

Research Project Information Sheet

Exploring the Influence of Information Manipulation on Buyer Decision Making in Darknet Marketplaces

Ethics Approval Number: S221716

The research team consists of Chief Investigator Professor Paul Salmon (University of the Sunshine Coast) and Investigators Mr Dennis Desmond (University of the Sunshine Coast) and Ms Sophie Eppingstall (University of the Sunshine Coast)

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Project Description

The purpose of this research project is to explore the influences on buyer decision making when making purchasing decisions in the form of darknet markets and what influences those decisions. If you are over the age of 18 and speak fluent English, you are invited to participate in this research project.

At no time will you be accessing darknet resources nor will you be asked to engage in illicit or unlawful activity. This study is designed solely to assess how the decision-making process occurs and what market, vendor and user characteristics influence illicit drug purchase decisions.

Participation

If you agree to participate in this research project, you will be asked to take part in a simulated darknet marketplace purchasing task. This will involve choosing to purchase a portion of MDMA/XTC/Molly in crushed, rock, powdered and pill form from a selection of 14 vendors located around the world. You will need to read the forum postings, visit vendor pages, and review the search engine results. Upon deciding to “purchase” the product, you will be asked to complete a short survey and then to participate in an interview exploring the influences on your purchasing decision. To understand your decision-making process, you will be asked some demographic questions that will not allow for unique identification. Further, you will be asked questions about your experience in the use of darknet marketplaces and the darknet in general.

Your responses in the interview will be recorded using an audio device. Participants can request to listen to the recording after the interview has concluded to finalise their comments. The audio recordings will be destroyed after they have been transcribed in a de-identified format. Only the persons listed as investigators will have access to these recordings. It is not possible to participate in the project without being recorded.

Note, the purchasing task involves selecting a vendor from which to purchase illicit drugs. The purchasing task occurs within a simulated darknet environment and does not involve real vendors, real products, or any expenditure. The simulated purchasing task will take a maximum of 30 minutes, the interview will take approximately 1 hour. There are options to participate in-person or online via zoom.

Your participation is voluntary. If you agree to participate but change your mind during any point you may exit the simulation or ask to stop the interview and your responses will not be saved. Harm reduction resources and support information is provided to support participants during the simulation. The participant may also end the experience at any time. During this process, no personal information will be collected.

Consent

You will be asked to provide consent to participate at the bottom of this page before progressing to a google form. The google form will ask for your contact email and ask you to identify convenient dates and times to you to participate in the research study. Your email will only be used to contact you confirming date and time of participation and will not be public to other participants. Consent is for your data and information to be collected, stored, and used in analysis and publications in a de-identified format. Your consent will be reconfirmed verbally before attending their testing session and any questions will be clarified.

Although the survey will ask participants about their prior exposure to and active participation in darknet marketplace activities, at no time in the survey will they be asked about prior criminal activity or asked to admit any criminal wrongdoing. Anonymised data will also be reviewed to ensure no sensitive information is associated with study participants.

Consent is sought for this project and for related, ethics approved, projects that may be undertaken by this research team.

Risks and Benefits

There are minimal risks associated with your participation, which may include discomfort at being exposed to a hypothetical product advertisement on the darknet. If you experience uncomfortable or distressing feelings and wish to talk to someone about this immediately, please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14. You may also wish to consider consulting your General Practitioner (GP) for additional support.

Accessing the darknet is not an illegal act. However, the products available on darknet markets are often illicit in nature. Buying or selling goods on the darknet is a criminal offence in Australia and that people have been charged in Australia for doing so.

For each participant who completes the research study, \$15AUD will be allocated toward a drug addiction and recovery charity as a lump sum donation at the end of the data collection period.

Privacy, Confidentiality and Results

All data collected to assist in this research project will be securely stored as per USC's Research Data Management Procedures. All comments and transcripts will be treated confidential unless required by law. Interview transcripts will be de-identified and stored in a non-identifiable format. The research project results could be presented in external or internal conferences or meetings, or publication. If you wish to have a summary of the findings for this research project, please contact the Research Contact (listed above).

Concerns of Complaints

If you have any concerns or complaints about the way this research project is being conducted, you can raise this with the Research Contact (listed above). If you wish to instead contact an independent individual, you can contact the Chair of the USC Human Research Ethics Committee: telephone (07) 5430 2823; email humanethics@usc.edu.au.

Thank you for your consideration of this study. Please record the information above if you choose to participate.

Consent

- I have read and understood the above project information. I consent to participate and for my anonymous data and information to be used for this project and future related ethics approved projects undertaken by this research team.