Online Marketing and Misconduct Related to Drugs

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Abstract

This study on online marketing and misconduct related to drugs aimed at examining patterns of misconduct, trading and buying behavior, marketing situations, online drugs trading networks, and online drug dealer estimation, using mixed methods which includes Participatory Observation, Qualitative Survey and Quantitative Survey from April to August 2019.

Illicit drugs and abused prescription drugs are sold more online via Twitter than Facebook due to its popularity as well as quick and easy access. According to Twitter drug dealer estimation, 6.3 users per 100,000 regular users are involved with drug trading behavior.

Drug dealers have enhanced awareness of online drug sales by creating the seller's image and displaying images of drugs, drug use equipment, as well as VDO clips demonstrating how to use drugs. In addition, the doses and quantities of drugs are shown with text describing the drug quality/qualification. Marketing strategies include promotions for both old and new customers to stimulate drug sale by offering free gifts/drugs, free delivery, more discount for more purchase, more drug with the regular price, buy one get one free campaigns and point collections to gain regular customers and seasonal promotions. Other strategies show customer chat logs to ensure drug quality and punctual delivery to ensure their credibility.

The most popular communication channel for discussing drug delivery is Line application, followed by (Twitter) direct message (DM), (Facebook) messenger or poke.

Drugs were mostly delivered face-to-face at a specific place as appointed or "Fist Bump", followed by a private delivery service.

Drug dealer's follower network on Twitter has a connection with other drug networks' followers, with the availability of more than one type of drug.

Drug dealers use caution by informing their customers to transfer the payment to their bank account or electronic wallet instead of getting a cash payment and delivering drugs via a third agent such as a private transportation company without face-to-face delivery.

Crucial information from this study results will be forwarded to the social media service providers to prevent and reduce drug problems per the national policy since the legal authorities could not report online misconduct related to drugs without apparent evidence according to Thai law. This information will be helpful for service providers to more easily terminate the user accounts instantly showing drug-related behavior.

Background

Currently, the widely used internet has an increasing number of users. Thailand has up to 57 million users, of which 51 million are regular social media users. In 2018 there were 12 million Twitter users with 5.7 million regular users and 49 million Facebook users. (Nalinthip Paksrikulkhamthon 2018, Digital Solution 2561) The average Thai internet use is 10 hours and 5 minutes per day. The most popular social media is YouTube (98.8%), followed by Line (98.6%) Facebook (96.0%) and Twitter (88.4%) respectively (Electronic Transactions Development Agency 2018). Social media is considered a big data (Sunny Jung Kim 2017), which can be easily searched by using a hashtag (XITONG YANG 2016) and can be real-time accessible for 24 hours. The data search result drives people's needs (Daniulaityte R 2013). This increased drug buying and selling and has become a communication channel for sharing drug experience, photos and VDO clips (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction 2016). Network social communication media is widely used among people with drug use experience as well as drug dealers (Nielsen S 2009, Kim 2017). Despite the small number of research studies concerning drugs on social media, online posts inviting and persuading people to join drug trading

networks are present. Most data on Facebook are positive messages, supporting, persuading and guiding the drug trade by providing information on size, effect, and price of Marijuana and Kratom (Kanittha Thaikla 2018). In the USA, more adults and teenagers use marijuana, with a particular increasing number in the states where marijuana selling is legal even though online commercials are not allowed (Azofeifa A 2016). Teenagers who use social media tend to use more Marijuana than those who are not on social media (New York Center for Living 2019). This has become an issue of concern for Thai teenagers aged 13-24 years, reported as using social media the most (Marketing Oops 2019). The real-time marketing pattern with obvious target and customers help create bonds and stimulate buying decisions. This complies with the Lazy Marketing approach where customers can make an order online for 24 hours with door-to-door delivery. This helps people to access drugs more easily and, most importantly, to be safe from being arrested. This trading pattern is half-hidden, so it is difficult to monitor, resulting in expanding and creating more severe problems. Therefore, this study is helpful in terms of surveillance and control, follow up, analysis of drug trends and patterns of both old and new drug marketing. The aim to increase the potential, primary data sources in drug eradication can be used in planning preventive strategies for accessing online drug marketing via social media network as well as obtaining quick data for harm reduction and treatment, and increased health efficiency of the Thai people.

The Study Objectives

This study aimed to:

1. Examine the pattern of misconduct, trading and buying behavior, marketing situation and drug trading networks

2. Generate language database, including slang, hashtags, names, and words used in online drug trading communication

3. Estimate the number of new online drugs dealers

Method

This study is a Mixed Method Research, using Rapid survey, quantitative survey, qualitative survey and participatory observation as study tools with the following procedures:

1. Review, collect, categorize slang or words used for drugs online to be used as keywords for searching or following up during the primary phase

2. Create a mock-up identity as "drug user" or "retail drug dealer" or "newly-released offender" to register as a social media user to follow up with an online drug situation

3. Use Organic Search on social media websites/applications such as Facebook or Twitter

4. Collect qualitative data with participatory observation as well as quantitative data

4.1 Qualitative data includes context, content, messages related to selling and buying behavior, conversations, drug description and size, buying method, payment, delivery, location, etc.

4.2 Quantitative data include the number of followers, number of following persons, drug price, drug delivery, location, etc.

5. Verify the collected data from social media which includes context, selling and buying behavior, conversations, drug descriptions, size, and price, buying methods, payment, delivery, etc. by comparing with the information obtained from the in-depth interviews conducted among 30 people with drug use or drug selling behavior in various regions

6. Enter the data into the database system

7. Apply Data mining algorithm in order to understand the language trend, message used in communication, culture and action of the target group on a particular online page (people who see advertisement), including all actions as Like, Share, Comment (Engagement) on the social media network

8. Follow up a group of links, behavior, data networks, trading, and data accuracy

9. Apply data triangulation verification in terms of time, place and person

10. Report the results from data collection to ONCE every two months

11. Apply Cluster analysis and Similarity matching on drug users' and drug dealers' accounts to find user's characteristics, network's characteristic and friends in the network

12. Estimate number of drug dealers on social media

Statistical Analysis

The narrative analysis is applied in analyzing quantitative data which includes frequency, percentage and mean for relationship analysis.

Big data analyzing techniques were applied to analyze relationships and hidden patterns behind big data with the use of mixed methods which include finding relationship patterns of high-quality data from messages, narrative data analysis for clearer appearance, and network relationship analysis. All data was summarized and descriptively narrated after being verified for accuracy and completeness of the content, interpreted, classified,

compared similarities and differences, categorized by group/type, weighted, verified for data accuracy, analyzed by deductive analysis, analyzed on meaning enhancement by multi methods, then interpreted and summarized regarding the relationship of context and related factors.

Social network analysis, relationship and network structure analysis from network density were also applied, including the size of sub-networks with drug-related behavior, number of friends in the network, and friends or acquaintances outside the network. The estimation of the value of drug dealers was conducted by using the incidence calculation principle in analyzing a number of new drug dealers on social networks "at a particular period of time" versus a number of social network users during the same period of time.

Study Results

Drug marketing on social media can be classified into two major groups.

1. The drug group consists of Ice, Marijuana, Kratom, Methamphetamine, Ecstasy, Ketamine, LSD, JSB, and etc.

2. Abused prescription drug group consists of pain killers such as Tramadol, sleeping pills, tranquilizers, antihistamines etc.

In general, the search result shows 4,271 cases of drug and abused prescription drugs selling more on Facebook (93%) than on Twitter. When comparing the data with the data from the same month of the previous year, there were 5,308 cases of drug and abused prescription drug selling in 2019; more on Twitter (74.8%) than on Facebook. This increased figure doubled from 2018, while the number of drugs sold on Facebook doubly decreased. Similarly, the number of abused prescription drug selling on Twitter was also increased when compared with the figure from the previous year, while abuse prescription drug selling on Facebook was also remarkably decreased. This trend is a result of the changing popularity of each social media platform.
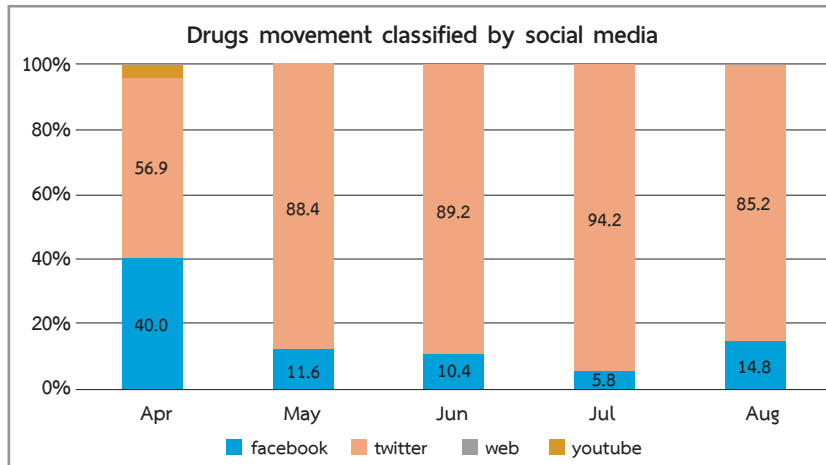
Figure 1 Percentage of drugs and abused prescription drug marketing surveillance
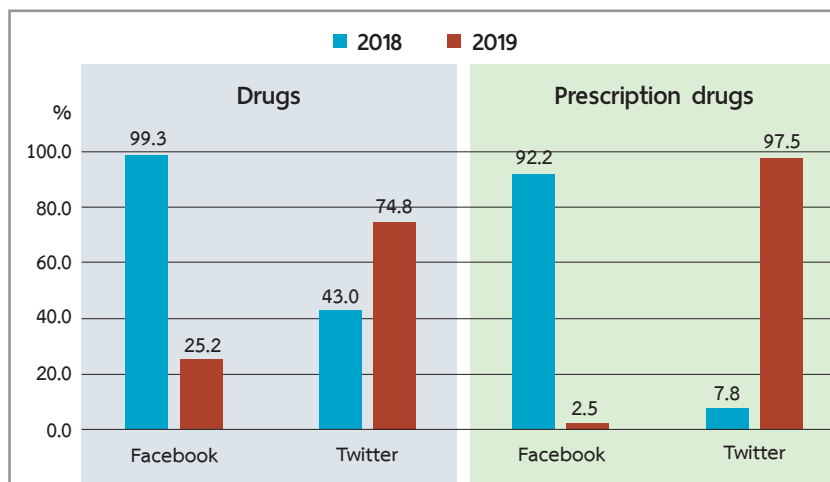
The online drugs and abused prescription drugs surveillance was conducted from April to August 2019 on 558 pages, most of which are on 469 Twitter pages (84.1%) and 74 Facebook pages (13.3%). Three hundred sixty-eight pages contained drug-related messages (65.9%). Each month, the most drug-related posts were on Twitter, followed by Facebook.

Figure 2 Drug movement classified by social media

The posts on Ice than Kratom, Marijuana, Methamphetamine, Ecstasy, and Heroin have increased since May 2019.

Figure 3 Drug movement classified by type of drugs and months of a survey in 2019
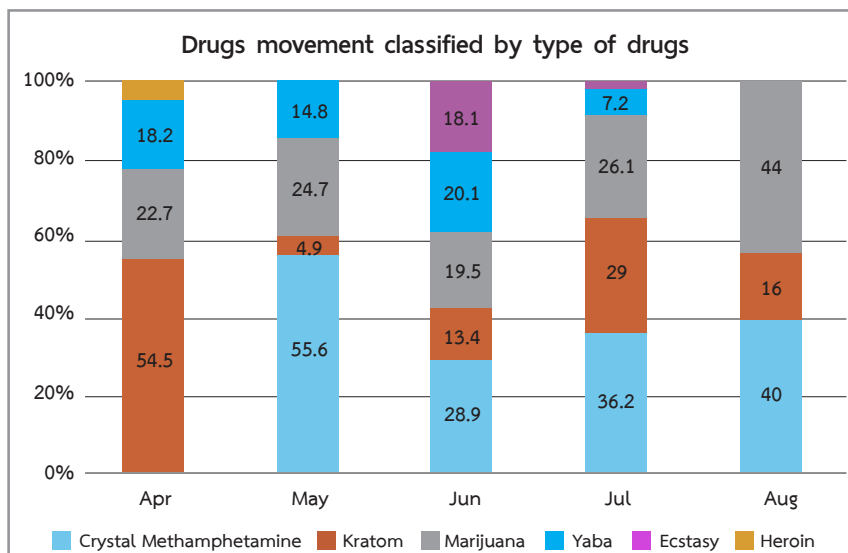
More posts appear on drugs and abused prescription drugs selling on Twitter due to its popularity as well as quick and easy access. According to the survey, there were 541 drug dealers on social media with 72.9% newly registered, (registered in 2019), and 27.1% old users. Four hundred ninety-one were Twitter users (358 new users and 133 old users) (90.8%), while all 50 Facebook users were old users (9.2%).

Figure 4 Drugs and Abused prescription drug dealers on Twitter
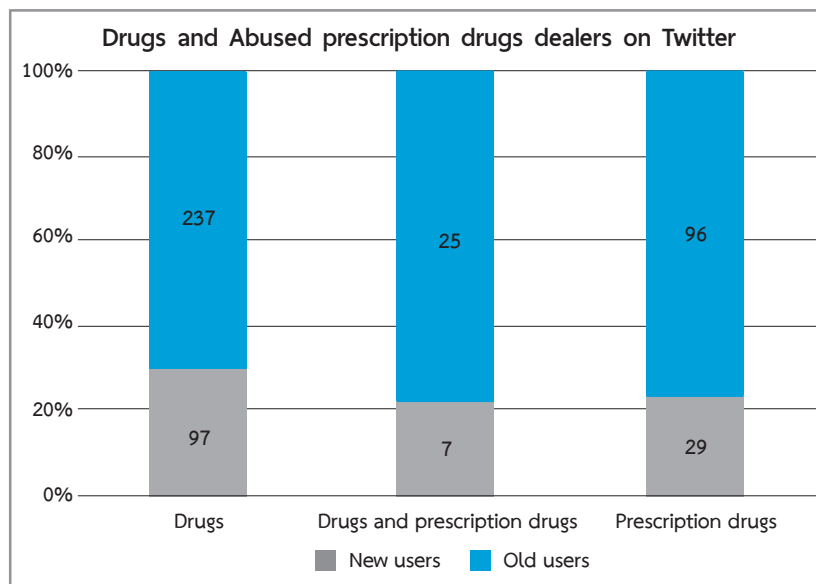
In 2018, there were 12 million registered Twitter users. According to the collected data from April to August 2019, the incidence of new Twitter users with drug behavior is three users per 100,000 Twitter users in Thailand. Among 5.7 million Twitter regular users, it is found that there were 6.3 new Twitter regular users with drug selling behavior per 100,000 regular Twitter users in Thailand.

The unique characteristic of Twitter is having followers. Among 32,403 followers of drug dealers, most of them are customers or have drug use behavior (98.5%), while 1.5% are drug dealers, selling Marijuana rather than Ice and Kratom leaves.

Drug dealers use social media as a channel in selling drugs such as Ice, Marijuana, Kratom leaves, Ecstasy, Ketamine, LSD, and Popper by displaying photos of drugs, drug use equipment, drug's appearance, pattern, size and quantity available for sale as well as VDO clip demonstrating how to use drug and drug use equipment as well as messages identifying the drug's quality and effect, price, delivery location and contact method to gain customers' trust.

Language used in communication between buyers and sellers on popular social media enhances more accessibility by using drug-related hashtags such as hashtags indicating size and quality, including emotional effect and sexual emotion after drug use, as well as hashtags indicating delivery location, seller's address, target customers, drugs and abused prescription drugs they are not selling to make social media users see more posts about drug selling. These are considered crucial strategies for drug selling on social media. The most popular hashtags are the names of drugs and their slang names.

The most popular communication channel for discussing drug trading, the payment condition, delivery method on the social network is usually conducted via Line Application (65.1%), followed by Twitter Direct Message (DM), Facebook chat box, and poking (34.9%).

Drugs are primarily delivered face-to-face at a particular place as appointed or "Fist Bump" (39.7%), followed by via private delivery service (24.2%), motorbike delivery service (19.6%), and Thailand post (13.7%).

Drug dealer follow-up network on Twitter has linked drug dealers selling a particular drug to other drugs. Similarly, tweeted hashtags have also linked to hashtags of both the same type of drug and different types of drugs. This obviously reflects that Twitter users can use the hashtag in searching for drug dealers easily, quickly and can reach more than 1 drug dealer with a different type of drug.

Example of popular hashtags

Ice: #lump #flake #ice #sellice #lumpjob #icejob #fuel #ice #goodjob #swingjob #strongjob, and etc.

Marijuana: #marijuana #high #drunkard #greenlover #smokelover #bigtail #tigertail #lonely #sticky #thaiorganic #marijuanastick etc.

Kratom leaves: #kratom #tomboil #tom #tomwater #tomleave #drunkenleave #tommedicine #drunkenmedicine #herb #greenlover #sweet etc.

Ecstasy: #emedicine #pulllover #sweet etc.

Abused prescription drugs: #whiteblue #greenwhite #greenyellow #condrug #alotofcredit #cap #pinkcap #caption #captindol #che #foreignche #xanax #caesar #central #xolam #mano #pinkcap #violetcap #drunkencap etc.

Picture 1 Connection of hashtags used in Ice trading
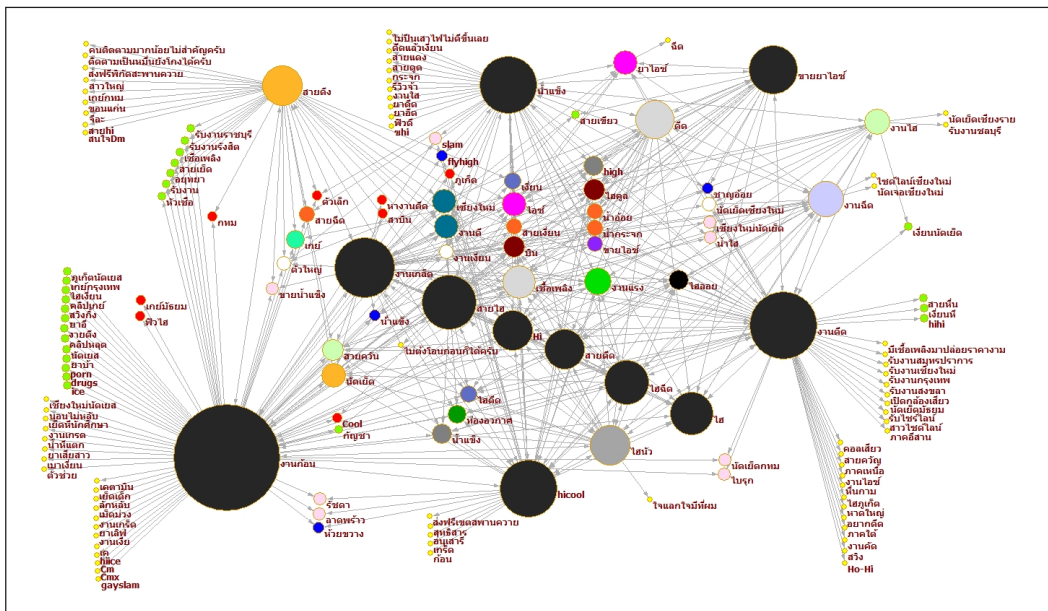
Picture 2: Connection of hashtags used in Marijuana trading
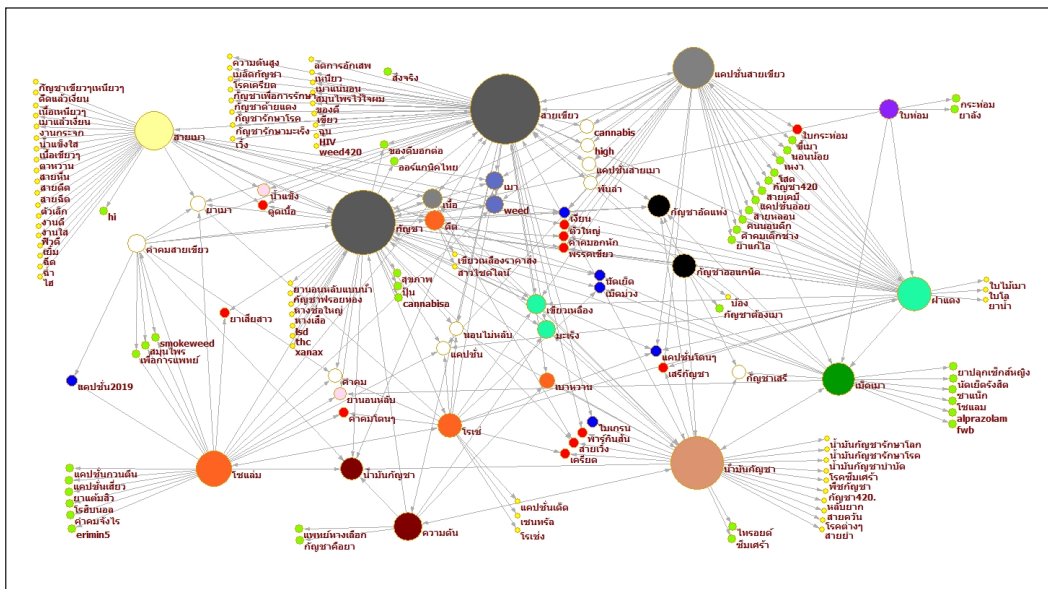
Drug Dealer's Precautions

Drug dealers are more cautious regarding online entrapment via Twitter than Facebook. They would obviously post without using their real name and last name, including a real profile picture. They would make no "Fist Bump" delivery, no cash payment, no cash on delivery, but prefer money transfer via bank account, Prompt Pay account, or electronic wallet by sending their information via Line application. On the other hand, drug dealers on Facebook are not so cautious as those on Twitter.

Online drug marketing strategies include enhancing customer's awareness of online drug sales by creating seller's image, having Twitter users participate in their activities by presenting good experiences to gain trust among new customers, attracting more people to press "Like" or "Follow" so as to instantly see their posts and increase the buying tendency. They also sell drugs with less profit to have new customers make their first order by making them excited with drugs from displaying VDO clips demonstrating how to use drugs and create drug use equipment. They also offer new imported drugs with fascinating promotion to increase the sale and repeat orders. Once the customers are impressed with the sellers, they would pass on their experience to others by word of mouth, building more credibility of the sellers. The captured chat logs with customers are also posted to guarantee the drug's quality and confirm punctual delivery.

Online drug marketing promotion emphasizes decreasing the time maintaining drugs in stock or transforming drugs to money as soon as possible so that they can buy more drugs for sale. The popular marketing promotion to enhance drug sales and attract new customers are as follows:

1. Provide discount to directly and easily attract customers. This strategy is suitable for both old and new customers, and can draw other drug dealers 'customers' interest by offering drugs at a cheaper price.

2. Offer free giveaways, free gift, or free delivery which is a strategy widely used among grocery stores, convenience stores, supermarkets or online shops, since it can effectively attract buyers' attentions. Among many drug dealers' offers, some customers might prefer to buy with the one who offers free giveaways.

3. Offer discount like "Buy more, save more" which helps increase sales due to the buying quantity set by the seller for the customer to get more discount if they buy more. Sometimes, retailers just buy drugs for selling to their customers.

4. Offer marketing promotion by providing more drugs with the same price. This strategy is suitable for drug dealers with quite a few drugs in stock or possession and enough to be given away for their customers. Once the customers know they will get more drugs with the same price, it would be easier for them to make buying decisions.

5. Offer "Buy one get one1 free" promotion to enhance excitement and easily stimulate the sales occasionally in a shorter period.

6. Offer "Point collection" campaign for casual customers or new customers to make them buy more to get more points to be exchanged for rewards.

7. Offer marketing promotion during special occasions for customers' long-term impression, making the customers keep waiting to buy drugs or abused prescription drugs during special occasion or festivals. This strategy also helps increase the sales.

Connection of Original Drug Marketing with Online Drug Marketing

Injection drug users such as heroin users do not usually buy heroin via social media since they know the drug dealers in their area. Therefore, they can call, send message or call via Line application to make an appointment for heroin delivery. This is different from other drug users who use or sell Ice, Marijuana, Kratom leaves and abused prescription drug and have connection to original drug marketing such as via friends to drug users in different areas of Thailand, linking to online drug dealers on social media like Facebook and Twitter for drug trading in the same area. Most posted messages would identify residing area or delivery area. The drugs are usually sold at a higher price in city areas (except the border area) than via social media. The advantages of online drug trading include its 24-hour availability, and lesser delivery time when compared to drug dealers in a different area. People usually buy drugs for sale and get the benefit from consuming some of the drugs. The drug dealers also have easy access to drugs such as hill area or border area where they would go find drugs for selling online. Most of their customers are friends or acquaintances.

Discussion and Recommendations

The information obtained from online drug marketing reflects drug situation and expanding drug marketing with 24-hour accessibility for people of all ages. Drugs can be delivered door-to-door, decreasing the risk for getting arrested. The information of social media users with drug trading behavior, language, hashtags used in communicating between sellers and buyers are considered important sources for following up on the drug epidemic situation in Thailand, and can be used as baseline data for surveillance, control, prevention and

solution of new drug problems. It can also be used as a guideline in imposing 20-year national security strategic policy, prevention and solution of the problems affecting internal security and national development, as well as prevention and resolution of cyber security problems.

The information on this report is only a fact from a particular period of time. The study results can be used as important information for social media service providers to prevent and reduce drug problems according to national policy as well as Facebook and Twitter policies with obvious restriction on posting drug-related content or message. Due to restriction of Thai law, the legal authority cannot directly report drug offences of drug dealers on social media without apparent evidence. The information of drug dealers on social media will be essential for service providers to terminate users with drug-related behavior more easily and instantly.

Recommendation on Prevention

- Seek cooperation from social media service providers to investigate, surveil and terminate users with drug-related behavior.

- Seek cooperation from delivery service providers to set up scanning system (scanner) for delivered goods, and to provide staff training on inspection and surveillance of drug delivery.

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