

# Telegram as a space for peer-led harm reduction communities and netreach interventions

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NO conflict of interest to declare

# Rationale

- To date, studies of peer-led online harm reduction (HR) communities have focused on web forums, arguing that online spaces are strategic settings for both obtaining up to date information on drug use and implementing new forms of outreach on the web or *netreach* (Vale Pires et al. 2016).
- **The study's aim was to learn more about PWUDs' communities on chat apps and provide insights to professionals wishing to implement harm reduction interventions in this type of environment:**
  - Why people turn to the online community?
  - Can this chat activity be framed as harm-reduction oriented?
  - How HR workers are accepted and what is their role?

# Methodology

- Data set: all the conversations (videos, images...) that took place on the chat from March 1 to May 31, 2020 (pandemic period) in a peer led community on Telegram.
- A HR outreach team (ASL TO4 – Neuttravel) was invited to join the community in this period.
- No. of members: 191 members at the start (411 by the end of data collection and 1298 today!).
- The permission to study the chat contents was asked to the chat administrator (Barbosa and Milan, 2019) → allowed after a poll.
- Direct quotations were not used.
- Iterative categorization (Neale 2016).
- Atlas.ti

# Information sought and discussion topics on the chat

Chat members turn to the community to obtain information on best ways of reducing risks and maximizing benefits of drugs

## *First posts*

Main subject	Topics	No. quotes
<b>Substances</b>	Generic questions about specific drugs	82
<b>Patterns of use</b>	Questions about safer use practices (> self-administration methods and dosages)	64
<b>Risks</b>	Questions about risks (legal and psychophysical) of specific substances	46
<b>Effects</b>	Questions about desired effects (recreational, performance enhancing, relaxing, pharmaceutical)	44
<b>Sourcing and storage</b>	Questions about how to grow/prepare drugs at home and the best ways of storing them	36
<b>Treatment</b>	Questions about treating addiction and withdrawal symptoms	19

- NPS
- Legal substances
- Prescription drugs (opioids, benzos)
- Alternative to medications



PANDEMIC PERIOD!

# What answers are provided by members?

- Requests for help were always welcomed without judgment and received immediate answers.
- Rather than encouraging substance use, answers promoted a more aware and targeted use (eg having a “sitter”, set and setting).
- Certain substances (opiates), patterns of use and self-production practices are clearly discouraged.
- Information included scientific papers (11 in total) on specific topics.



Conversations can be properly framed as harm reduction-oriented

# How were the netreach workers accepted in the community and what is their role?

## Chat members

- Asked for information on drug use patterns, HR (> drug-checking), prevention and (<) treatment
- Interested in training/initiatives organized by the HR team.
- Invited peer workers to weigh in on issues where their opinions were contrasting (psychedelics) → **recognition**
- Reshared posts, videos, articles posted by the HR team → **multiplier effect**

## Peer workers

- Took part in chat conversations with moderation, waiting to be consulted rather than intervening on their own initiative.
- Their comments are empathetic, never judgmental and aimed to enhance dialog between different points of view rather than playing the role of sententious experts.

# Conclusions

- The community's activity is similar to that of web forums, discussions revolve around safety and curbing risks and can be considered an “ethical practice” (Boothroyd and Lewis, 2016).
- The information and suggestions exchanged between the chat members are generally correct and in line with those provided by HR workers, which suggests that **harm reduction from below is not a form of resistance or opposition to the public health approach** (Barratt et al., 2014).
- **PWUDs are quite open to dialog and discussion with professionals: cooperation is possible!**
- **Netreach interventions can reduce the distance between technical and “lay” knowledge**, giving way to greater sharing and co-construction of drug knowledge (Bancroft, 2017).



# Thanks for your attention!

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