

# Online chatrooms for drug users in China: A new kind of social tumor

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China has a long history of fight against drugs. In 1906 the Chinese government reported that, 30–40% of the population is addicted to opium [1]. Up to 1949, the communist government used severe punishment and restricted liquidity through the account policy which was successful in solving the problem of drug abuse. From 1979, with Chinese government's emphasis on economic development, the population got more opportunities and drugs came back to China.

The number of officially verified drug abusers in China rose dramatically from 70,000 in 1990 to 2.09 million by the end of 2012 [2]. Chinese government explored new ways by which illicit drugs were accessed including internet and mobile phones [2–4]. Our study was conducted in 2015 with 42 Chinese illicit drug users. Out of these one-fourth of them accessed internet for over 8 hours per days and three of them for over 20 hours everyday.

Study in China showed that nearly two-thirds of heroin users first accessed the drug through their “drug peers” [2]. A study with Chinese illicit drug users showed that 84.5% of them had a small social network which usually had four members who had a very close relationship and met each other three times every week. They met for seeking drugs, money, group drug abuse, chatting and entertainment [5]. With the development of internet, such small social networks could exist inconspicuously.

In China the cumulative number of internet users has dramatically increased. The families with broad band

internet access were 0.205 billion [6] and those who access internet on mobile were 1.293 billion [7].

The explosive growth of internet use in the last decade has greatly impacted the psychological research in understanding its role in communication and interpersonal behavior [8, 9]. Recently, the Chinese National TV channel reported that in the biggest online social network named Thengxun in China, a large number of self-organized chatrooms of illicit drug users were detected by the police. In this network, a drug dealer had build 63 chatrooms in which 17000 illicit drug users were active [10]. Why do such drug dealers and users prefer to use online network and chatroom?

From the evolutionary aspect, our ancestors favored to live together so that they had better chances to successfully overcome the challenges of nature than a person living alone. To this day, most of the humans can not isolate themselves from one another. They belong to a group; the group could be in real or virtual world. A number of people feel more comfortable using internet than interacting in the real world. Why do these people like virtual world?

1. In recent years, when I sit in a Chinese restaurant, I always see that during the dinner, the parents and their children play for a long time on their mobile phones or ipad, but do not talk to each other. Some people interact with their family members only because of kinship (to go to a restaurant together, maybe just a ceremonial display that they belong to a family). In reality they have no common interest among themselves. At the same time, each of them is able to find an online friend through internet, with whom they can share their feeling. If they are not satisfied with the online friend, they can easily change them, but with the family members, they have no choice.

2. Western Modern society could be considered a huge prison. The people are monitored completely and the individuals are trained to obey [11]. The phenomenon has existed in China for thousands of years. China belongs to a human society, the law is often not complied with and the people often fear people with power, although this power could be small, because people do not know, what may happen, when they inadvertently offend people

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with power. The reaction of the people with power is unpredictable, because their behavior cannot be effectively restricted by law. In this case, most Chinese adults do not display their real persona in the real world. A number of people like internet because they found that in the virtual world they can display and express their real persona.

3. Foucault found that the modern monitor system could be omnivisibilité. “nous vivons dans une société où règne le panoptisme” [12]. The omnivisibilité is based on the government which control personal data (name, ID code and so forth). In Internet, people through changing their name and other personal data to become invisible. Bauman stated that, “It is so easy to take a different identity, a new personal” [13].

4. Baudrillard stated that, “Now social violence showed less direct repression of impulses, physiological limitations on the individual, or the oppression of a public class, and showed more gridded social relations, appear more complex systems isolation, such as geography, occupational and cultural isolation” [14]. In the real world low education, low income people or minority groups have limited chance to express their issues because the press was controlled by people or groups with power. They control people through controlling books, radio and newspapers, but they have more difficulty in controlling internet due to its properties. With the help of internet, the isolated people have more opportunities to display themselves.

5. Anonymity could give people a chance of self-exposure, and self-exposure is an important predictor of the intimacy [15]. With anonymity they could display themselves without persona. Drug users also favor to communicate with others, Through chatroom they form a community, in where they can free do what they want.

Most drug users are discriminated by the society and they feel isolated, but in the chatrooms, they did not feel isolation [16]. In contrast the behavior (for example illicit drug use behavior, group sex), which is banned, restricted or controlled in the real world, can be expressed or even encouraged in the virtual world. High-risk adolescents tend to interact more with each other and therefore more likely to provide positive reactions to talk about deviant behaviors [17]. Experiment with 535 American students showed that participants in the chat conditions felt significantly higher pro-marijuana normative pressure [18, 19]. Through this praise from another, the drug users found the value of themselves, which they could not get in real world. In the real world, they were described by Hegel as Dalits [20]. Poverty do not create Dalits, but the emotion related with poverty (for example, the backlash against the wealth by society or government), created the Dalits [20]. The drug users could be considered a new type of Dalits, and they express their backlash against the social value through their behavior in chatrooms. For example, a lady received a very good education, who was trained with piano and vocal for long time when she was young, and later she entered an elite university

in her hometown to learn music. Years later, when her marriage broke, she felt sad and began to consumed methamphetamine. She said, she wanted to escape from the real world into another world. She was found by the drug dealer and worked for his chatroom with her music talent as an administrator, and she could get free methamphetamine [10].

Generally, the illicit drug users used the chatrooms for their emotional release and drug consumption. As such chatrooms can connect drug users in unlimited in number, this could be a serious danger.

**Keywords:** China, Drug users, Online chatrooms, Social tumor

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Zhuo Li Tao – Substantial contributions to conception and design, Acquisition of data, Analysis and interpretation of data, Drafting the article, Revising it critically for important intellectual content, Final approval of the version to be published

#### Guarantor

The corresponding author is the guarantor of submission.

#### Conflict of Interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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