

DRUGS AND THE INTERNET

Issue 2, March 2014

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To date the availability of illicit drugs in Australia has largely been examined through household surveys and interviews with people who use drugs; indicators such as drug seizures and arrests; and analyses of hospital admissions and drug-related deaths. Over the past decade there has been an increasing awareness and interest in online marketplaces as a source for discussion about and purchase of drugs (Walsh, 2011). The advent of the Silk Road in 2011, as an online marketplace, has broadened out the availability of new psychoactive substances (NPS) and other more conventional illicit substances (such as cannabis and MDMA).

This bulletin is the second in a new Drug Trends series that provides analysis of trends over time in the availability and type of substances sold via the internet to Australia. The current bulletin reports for the time period March 2013 to November 2013.

Key findings

- The total number of retailers on the Silk Road increased (from 406 in early March 2013 to 579 just before its closure in October 2013), while the number of retailers on the surface web declined slightly (from 99 in March 2013 to 72 in November 2013).
- This sampling period saw an accelerated increase in the number of domestic retailers operating on the Silk Road, potentially indicating a mounting interest in dark web marketplaces among domestic retailers.
- On the Silk Road, cannabis and pharmaceuticals (primarily benzodiazepines and sildenafil) were sold by the largest number of retailers across all time points, followed by MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine) and NPS.
- Compared with the first bulletin, pharmaceuticals shifted from the fourth most available substance available on the Silk Road to second. Conversely, NPS availability has declined, shifting from second most available substance class to fourth.
- The closure of the Silk Road saw a proliferation of new retailers in alternative marketplaces, many of which have since been closed down due to security concerns. Despite this, new marketplaces appear to be emerging in their wake, indicating that interest in dark web marketplaces has continued.



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- Substances available on alternate marketplaces largely mirrored those sold on the original Silk Road, in that cannabis and pharmaceuticals were the most commonly sold substances. Cocaine, MDMA, NPS and methamphetamine followed, with variations in order across marketplaces

METHODS USED IN THIS BULLETIN

'Surface Web' Monitoring

The methodology for monitoring the 'surface web' was adapted from the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction outlined in Solberg, Sedefov, and Griffiths (2011). 'Surface web' sites are those that are registered with search engines, and hence can be identified using tools such as Google web searches. Retailers were located by using a generic list of search terms (e.g. "herbal highs", "research chemicals", "legal ecstasy", etc.) on the Metacrawler search engine (<http://www.metacrawler.com>), which combines search results from Google, Yahoo and Yandex.

Once retailers were identified, availability of selling and shipping to Australia was confirmed and the substances on offer were recorded. Searches were conducted monthly from March 2013 until November 2013, between the 15th and the 25th of each month. Searches were ceased once saturation point was determined, i.e. when no new retailers were returned within the first 100 search results for each search term. Retailers identified in previous searches were revisited and current activity confirmed, including current availability of substances for sale.

Silk Road Marketplace ('Deep Web') Monitoring

The Silk Road Marketplace was accessed using a dedicated Domestic user account every fortnight. Substances sold on the Silk Road are available both from domestic retailers within Australia and international retailers. Available substances are placed in nine categories – cannabis, dissociatives, ecstasy, opioids, precursors, prescription medications, psychedelics, stimulants and 'other'. Each of these categories is then divided into various subcategories including natural and synthetic substances within the broader class, e.g. LSD, magic mushrooms, and various NPS families under the 'psychedelics' category. See Appendix C for a detailed description of the categories and subcategories of substances available on the Silk Road.

The total number of each available substance under each subcategory was recorded as well as the number of unique retailers selling each substance. Each retailer was assigned a unique code based on the time point in which they were first identified and the retailer's country of origin was recorded.

Alternate Dark Web Marketplace Monitoring

Following the closure of the Silk Road on the 3rd of October, 2013, discussion on online

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forums focussed on alternate marketplaces on which to trade illicit substances (Van Buskirk, Roxburgh, Farrell, & Burns, 2014). Two marketplaces in particular were identified: Black Market Reloaded (BMR) and the Sheep Marketplace. In addition to these, Silk Road 2.0 was launched on November 6, 2013. Weekly snapshots of BMR and the Sheep Marketplace were taken from October 3, 2013, with weekly snapshots of Silk Road 2.0 commencing on the 7th of November, 2013. Unlike the monitoring of the original Silk Road, complete snapshots of the marketplaces were conducted, with all retailers and items from all countries and shipping destinations recorded. From this total, those retailers specifically listing Australia as an acceptable shipping destination were then extracted and analysed separately.

RESULTS

Number of Retailers

Surface Web and Silk Road Searches

- Total retailers selling to Australia quantified at each time point for the Silk Road and Surface Web searches are shown in **Figure 1**.
- The number of retailers on the surface web selling to Australia declined slightly over the sampling period, ranging from 99 retailers at February 2013 to 74 in September 2013.
- The total number of retailers on the Silk Road selling to Australia increased significantly over the time period by 11 retailers at each time point, from 406 retailers in early February 2013 to a total of 579 in late September 2013.

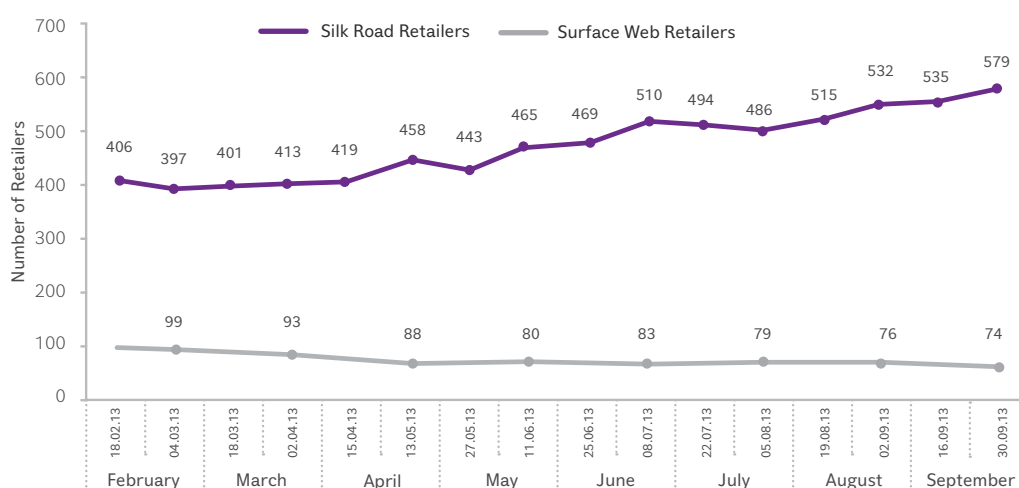


Figure 1: Total number of unique retailers selling to Australia by time point for Silk Road searches and Surface Web searches (February 2013 to September 2013). **NB:** Searches were conducted over the same time period, though surface web searches were conducted monthly and Silk Road searches fortnightly. As such, there are twice as many data points for Silk Road searches.

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The number of domestic retailers on the Silk Road (i.e. based in Australia) increased significantly over the sampling period by approximately 5 retailers at each time point. This represents a more rapid increase than was seen in the previous bulletin (Van Buskirk, Roxburgh, Bruno, & Burns, 2013), indicating that the rate of increase of domestic retailers accelerated in this sampling period. This increase accounts for approximately half of the increase seen in the total number of retailers shipping to Australia at each time point (i.e. domestic and international). The total number of domestic retailers increased from 53 in early February 2013 to 129 in September 2013, a more than twofold increase. The total number of international retailers shipping to Australia increased by approximately six retailers at each time point, from 353 in February 2013 to 450 in September 2013, representing a 27% increase in total retailer numbers. Results are shown in

Figure 2.

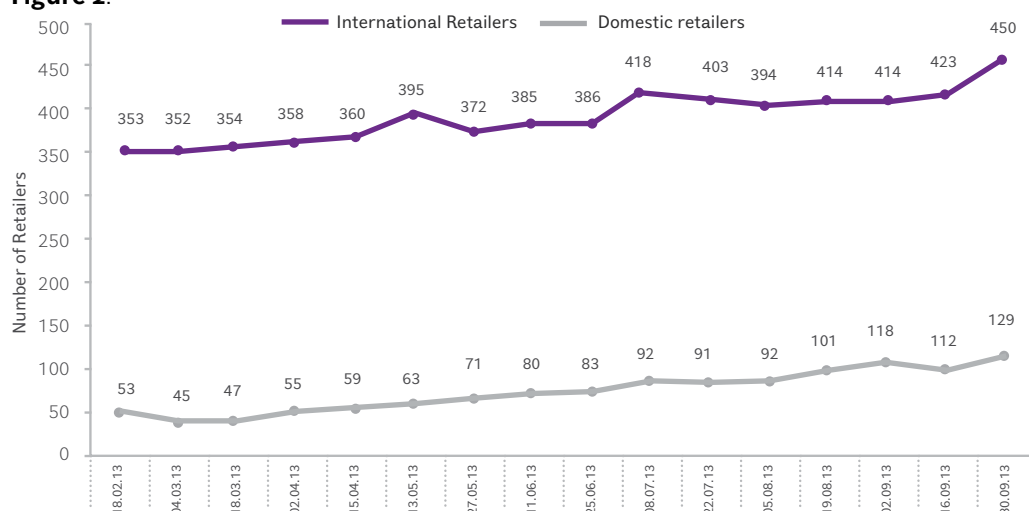


Figure 2: Total number of unique domestic and international retailers shipping to Australia on the Silk Road by time point (February 2013 to September 2013).

Substances Available to Australia

Surface Web Searches

The most commonly available substances sold by retailers quantified on the surface web are detailed in **Table 1**. These substances are largely similar to those identified in the previous bulletin, with the notable exception of 6-APB, which was banned in the United Kingdom in June 2013 (Travis, 2013). This substance dropped from first most commonly sold substance to fourteenth, with only three retailers offering it for sale in November 2013. Also, there appears to be a rising prevalence of synthetic cannabinoids (5F-AKB48, AM2201, 5F-PB-22 and STS-135) available.

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The stimulant ethylphenidate was the most commonly sold NPS on the surface web, followed by the tryptamine 5-MeO-DALT (N,N-diallyl-5-methoxytryptamine) and the tryptamine aMT (α -Methyltryptamine). These substances are largely similar to those identified in the previous bulletin, with the notable exception of 6-APB, which was banned in the United Kingdom in June 2013 (Travis, 2013). This substance dropped from first most commonly sold substance to fourteenth, with only three retailers offering it for sale in November 2013. Also, there appears to be a rising prevalence of synthetic cannabinoids (5F-AKB48, AM2201, 5F-PB-22 and STS-135) available.

Table 1: Number of retailers selling the ten most common EPS on the surface web by substance type and time point

Substance	Mar-13	Apr-13	May-13	Jun-13	Jul-13	Aug-13	Sep-13	Oct-13	Nov-13	Total
Ethylphenidate	26	24	24	21	25	24	21	18	17	183
5-MeO-DALT	25	23	23	21	20	20	18	17	16	167
aMT	24	22	22	20	19	20	19	18	17	164
Methiopropamine	23	22	22	20	22	20	17	15	14	161
MDAI	22	22	22	19	18	17	15	14	13	149
Etizolam	19	18	18	16	14	14	13	11	11	123
5F-AKB48	9	9	11	12	18	17	16	14	12	106
AM2201	18	14	14	13	11	11	11	10	9	102
5F-PB22	8	8	10	12	17	16	14	13	12	98
STS-135	7	7	8	10	18	18	16	13	12	97

NB: Many retailers sold multiple products, and as such these data do not reflect unique retailers. For further information on the above listed NPS, please see Appendix A.

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Silk Road Searches

All substances available to Australian users on the Silk Road, and the number of unique retailers selling each substance over the monitoring period, are outlined in **Table 2**. Cannabis and pharmaceuticals (primarily benzodiazepines, prescription opioids and sildenafil) were sold by the largest number of retailers across the monitoring period, followed by MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxy-N-methylamphetamine) and NPS. Amongst domestic retailers, MDMA, cannabis and pharmaceuticals were the three most commonly sold substances. Additionally, performance and image enhancing drugs (PIEDs) were the sixth most commonly sold substance by domestic retailers, while among international retailers they ranked tenth.

Substance	International		Domestic		Total Retailers	
	Number	Ranking	Number	Ranking	Number	Overall
Cannabis	375	1	79	3	454	1
Pharmaceuticals	350	2	88	2	438	2
MDMA	266	4	95	1	361	3
NPS	299	3	57	5	356	4
Cocaine	228	5	33	7	261	5
Methamphetamine	178	6	75	4	253	6
LSD	144	7	31	8	175	7
Ketamine	103	9	28	9	131	8
PIEDs	91	10	38	6	129	9
Illicit Opioids	107	8	12	11	119	10
Magic Mushrooms	86	11	26	10	112	11
Synthetic Cannabinoids	40	12	3	13	43	12
GHB	34	13	2	14	36	13
Precursors	21	14	5	12	26	14

Table 2: Number of retailers on the Silk Road selling each substance type to Australia during the monitoring period by country of origin

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Table 3 outlines the ten most commonly sold NPS on the Silk Road. The categories 2C-x, NBOMe Family, 5-MeO Family (5-methoxy-substituted) and 4-AcO Family (4-Acetoxy-substituted) were collapsed for clarity as many of these drugs (e.g. 2C-B, 2C-I, 2C-E in the 2C-x category) are sold in the same form, and are advertised as having similar effects. Drugs from the 2C-x and NBOMe categories were the most commonly sold, followed by Methylone, DMT (dimethyltryptamine) and Mephedrone and Methylone

Table 3: Number of retailers on the Silk Road selling the ten most common NPS by time point, February to September 2013.

Substance	18 Feb	4 Mar	18 Mar	2 Apr	15 Apr	13 May	27 May	11 Jun	25 Jun	8 Jul	22 Jul	5 Aug	19 Aug	2 Sep	Total
2C-x	33	33	33	31	29	30	26	28	30	30	22	25	21	24	395
NBOMe	27	30	29	28	17	26	26	29	26	28	23	23	27	30	369
Methylone	17	18	16	16	16	22	22	24	26	28	27	25	20	28	305
DMT	14	16	16	17	15	17	19	19	20	27	23	17	20	24	264
Mephedrone	19	20	17	20	11	24	16	18	15	16	14	14	11	13	228
5-MeO Family	15	14	16	15	13	18	19	20	22	19	13	13	12	15	224
MDPV	12	13	13	14	11	15	12	11	17	17	15	14	13	15	192
4-MEC	10	10	10	10	9	10	11	12	12	13	9	10	10	11	147
4-AcO Family	7	4	9	6	7	7	10	10	13	11	9	9	6	10	118
DOx	9	8	7	6	6	8	9	9	8	8	6	6	7	7	104

NB: Details of specific NPS at each time point were only collected from time point 4 onwards. FAs = Fluoroamphetamines. For further information on the above substances and categories, please see Appendix A and B. All dates listed are in 2013

Alternate Marketplaces

The total number of retailers identified by time point in the three monitored marketplaces, i.e. those selling to all destinations from both domestic and international countries of origin, is outlined in Figure 3. All three monitored marketplaces saw significant increases in the number of active retailers across time points, with BMR, Sheep Marketplace and Silk Road 2.0 increasing by roughly 40, 69 and 61 retailers at each time point, respectively. Across all time points, 868 unique retailers were identified on the Sheep Marketplace, of which 607 (69.9%) listed Australia as an acceptable shipping destination, with 96 of these retailers (15.8%) based within Australia. On the BMR, 889 retailers were identified, of which 428 (48.1%) were willing to ship to Australia, and 67 (15.6%) of these were located within Australia. On Silk Road 2.0, of the 239 retailers identified, 104 (43.5%) would ship to Australia, with 23 of these (22.1%) based within Australia.

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Figure 3: Total number of retailers identified by time point and marketplace across all shipping destinations, October to November 2013

Table 4 outlines the number of retailers identified by marketplace over the monitoring period specifically willing to ship to Australia by substance for sale. Across all three marketplaces, pharmaceutical drugs (primarily benzodiazepines, pharmaceutical opioids and sildenafil) and cannabis were the two most commonly sold substances. Cocaine, MDMA, NPS and methamphetamine largely followed these two substances, with slight variations in order across marketplaces.

Table 4: Number of retailers selling to Australia by substance, marketplace and country of origin. NB: Many retailers sold multiple products, and as such these data do not reflect unique retailers.

Substance Category	Black Market Reloaded			Sheep Marketplace			Silk Road 2.0		
	International	Domestic	Total	International	Domestic	Total	International	Domestic	Total
Cannabis	127	15	142	165	21	186	27	7	34
Pharmaceuticals	122	17	139	167	32	199	22	8	30
MDMA	77	13	90	115	26	141	17	6	23
Cocaine	78	11	89	95	21	116	8	7	15
NPS	79	8	87	88	13	101	26	1	27
Methamphetamine	58	25	83	78	32	110	8	5	13
LSD	47	10	57	41	5	46	14	3	17
Illicit Opioids	41	5	46	31	9	40	4	2	6
PIEDs	25	12	37	21	17	38	1	0	1
Magic Mushrooms	30	2	32	20	4	24	6	0	6
Ketamine	14	2	16	20	6	26	4	3	7
Synthetic Cannabinoids	12	0	12	3	0	3	3	1	4
GHB	8	2	10	9	1	10	1	2	3



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Summary

- The number of retailers on the Silk Road shipping to Australia trended upwards significantly over the sampling period with the total increasing by 11 retailers at each time point. Of these 10, approximately five retailers were from Australia, indicating a greater proportion of domestic retailers comprising the total increase in retailers at each time point than was observed in the previous bulletin.
- Over the same time period, the total number of retailers on the surface web appeared to decline.
- The number of retailers selling each substance, as well as the specific types of NPS sold on the Silk Road did not differ greatly from those observed in the first bulletin.
- However, the number of retailers offering pharmaceutical drugs for sale appears to have increased and during this monitoring period pharmaceuticals were the second most commonly sold substance, while the number of retailers selling has NPS declined slightly.
- Alternate marketplaces appear to have a slightly greater availability of pharmaceutical substances than the original Silk Road, though the ranking of substances was mostly similar across all four monitored dark web marketplaces.
- It is of note that the most commonly available substances on these marketplaces are primarily traditional illicit substances and pharmaceuticals, rather than NPS, and therefore largely reflect what is seen in traditional street markets.
- As with the previous bulletin, it is not possible from these results to determine how often, and in what amounts, illicit and emerging substances are being purchased online in Australia. The 2012 EDRS report suggested low usage of the internet for purchasing drugs among existing ecstasy consumers, with only 3% having used the internet to purchase any substance, compared with 60% purchasing any substance from a dealer and 58% from a friend (Sindicich & Burns, 2013). Recently published findings from the Global Drug Survey put usage of the Silk Road amongst Australians at around 7% of surveyed consumers (Barratt, Ferris, & Winstock, 2013). However, this sample was likely biased towards an upper middle class population, who likely have greater access to and knowledge regarding technology.
- In either case, it would appear that current usage of online marketplaces for the purchase of illicit substances is much lower than the use of traditional street markets.

Implications

The BMR and the Sheep Marketplace are no longer open. This was due to an alleged security vulnerability on the Sheep Marketplace, leading to user accounts becoming compromised, and many users' funds being stolen. In the wake of this, the moderators of the BMR were concerned about a similar vulnerability occurring and ceased trading. However, many more marketplaces have opened since these closures. In addition to the marketplaces monitored



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here, at least eight additional, smaller markets currently exist on the dark web, with increasingly advanced security features. This would appear to indicate that the demand for, and the faith in the security of, dark web marketplaces has not been significantly diminished. Indeed, the number of active retailers operating on Silk Road 2.0 at the last recorded data point was 549 (unpublished data), indicating that this marketplace is now operating at a similar volume of retailers as BMR or Sheep Marketplace during their peak. Additionally, the most commonly available substances for sale to Australia on the Silk Road and alternate marketplaces in this monitoring period were traditional drugs such as cannabis, pharmaceuticals and MDMA. While much research to date has focussed on online marketplaces in terms of their sale of NPS (Corazza et al., 2012; Forsyth, 2012; Tofighi & Lee, 2012; Walsh, 2011), current research, as well as the findings presented here, suggest that the demand for these substances on dark web marketplaces is actually lower than for traditional illicit substances (Barratt et al., 2013). This would suggest that these marketplaces run in parallel to traditional street markets, rather than representing an entirely new marketplace. Future research will investigate the specific pharmaceutical drugs for sale on these marketplaces and explore the implications of their rising availability.

The increased proportion of domestic versus international retailers operating on these marketplaces is noteworthy. The first bulletin in this series found that domestic retailers only accounted for a small proportion of the total increase in retailers, with only one retailer of the 10 additional retailers per time point being from Australia (Van Buskirk et al., 2013). However, the current monitoring period saw this proportion rise to almost half, with five of the total 11 additional retailers at each time point being from Australia. It is not currently clear what is driving this accelerated uptake of dark web marketplaces by domestic retailers, and this warrants further investigation in large scale monitoring systems such as the EDRS. Although the proportion of domestic retailers versus international retailers on the alternate marketplaces is not yet as high as numbers observed on the original Silk Road, future monitoring will reveal if the uptake of these new marketplaces occurs at a similar magnitude.

The number of retailers operating on the surface web appears to be on a steady decline. This may be due to the increasing implementation of domestic and international legislation controlling these substances, or due to the increasing popularity and prevalence of established trading networks on dark web marketplaces. The popularity of NPS on dark web marketplaces, as well as the recent proliferation of retailers operating on them, may be part of a larger migration from surface web to dark web to sell these substances, as users become more aware and familiar with this method of trading. It would appear from current research that dark web marketplaces, as opposed to surface web stores, are the preferred method of purchasing drugs online (Barratt et al., 2013), and future monitoring of these marketplaces will reveal whether this trend will continue.

Given the rapidity with which dark web marketplaces grow and subsequently close, their continued, systematic monitoring is critical. Future bulletins in this series will continue to provide timely and accurate updates on the state of dark web marketplaces and seek to

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assess their impact on traditional street marketplaces, as well as the impact of the Internet as a whole on illicit drug use in Australia.

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Appendix A: Chemical classification of mentioned NPS.

NPS	Category	Subcategory
2C-x	Psychedelic	Phenethylamine
4-AcO Family	Psychedelic	Tryptamine
5-APB	Entactogen	Phenethylamine
5F-AKB58	Synthetic Cannabinoid	Cannabimimetic
5F-PB22	Synthetic Cannabinoid	Cannabimimetic
5-MeO Family	Psychedelic	Tryptamine
6-APB	Entactogen	Phenethylamine
AM2201	Synthetic Cannabinoid	Cannabimimetic
aMT	Psychedelic	Tryptamine
DMT	Psychedelic	Tryptamine
DOx	Psychedelic Amphetamine	Phenethylamine
Ethylphenidate	Other Stimulant	Stimulant
Etizolam	Benzodiazepine Analogue	Benzodiazepine Analogue
FAs	Entactogen	Phenethylamine
MDAI	Entactogen	Phenethylamine
MDPV	Stimulant	Phenethylamine
Mephedrone	Stimulant	Phenethylamine
Methiopropamine	Other Stimulant	Stimulant
Methylone	Entactogen	Phenethylamine
NBOMe Family	Psychedelic	Phenethylamine
STS-135	Synthetic Cannabinoid	Cannabimimetic

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Appendix B: Glossary of categories and abbreviations used in bulletin

Category	Commonly Available Examples
2C-x	2C-B, 2C-E, 2C-I
4-AcO Family	4-AcO-DMT, 4-AcO-DET, 4-AcO-MiPT
5-MeO Family	5-MeO-DMT, 5-MeO-DiPT
Cannabis	Marijuana, hash, edibles (THC infused foods)
DOx	DOI, DOM, DOC
Illicit Opioids	Heroin, Opium
MDMA	MDMA powder, 'Ecstasy' pills
Methamphetamine	Powder (Speed), crystal (Ice)
NBOMe Family	25C-NBOMe, 25I-NBOMe, 25E-NBOMe
Pharmaceuticals	Pharmaceutical Opioids, Benzodiazepines, Sildenafil (Viagra)
PIEDs	Clenbuterol, Nordicor, Biogen
Synthetic Cannabinoids	JWH Family, AM2201, UR144

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Appendix C: Categories of substances available on the Silk Road

Cannabis

Hash
Clones
Concentrates
Edibles
Oils
Seeds
Synthetic
Topicals
Weed

Dissociatives

DXM
Ketamine
MXE
PCP

Ecstasy

5-APB
4-MEC
Butylone
MDA
MDAI
MDMA
Methylone
MPA
Pills

Opioids

Heroin
Opium
Prescription

Prescription

Benzos
Other
Pain Relief
Steroids, PEDs
Stimulants
Viagra

Psychedelics

2C Family
4-AcO-DET
4-AcO-DMT
4-HO family
5-MeO-DALT
5-MeO-DIPT
5-MeO-DMT
5-MEO-MIPT
AMT
DMT
DOx
Ibogain
LSA
LSD
Mescaline
NBOMe
Salvia
Shrooms
TMA Family

Stimulants

Cocaine
4-MEC
6-APB
A-PVP
Caffeine
Crack
Ephedrine
Ethylphenidate
FAs
FMAs
FMCs
MDPPP
MDPV
Mephedrone
Meth
Pentadrone
Prescription
Speed

Other

Barbiturates
Entheogens
Inhalants
Intoxicants
Nootropics
SSRIs
Supplements
Tobacco

THE NATIONAL DRUG AND ALCOHOL RESEARCH CENTRE

University of New South Wales, Sydney NSW 2052

Phone: +61 2 9385 0333 Fax: +61 2 9385 0222

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