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I, Michael L Rosino, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology.

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Describing the Indescribable: Interpretation, Discourse, and Social Learning within an Online Drug Community

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Describing the Indescribable: Interpretation, Discourse, and Social Learning within an Online Drug Community

A thesis submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Cincinnati in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Sociology of the College of Arts and Sciences

by

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ABSTRACT

The development of online drug communities is heavily intertwined with new subcultural trends and patterns in global drug use including the recent increase in use of novel hallucinogens. Analyzing these emergent forms of subculture provides important insights into the growing connection between computer-mediated communication and drug use in contemporary society. Drawing on a framework which integrates social learning theory and social constructionism, I analyze interpretations and discourse within the online drug community DMT-Nexus. I develop a methodology for analyzing online communities utilizing interpretive and conversational qualitative analysis techniques to generate a typology of subcultural knowledge and meanings and develop a conception of the social construction process in online communities.

The findings of this study show how online contexts affect the social learning process that enables drug use and illustrate the mechanisms through which users gain relevant knowledge and meanings as well as status and credibility. Based on these findings, I pose an update to Becker’s (1963) social learning model of drug use which reflects the implications of online contexts. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate how group knowledge and shared meanings are socially constructed within online communities through conversation as a reflexive process. For instance, drug users may advocate certain techniques or methods for using and experiencing drugs which others can corroborate through their responses or they may pose interpretations of drug-induced experiences which can be validated or rejected by others. Finally, through focusing on computer mediated communication, this study reveals the importance of not only learning and the development of subcultural knowledge but also linguistic descriptions and modes of communication in the Web-based social processes that enable drug use.
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INTRODUCTION

Growth in the scope and accessibility of communication and information technology such as the Internet has led to the emergence of an increasing multitude of informational websites and virtual communities including web forums on drug use (Bogenschutz 2000; Murguia, Tackett-Gibson & Lessem 2007; Montagne 2008; Walsh 2011). The expansion of online drug communities is connected to new subcultural developments and global drug use trends. In recent years, awareness and use of novel psychoactive drugs including formerly obscure hallucinogens such as dimethyltryptamine, mescaline, ibogaine, salvia divinorum, and ketamine and an array of newly developed designer drugs has escalated in Western society (Bogenschutz 2000; Halpern & Pope 2001; Tupper 2006; Vardakou, Pistos & Spilipoulou 2011; Corazza et al 2012; Delcua et al 2012; Forsyth 2012; Bruno, Poesiat & Matthews 2013). While sociological research has yet to investigate online drug communities in depth, analyzing these emergent subcultures provides important insights into the growing connection between computer-mediated communication and drug use in contemporary society.

Survey research indicates that contemporary drug users are more likely to rely on online sources for information about drugs than any other source (Murguia, Tackett-Gibson & Lessem 2007) and that information learned via the Internet can influence individuals’ drug use practices (Boyer, Shannon & Hibberd 2005). As the Web serves as a primary source of information and communication, much of the knowledge and meanings held by contemporary drug users is the product of discussions that take place on the Internet (Boyer et al 2007). The context of computer-mediated communication uniquely shapes online interactions between drug users. The Web is both a form of media and a mode of communication (Morris & Ogan 1996). It is relatively unregulated in comparison to other forms of media such as television and radio and
therefore potentially more conducive to the development of non-hegemonic discourses and alternative ideologies. Thus, in contrast to pre-Internet drug ‘scenes’, there is a much wider variety of information and narratives available to contemporary drug users than ever before (Murguia, Tackett-Gibson & Lessem 2007; Walsh 2011).

Since the 1950s and 60s, sociologists have theorized that drug use is a socially learned behavior based on knowledge and meanings (Becker 1953) and that drug-induced experiences are socially constructed (Becker 1967; Watts 1971). While these theories remain relevant, they reflect a societal context in which interactions are heavily moderated by factors such as geographical boundaries and physical space. Thus they describe social processes which operate largely through shared experiences and face-to-face interactions. In modern society, the internet serves as a means for the transmission of subcultural knowledge and meanings (Holt & Copes 2010). Thus, comprehensive sociological research must explore the specific social processes that influence drug use within the context of the Web. As interactions within online communities generate text-based, immediately documented, and publically available data (Holtz, Kronberger & Wagner 2012), contemporary sociologists can apply the theoretical and analytic tools of sociology to the breadth of data made available by online communication.

In this thesis, I analyze a growing online drug community in order to address four questions, informed by Becker’s (1953) groundbreaking study and related sociological theories of drug use, that surface in light of the proliferation of novel psychoactive drug use and its corresponding online subcultures. How does the social learning process that enables drug use operate in the context of an online drug community? In particular, how do individuals learn to induce, interpret, and enjoy experiences with novel psychoactive drugs? How do drug users communicate knowledge and meanings about drugs, drug use, and drug-induced experiences on
the Web? Finally, how are group knowledge and shared meanings relevant to the social learning process developed? In order to address these questions, this study analyzes discourse within the online drug community *DMT-Nexus* (http://www.dmt-nexus.me).

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The Internet provides a new and under-researched space for the cultural sharing and interaction that enables the development of deviant subcultures. Holt & Copes (2010) note that research on deviant online communities “may require the creation of new theoretical frameworks to understand the formation and spread of subcultural knowledge” (651). The theoretical framework developed in this thesis seeks to elucidate the interactions and social processes that take place in the context of online drug communities. Specifically, it integrates social learning and social constructionist approaches to understanding subcultural drug use and explores the implications of computer-mediated communication.

*Subculture, Social Learning, and the Enjoyment of Drug-Induced Experiences*

Knowledge and meanings gained through social interaction within drug subcultures shape drug-induced experiences and influence patterns of use for individuals (Becker 1953, 1967; Watts 1971). Becker’s (1953) famous study “Becoming a Marihuana User” explains the micro-level social learning process involved in becoming a drug user: first, learning to use the drug effectively, secondly, learning to recognize its effects and finally, learning to appreciate those effects. Further expanding on this theory, in a later study, he theorizes that the likelihood of drug use resulting in a negative psychological state such as anxiety is a function of “the historical development of a subculture” (Becker 1967:163). The existence of a drug-positive subculture allows for positive interpretations to develop about drug-induced states which can compete with
and replace negative interpretations (such as drug-induced states as psychosis) and thus enable enjoyment and continued use (Becker 1967).

Many studies on psychoactive drugs illustrate that two factors, ‘set’ and ‘setting’, determine a drug’s subjective effects (Leary 1964, 1966; Becker 1967; Watts 1971; Shewan, Dalgarno & Reith 2000). ‘Set’ consists of an individual drug user’s knowledge, definitions, and overall mental and emotional state while ‘setting’ refers to the context of use, i.e. external stimuli and sensory input (Watts 1971). The deterministic qualities of ‘set’ and ‘setting’ demonstrate that psychoactive drug-induced states often entail a high level of suggestibility (Watts 1971; Goode 2008). Thus, the same drug, when used in different cognitive, cultural, social, or physical contexts, can induce highly disparate experiences (Becker 1980; Watts 1971; Goode 2008). Psychoactive drugs can generate experiences which users find confusing or frightening if they are used without the proper mental and situational context (Watts 1971; Becker 1980). Thus, in order to become drug users, individuals must learn not only the practical knowledge required to consume drugs but also knowledge and meanings conducive to the enjoyment of drug-induced states (Becker 1963).

The purpose that individuals ascribe to their drug use influences their drug-induced experiences and drug taking behavior (Becker 1967; Watts 1971). The process of becoming a drug user often entails assigning a recreational, therapeutic, or medical value to the drug’s effects and minimizing or reframing any harmful consequences (Smith 1980). Social learning within pro-drug subcultures allows individuals to define their drug use and its effects as positive, valuable, or at the very least non-problematic (Becker 1967; Watts 1971). For example, qualitative research suggests that many contemporary users of hallucinogens perceive their drug use as a means for beneficial psychological or spiritual exploration (Cakic et al 2010; Móró et al
Additionally, how individuals define the role of drug use in daily life, in terms of not only its function but also its importance, affects the meanings derived from drug-induced experiences and patterns of use as well (Watts 1971). For example, Golub, Johnson, & Dunlap (2005) find that “it is the prevailing drug subcultures and each person’s place relative to them that impart a greater significance to the activity [of drug use]” (218).

Furthermore, in order to become a drug user, an individual must reconcile the fact that drug use is often illegal and labeled as deviant by mainstream society (Becker 1963; Watts 1971). Within the context of drug-positive subcultures, drug use is both normalized and positively framed (Becker 1963, 1967; Johnson 1980; Blackman 2010). Thus, identification with drug subcultures enables individuals to minimize the stigma of deviance labeling and perceived legitimacy of anti-drug or prohibitionist narratives and avoid cognitive discomfort during drug use (Becker 1963; Anderson & Mott 1998; Blackman 2010; Walsh 2011). Participation in pro-drug subcultural communities allows individuals to learn from other potentially more experienced drug users and cultivate a base of knowledge, meanings, and self-identity conducive to drug use and enjoyment despite its deviancy, illegality, and the overall potential for undesired consequences (Becker 1963; 1967; Watts 1971; Johnson 1980).

As this section illustrates, drug subcultures have a profound effect on the cultural associations and patterns of behavior among drug users. The conditions of drug subcultures shape the social environment for the transmission of knowledge and meanings which enable both drug use and the ability to find drug-induced states pleasurable. Furthermore, drug subcultures change over time in response to shifts in technology, mainstream culture, political policy, social structure, and other societal factors (Johnson 1980; Golub et al 2005). Because of this ongoing “subcultural evolution” (Golub et al 2005:218), sociological research on drug use must examine
and address new forms of subculture as they emerge. Online drug communities, as newly emergent forms of subculture, therefore warrant in-depth analysis in order to better understand how they shape the social processes related to drug use in contemporary society.

**Online Drug Communities and the Construction of Subcultural Knowledge and Meanings**

The advancement of the Internet and particularly Web 2.0 technologies\(^1\) has led to the emergence and growth of online communities. An online community is a membership-based collectivity of individuals who communicate with one another through the use of a virtual web space such as a forum, user group, user-edited wiki, weblog, or online bulletin board. Because they exist on the Web, online communities can transcend traditional barriers to social interaction such as physical space and political boundaries. Online communities function as spaces for their users to develop and share knowledge (Simpson 2003; Vargas 2011) and request and provide social and emotional support (Chua & Balkunje 2013). They are generally devoted to a specific topic or shared interest (King 2008) and online drug communities are those which center on the topic of drugs and drug use. Murguia, Tackett-Gibson & Lessem (2007) find that the participants of online drug communities are “firmly embedded in two interconnected worlds” (58): a physical one in which daily life occurs including drug use and a cyber one in which information is exchanged including norms, rituals of use, harm reduction strategies, and frames of interpretation.

The traditional social learning model asserts that drug use is learned primarily through socially shared drug taking and “observation and imitation” (Becker 1963:48) between novice and experienced users. However, in contemporary society, computer-mediated communication also serves as an “effective means to transmit subcultural knowledge” (Holt & Copes 2010:641).

\(^1\) Web 2.0 technologies are Web platforms and other virtual spaces which foster real-time interaction and participation in content creation rather than simply content consumption (Thomas & Sheth 2011).
Online interactions between drug users are based on computer-moderated communication (CMC) rather than directly shared drug taking experiences and face-to-face interaction. According to Jones (2003), “the language of CMC is shaped by both the technology and the social context within which it operates” (7). Thus, in order to successfully navigate interaction in an online drug community, individuals must harness the necessary technological, sociocultural, discursive, and linguistic proficiency. Online drug community members assess each other’s level of experience and knowledge based on self-presentation performed entirely through text and images. Experienced and/or knowledgeable individuals who post detailed experiential accounts, share knowledge, and provide advice to novice users facilitate web-based social learning.

Drug subcultures provide a space for not only social learning but also the generation of knowledge and meanings relevant to the social learning process. In order to integrate experiences of altered states of consciousness\(^2\) into day to day reality, individuals construct linguistic narratives through interpretation (Berger & Luckman 1966). Watts (1971), posing a social constructionist approach to understanding drug-induced experiences, states that “the interpretation of any experience is a social act” (123) including those induced by psychoactive drugs. Similarly, Becker (1980) finds that “users bring to bear, in interpreting their experience, knowledge and definitions derived from participation in particular social groups” (182) and that those developed within drug subcultures enable individuals to enjoy drug-induced experiences. Discussions in online drug communities can therefore generate both knowledge about drugs and

\(^2\) It is of note that Berger & Luckman (1966) utilize the example of dreams for their articulation of this point rather than drug-induced states of consciousness: “For instance, I can interpret “the meaning” of a dream by integrating it linguistically into the order of everyday life. Such integration transposes the discrete reality of the dream into the reality of everyday life by making it an enclave within the latter. The dream is now meaningful in terms of the reality of everyday life rather than its own discrete reality” (12). As their example elucidates a larger point about the ability of language to transcend ‘discrete realities’, it is reasonable that the integration of temporary non-normative experiences into ‘everyday life’ would operate quite similarly.
drug use and meanings or definitions which can justify drug use and enable individuals to positively interpret or reframe drug-induced experiences.

Previous research on subcultural drug use suggests that the knowledge and meanings developed within online drug communities can influence the perceptions, experiences, and behaviors of the individuals who utilize them (Becker 1967; Anderson & Mott 1998; Boyer et al 2007; Watts 2011). However, what remains to be established is the process through which knowledge and meanings become ubiquitous in an online drug community and thus influential. Considering factors such as the self-presentation of knowledgeability, credibility, and level of experience through text and the reception that such self-presentations receive can provide a useful framework for analyzing this issue. Savoleinen (2011) finds that quality and credibility judgments of other posts are common within online community postings. It is probable that a similar process consisting of individuals assessing the validity of each other’s statements and credibility of each other’s self-presentations generates the consensus of knowledge and meanings among members of an online drug community.

The construction of cogent knowledge and meanings within drug subcultures takes place through the sharing of experiences and knowledge (Becker 1967). Watts (1971) notes that, in shared drug taking, “what is actually shared is not one’s experience but the common physical stimuli and the interpretation of the experience” (123). In the absence of actual shared drug taking, online communication between drug users often entails the sharing of experiential accounts and interpretations of drug-induced experiences via text (Walsh 2011). Therefore, effective communication of knowledge and meanings is reliant on individuals’ capacities for meaningful description. Psychoactive drugs, especially hallucinogens, often generate non-normative experiences which may be difficult for direct and literal descriptions (Slattery 2005).
Consequently, communication amongst drug users often relies on metaphorical and symbolic language which carries implied meanings about drugs and drug-induced states (Montagne 1998) with perhaps the best known example being of drug-induced experiences as ‘trips’ which implies the symbolism of travel (Banco 2008).

Additionally, many parts of the Web are publically accessible and conversations among drug users online often entail the communication of stigmatized and legally incriminating information. They therefore often utilize community-specific drug argot which provides a means for both covert information exchange and subcultural membership signification and reflect the shared meanings within the subculture itself (Cromwell 1970; Mieczkowski 1986; Jonson et al 2006). Similar to the metaphorical communication among drug users, argot also provides a necessary vocabulary to describe unique aspects of drug taking (Agar 1974). Furthermore, when discussing drug use within public spaces online, individuals may utilize pseudonymity (Barratt 2011) or other modes of communication to avoid self-incrimination. The importance of argot and pseudonymity further illustrates that individuals’ abilities to articulate information about drugs and describe the phenomena experienced in drug-induced states in online contexts is largely based on their stock of knowledge of relevant concepts and modes of communication.

Social interaction provides a means for social construction, and social learning processes relating to drug use. Computer-mediated communication between drug users creates a space for social interaction that does not rely on the physical presence of individuals and the undertaking of shared drug use. In order to explore the issues posed by this emergent situation, this study analyzes the interactions within an online drug community. This analysis entails an examination of discursive patterns, the knowledge, interpretations, and ideas posed by members, and the generation of group knowledge and shared meanings. As this study centers on a specific case, the
following section provides an overview and background of the particular online drug community I have chosen for this study (\textit{DMT-Nexus}) and the drug around which it is based (dimethyltryptamine).

\textbf{THE CASE OF DMT AND ITS ONLINE SUBCULTURE}

This study analyzes qualitative data derived from the online community \textit{DMT-Nexus} (www.dmt-nexus.me/forum/), a forum-based website that revolves around dimethyltryptamine (DMT). DMT is one of the most popular of recently proliferating niche psychoactives which is developing a burgeoning largely Web-based subculture (Walsh 2011) and \textit{DMT-Nexus} serves as a microcultural community within the larger online DMT subculture. According to the web domain statistics site alexa.com, \textit{DMT-Nexus} users “tend to browse from home, and they tend to be childless, moderately educated men under the age of 35” and most users browse the site from the US, UK, or Canada. I selected the site based on its individual characteristics such as its social cohesion as evidenced by the detailed ‘Attitude Page’ (wiki.dmt-nexus.me/Attitude_Page) which outlines and codifies the rules and cultural and communicative norms of the forum.

According to the ‘Attitude Page’, \textit{DMT-Nexus} is “dedicated to expanding knowledge regarding DMT and related psychedelics, with a strong focus on the safety and respect necessary both in the use of these substances as well as in the form of developing the knowledge and sharing the knowledge within the community”. Thus, it is explicitly and overtly an online community aiming to facilitate social learning toward non-problematic hallucinogen use. Moreover, the growth in membership and activity of the online community itself exemplifies the expanding nature of online drug subcultures and especially those based around the use of novel drugs. For instance, though DMT is a niche drug, as of March 2013, there are over 396,000 posts
on the forum altogether and since its creation the amount of daily postings on the site has increased over time.

According to data from the *Global Drug Survey* (2012), 6% of US respondents had used DMT in the past 12 months. This is a high proportion considering that hallucinogenic drug use is generally infrequent, particularly for drugs such as DMT which induce intense and bizarre experiences (Goode 2008). DMT affects the central nervous system to induce an altered state of perception and consciousness (Goode 2008). Its subjective effects include “intense visuals, euphoria, [and] even true hallucinations (perceived extensions of reality)” (Freye & Levy 2009:219). A sense of entering an alternate reality and “apparent communication with discarnate entities” (Meyer 1994:161) generally characterize DMT-induced experiences. DMT users may become comatose for the duration of their drug experiences and they may experience “loss of body-awareness” (Meyer 1994:171) and loss of identity or ‘ego death’ at large doses (Meyer 1994; Hayes 2000).

Like other hallucinogens, DMT is not a chemically addictive substance but rather one which requires the development of a fondness for the experiences that it can induce (Goode 2008). Thus, its use cannot be explained by pharmacological addiction models. Rather, DMT use is an acquired taste which is not enjoyable or otherwise positively experienced without the appropriate context, knowledge, and meanings and it can even produce experiences of dysphoria, cognitive dissonance, and anxiety. As such, it provides an exemplary case for examining the role of social processes in influencing patterns of drug use. Additionally, as DMT is a formerly obscure drug, it lacks a concrete definitional consensus among both users and researchers. Thus analyzing discussions about the drug allows for insights into relevant social construction processes as they unfold.
While the study of a more recent phenomenon such as the Web-based DMT subculture makes this thesis particularly timely in capturing a contemporary drug use trend as it develops, DMT use in and of itself is not entirely new. Exploring the cultural and historical contexts of DMT such as the evolution of its use over time and its associated academic and subcultural discourses is helpful for understanding the knowledge, perceptions, and practices of contemporary users. The sections that follow illuminate the specific sociocultural milieu surrounding dimethyltryptamine usage and its links to the social processes elucidated throughout this paper.

Sociohistorical, Legal, and Cultural Milieus

The social and cultural history of a drug influences the conceptual frameworks and contexts that accompany usage (Becker 1967). Since prehistoric times, human beings have used psychoactive substances (Sullivan & Hagen 2002) and like many drugs, dimethyltryptamine has a long history of indigenous use (Meyer 1994). Indigenous peoples of the Amazon and Andes have been using it in the form of ayahuasca for thousands of years in a religious context (Meyer 1994). Shamans use ayahuasca to attain altered states in order to perform important spiritual, cultural, and social rituals including communication with ancestor spirits and the natural world (Luna 2011). These indigenous cultures view the use of ayahuasca as an important practice which requires knowledge, training, and a specific context (Lucia Goulart 2011). Thus, even in its indigenous context, ritualistic drug use such as ayahuasca use is a socially learned behavior based on the development and cultivation of knowledge and meanings (Gorsuch 1980).

The US Supreme Court recently legalized the religious use of ayahuasca on the grounds of religious freedom and evidence that it is not harmful or chemically addictive (Gonzales v. O Centro Espírita Beneficente Uniao Do Vegetal 2005; Church of the Holy Light of the Queen v.
Musakey 2009). While raw DMT-containing plant materials which are used for producing the drug remain quasi-legal, synthetic DMT itself remains prohibited as a Schedule I drug and possession of the substance can result in up to 7 years in prison (Freye & Levy 2009). The current legal status of dimethyltryptamine reflects an emerging approach to drug policy which tolerates and legitimizes certain religious, cultural, and therapeutic applications such as medical cannabis or religious peyote use while continuing a largely punitive approach to subcultural and ostensibly recreational use.

Though it is rooted in a shamanic cultural context, ayahuasca use has not remained endemic to Amazonian indigenous people. Globalization and growing American and European fascination with indigenous spirituality and hallucinogens has brought ‘drug tourists’ to the Amazonian rainforest in search of ayahuasca (Lucia Goulart 2011) and its use has spread throughout the Northern and Western hemispheres (Tupper 2006). Despite the cultural appropriation of ayahuasca shamanism, the context of contemporary subcultural use is largely dissimilar and its practices and meanings often diverge significantly (Tupper 2006; Walsh 2011). For instance, modern users are more likely to use synthetic DMT than ayahuasca which is commonly ingested via smoking (Cakic, Potkonyak & Marshall 2010).

As drug use persists and evolves, research and writing on drugs and drug-induced experiences continues to persist and evolve as well. The resulting literature has introduced several prominent approaches and conceptual models for understanding drug-induced states. Those which encourage drug use or frame it as potentially positive, beneficial or non-problematic are likely to influence the perceptions of drug users and permeate drug subcultures. In order to illuminate the wider discourses about hallucinogenic drugs and DMT specifically which influence the knowledge, interpretations, and practices of its users, it is essential to
explore the recent development of conceptions of DMT use. The following sections provide an overview of major streams of thought within subcultural and scientific communities for operationalizing and explaining DMT’s subjective effects.

*Psychospiritual Approaches to Drug-Induced Experiences*

Psychospiritual approaches to drug use have been influential among hallucinogenic drug users (Watts 1971; Móró et al 2011). Aldous Huxley’s (1954) *The Doors of Perception*, an account and discussion of a mescaline-induced experience, links the use of hallucinogenic drugs to the desire for self-transcendence and suggests that drug-induced states are more expansive ways of perceiving reality which can facilitate contemplation and the revelation of insight. It provided some of the first widely available positive psychospiritual interpretations of drug-induced experiences in the US and Europe and helped inspire the research approach of ‘psychonautics’ or direct experience. The ‘psychonautic’ approach has led to the development of varied subcultural models for understanding drug use (Newcombe 2008; Móró et al 2011). For instance, in the 1990’s, ethnobotanist and author Terrance McKenna developed and popularized positive psychospiritual interpretations of DMT. In his work, McKenna (1993; 1994) depicts his own DMT-induced experiences as transdimensional travel or perception and presents DMT use as “a means for mankind to reconnect with the life-force or planetary intelligence” (Peet & Marcus 1992:29).

Though largely marginalized in mainstream circles such as academia, psychospiritual models and experience-based approaches continue to permeate the subculturally embraced literature on DMT. Recently, psychiatrist Rick Strassman performed the first government funded wide-scale human subject research on DMT at the University of New Mexico which primarily focused on attaining information about the drug’s objective effects. However, Strassman also
recorded his volunteers’ experiential accounts. These accounts, along with his own, were used for his 2001 book *DMT: The Spirit Molecule* which was later produced into a documentary of the same name. Strassman (2001) posits that DMT may reveal an alternate dimension and that the pineal gland releases endogenous DMT during liminal states such as birth, death, dreaming, and deep meditation. *DMT: The Spirit Molecule*, like many works on the meaning and implications of drug-induced experiences, is largely speculative and illustrates the role of an author’s interpretational framework. It relies heavily on religion, mysticism, and the conception of psychoactive drugs as entheogens or a means to induce spiritual experiences or mystical states.

Psychospiritual and psychonautic approaches to DMT use illustrate how pro-drug literature can provide a positive framing of the meaning and purpose of drug use. Thus, such approaches present relevant examples of the broader conceptions and discourses that underlie contemporary drug use. However, there are ongoing debates and negotiations of consensus taking place within drug subcultures. Therefore, the ideas presented by pro-drug literature can only become part of the group knowledge and shared meanings of drug subcultures through the communication between drug users. Additionally, academic research offers a further source of knowledge and interpretations for understanding drug-induced experiences. For instance, while psychospiritual and psychonautic approaches may be commonplace among drug enthusiasts, much of the institutional research employs a fairly unidirectional psychopharmacological approach focusing on the biochemical and mental health impacts of drug use.

*Psychopharmacological Approaches to Drug-Induced Experiences*

Between 1972 and 1990, government and institutional funding for research on hallucinogenic drugs was suspended due to conservative backlash against the 1960’s counterculture (Horgan 2005; Brown 2007). Therefore, institutional research on many drugs is
limited to preliminary pharmacological explorations. Pharmacologists have found that dimethyltryptamine is an endogenous biochemical (Freye & Levy 2009) though its function in the human body remains unknown. Research since the 1960’s has postulated that endogenous dimethyltryptamine is related to schizophrenia and other psychoses (Polin, Cardon, & Kety 1961; Angrist et al 1976) while more recent research suggests that it may serve as an anxiolytic which produces a “calm and relaxed mental state” (Jacob & Presti 2005:935). These two hypotheses illustrate the major conceptual frameworks used in psychopharmacological research: mental illness and mental well-being.

Researchers sometimes refer to psychoactive drugs as psychotomimetic drugs because their effects are thought to emulate or even temporarily cause psychosis (Szára 1994). Based on this conception, research has applied psychometric scales to drug users in order to measure drug induced states via the categories of mentally ill states (Gillin et al 1976). Researchers using this methodology have found that the acute psychological effects of DMT mimic many of the symptoms unique to schizophrenia including delusions and true-hallucinations (Gillin et al 1976; Gouzoulis-Mayfrank et al 2005). The wider discourse of the psychotomimetic approach that drugs induce temporary or permanent insanity portrays a clearly negative association. Thus, as noted by Becker (1967) and Watts (1971), the conception that drug use produces mental illness must be rejected by drug users in order to avoid cognitive dissonance and enjoy drug-induced states.

In contrast to the psychotomimetic approach, the psychoheuristic approach explores the possibilities of psychoactive drug-induced states for providing therapeutic benefits and psychological insights (Szára 1994). In a review of the existing literature, Gable (2007) finds that “long-term psychological benefits have been documented when ayahuasca is used in a well-
established social context” (24). For instance, there is strong evidence that it can be helpful in treating alcohol and drug addiction (Mabit 1996; McKenna 2004; Mabit 2007). This conception of drug-induced experiences is likely influential to drug users and enthusiasts as it presents a conception of drug-induced mental states as potentially productive or useful. Though it lacks a spiritual or metaphysical component, the psychoheuristic model is somewhat in line with psychospiritual conceptions of psychoactive drugs as tools for contemplative introspection.

Furthermore, as psychopharmacological research on DMT lacks an agreed upon conception of both its function and effects, an important question emerges: how can mind-altering drugs such as dimethyltryptamine contribute to both mental illness and wellbeing? On the surface, such different approaches and findings are difficult to reconcile. From a deeper sociocultural perspective, the paradox suggests that these approaches are dependent on culturally situated notions of mental health and states of altered perception. Papadimitropoulos (2009) remarks that “in the so-called ‘West’, an altered state of consciousness can often be portrayed as an anti-social mode of being and it is thus not highly valued” (73). Likewise, drug use, when studied in the context of shamanic societies such as ayahuasca use, is treated as a legitimate practice, but when studied in our own society such as synthetic DMT use, it is often considered inherently illegitimate and problematic (Adrian 2002). Thus, taken as a whole, the literature on DMT illustrates the significance of sociocultural context in influencing perceptions and interpretations of drug use and drug induced-experiences.

**A Sociocultural Approach to Drug Use via Online Drug Communities**

As illustrated by the above overview of psychospiritual and psychopharmacological approaches to DMT, not only drug users but also drug researchers utilize approaches to and interpretations of drug use which reflect sociocultural factors such as government policy and
cultural trends. Hence, though drug use is generally a social activity, individualistic approaches such as those based primarily on conceptions of mental health and illness have continued to play a primary role in institutional drug research. As Becker (1967) states of early psychotomimetic research on hallucinogenic drugs, “sociologists are unlikely to accept such an asocial and unicausal explanation of any form of complex social behavior” (164). Similarly, Moore & Miles (2004) among others find that, while psychopharmacological approaches provide useful information on drugs and their effects, only sociocultural approaches, especially those focusing on emergent subcultural contexts, can adequately address individual and collective drug taking behaviors.

Sociocultural research approaches focus on the social and cultural aspects of drug use, often concentrating specifically on the relationship between subcultural knowledge and meanings and patterns of behavior among drug users. Thus, studying the social processes within drug subcultures is indispensible to the development of sociocultural theories of drug use. The impact of the emergence of communication and information technologies on the development and dissemination of pro-drug subcultural knowledge and meanings remains to be fully investigated by social scientists. This study investigates two well-developed and explanatory social processes associated with drug use: social learning and social construction (Becker 1963; 1967; 1980; Watts 1971) in the context of online drug communities. I theorize in this thesis, first, that a process of social construction generates the subcultural knowledge and meanings that enable drug use and enjoyment and second, that individuals internalize these subcultural constructions through a process of social learning. In order to understand how social learning and social construction processes operate within online drug communities, I utilized qualitative analysis techniques on the conversational data within the threads of the online forum *DMT-Nexus.*
METHODS

Data

The qualitative data analyzed in this study derives from posts within the online drug community *DMT-Nexus* (dmt-nexus.me). Because it captures candid conversations between drug users, this approach can help reduce the self-report bias that can emanate from traditional qualitative data such as interviews. Holtz, Kronberger & Wagner (2012) find that “in contrast to face-to-face situations, the relative anonymity of the Internet motivates contributors to greater openness” (56). However, the social remoteness between deviant individuals and academic researchers can create misunderstandings in research on deviant or subcultural online communities (Holt & Copes 2010). With this in mind, I explored the *DMT-Nexus* forums in depth and thoroughly reviewed the literature on drug use, online communities, and drug subcultures in order to contextualize the data analyzed by this study. Additionally, I have taken a critical approach to users’ accounts so as to avoid reifying the perceptions and interpretations contained therein.

Data collection took place between September 24th and 28th, 2012. The primary focus of this analysis is three subforums specifically geared towards the sharing of experiential narratives (*First Steps in Hyperspace, DMT Experiences, and Quality Experiences*). I collected a randomized sample of 201 threads within these subforums and supplemented it through cursory explorations of other subforums where prudent. *First Steps in Hyperspace* is a subforum geared toward allowing novice users to introduce themselves, solicit advice from more experienced users, and share their experiences. *DMT Experiences* is a more general subforum for users to share and discuss DMT-induced experiences. *Quality Experiences* is a subforum which contains posts that community moderators have been selected as high quality (well-written and meaningful) descriptions of DMT-induced experiences. These subforums provide insights into
the variability in levels of experience and knowledgeability between users as well as qualitative differences between post types. Analyzing all three subforums allowed me to access conversations which illustrate different aspects and stages of the social learning and social construction processes relevant to this study.

**Coding and Analysis**

This study is largely concerned with how individuals participating in online drug communities learn how to use drugs, experience drug-induced states, and interpret drug-induced experiences. Thus, I utilized a synthesis of interpretive research, conversational analysis, and grounded theory approaches to analyzing qualitative data. Inductive and interpretive analysis allows for investigation into how individuals communicate relevant knowledge and interpretations of drug-induced experiences within their online posts. Analyzing the data as conversational discourse enables understandings of how their collective linguistic communications construct group knowledge and shared meanings which facilitate drug use. By analyzing these aspects of online drug communities, the findings of this study provide an opportunity for grounded theory development.

I used *Nvivo9* qualitative research software for data coding. I organized word clusters within posts into knowledge and meaning categories relevant to the social learning process as well as any emergent categories. I coded specific elements of subcultural knowledge and meanings (such as practices, interpretations, argot, explanations, and norms) into a typology for analysis. In order to examine the more technical aspects of discussions such as drug procurement and consumption, I developed knowledge categories inductively while using Becker’s (1963) stages of social learning as a general basis. In order to address meaning and experience based aspects of discussions, I utilized an interpretive approach to examine posts in terms of the
interpretations they contain (Denzin 1992; Pressler & Dasilva 1996) with particular focus on the metaphorical and figurative language used to describe drug-induced experiences.

Furthermore, I examined textual content within posts in terms of its conversational context. I analyzed discussions using an approach based on the sequential posting structure of forum based websites - specifically, that it is composed of threads consisting of original posts and responses. This approach utilizes the concept of ‘adjacency pairs’ in conversational analysis such as ‘question—answer’; ‘greeting—greeting’; and ‘request—reply’ (Gibson 2009:7). I coded reaction posts from other members in the community to the experiential accounts, information, and questions contained in original posts and in terms of whether or not they validate or respond positively to measure credibility and impact. I coded and analyzed responses to experiential narratives posted in DMT-Nexus to generate a typology that illustrates the factors which illicit specific response types. I also categorized and analyzed general trends and themes from the data as they emerged.

A note on presentation and community argot – DMT as ‘spice’

I have chosen to present the results of this study in a general structure that reflects the social learning model and social construction processes developed in this paper below. I utilize quotes from discussions within DMT-Nexus to illustrate the findings of this study and present them as they are without spelling or grammatical correction. Understandably, many themes that emerged in this analysis overlap with one another. Of particular note are the specific argot, communicative norms, and other linguistic techniques unique to DMT-Nexus. As argot provides much of the terminology that community members utilize in their discussions, I have chosen to explain relevant community terminology where appropriate rather than relegating these explanations to a discrete section despite the fact that its function is discussed in both Stage 3
and Stage 4 of the findings section. As the following example illustrates, explaining argot is essential in presenting relevant quotations and discussions.

Within *DMT-Nexus*, synthesized DMT is commonly called ‘spice’ or ‘the spice’. In the wider drug subculture, the term ‘spice’ has become a proprietary eponym for many designer drugs (Delcua et al 2012) due to a popular synthetic ‘herbal incense’ labeled as ‘not for human consumption’ called *Spice* which induces cannabis-like effects when smoked (National Institute on Drug Abuse 2012). However, within the context of *DMT-Nexus*, the term ‘spice’ refers exclusively to synthetic DMT. In fact, users can be banned from the community for discussing the use of deceptively marketed synthetic drugs with unknown health and safety risks such as ‘herbal incense’ products. ‘Spice’ is just one of several terms used by *DMT-Nexus* members in conversations relevant to every stage in the social learning process. Throughout the findings section, these terms and modes of communication allow *DMT-Nexus* members to signify subcultural membership, avoid incrimination, and communicate implied meanings about DMT and DMT usage.

**FINDINGS**

Analyzing online communication among drug users provides a window into the social processes that underlie contemporary drug use. The discussions that take place in *DMT-Nexus* largely entail the development and proliferation of knowledge about DMT and interpretations of DMT-induced experiences which facilitate usage and enjoyment. The shared meanings that undergird its social cohesion range from those as broad as a valuation of DMT use to those as nuanced as interpretations of specific phenomena within the experiences that it induces. The subcultural knowledge and meanings constructed in online drug communities relate to the achievement of drug-induced states, the subjective experiencing of these states, the meanings derived from drug-
induced experiences, and patterns of drug use behavior. In order to present a complete picture of how the Internet can shape the social learning and practices among drug users, it is important to consider how individuals decide to use drugs for the first time and come to seek out online drug communities.

Prologue: ‘First Steps in Hyperspace’- Navigating Drug Discourses Online

Becker (1963) finds that individuals who commit deviance generally undertake “deviant careers” (25) often with a clear beginning and end. The start of which entails an initial act which transgresses normative boundaries. In the case of drug users, this begins with the act of associating with drug users and attempting drug use for the first time. Individuals who seek out online drug communities are likely already curious about drug use due to other factors. Encountering pro-drug discourses or positive interpretations of drug-induced experiences through social networks and media plays a significant factor in sparking initial curiosity and interest. For instance, growing cultural awareness of drugs such as DMT in contemporary society (as its appearance in music³, literature⁴, television⁵, and film⁶ exemplifies) both reflects and generates increased subcultural development and participation. Individuals may also interact with drug users and thus become introduced to drug subcultures (Becker 1963; Goode 2008).

One user explains,

“my dad who is also a member of the Nexus is the one who discovered dmt from

³ “Dimethyltryptamine” by Jay Electronica and “Pineal Gland” by Ab-Soul which utilizes imagery from DMT: The Spirit Molecule both serve as interesting examples of this trend in hip-hop music.

⁴ DMT: The Spirit Molecule by Rick Strassman (2010) and countless books and lectures by Terrence McKenna among others illustrate this trend.

⁵ References to dimethyltryptamine and ayahuasca have appeared in recent television programs such as National Geographic Channel’s Drugs Inc., Cartoon Network’s Adventure Time, Showtime’s Weeds, FX’s Wilfred, and countless made-for-TV documentaries.

⁶ The most commonly cited example of references to the drug in films is the documentary DMT: The Spirit Molecule. Furthermore, the 2010 French film Enter the Void features a scene depicting a first person DMT-induced experience and the 2012 American comedy Wanderlust depicts a character up in a tree after taking ayahuasca, utilizing the ‘I think I can fly’ hallucinogenic drug trope for comedic effect.
watching [DMT:] The Spirit Molecule on Netflix, which is also what sparked my interest as well.”

For curious individuals, encountering positively framed conceptions and accounts of drug use can influence the decision to try drugs.

Within online drug communities, pro-drug or normalization discourses take shape primarily due to the shared valuation of drug use among members. In this way, drug use, a deviant activity to society at large, becomes a normative activity within the confines of drug subcultures. In this context, the question of whether or not one should use drugs is based on personal choice and the avoidance of harms and consequences rather than a consideration of the relative ‘sinfulness’ or ‘deviancy’ of drug use. In the subforum First Steps in Hyperspace, messages to those curious about DMT or interested in using it for the first time often include tacit encouragement to use combined with a ‘proceed but with caution’ approach. For example, one ostensibly experienced user warns

“if you do intend to try this... start with lower doses and work your way up ... be safe.”

As the quote illustrates, conversations in online drug communities such as DMT-Nexus often utilize a harm reduction discourse. Two main assumptions underlie harm reduction discourses online. First, that drug use is not inherently problematic in and of itself. Second, that access to resources such as information and social support serve as a means for less or even non-problematic drug use. Harm reduction websites such as online drug communities focus on providing such resources. From a harm reduction perspective, involvement in online drug communities allows inexperienced users to learn about drugs before trying them and thus avoid the negative consequences of an uninformed approach.

Examining conversations in online drug communities can reveal the features of the social construction and social learning processes that take place through them. The example of pro-drug
and harm reduction discourses illustrates how online drug communities can generate knowledge and meanings which affect novice or first time users’ decisions and behaviors. However, deciding to try a drug for the first time is only one step in the process of becoming a drug user. We must also endeavor to understand how drug users utilize online communities to learn the practices involved in drug consumption, normalize their drug use, minimize or reframe its negative consequences, and make drug use a routine activity in their daily lives. The following section therefore explicates the subsequent social learning and social construction processes that enable the individuals who use and participate in online drug communities to become drug users.

**Becoming a DMT User Online: Bringing Becker into the Digital World**

*DMT-Nexus* bills itself as an ‘Entheogenic University’ in its banners and descriptions. The term ‘Ethneogenic University’ reflects both its orientation toward psychospiritual approaches (such as the conception of drugs as entheogens) and its primary function for members as a space for learning. As this example illustrates, online drug communities such as *DMT-Nexus* are sites for the social learning process that allows individuals to gain prerequisite knowledge and meanings in order to become drug users. Becker’s (1953) social learning model includes 3 stages: learning to use the drug, learning to recognize its effects, and learning to appreciate them. While the conception of drug use and enjoyment as socially learned remains highly relevant, the consideration of online contexts and novel drugs can improve our understanding of this process in meaningful ways. With this in mind, I have developed a 4-stage social learning model in the context of online drug communities based on the findings of this study as a modification of Becker’s (1953) original 3-stage social learning model.
Computer-Moderated Social Learning Model of Drug Use:

1. **Learning to access and consume the drug** – Relevant knowledge includes effective means of procurement, preparation, and consumption.

2. **Learning to recognize and experience drug-induced states** – Relevant knowledge includes the ability to recognize and modulate the intensity levels of drug-induced states, techniques for avoiding anxiety and negative experiences, and useful considerations about setting, context, intentions, and attitudes.

3. **Learning to interpret drug-induced experiences** – Relevant knowledge includes the ability to recognize and appreciate specific drug-induced phenomena, derive positive or useful meaning from drug-induced experiences, and techniques for reframing and integrating experiences into daily life.

4. **Learning to communicate knowledge and describe drug-induced experiences** – For active participants, relevant knowledge includes the ability to use descriptive language for meaningful communication, modes of articulation, technological proficiency, community norms, and argot. For passive participants, relevant knowledge includes the ability to access and comprehend the individual messages and overall conversations within a particular online space.

All of the stages of Becker’s (1953) model have been updated to highlight relevant findings of this study such as procuring or producing the drug, the ability to properly experience and moderate drug-induced states, and the interpretation and reframing of drug-induced experiences. Furthermore, the addition of a fourth stage that relates to unique aspects of online communities such as their reliance on computer-moderated communication is the key contribution of this model. It is of note that, after interested individuals find an online drug community, they may
choose to participate in discussions or simply use it as an information source. Either way, they are engaging in the social learning that underlies subcultural drug use. Though not all users take an active role in *DMT-Nexus*, in order to learn from the site they must at the very least learn to navigate the community and decipher the web of argot, metaphors, and communicative norms within its conversations. Users who do choose to actively engage in the social life of an online community participate in not only the process of learning but also the discussions that construct relevant knowledge and meanings.

Information relevant to all 4 stages of this model is interrelated, constructed through social interaction, and constitutes subcultural knowledge and meanings. The following sections present the findings of my analysis of *DMT-Nexus* and also present the differences that emerge in comparison to Becker’s (1963) social learning model and analysis of cannabis users. Through conversational analysis of the discussions within online drug communities, they also explicate the process of social construction that takes place through the reflexive validation of knowledge and meanings.

*Stage 1: Learning to Access and Consume a Drug*

The first stage in learning how to become a drug user is learning how to effectively consume the drug (Becker 1953). Individuals must first gain access to the substance itself before using it. Becker (1963) finds that experienced drug users often provide the drug to novice users via shared drug taking and that individuals often access the drug through social networking with other drug users or drug dealers. While the sale and purchase of DMT are often not discussed on the site due to concerns over discussing illegal activities, the social networking method of accessing drugs is corroborated by several accounts in *DMT-Nexus*:

“so my friend unexpectedly brought dmt, i was interested about it for a couple of years, have read many books, trip reports etc. I couldn't miss this opportunity.”
“I've been talking to a friend about my recent trips & he was expressing some interest so i told him next time i come round to his place i'll bring some DMT & said its completely up to him if he wants to try any.”

DMT users may also choose to produce the drug themselves either as a measure of quality control or due to difficulty attaining it through other channels. There are several subforums in DMT-Nexus (such as DMT Extraction and General Extractions Help) which focus on constructing knowledge relevant to this aspect of DMT use. For the most part, they are geared toward developing safe and effective methods for extracting DMT from quasi-legal plant materials. These subforums explicitly focus on small scale extractions which facilitate personal use rather than large scale production for commodification. As the process of extraction or synthesis can be quite complicated, novice users often pose questions or solicit advice on the topic of extraction techniques to more experienced users. For instance, in response to a question posed on an extraction technique, an ostensibly experienced user suggests

“remove from freezer after precipitation, pour solvent to another container (use a coffee filter to capture crystals that aren't stuck to the jar) then place upside down in the freezer, open, with a couple folded paper tissues under it.”

Once an individual gains access to DMT, they must also learn how to consume it effectively. Specifically, users must learn techniques of consumption including the preferred paraphernalia and its operation. A highly important form of argot in DMT-Nexus relating to this stage is the term ‘GVG’. ‘GVG’ refers to a device commonly used to vaporize and inhale synthetic DMT and other substances such as cannabis. This apparatus, known officially as the ‘Glass Vapor Genie’, can be purchased online and is the preferred method of consumption among ostensibly experienced users of DMT. Though a multitude of consumption methods are discussed in DMT-Nexus, including those used for ayahuasca, the ‘Glass Vapor Genie’ is commonly recommended to novice DMT users who have trouble achieving desired effects, inefficiently use the drug, or suffer side effects.
According to many *DMT-Nexus* members, using a ‘GVG’ increases the efficiency of use and minimizes discomfort and damage to the lungs and throat in comparison to the harshness of smoked DMT. One user claims:

“I have had absolutely no displeasure with the GVG... It honestly just tastes like warm floral air, even somewhat soothing.”

Such accounts of positive experiences with drug use methods can influence other users’ drug taking choices. For instance, another user states in the same thread:

“So I have decided to believe the hype and get myself a GVG.”

Experienced users provide advice for how to properly use the device:

“Use several metal screens otherwise the DMT [will] melt and fall down inside the pipe, nothing beeing [sic] vaporized.”

They also provide encouragement to novices to master the preferred modes of consumption:

“A lot of attention to technique is needed at first i suppose. I imagine once you have it, you have it. Like riding a bike only way cooler.”

As a primary stage of social learning, gaining the ability to access a drug and consume it allows drug users to induce a state of altered perception and consciousness. However, the ability to enjoy this state relies on the acquisition of further knowledge and meanings relating to the recognition, moderation, and interpretation of drug-induced experiences and the phenomena of which they are composed.

**Stage 2: Learning to Recognize and Experience Drug-Induced States**

Recognizing the effects of a drug and connecting them with drug use is the second stage in Becker’s (1953) social learning process. Within the context of *DMT-Nexus*, it is perhaps more appropriate to consider that this stage involves learning not only how to recognize but also how to properly experience DMT’s subjective effects. For instance, the commonly used argot term ‘breakthrough’ refers to users’ experiences of full submergence into the so called ‘alternate reality’ that accompanies strong DMT-induced states. This ‘alternate reality’ is commonly
referred to as ‘hyperspace’, a term that DMT pioneer and subcultural icon Terence McKenna (1993) popularized in his work. DMT-Nexus members utilize the term ‘breakthrough’ to describe a vague threshold which distinguishes particularly intense and overwhelming DMT-induced experiences from more liminal or subtle ones. Although the distinction of ‘breakthrough’ experiences is murky among DMT users, one user notes that “when you do actually fully breakthrough you'll know it”.

Many discussions in DMT-Nexus focus on advice on how to produce a ‘breakthrough’ experience and narratives detailing attempts (both successful and not) to achieve this state. Much of the advice for how to induce a ‘breakthrough’ experience shared in DMT-Nexus involves ingesting a high enough amount of the drug to create a highly altered state. According to one DMT-Nexus user,

“20-30mg is breakthrough dose when taken in single inhalation.”

Though Becker (1953) includes the ingestion of a high enough dose to induce an altered state in stage one of his social learning process, I include it as a secondary stage because it is often included in conversations of how to experience drug-induced states.

Along with suggestions for dosing, many discussions focus on the role of intentions and attitudes in achieving a ‘breakthrough’ experience. One user notes:

“I do believe your attitude has a huge impact on your experience. I vividly remember the journey where I said to myself: "forget the anxiety, forget your fears, stop worrying about dosage and inhaling long enough, and just relax and experience something extremely beautiful and rare".”

Furthermore, many users expressed that fully and properly experiencing the effects of DMT (and thus having a ‘breakthrough’ to ‘hyperspace’) is contingent upon viewing the drug in a particular context. One user states of his trouble achieving a ‘breakthrough’ experience,

“I did not know it at the time, but I was being "locked out" of hyperspace because I was beginning to view the sacrament as an escape from reality, rather than a powerful
medicine.”

Conversations on how to achieve a ‘breakthrough’ experience illustrate that, as much as dosing or any other factor, the perception of DMT and its effects greatly influences the subjective experiences that it induces. The deterministic quality of interpretations in defining and influencing the qualities of drug-induced experiences is evident in experiential narratives and the fact that interpretations are a central theme of discussion within *DMT-Nexus*. The development of interpretations allows users to contextualize and derive meaning from their experiences. Specifically, positive interpretations enable drug users to justify their drug use and perceive it as beneficial. The interpretation of DMT-induced experiences plays a primary role in both discussions in the *DMT-Nexus* community and the social learning process that underlies its use.

*Stage 3: Learning to Interpret Drug-Induced Experiences*

In Becker’s (1953) social learning model, learning to enjoy a drug’s subjective effects is the third stage in the social learning process that enables drug use. In terms of experience inducing drugs such as DMT and other hallucinogens, learning to enjoy their subjective effects revolves around learning to positively interpret drug-induced experiences. Drug users can potentially experience a spectrum of drug-induced states ranging from pleasurable to dysphoric. In order to positively experience drug-induced experiences and reframe negative ones, they must be able to utilize a base of knowledge and meanings for interpretation. Communication within drug subcultures constructs positively framed conceptions of drug use and interpretations of drug-induced experiences. Becker (1967) finds that pro-drug subcultures pose alternatives to anti-drug discourses which enable individuals to learn rationalizations for drug use. Like other drug subcultures, pro-drug discourses are normative in *DMT-Nexus* and thus the experiential narratives that users share on the site often contain positive interpretations of DMT-induced experiences. Furthermore, positively framed accounts are generally met with validation from
other members of the site. For instance, in response to a positively framed experiential narrative, one user comments

“this is the kind of experience I would like to communicate to drug-naive, pro-prohibition people.”

Because the experiences induced by DMT are so different from those which arise in normal waking states of consciousness, users must identify and categorize them in ways that avoid cognitive dissonance and other barriers to the enjoyment of drug use. That is, drug users must come to some sense of what it is that they are actually experiencing while in drug-induced states of consciousness. The experiential narratives shared in DMT-Nexus demonstrate that many DMT users and enthusiasts believe that its subjective effects are not simply false perceptions of non-existent phenomena but rather reveal a realm which exists beyond normal human perception. While there is some heterogeneity in their interpretations, many users within DMT-Nexus reject the notion of their experiences as chemically induced true-hallucinations. One user explains

“as for whether it real or not - I don't know, I don't think anyone can say for sure. It sure seems real when it's happening though.”

Through interpretation, DMT-Nexus members create linguistic narratives in order to make sense of their experiences and post their accounts online. For instance, users in DMT-Nexus commonly refer to their experiences as ‘travel’, or ‘journeying’. Additionally, many also interpret their experiences as the product of altered (or enhanced) perception as exemplified by one user’s assertion that “DMT is a catalyst to what your mind can already do”. Narratives in DMT-Nexus describe the seemingly otherworldly nature of DMT-induced experiences as transportation to or perception of “the spirit world”, a “place past reality”, a “timeless, numinous, stunning, higher dimensional realm”, “visionary space”, or a “realm beyond life/beyond death”. Metaphors, such as drug-induced experiences as travel, communicate implied meanings by
creating an association between concepts. The symbolic and metaphorical language within experiential narratives serves as a source of community argot and a means for DMT-Nexus members to tacitly communicate interpretations of drug-induced experiences.

Becker (1953) focuses his analysis on how drug users learn to identify and enjoy drug-induced states. However, it is not only important to understand what drug users perceive their drug-induced experiences to be but also their perceptions of what these experiences mean. Furthermore, it is essential to consider how these derived meanings affect and fit into their worldviews and daily lives. For instance, a common positive interpretation found within the posts of DMT-Nexus is the perception of DMT-induced experiences as transformative:

“I came out better after taking DMT”
“I will never be the same.”

The perception of spiritual or personal transformation as a result of DMT-induced experiences also appears to affect daily life for users through associated changes in attitude, lifestyle, and behavior:

“After traveling to hyperspace, I no longer walk the earth with the suspicion that everyone out there exists to mug/rob/kill me.”
“I no longer try to have a self serving impact, full of negativity and anger, and arrogance.”
“As part of this [new] "all-in" mentality, i have been celebate [sic] for several months now. i don't even masturbate anymore. i am a vegan (about 75% raw) and i meditate daily.”
“This one experience changed my life profoundly. It inspired my art, it inspired my thinking andd [sic] feeling. It made me a more ‘spiritual’ person if you will, opened me up to a whole new world of possibilities.”

Along with and connecting to their interpretations of drug-induced experiences as a means for transformation, many users also interpret their experiences as a source of revelations about not only themselves but also the nature of the universe or reality:

“I realized that the world is imagination.”
“I knew right then that there was literally no such thing as death […]. I felt that there is only one thing, and it is an inner consciousness.”

“One lesson coming through loud and clear is just how small I really am.”

Due to their implication of an assumed potential for drug-induced experiences to provide psychological and spiritual transformation or the revelation of knowledge about the self or the universe, the positive interpretations employed by DMT users relate heavily with psychonautic, psychoheuristic, and psycho-spiritual approaches to drug use and the commonly held subcultural conception of the substance as an entheogen. These interpretations allow users to derive positive meaning from DMT’s subjective effects and define the function of DMT use in their lives as beneficial. Beyond identifying the experience and what it means on the whole in a positive light, users must also make sense of the phenomena within their experiences such as the perception of interaction with beings or entities (Meyer 1994) in order to enjoy their use of DMT.

The process of becoming a cannabis user described by Becker (1953) and the process of becoming a user of DMT are differentiated by the fact that the phenomena experienced by niche or novel drug users are often more complex and bizarre. DMT users must not only learn to recognize and appreciate the sensation (or ‘high’) of DMT-induced states but also the unique sights, sounds, and textures. Learning how to make sense of the experience of communication and interaction with “discarnate entities” (Meyer 1994:161) is a fundamental aspect of learning to positively interpret and thus enjoy DMT-induced experiences. Computer-mediated communication on this topic is moderated by a primary reliance on text-based language. DMT users can only describe these so-called ‘entities’ in preexistent terminology in order to incorporate them linguistically into the narratives they share online. Thus, they routinely rely on Western cultural archetypes with well established conceptions. The following examples provide an overview of some of the most commonly used descriptors of beings or entities encountered during DMT-induced experiences such as humans, aliens, animals, deities, and spirits:
“A man and a woman stood before me looking like an archetypal European Adam and Eve.”
“I've had contact with "greys" and other alien type creatures many times”
“I saw a four-legged, 2-D animal-like entity arcing near me and thought of cats.”
“I met a being whom I call God”
“entities/spirits that are encountered are during these times are the one waiting on reincarnation”
“i think the entities they speak of are spirits, i’ve seen what i thought was a ghost in my old house, we had some rather weird things go on there”.
In online drug communities, the development of cogent explanations and interpretations for drug-induced phenomena takes place through description and communication. Much like other metaphorical descriptions of DMT-induced experiences, the language used to describe DMT entities carries implied meanings about not only the phenomena, but also the nature of the experience itself. Conversations surrounding the interpretation of DMT ‘entities’ focus on topics such as determining what an entity is, if it is commonly experienced, what it means, and how to best deal or interact with it. Similar to the perception of alternate reality, most users in DMT-Nexus regard the phenomena of ‘entities’ as real perceptions, possibly in order to avoid the cognitive dissonance associated with hallucinations and psychosis:

“I don't know what's up with the entities. Mine are frequently quite anthropomorphic as are my husbands'. I do know he has suggested that the DMT is heavily stimulating brain areas related to seeing and recognize people. But that sounds like way too much of a rationalist reduction to me.”
“The skeptic in me just says that what people meet are archetypes and/or fractions of their disassembled ego: the mind desperately trying to make sense of it's scrambled cognitive, emotional and sensorical input/output systems. But even for a skeptic there aren't any real answers. Is time and space an illusion? - as some physicists have suggested - or do we (our souls) exist in superposition over an infinite number of parallel universes and/or dimensions? I used to be a hardcore skeptic when I was younger. Today I'm more open-minded towards spirituality and I'm acknowledging the fact that even the scientists doesn't know much about our minds and the universe.”
“the entities certainly feel very real, so to me they are!”
“Whether or not they're external is one thing, but I feel rather confident in declaring that I don't believe that they are figments of the imagination.”
“I tend to believe that these entities are very "real", while it's been hotly debated, I think the notion that they are just figments of our imagination is just infinite human arrogance.”

Oftentimes some type of interaction takes place between the user and the entity or entities that they encounter which generally entails some form of communication. As explored earlier in this paper, many users interpret their experiences with DMT as a source of wisdom or revelation. The entities commonly perceived in DMT-induced states are often considered by users as messengers and that thus these experiences have a message or meaning which can be derived through interpretation. The following excerpts illustrate this aspect of DMT-induced experiences:

“I was ‘told’ by something that I was afraid of letting go and giving in. It wasn’t an audible voice but a feeling that was imprinted on me.”

“There is the unmistakable apparency that I am being communicated with by higher beings.”

“They try and communicate with us through visions and even tried to verbally communicate.”

“That’s when it told me that the universe was made of love, and if I listened for it, I could be wrapped in this love too.”

Negative experiences entailing contact with apparently evil or harmful entities are also commonly reported by DMT-Nexus members. For instance, one user describes his experience as,

“some dark character all in black is laughing in my face, running back and forth all over me. I hear evil laughter, spirits flying all over the place. Eyes. Teeth.”

These experiences can result in dysphoria that permeates into everyday life. Aside from negative health effects and chemical addiction which are relatively low for drugs like DMT, the most serious potential harm of psychoactive drug use is problems integrating intense, strange, or negative drug-induced experiences into a functional worldview. Narratives based around negative experiences are met with advice and support from the others in order to aid the successful contextualization and integration of these experiences into day to day reality. In order to continue drug use, individuals must effectively make sense of these experiences in terms of
day to day reality. Due to the intensity and all-encompassing nature of high-dosage DMT-induced experiences, users can experience tremendous cognitive and even physical discomfort and thus many experiential narratives entail extreme fear and anxiety:

“I was terrified. My mind was screaming, “WHAT THE FUCK IS HAPPENING”.”
“what was left of my conscious mind was reeling with fear on a scale i never knew existed.”
“the most complete fear imagineable.”
“I felt utter despair and abject hatred.”
“I had lost my mind for many hours and fallen into complete madness”

Individuals who fail to positively reframe and effectively integrate such experiences can suffer negative psychological and social consequences which become a barrier to further use. One user recalls

“eventually things got out of hand and it was causing me problems in the real world so i had to stop. It became harder and harder to hang on to reality. It just all got too weird to be healthy so i took 18 months off from dmt.”

Online drug communities geared toward harm reduction such as DMT-Nexus often serve as a source of social support for members facing difficulties with their drug use. As one member puts it,

“I have learned a lot from reading these forums. I come on the Nexus site several times a week & read experiences to try & gather a better understanding of my own struggles with dmt & come to find out I'm not alone!”

In DMT-Nexus, the importance of social support is expressly manifest in conversations geared towards helping individuals positively reframe and cope with problematic experiences. Such conversations are spaces for social learning which can enable the continuation of drug use in which experienced DMT users can provide neutralizing or positive interpretations for problematic experiences, advice for avoiding them, and encouragement of further use:

“Remember this thing can get really weird to put it mildly so integration and grounding is really important.”
“Taking your time and not feeling rushed will make a big difference in being able to lock
down what happened and assimilate it.”

“Just keep on trying, and try to appreciate whatever the molecule throws your way because even if it’s a rather mild experience, those kinds of journeys are brilliant in terms of getting you accustomed with the sensations and effects so that when you do have a full breakthrough, you won't inevitably get scared, resist and make things a whole lot of worse for yourself.”

“Stay grounded, that the best words of advice i can give anyone working with dmt. Its not hard to go a bit sideways with this stuff.”

“The only advice I could give is that if you feel you've gone too far, recede for a while. Don't take anything for a while. Your brain will reset itself over time, and level itself out.”

Both the interpretations that individuals utilize while in a drug-induced state and subsequent reframing serve as means for deriving meaning from DMT-induced experiences and integrating that meaning into daily life. The interpretation, reframing, and integration of drug-induced experiences are deeply intertwined with the composition of the experiential narratives found in online drug communities. Constructing a narrative involves the creation of linguistically articulated descriptions of the phenomena experienced in drug-induced states which can then become meaningfully integrated into everyday life. One DMT-Nexus member explains that

“taking time to organize and put these thoughts and lessons down in the written language is, IMO, a wonderful tool for self development and integration.”

The conversion of experiential knowledge into language for communication is an essential element of the social processes within online drug communities. The following stage elucidates the aspects of social learning relating to communication and description within online drug communities.

Stage 4: Learning to Communicate Knowledge and Describe Experiences

An online community cannot exist without the active participation of its members. Participation in the discussions within online drug communities involves the description of experiences and articulation of knowledge to other community members. While clearly not everyone who accesses online drug communities takes an active role, learning from the posts in
an online drug community involves at the very least understanding the argot and conversational norms of the particular subculture and online space. In order to be considered an experienced drug user by other members of an online drug community, an individual must be able to communicate knowledge and experiential narratives. Effective communication and participation within an online drug community depends on not only an individual’s knowledgeability of drugs and other related topics but also the norms and modes of communication within a particular community. Thus learning specific to the linguistic issues of description and communication is particularly important in online contexts.

Grasping the preferred modes of communication and conversational norms is essential for the comprehension of subcultural knowledge and meanings. Within online drug communities, communicative norms are influenced by the context of online communication. For instance, many online communities are publicly accessible. However, though drug use is normalized within the context of drug subcultures, it remains largely illegal and somewhat stigmatized in the wider society. As many of the actions and events described within users’ reports (such as the procurement, extraction, and consumption of DMT) are prohibited by law, discussing them openly is a potentially incriminating act. In order to mitigate this issue, ‘SWIM’ (‘someone who isn’t me’) is commonly used as a first-person pronoun in experiential narratives. Thus, novice users are encouraged to “learn to SWIM” in order to properly share their accounts.

As explored in the examination of DMT-Nexus members’ interpretations, individuals commonly employ argot or metaphorical language rather than technical or literal terms in their postings. Such modes of discourse serve as not only means for communicating meanings about drug use but also further means for avoiding incrimination in public online spaces. For instance, users may state that they used ‘spice’ to ‘breakthrough’ to ‘hyperspace’ or that they experienced
a ‘journey’ to ‘the spirit realm’ rather than outright stating that they smoked or vaporized DMT. As explored previously, the argot term ‘spice’ is extremely common within online discussions between DMT users. However, it appears to be a unique creation of the online DMT subculture. For example, one user notes,

“seems to me that dmt is only called spice on the net - i’ve never met anyone in real life who would call it spice in every day language - even when i’ve met up with people who called it spice online in person they call it DMT and not spice”

The examples of ‘SWIM’ and ‘spice’ illustrate forms of argot among drug users that emerge in online contexts and would likely not exist otherwise. The particular language used by the members of online drug communities thus must be learned in order to understand and learn from other users’ posts.

The drive to avoid incrimination is further evident in that many users’ posts contain asides or signatures (text which appears below users’ posts) meant to imply that their online posts do not actually describe their own personal experiences with drugs:

“hey guys.. swim asked me to post this...”

“This story is fictional, but is written from the first person perspective.”

“Note that the poster of this message would never actually use or recommend to use illegal substances. He is just an attention seeker and should be considered to be lying about everything he posts and his posts are only for the sake of generating discussion.”

Individuals’ abilities to communicate in online drug communities rely on not only their knowledge of argot and ability to avoid incrimination. Communication styles, descriptions, and self-presentation through text all have a unique significance within the discussions and experiential narratives of DMT-Nexus in comparison to offline interactions between drug users.

The transmission of knowledge and meanings in drug subcultures generally flows from more experienced or knowledgeable users to others (Becker 1963). Thus, the operations of status distinction between drug users are a key aspect of social learning and social construction in drug subcultures. In off-line interactions, drug users typically assess each other’s status based on
performances of self within face-to-face interaction. Level of knowledge or experience is thus signified by factors such as an individual’s drug taking technique and ability to enjoy drug induced-states (Becker 1963). Similarly, variations in knowledgeability and level of experience among DMT-Nexus members generate an implied hierarchy which gives more weight or credibility to the posts of certain individuals. However, an individual’s performance of self-presentation through text and images and how this self-presentation is perceived by others serve as the major criteria.

Knowledgeability, or the possession and display of knowledge, plays a key role in the communication between drug users. However, only particular knowledge types are utilized and valued by individuals in DMT-Nexus. The majority of valued forms of knowledge are those which can be utilized in order to interpret and frame DMT-induced experiences. Besides DMT-specific knowledge, the most utilized types of knowledge within experiential narratives include spirituality and religion (ranging from Buddhism, New Ageism, the Chakra system, to Christian archetypes), indigenous understandings of ayahuasca usage, scientific knowledge (including physics, neurology, and chemistry), philosophy (spiritual, existential, and other), and concepts and information from pro-drug literature (including authors such as Terrence McKenna and Hunter S. Thompson). DMT users’ reliance on knowledge from the realms of religion, spirituality, and philosophy to explain their experiences illustrates the permeation of psychospiritual approaches to drug use on the DMT subculture.

Beyond covertly signifying their knowledgeability or level experience through including certain forms of knowledge and interpretations in their posts, users may also attempt to communicate their status in more overt ways. For example, they may blatantly present themselves as experienced drug users:
“i have smoked DMT close to 2,000 times now. i have drank ayahuasca hundreds of times (lived in a santo daime community for a few months at one point).”
“i have been a ritualistic entheogenist for about ten years”
“i have about 15yrs experience of using psychedelics”

Differences in the reception and perceived quality of users’ posts suggest the process through which the knowledge and interpretations contained within posts become validated by others as group knowledge or shared meanings. The knowledge and interpretations of drug users do not arise out of a vacuum nor are they intuitively obvious to anyone who uses drugs. They are not only learned but also constructed through social interaction. Much of the findings presented thus far (such as individuals corroborating each other’s interpretations of drug-induced experiences or preferred methods of ingestion) illustrate the underlying process of social construction which is intertwined with social learning in online drug communities. The final segment of the findings section of this study thus provides an explanatory theory of how conversations in online drug communities construct subcultural knowledge and meanings.

Epilogue: Reflexive Validation – The Process of Knowledge and Meaning Construction

In examining how subcultural knowledge and meanings are learned in online contexts, it is essential to consider how subcultural knowledge and meanings are formed. The examples and findings of this study suggest that patterns of interaction serve as a mechanism for the development of consensus or validation. Examining threads based around original posts containing narratives of drug-induced experience provides further demonstration. In DMT-Nexus, the positive responses to posts which are deemed high quality, explanatory, or credible validate the knowledge and interpretations contained within them. Such posts are composed by users who can not only communicate their knowledge but also interpret and describe their experiences with DMT in detail-rich and meaningful ways. For instance, one DMT-Nexus member describes the visual aspect of his experience as:
“Pixellated glyphs; undulating, twisting, rotating geometric shapes. Cellular strands like complex hyperdimensional rubik's cubes arranged into fractalised temples of data. Constant shifting, rearranging, representing. Information overload moebius-twisted and then folded in on itself.”

The high value assigned to the ability to describe and articulate subjective drug-induced experiences among members of the DMT-Nexus community relates to the commonly expressed perception that psychoactive drug-induced experiences (and especially DMT-induced experiences) are difficult to articulate if not entirely indescribable. For example, one user remarks in an experiential narrative that

“With $300,000,000 and the finest film crew the world has ever seen, I could not replicate this moment, so there’s no way I can do this justice with my feeble words.”

Thus, positive and validating responses to experiential narratives are most commonly based on enjoyment of the descriptions included:

“This could be a movie.”

“Your writing flows so smoothly that I felt myself being lulled into a tranquil, blissful trance as I read it.”

“What a pleasure to read this!”

“Great job in articulating your experience.”

This discursive pattern illustrates the reflexive process through which knowledge and interpretations are validated. That is, interpretations, concepts, theories, and models are posited within experiential narratives and become group knowledge or shared interpretations when they are met with positive responses from other community members. Along with the quality of descriptions, experiential narratives in DMT-Nexus are also reflexively validated through the recognition of shared knowledge or similar experiences and interpretations. For instance, if a narrative describes or explains a commonly encountered element of DMT-induced experiences, it is more relatable and thus responded to more positively. This trend is evident in the following examples of positive responses about shared experiences, phenomena, or derived meaning:

“Wow, really this has been going through my head for years now.”
“SWIM's first trip to hyperspace was very similar to what you described...”
“I definitely feel where you're coming from with this experience. The earth-shattering vibration that you describe is present with many of my strong breakthroughs.”

Experiential narratives are also commonly praised and well-received for being emotionally touching or inspirational (in terms of hope, courage, or further usage and exploration) to other members of the community. In particular, as previously explored, positive interpretations of DMT-induced experiences such as the perception of personal transformation or insights attained through DMT use are valued in this context and generally elicit such reactions.

These responses to positively framed experiential narratives illustrate this trend:

“powerful story of hope.”
“Sounds Amazing.... You just inspired me to make the most pure, fluffy, white dmt i've ever made.. I cant wait. thank you : )”
“Truly the most inspiring journey i have encountered.you have humbled me and challenged me to go deeper.”

As part of this validation process, elements of experiential narratives may also be met with disagreement, skepticism, or outright rejection from other members and thus fail to gain traction and proliferate within the community. For instance, one member states in regards to a post met with negative responses,

“we do like facts and research as you can see truth is everything.. and the crew will call you out on it, its never to offend. it's to make sure we are as safe and informed as we can be”.

In line with the attitudinal norms of the site, negative responses are generally respectful and constructive:

“This is unsafe information, please no one actually try this, we want safe happy healthy travelers.”
“This is a speculation, not a fact.”
“Lots of misinformation there! Please research more carefully.”
“I'm not fully in agreement that DMT always makes 'sense' in the normal perception of what 'sense' is. Ive had twisty eyed goblin face people muck with me, had little girls throw tomatoes and and hyperspace alcoholic drinks splashed all over me.”
Negative responses occasionally devolve into disrespect as one user’s response illustrates:

“that was the vaguest explanation [sic] of NOTHING i have heard yet on this forum.”

However, disrespectful responses such as this are commonly met with negative sanctioning for violating community norms and thus do not serve as effective means of communicating disagreement or incredulity.

Through their interactions, the members of online drug communities collaboratively negotiate and develop group knowledge and shared meanings. While previous conceptions of this process focus on face-to-face interaction, in the context of computer-mediated communication social interaction and thus social construction is uniquely structured. The likelihood of an individual post receiving validation from others relies on factors such as the inclusion of detailed descriptions of drug-induced experiences, the use of interpretations to derive positive meaning from drug-induced experiences, the articulation of commonly experienced phenomena, the inclusion of subcultural knowledge and meanings, overt self-presentation, proper use of community argot, and the observance of communicative norms. Through the process of reflexive validation, knowledge and meanings conducive to drug use are socially constructed through conversations within the forums of DMT-Nexus.

CONCLUSIONS

Past research has examined the growing connection between information and communication technology and drug use (Boyer et al 2007; Walsh 2011) and used online drug communities and other drug websites as a source of data for analyzing aspects of contemporary drug use such as discourses employed by users and nonusers, drug users’ reasons for use (Murgria, Tackett-Gibson & Lessem 2007), and macro-level drug use trends (Vardakou, Pistos & Spilipoulou 2011; Corazza et al 2012; Delcua et al 2012; Forsyth 2012; Bruno et al 2013). Furthermore,
previous research suggests that the Internet serves as a space for the learning of subcultural knowledge conducive to deviant behaviors such as internet piracy (Holt & Copes 2010). However, as a recently emerging trend, the territory of online drug communities in general and particularly those based around emergent drug use trends has remained largely uncharted despite its clear impact on contemporary drug use. Specifically, research had yet to explore the impact of online drug communities as sites for the social learning and social construction processes that enable drug use. This study advances the literature on the topics of new media studies and sociology of drug use by presenting a model of primary social processes relating to subcultural drug use which acknowledges the implications of online contexts.

In particular, this study provides an update to Becker’s (1963) social learning model and social constructionist understandings of drug use (Becker 1967; Watts 1971). The results of this study demonstrate the enduring importance of examining subcultural interpretations and discourse for understanding drug use in society and reveal how online drug communities shape the social construction and social learning processes among drug users. In order to become a drug user, as Becker (1953) illustrated 60 years ago, individuals must learn how to use their drug of choice, how to experience its effects, how to interpret and derive meaning from their drug-induced experiences, and how to effectively communicate and describe their experiences. This study addresses the extent to which Becker’s insights apply to online drug communities and, if so, how that experiential learning takes place in the absence of face-to-face interactions. More specifically, I have discovered the mechanisms through which users gain relevant knowledge and interpretations through online social learning. For instance, when users pose questions and receive advice or read the experiences and interpretations of others, they learn through computer-mediated interaction.
This study reveals the centrality of both description and communication to the social processes that enable drug use and shape drug subcultures within online contexts in the absence of face-to-face communication and physically copresent drug taking. Experiential narratives which contain knowledge about DMT, community argot, or psychospiritual interpretations of DMT induced-experiences and follow established community norms are more positively received by the community at large. Along with detailed and well-articulated descriptions, posts which describe commonly encountered or positively framed and thus inspirational DMT-induced experiences also receive more positive responses. The perceived quality of a user’s posts along with their general self-presentation influences the response they receive from the community-at-large and their status within the community. Ostensibly experienced or knowledgeable users’ posts gain higher symbolic status and their accounts and ideas are more influential in overall community discourses.

Furthermore, the results of this study illustrate how meanings and knowledge are socially constructed within online communities through discussions as a reflexive process and that the implications of online posts are determined by larger conversational contexts. Specifically, they illustrate how certain information and ideas become valued and permeate within online drug communities and online communities at large. For instance, drug users may advocate certain techniques or methods for using and experiencing drugs which others can corroborate through their responses. They may also pose interpretations of drug-induced experiences which can be validated or rejected by others. In this way, individuals collaborate via online communication to develop knowledge about drugs and interpretations of drug use and experiences. As a space for social learning, online drug communities develop and spread knowledge and interpretations
which enable individuals to make sense of their experiences with drugs, continue drug usage and attempt to minimize and reframe negative cognitive, social, and physical consequences.

The findings of this study illustrate that online communities, in particular their reliance on computer-mediated communication and the fact that they are often public spaces, can create discursive formations and argot which are not fungible or utilized in offline contexts. This fact has implications for both the importance of studying online communities and for the methodological and participatory rigor needed for valuable and precise online research. Online drug communities warrant intensive study because they allow for expansive networks of communication between drug users which operate under unique conditions and norms. Furthermore, researchers examining online communities, especially those which are subcultural or deviant, cannot assume that their knowledge of offline equivalents is entirely applicable. In order to gain a full understanding of the social processes within online communities, researchers must immerse themselves in the particular ‘field’ of a virtual space much like an ethnographer would in studying an offline community.

In contemporary Western society, online culture has become increasingly ubiquitous. As the scope and pervasiveness of the Internet continues to enlarge, examining how online communication shapes the sociocultural processes that influence human behavior in various contexts is an increasingly important undertaking. The Internet has allowed for the global expansion of drug subcultures and thus globalized access to their ideas and interpretations including pro-drug and harm reduction discourses. One likely artifact of the growing vibrancy of drug-positive subcultures is shifts in public attitudes including a growing tolerance toward drug use (Blackman 2010). According to Walsh (2011:55), “it is arguably the use of the Web as an information source that may offer the greatest challenge to the incumbent paradigm, with
experiential discourses offering alternatives to the hegemonic narrative”. When considered in
this light, online drug communities are not only important cites of research as spaces for
communicative interaction and meaning making which reflect the evolution of subculture but
also as potential catalysts for social and cultural change.

As society and culture change over time, they are continuously transforming and being
transformed by group level and individual patterns of drug taking behavior. Thus, sociocultural
research approaches to drug use, especially those focusing on emergent subcultures and
interactional contexts, continue to provide a relevant and necessary voice in the academic
discourse on this topic. As the results of this study suggest, the potential effects of these
communities on patterns of drug use as well as society at large are multifaceted. Online drug
communities are not only sources of knowledge and meanings that can enable, normalize, and
justify drug use but also sources of information and social support that, from a harm reduction
standpoint, can decrease the personal and social problems incurred. Approaches and narratives
which overtly problematize or valorize the rise of online drug communities are inherently
reductive and thus limit our potential to understand how they operate and affect individuals and
society. Nuanced sociocultural approaches to online drug communities such as the one
developed and utilized in this thesis are valuable for gaining further insights into their wide
ranging implications.

Limitations and Future Research

This study focuses primarily on drug users who are able to participate in online
communities. Internet access and overall technological proficiency is less common among
working class and poor individuals in comparison to their upper and middle class counterparts
(Hargittai 2008). As illustrated throughout the paper, the ability to access the Internet and
participate in online discussions is central to participating in many of the emerging drug trends discussed. The Internet is often optimistically thought of as a tool for radically democratizing access to information and knowledge construction processes. However, it is essential to note that many individuals are excluded from online contexts and the discussions and information therein. Furthermore, middle and upper class individuals are more likely to use hallucinogenic drugs such as DMT (Hunt 1997). Thus, the socioeconomic factors underlying online communication and drug use are very likely interrelated and deserving of further analysis by future research.

While this study contributes generalizable findings about the social processes within online drug communities, there may be subtle differences in the valued knowledge, interpretational strategies, and meaning making in online communities based on drug type. For instance, a superficial examination of the heroin subforum within the general online drug community drugs-forum.com reveals that harm reduction advice may be more commonly shared by heroin users online than positive interpretations of the heroin experience. Users within online communities based around other chemically addictive drugs such as cocaine may also share narratives which serve as warnings of addiction, justifications for use, or maps of stages of addiction and abuse over time. Further research is warranted to extrapolate these issues in depth and flesh out the heterogeneity of online drug communities based around various drug types. Fortunately, this study provides a useful theoretical framework and methodological approach for such research.

Due to the limitations of focusing only on online interactions in this study, the social learning model described is somewhat less clearly evident as a sequential social process that transforms individuals’ perceptions, actions, and identities. Nonetheless, it illustrates how the knowledge and meanings necessary for drug use and enjoyment are constructed and made
available for users who utilize online drug communities as a virtual subculture. Additionally, for many drug users, online interactions are only one of several sources of knowledge and meanings. As this methodology cannot penetrate into drug users’ actual lives offline, it cannot fully extrapolate the effects of the online interactions examined within this study on their actual patterns of drug use. Preliminary research suggests that utilizing online drug communities affects individuals’ perceptions, knowledge, and practices (Boyer et al 2005). However, future research should analyze how participation in online drug communities influences individual’s knowledge, interpretations, and behaviors in more specific ways. Such research would entail the ethnographic study of individuals who use online drug communities as well as the development of survey and interview data.

As a final note, the Internet is increasingly becoming a place for not only discussions about drugs but also for their commodification (Walsh 2011). While the online drug community analyzed in this study does not explicitly facilitate the sale of drugs, they are often solicited and sold online using argot and covert services (Barratt, Lenton & Allen 2013). For instance, online drug marketplaces such as Silk Road on the anonymous TOR network, essentially an EBay for illegal drugs, provide access to a wide variety of drugs and other contraband shipped via mail using an untraceable digital currency called bitcoin (Chien 2011; Barratt et al 2013). The emergence of highly organized virtual black markets makes the Internet not only a source of information about drugs, social support, and other intangible resources but also a source of drugs themselves which must be further explored by researchers for its implications on contemporary drug use.
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