respond, either because they were directly involved in substance-related exchanges or because they had encountered such references on the platform. Informed by media reports that presented drug offers as visible in user bios, the design aimed not only to reach potential vendors but also to invite broader experiences from ordinary users (for transparency, the full researcher bios and profile screenshots are presented in the Supplemental Material). The lack of responses, therefore, became analytically meaningful, suggesting that such content is either marginal or concealed in practice, as elaborated further in the following sections.

The bios also informed that each respondent would be provided with a detailed document outlining the research methodology and ethics—this was also a tool for obtaining informed consent and building trust among those who would decide to interact with researchers. The insistence on full transparency—embedding the researcher visibly within the platform's ecology—functioned both as an ethical commitment and a methodological constraint, rendering presence itself an object of negotiation. By openly identifying as researchers, the team suspected this would reduce the chances of engaging with individuals operating at the margins of legality. Yet, this decision reflected a commitment to ethical research.

To maximize the number of interviewees and the chance of encountering content potentially related to substance trade, the researchers decided to use the paid Tinder Premium feature, allowing them to change profile "locations." This was done in order to test for the presence of substance sales offers in Poland's smaller and larger cities. The study spanned 6 months, from August 2024 to the end of January 2025, during which the team conducted systematic searches through the app. Several times a week, researchers carried out 30–60 minute sessions, swiping through profiles without predetermined selection criteria, with the dual aim of identifying potential interviewees and detecting visual, textual, or symbolic cues—such as emojis or coded language—that

might indicate drug-related content. It was decided that each new interaction initiated through matching the researcher with the given user would start from the standardized message that briefly introduced the research topic and procedure, and encourage potential interviewees to learn more about the details.

Methodological pivots and adaptive strategies

After 2 months of research with no meaningful responses, the research team began experimenting with different communication strategies. These included shorter, more concise profile descriptions and longer, more elaborate ones, aiming to balance transparency and user engagement (all alternative bios are presented in the Supplemental Material). The team also experimented with the tone and structure, adjusting the emphasis on academic affiliation, ethics approval, and voluntary participation. Additionally, different profile photos were used, some more professional in tone, others leaned slightly more toward a casual yet credible appearance, as transparency remained the core principle of all iterative adjustments.

As a further adaptive step, the research team also explored alternative recruitment methods beyond Tinder, aiming to reach individuals with relevant (past or anecdotal) experiences or to locate traces of substance-related content that may circulate outside the app itself. Among these were posting a recruitment thread on Polish-language social media related to online dating, mostly Facebook groups and online message boards. Other attempts included using the Polish counterpart of Reddit, which is the Wykop service, particularly those channels that were devoted to discussing dating apps. This was relevant as this platform can be used as a safe and anonymous space to discuss various online dating issues (Masden and Edwards, 2015). The research team assumed that among all these channels' users, those interested in online dating might share or comment on encounters with substance offers or other drug-related signals, whether directly experienced or observed in digital spaces. A scoping-style content analysis was conducted across these public platforms—spanning 5 years back—to identify posts, threads, or comments referencing drug-related exchanges, symbols, or language within dating app contexts, which the research team intended to capture and subject to further analytical examination.

Absence as a methodological encounter

Narrating the silence: When the field fails to speak

The inquiry into Tinder as a possible site of illicit exchanges ultimately materialized not as an empirical discovery, but as a confrontation with the absence of data—a silence that demanded methodological interpretation. It prompted several important reflections—not only concerning the nature of the phenomenon itself, but more crucially, from the perspective of this Research Note, regarding the methodological challenges involved in studying such an elusive digital environment using digital ethnography.

The methodological choices—such as the varying profile descriptions—became part of a broader experimental ethos. As the study unfolded, it gradually shifted from being purely outcome-oriented to taking on the qualities of a meta-investigation into what is ethically and practically possible when researchers engage with online environments marked by ambiguous legal and social boundaries. Importantly, the lack of empirical results and the emerging methodological

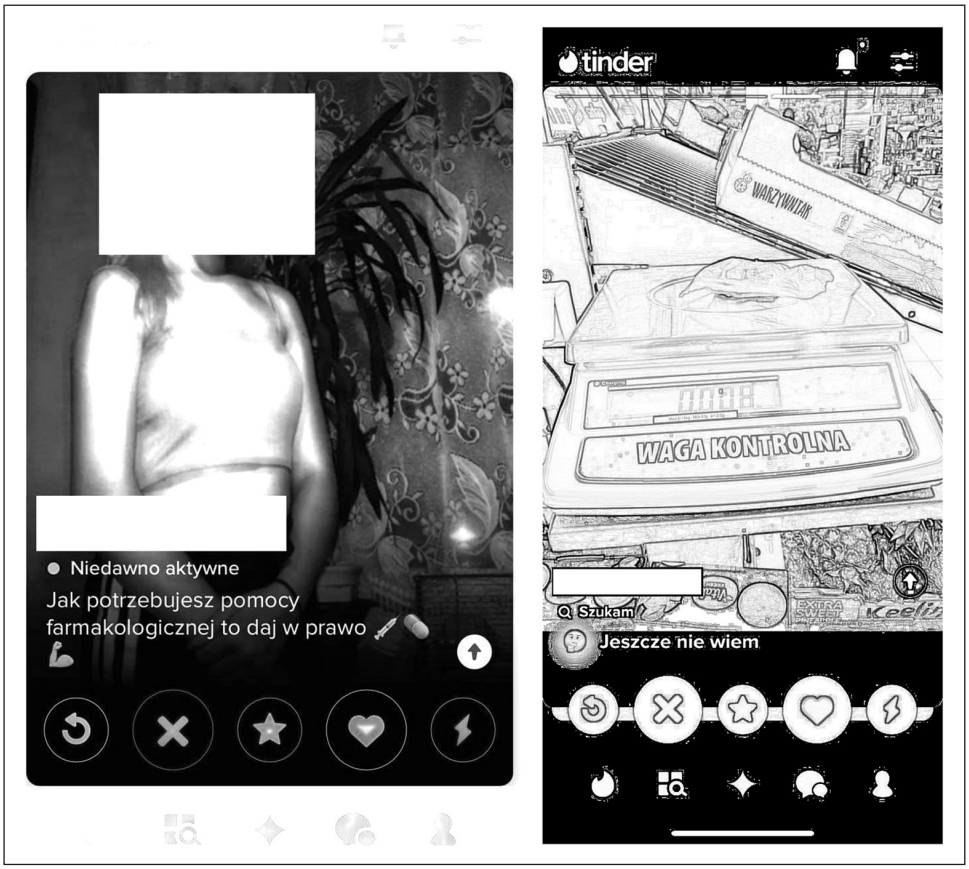


Figure 1. Screenshots of two Tinder profiles potentially involved in drug-related activity.

insights should not be viewed as separate outcomes: instead, the former directly shaped and intensified the latter. The present section briefly summarizes the lack of empirical findings, followed by a deeper reflection on the methodological implications of this failed research attempt.

From the empirical standpoint: Absence as evidence

Despite 6 months of systematic research efforts, the team was unable to reach respondents or identify traces of drug-related content. There were no clear indicators, profiles, or communication codes suggesting the presence of illegal substances on Tinder, nor did off-platform searches reveal users discussing such activity. No one contacted the researchers through the dating app, and only a few participants reached out through social media, sharing two screenshots of profiles that were potentially linked to drug dealing. Attempts to locate these profiles through targeted searches proved unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the screenshots are presented in Figure 1.

The profile on the left shows a person with no visible indication that they might be involved in drug dealing; however, the caption reads: "If you need pharmacological help, swipe right." The profile on the right displays a digital scale with a plastic bag on it, suggesting the presence of a

substance, likely marijuana. Given the sensitive nature of the material and potential users' expectation of privacy (despite the profiles being published publicly on Tinder), nicknames, age, and faces of individuals depicted are obscured. In addition, the images were edited using the previously mentioned "penciling method" (Taylor and VandenBroek, 2025).[2]

Although the lack of empirical data does not allow for definitive conclusions, it can be suspected that drug trade on Tinder is likely marginal or operates in highly concealed ways—at least within the studied context. This is in line with the studies mentioned previously (e.g. Moyle et al., 2019), which showed that only a small percentage of users reported purchasing drugs through dating apps. Media reports continue to suggest that Tinder is being widely used to sell illegal substances, yet such claims are often anecdotal or speculative rather than grounded in systematic research. The platform's affordances, based on swiping profiles, individual matches, and private interactions, may structurally limit transactions, lacking the reputation mechanisms, safety protocols, and communal infrastructures typical of cryptomarkets (Moeller, 2023).

However, this scarcity of empirical evidence does not simply point to the marginal or concealed nature of the phenomenon. It may also indicate that drug-related exchanges on Tinder align more closely with what Coomber (2010) terms "social supply," where substances are shared, facilitated, or opportunistically exchanged within existing networks rather than through overtly commercial, market-like arrangements. If drug sourcing on Tinder aligns more closely with such socially embedded practices, it would produce far fewer visible signals of trade and remain largely invisible to a research design oriented toward market cues or explicit offers. From this perspective, the absence of findings may reflect not the non-existence of the phenomenon, but the difficulty of capturing socially embedded exchanges through ethnographic approaches that depend on platform-visible markers. At the same time, it constitutes a form of data in itself—what has been conceptualized as absence as data. In this sense, the silence encountered becomes analytically meaningful, inviting reflection on the conditions under which certain practices remain obscured or inaccessible.

Reflexive lessons: Ethics, visibility, and the inaccessible

Although the study can be considered a research failure, and the empirical evidence was mini-mal—limited to two user-submitted screenshots—it still points to the possible presence of drug-related content on Tinder. Rather than disproving the phenomenon, these traces underscore its elusive and inaccessible character, reinforcing this Note's broader argument about the layered methodological and ethical challenges involved not only in investigating drug trading using digital ethnography on dating platforms but also in grappling more broadly with hidden digital practices. These difficulties exemplify what this Research Note frames as epistemic frictions—moments where invisibility, platform design, and ethical transparency converge to shape what can (and cannot) be known.

While the term epistemic frictions is introduced here to capture these tensions, related concerns have been raised in media and platform studies. Seaver (2017) shows how algorithms can be understood as unstable sociotechnical objects enacted through diverse practices, while Cellard (2022) describes them as "figures" that circulate across discursive and institutional contexts. Both accounts highlight how opacity and multiplicity are inherent to algorithmic infrastructures. Similarly, Büscher (2025) situates such challenges within broader debates on platform

capitalism and crises of truth, emphasizing how limits of knowledge are also tied to political economies of platforms. Positioning epistemic frictions alongside these perspectives helps situate the concept within wider discussions on infrastructural opacity and the difficulties of knowing in a platform society.

These broader debates also highlight that opacity and inaccessibility are not only technical matters but also intersect with questions of ethics and research design. While ethical transparency was a core principle of the present study, it is worth considering whether this rigorously open stance may have inadvertently contributed to the field's silence. In digital ethnographies of drug markets and other hidden populations, "lurking" is often justified, especially in contexts such as cryptomarkets or open Telegram channels where communication carries a more public character (Barratt and Maddox, 2016; Harviainen et al., 2021; Kaufmann and Tzanetakis, 2020; see also some general conclusions on internet ethics: Elgesem, 2015). Tinder, however, differs in that users primarily seek intimacy, dating, or sexual encounters rather than open exchange. Even with incognito settings, profiles are encountered through the matching system, which makes total invisibility illusory. In this environment, remaining unannounced would risk misleading participants, so visible researcher identification was treated as an ethical necessity.

At the same time, debates on visibility and concealment remain far from settled. Walford (2018) argues that in contemporary ethnography, the promise of anonymity is increasingly untenable due to the pervasive visibility of digital life, and that clinging to ideals of concealment may obstruct meaningful inquiry. In our case, insisting on overt researcher identification and visible consent protocols may have reinforced participants' reluctance to engage, particularly within an illicit or stigmatized context. A more flexible approach—acknowledging the impossibility of full anonymity, and instead negotiating partial forms of confidentiality—might have allowed for a more responsive recruitment strategy. From this perspective, ethical rigidity itself becomes part of the methodological constraint, entangled in the very epistemic frictions the study aimed to map. At the same time, however, it is important to acknowledge that drastic methodological pivoting—such as abandoning transparency altogether—would risk undermining not only the ethical foundations of the study, but also its interpretive validity, that is, the credibility of any knowledge claims grounded in researcher–participant interaction. In this light, the lack of empirical success does not signal a failure to adapt but becomes an integral part of the methodological narrative.

Previous digital ethnographies with stigmatized or illicit communities have shown that successful engagement often depends not only on methodological transparency but also on the affordances of the platform itself. For instance, Barratt and Maddox (2016) researched Silk Road, the first major cryptomarket, where built-in messaging tools enabled direct recruitment and dialog with participants. These platform-specific affordances created conditions of trust and continuity that facilitated their access. In contrast, Tinder offers none of these mechanisms: its design is centered around visual presentation, lacks topic-based interaction spaces, and affords no reliable way to broadcast research intentions or develop sustained contact. Tinder structurally lacks affordances for prolonged engagement—something demonstrated by this study, as only outreach beyond the studied app—on more open, forum-oriented platforms—produced any outcome, namely two user-submitted screenshots.

Hence, the failed attempt highlights the need to reconceptualize research access in contexts where illicit activity is deliberately obscured and structurally protected by user norms and platform

design. Future research might shift from active, researcher-led procedures toward models of distributed ethnography, involving participants as informants through diary-based self-observation (Ziencina, 2023) or platform walkthroughs (Light et al., 2018).[3] However, while it might be tempting to suggest that the present study should have shifted toward different methodological tools—such as those mentioned above or anonymized surveys, participant observation in offline contexts, or even covert digital infiltration—such approaches would not only raise distinct ethical dilemmas but also depart from the epistemological commitments of digital ethnography. Ultimately, this project did not measure or verify the prevalence of online drug trade, but (as it turned out) critically examined the conditions of (in)accessibility, opacity, and ethical navigation in platform-mediated environments. A different method would have meant a different research object.

Extending this reflection, one may state that what is described as a methodological failure may also be understood as a broader, field-level challenge. Much of the scholarship on online drug trading has focused on cryptomarkets, encrypted messaging apps, or social media platforms that afford visibility and traceability (e.g. BenBaruch et al., 2025; Demant et al., 2019; Dewey and Buzzetti, 2024). Assumptions shaped by these contexts may predispose researchers to expect similar levels of access and transparency on Tinder. Yet, the platform's design—based on ephemeral matches, individualized swiping, and limited interaction affordances—operates according to different logics, which may structurally conceal or discourage drug-related exchanges. From this perspective, the silence encountered is not only a methodological constraint but also a reminder that disciplinary expectations themselves shape what is perceived as success or failure in digital ethnography.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that the Research Note should not be read solely as a documentation of a research failure but rather as an invitation to reflect on how failure itself is conceptualized within digital ethnography. The challenges encountered—absence of contact, methodological dead-ends, the traces of a presumed phenomenon—raise broader epistemological questions about how absence becomes a meaningful object of analysis and how disciplinary assumptions and platform-specific architectures together shape the conditions of inquiry. In this regard, the study illustrates moments when the researcher's visibility, ethical transparency, and methodological rigor collide with the protective architectures of the digital platforms under study. These moments are not simply barriers; they can be read as analytical sites where method, ethics, and platform design converge. In this sense, the Note contributes to reflexive methodological debates that call for an examination not only of research findings but of the very conditions of possibility under which research can—or cannot—be done (Lupton, 2021; Pink et al., 2016). Rather than viewing Tinder's silence as a void, the project treated it as an epistemic friction: a tension that reveals the infrastructural, ethical, disciplinary, and social dimensions that shape access and intelligibility in platform-based ethnographies.

All these methodological implications may also be of use beyond the study of drug trading on dating apps. Scholars examining image-based abuse, intimate partner violence, and stalking (Filice et al., 2022), or forms of sextortion (Tavakoli et al., 2024), similarly encounter phenomena that are marked by deliberate concealment, ethical sensitivity, and infrastructural opacity. In such contexts, overt traces are scarce, participants are often reluctant or unable to speak, and the platforms themselves structurally limit research access. The strategies outlined here—treating absence as data, foregrounding epistemic frictions, and reflecting on the consequences of ethical transparency—can provide a toolkit for making sense of these silences. For example, absence of explicit

content may itself reveal how abuse circulates indirectly; epistemic frictions may clarify how platform affordances intersect with user strategies of concealment; and ethical commitments inevitably shape what forms of disclosure or testimony become possible. In this sense, the analytical lens developed here offers a way of engaging with a broader set of harmful or risky practices on dating apps, where what is unseen or unsaid is often as significant as what is observed.

In sum, the central contribution of this Research Note is to demonstrate how the absence of findings can itself become analytically productive. Rather than being dismissed as failure, such absences highlight the conditions under which illicit or harmful practices remain inaccessible, and they invite researchers to recognize how methodological design, platform affordances, and field-level assumptions interact to shape what can and cannot be known. For scholars of drug markets, this suggests caution in assuming the visibility of trade across all digital platforms. For digital ethnographers more broadly, it offers a reminder that silence, opacity, and refusal are not dead ends but important sites of knowledge in their own right.

ORCID iD

Piotr Siuda https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1644-5915

Ethical considerations

The study obtained two ethical clearances from internal review boards: the University of Edinburgh (approval ID: 288628) and the Faculty of Cultural Studies at the Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland.

Author contributions

PS contributed to the study design, data analysis, data interpretation, and manuscript writing.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research is supported by the Polish National Science Centre, Poland (Narodowe Centrum Nauki) grant: 2021/43/B/HS6/00710.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. The specific research objectives included: (1) identifying the communication codes used by vendors on Tinder and methods of bypassing platform moderation; (2) defining the profile of users involved in selling and purchasing substances, including their motivations, strategies for finding suppliers, etc.; (3) examining user interactions in the context of drug trading; and (4) comparing the nature of drug trading on Tinder with other online platforms, such as social media and darknet cryptomarkets, with particular attention to the possible hybrid nature of such activity.

2. This approach enabled the preservation of the original context of the images while minimizing their recognizability to both the human eye and search engines. Rather than relying on online tools that require uploading images to unfamiliar cloud services, GIMP software was used, as recommended by Taylor and VandenBroek (2025).
3. In the case of Tinder, this would involve recruiting a randomly selected, demographically diverse group of users to document any encounter with illicit substances content (using notes and screenshots) without interacting with potential vendors' profiles. While this method relies on subjective observations and algorithmic processes and may have limited representativeness, it could help capture the presence of such content in users' daily experiences.

References

Bakken SA and Harder SK (2023) From dealing to influencing: Online marketing of cannabis on Instagram. *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* 19(1): 135–157.

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

Barratt MJ and Maddox A (2016) Active engagement with stigmatised communities through digital ethnography. *Qualitative Research* 16(6): 701–719.

BenBaruch Y, Barratt MJ, Feingold D et al. (2025) Cannabis trading on telegram channels: Implications for the normalization of use and supply. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 145: 104930.

Borromeo L (2016) Drug dealers using Instagram and Tinder to find young customers. *The Guardian*, 7 April. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2016/apr/07/drug-dealers-instagram-tinder-young-customers (accessed 18 February 2025).

Brown K (2018) Tinder matched me with a drug dealer. Available at: https://vocal.media/humans/tinder-matched-me-with-a-drug-dealer (accessed 18 February 2025).

Büscher B (2025) Artificial Intelligence, platform capitalist power, and the impact of the crisis of truth on ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 54: 253–269.

Cellard L (2022) Algorithms as figures: Towards a post-digital ethnography of algorithmic contexts. *New Media & Society* 24(4): 982–1000.

Childs A and Bernot A (2025) The platformisation of illicit drug markets: How datafication, technological affordances, and platform-mediated labour practices shape illicit drug markets. *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* 21(2): 149–168.

Dazed (2016) Teenagers are now buying their drugs on Tinder. Available at: https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/30682/1/teenagers-are-now-buying-their-drugs-on-tinder (accessed 18 February 2025).

Demant J, Bakken SA, Oksanen A et al. (2019) Drug dealing on Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram: A qualitative analysis of novel drug markets in the Nordic countries. *Drug and Alcohol Review* 38(4): 377–385.

Dewey M and Buzzetti A (2024) Easier, faster and safer: The social organization of drug dealing through encrypted messaging apps. *Sociology Compass* 18(2): e13175.

Elgesem D (2015) Consent and information – Ethical considerations when conducting research on social media. In: Fossheim H and Ingierd H (eds) *Internet Research Ethics*. Cappelen Damm Akademisk, pp.14–34.

Filice E, Abeywickrama KD, Parry DC et al. (2022) Sexual violence and abuse in online dating: A scoping review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 67: 101781.

Fuller K (2024) In the News: Drug dealers using dating apps to sell drugs. In: *AKUA MIND BODY*. Available at: https://akuamindbody.com/in-the-news-drug-dealers-using-dating-apps-to-sell-drugs/ (accessed 18 February 2025).

Harviainen JT, Haasio A, Ruokolainen T et al. (2021) Information protection in dark web drug markets research. In: *Proceedings of the 54th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, Grand Hyatt Kauai, Hawaii, USA, 4–8 January 2021, pp. 4673–4680. Available at: http://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/handle/10125/71184 (accessed 8 August 2021).

Kaufmann M and Tzanetakis M (2020) Doing Internet research with hard-to-reach communities: methodological reflections on gaining meaningful access. *Qualitative Research* 20: 927–944.

Light B, Burgess J and Duguay S (2018) The walkthrough method: An approach to the study of apps. *New Media & Society* 20(3): 881–900.

Lupton D (ed.) (2021) *Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic. 4228791, SSRN Scholarly Paper*. Social Science Research Network. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=4228791

Martin J (2019) *Cryptomarkets: A Research Companion*. Emerald Publishing.

Masden C and Edwards WK (2015) Understanding the role of community in online dating. In: *Proceedings of the 33rd annual ACM conference on human factors in computing systems*, New York, NY, 18 April 2015, pp.535–544. CHI '15. Association for Computing Machinery. DOI: 10.1145/2702123.2702417

Moeller K (2023) Trust in cryptomarkets for illicit drugs. In: Tzanetakis M and South N (eds) *Digital Transformations of Illicit Drug Markets: Reconfiguration and Continuity*. Emerald Publishing Limited, pp.29–43, Available at: https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/978-1-80043-866-820231003/full/html (accessed 29 December 2023).

Moyle L, Childs A, Coomber R et al. (2019) #Drugsforsale: An exploration of the use of social media and encrypted messaging apps to supply and access drugs. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 63: 101–110.

Nichol T (2016) Dating app a target for selling drugs. Available at: https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/dating-app-a-target-for-dealers-selling-their-drugs/EIF7LK4BQBHAQWUIUO6IO4X5SQ/ (accessed 18 February 2025).

Pink S, Horst HA, Postill J et al. (2016) *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. Sage Publications Ltd.

ReConnect (2021) Teens are buying drugs on social media - Here's what you should know. Available at: https://www.reconnect-families.com/blog/teens-buying-drugs-on-social-media-5e9n3-5xbgk-tb4ke (accessed 18 February 2025).

Seaver N (2017) Algorithms as culture: Some tactics for the ethnography of algorithmic systems. *Big Data & Society* 4(2): 2053951717738104.

Shamani J (2021) People are using dating apps to find doctors, drugs, and protesters. In: *VICE*. Available at: https://www.vice.com/en/article/dating-apps-tinder-bumble-hinge-score-weed-mdma-protest-job-doctor-wtf/ (accessed 18 February 2025).

Siuda P (2025) Navigating community-transaction and egalitarian-hierarchy divides: Redefining virtual communities in the darknet drug trade and beyond. *Information Communication & Society*. Epub ahead of print 3 August 2025. DOI: 10.1080/1369118X.2025.2540920.

Siuda P, Aaltonen M, Haasio A et al. (2025) Digital drug trading ecologies in context: Technological, geographic, and linguistic variation across darknet platforms. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 145: 104984.

Siuda P and Matuszewski P (2025) The opioid crisis in Poland? Insights from online forum data. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 142: 104844.

Siuda P, Świeca L, Cheba P et al. (2024) "Similar to legal companies": Vendor brands and other aspects of marketing communication in the darknet drug trade. *Deviant Behavior*. Epub ahead of print 7 November 2024. DOI: 10.1080/01639625.2024.2428711.

Sudan HK, Tai AMY, Kim J et al. (2023) Decrypting the cryptomarkets: Trends over a decade of the Dark Web drug trade. *Drug Science Policy and Law* 9: 20503245231215668.

Tavakoli H, Tzani C, Ioannou M et al. (2024) Dating applications: A honeypot for sextortion victims. *Deviant Behavior* 45(12): 1655–1666.

Taylor N and VandenBroek A (2025) Penciling: An anonymization method for social media images. *Field Methods* 37(2): 172–178.

Urodov A (2017) I swiped through Tinder looking for everything but love. Available at: https://theoutline.com/post/1980/i-swiped-through-tinder-looking-for-everything-but-love (accessed 18 February 2025).

van der Sanden R, Wilkins C, Rychert M et al. (2022) 'Choice' of social media platform or encrypted messaging app to buy and sell illegal drugs. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 108: 103819.

Walford G (2018) The impossibility of anonymity in ethnographic research. *Qualitative Research* 18(5): 516–525.

Wang Z, Yang X, Mo PKH et al. (2020) Influence of social media on sexualized drug use and chemsex among Chinese men who have sex with men: Observational prospective cohort study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 22(7): e17894.

Wanke M, Załęska O and Siuda P (2025a) "Now I like to know what I smoke"—differentiated cannabis normalization in Polish online discussions. *Drugs Education Prevention and Policy* 32(6): 621–631.

Wanke M, Załęska O and Siuda P (2025b) "Overdried, without curing? F*Ck, this [Is supposed to be] government licensed skunk!" Medical cannabis and the refracted publics within an online Polish Drug Forum. *Sociological Inquiry* 95(2): 271–287.

ZB (2025) Tinder used to buy and sell drugs. Available at: https://www.newstalkzb.co.nz/news/crime/tinder-used-to-buy-and-sell-drugs/ (accessed 18 February 2025).

Ziencina AD (2023) *Under pressure: A daily diary study of online social influence and youth substance use*. Open Access Theses & Dissertations: 4034.