Q-Step Internship: How drug dealers operating on drug cryptomarkets advertise and promote their products

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I interned as a Research Assistant for Judith Aldridge who is based at the Centre for Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Manchester. The CCCJ perform cutting edge criminological research and consultancy work in a diverse number of areas categorised under five key themes, one of which is 'Drugs: Markets, Policies and Consumptions'.

Objectives

The objective of this project was to find out how drug sellers and buyers on online drug cryptomarkets perceive the risk of detection and how they try to reduce them.

Cryptomarkets: *marketplaces that host multiple sellers or 'vendors'; that provide participants with anonymity via their location on the hidden web and use of cryptocurrencies for payment (Barratt & Aldridge, 2016).*

What I Did

Data collected from Silk Road 1 contained content analysis of the 'description' field for listings of vendors describing the products they were selling and services offered. This data had all been put into MS Excel files. **What I did:**

- Cleaned the data and randomly selected listings using a random number generator until a total of 600 listings of different drug types was achieved.
- They were then given a unique ID number.
- Using a coding scheme created by the researchers, I coded the listings using SPSS software.
- I combed the listing for themes, ideas, key terms and phrases and attached the relevant code from the coding scheme to them as demonstrated below.

Key Findings

	n	%
Risks connected to shipping	**335**	**55**
Shipping methods	283	47
Product packaging, including 'stealth' measures	198	33
Refund/reship policies	106	18
Risks connected to data security	**191**	**32**
Data and transaction security measures taken	191	32
Use of encryption for communication (e.g. PGP, Privnote)	124	21
Total	**300**	

Vendors making listing reference to service features relevant to characterizing and minimizing legal risk (Aldridge, 2016)

Coding Process

Case #31 - quote from a listing for cocaine.

- If a theme, eg. type of drug, if it has been tested for potency etc. is present in a lisiting, a code of **1** is given. If it is absent, **0.**

Q_STRENGTH	Q_TEST	Q_TYPE	Q_WEIGHT	Q_
1	0	0	0	
1	0	0	0	
1	1	0	0	
1	0	0	0	
1	0	0	0	
1	1	0	0	
1	0	0	1	

#31

Results

Some of the coding that I did went toward the publication of a paper in which results from the larger project particularly geared to how vendors communicated with their customers about legal risk in their advertising.

Skills Learned

- How to clean and prepare large amounts of data.
- Enhanced MS Excell skills.
- Basic SPSS skills.
- How to systematically go through and analyse large amounts of qualitative data to be able to code it for quantitative analysis.
- How to code and recode large amounts of data using SPSS.
- Gained extensive knowledge about drug cryptomarkets.

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Q-Step

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