

The evolution of social media drug markets in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Introduction: *Studies suggest social media and messaging apps are increasingly used by young people to buy and sell drug drugs. Little is known about how these social media markets have evolved in Aotearoa New Zealand's unique drug market.*

Methods: *Qualitative interviews with 33 social media drug market participants conducted via the encrypted Wickr app and quantitative data from successive waves of the large sample online New Zealand Drug Trends surveys (2020-2025) (N=>10,000).*

Results: *The proportion of respondents reporting past-6-month drug purchasing from a social media or messaging app increased steadily from 2020. Drug types most often purchased via social media and messaging apps were cannabis and MDMA. However, social media-purchasing of other drug types is also increasing. For example, the proportion purchasing MDMA via social media increased from 13% in 2020 to 24% in 2024. Facebook/Messenger and Snapchat have remained New Zealand's most popular apps for purchasing drugs since 2020. Interview data highlighted both the potential for buying and selling via social media to increase the potential for drug market harms, particularly in more commercial selling groups. However, conversely some interviewees shared they felt it helped make drug transactions safer and increased the transparency of buying and selling.*

Discussions and Conclusions: *Social media and messaging apps have emerged as a stable feature of the New Zealand drug market landscape, particularly among younger age groups. However, more research is needed to evaluate their impact on drug use patterns and drug harms, including the link between social media drug purchasing and exposure to other forms of digital drug content.*

Implications for Practice or Policy: *The increasing role of social media and messaging apps in drug purchasing points to the increasing intertwining of digital technology and drug policy regulatory responses to managing drug markets and designing harm reduction initiatives.*

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