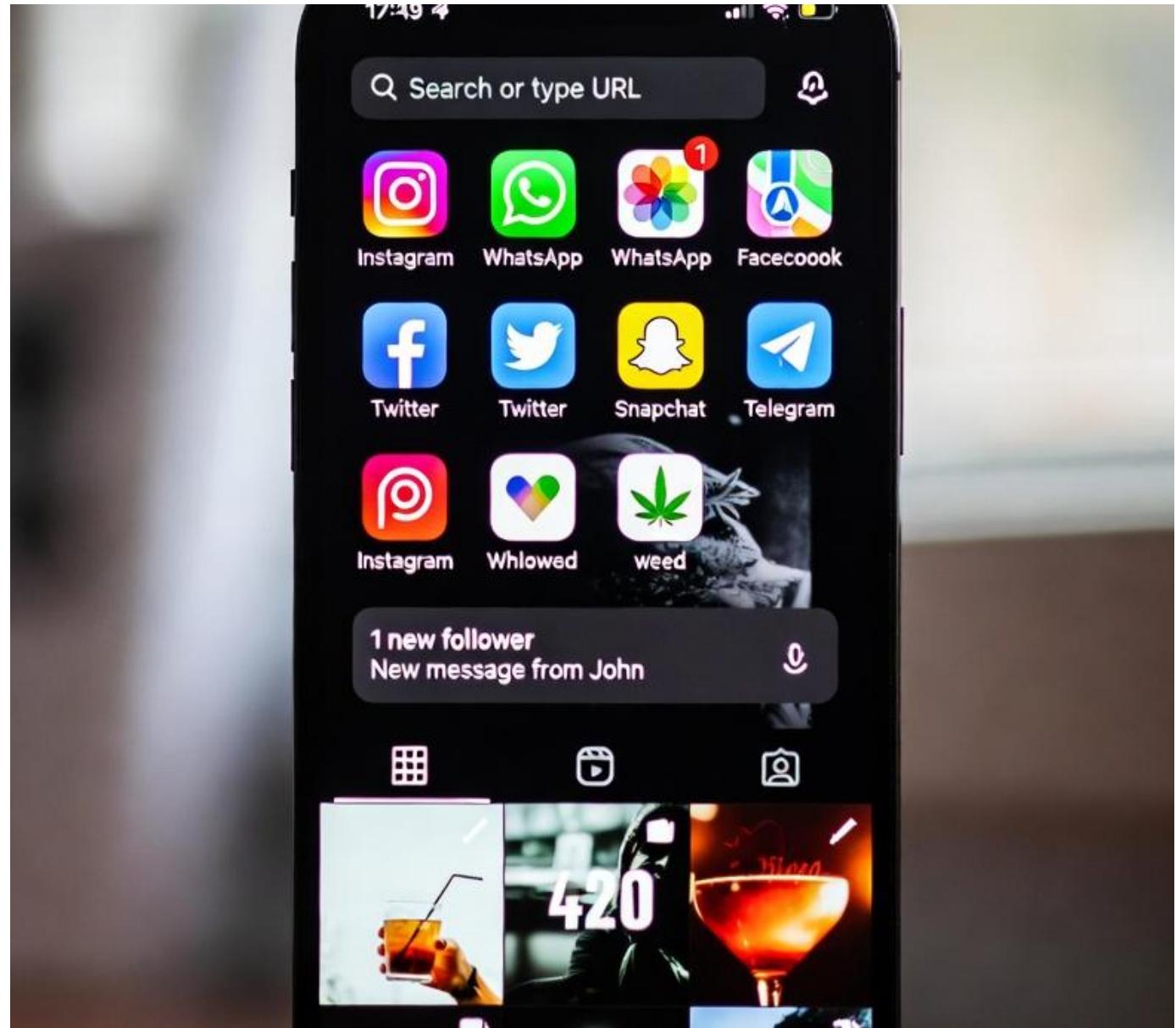


Understanding digital drug trafficking:

A strategic overview of trends,
criminal methodologies and
operational implications

Dubai, 24 of
November 2025



Global number who used drug estimated (15/64 years)

Rising global drug use: 316 M (6% of the global population)

- Cannabis: 244 M (4.6% of GP)
- Opioids (synthetic and natural): 60 M (1.2 % of GP)
- Amphetamines: 30 M (0.6% of GP)
- Cocaine: 23 M (0.5% of GP)
- Ecstasy: 21 M (0.4% of GP)



Estimated value distribution

Illegal trade in drugs generates billions USD yearly

Stage	Share of total income
Cultivation/production	1–3%
Processing / trafficking (wholesale)	20–25%
Retail level	70–75%



International drug trafficking: few indicators

- Increase in “Supply”
- Increase in “Quality” (cocaine, cannabis,)
- Lower prices (cocaine, cannabis, NPS)
- Drug trafficking is a business



Comparison of drug trafficking group structure



Governance-oriented

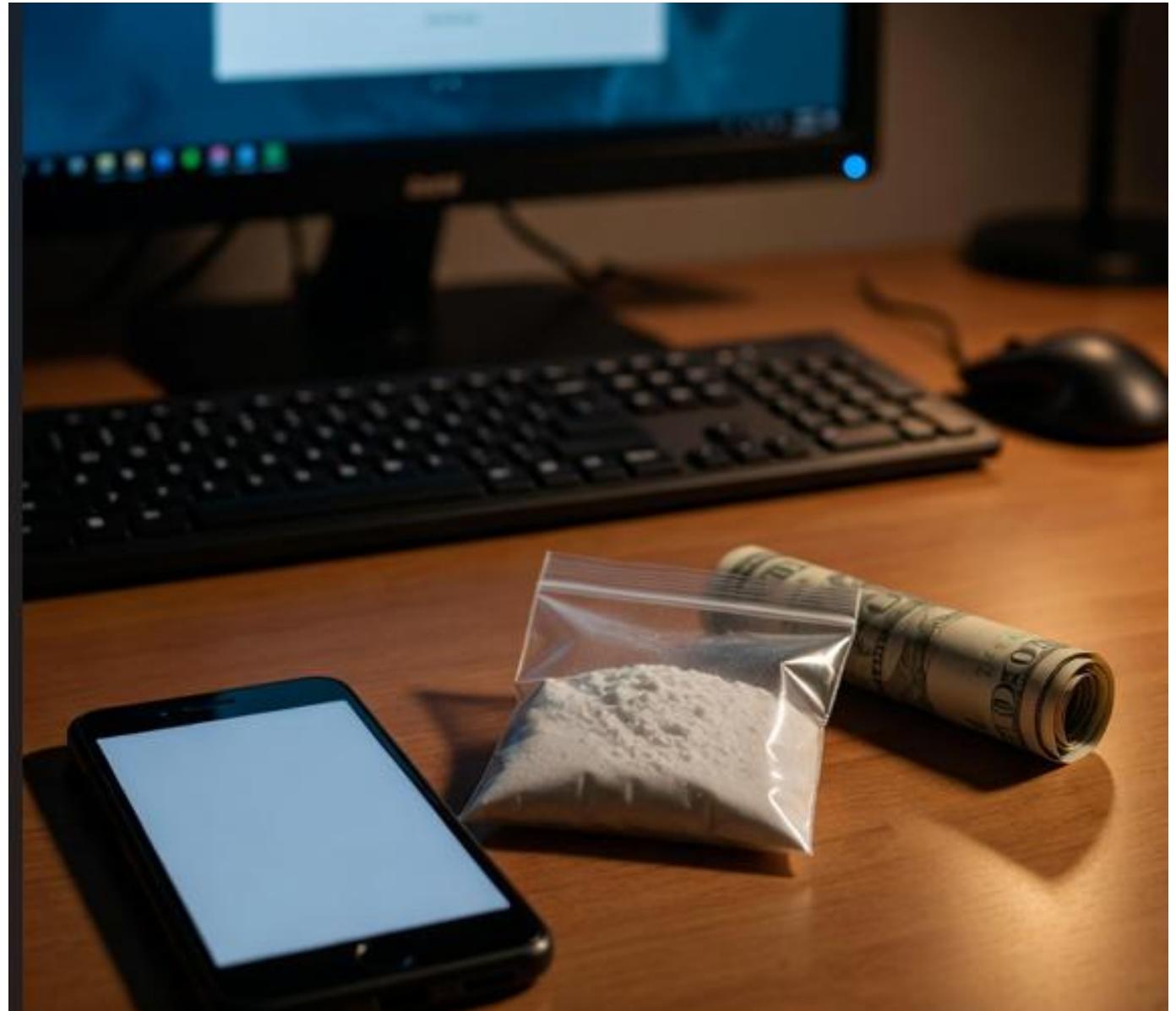
- Focus is on control or domination of a territory or a market
- Drug trafficking is one of many activities in which the group or its members engage
- Territorial control is paramount
- Reputation is leveraged, especially violent reputation
- High propensity for violence
- Membership is based on shared background, ethnicity or kinship
- Hierarchical, often governed by rules and codes



Trade-oriented groups

- Focus is on market transactions and profit maximization
- Drug trafficking is the primary or sole activity in which group engages
- Little to no need to control territory
- Often unnamed and have a limited reputation
- Low propensity for violence
- Membership is based on prioritizing transactions; more opportunistic
- Flatter or networked, less often governed by strict rules or codes

Digitalization of the drug market



- **Growing convergence between traditional drug markets and digital ecosystems.**

Social media, encrypted messaging apps, and online marketplaces are increasingly used for:

- ✓ Advertising and promotion of drugs
- ✓ Direct transactions
- ✓ Recruitment of couriers and distributors



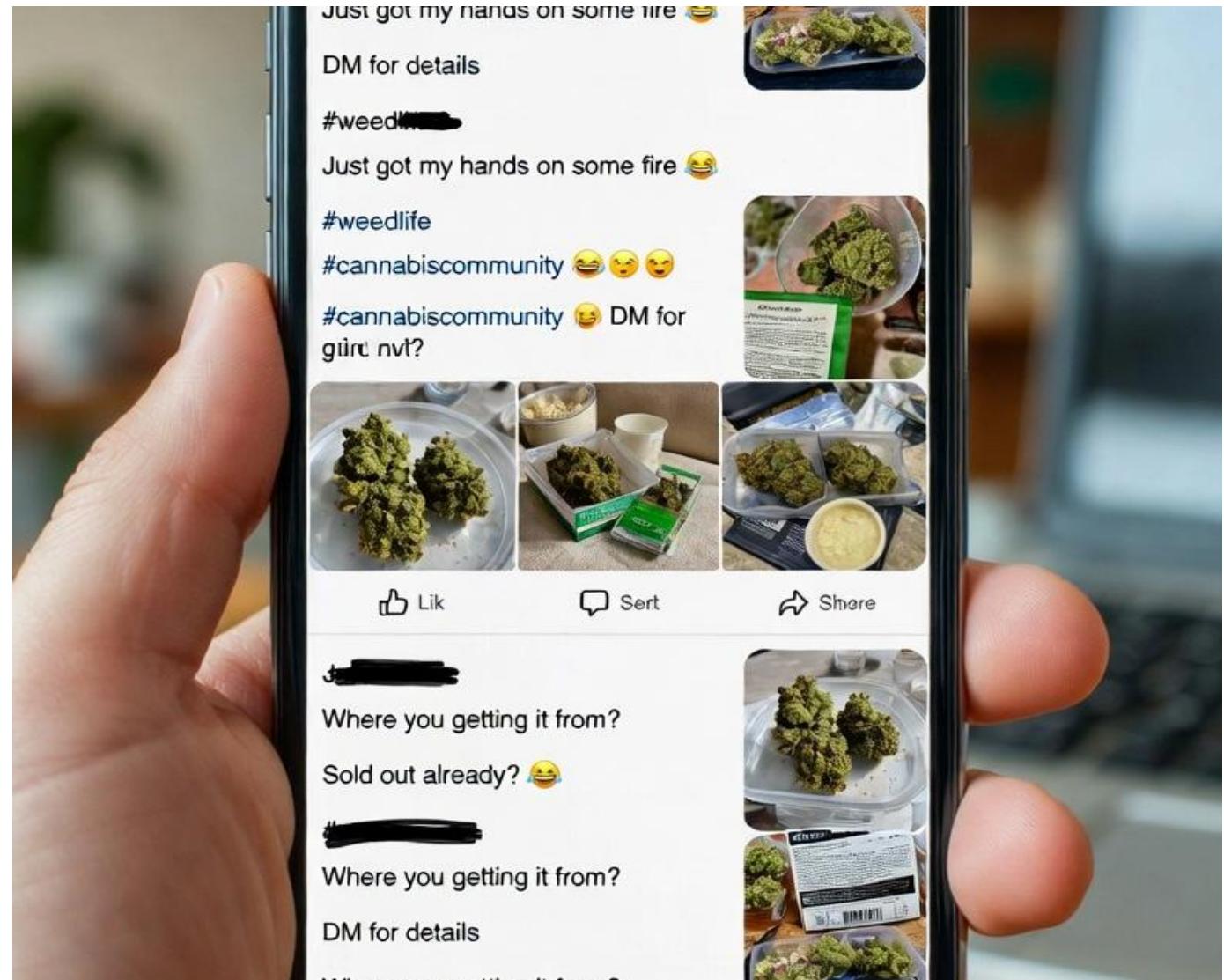
Common tactics used online

Use of coded language, emojis, or altered hashtags to evade detection.

Creation of temporary accounts or “stories” to promote products.

Transition from open platforms to encrypted channels (e.g., WhatsApp, Signal, Telegram).

Leveraging visual content and high engagement posts to boost algorithmic reach



Common Emoji codes



Disclaimer: These emojis reflect common examples found in DEA investigations. This list is not all-inclusive, and the images above are a representative sample.



Methodology: Transactions & client profiles

- Encrypted communication:
disappearing messages, disposable
accounts
- Payments via cash, crypto, e-wallets,
voucher
- Clients: adolescents, discreet adult
consumers, remote-area users
- Ease of access and perceived
anonymity driving demand



Drug delivery methods and profile of delivery personnel

- Misuse of gig-economy riders and ride-hailing services
- Dead drops, GPS-tagged locations, parcel lockers
- Concealed delivery in food containers, envelopes, clothing
- Use of anonymous couriers
- Occasional aware accomplices
- High turnover and anonymity exploited by criminals
- Growing involvement of women and minors in some regions



Example of an organized delivery chain

- 1: Advertising via Instagram/Snapchat
- 2: Client moves to Telegram/WhatsApp
- 3: Payment verification (or cash at home)
- 4: Dispatcher assigns courier
- 5: Collection from micro-stash (or products are with the courier)
- 6: Delivery: direct, drop point, or locker



**DISRUPTIVE RESPONSES TO VARIOUS ORGANIZED CRIMINAL GROUPS
ENGAGED IN DRUG TRAFFICKING**

GROUP CHARACTERISTICS	STRENGTHS	VULNERABILITIES	DISRUPTIVE RESPONSES
Oriented towards governance and centralized	Hierarchy and limited information flow protects against infiltration	Group reliant on key individuals to operate	Targeting of members with highest decision-making capacity or those with greatest skills (e.g. money-launderers or chemists) to disrupt operations; uprooting of group structure may be possible through removal of leadership
Oriented towards governance and decentralized	Greater connectivity among members increases resilience to law enforcement pressure	Trust among members can be damaged through use of informants; groups might be easier to infiltrate	Removal of top leadership, especially in places experiencing high levels of violence, may generate more violence. Instead, removal of mid-level members that serve as bridges between leaders and operatives may be more disruptive
Oriented towards trade and centralized	Hard to infiltrate and go to great lengths to keep operations from discovery; often smaller networks	Group reliant on key individuals to operate	Interventions may require extensive surveillance and mapping to identify key nodes and work to damage trust within networks
Oriented towards trade and decentralized	Greater connectivity among members and lower barriers to membership make groups highly resilient to law enforcement	Trust among members can be damaged through use of informants	Interventions may require extensive surveillance and mapping to identify key nodes and work to damage trust within networks

Disruptive responses to various organized criminal groups engaged in drug trafficking



Key main recommendations

- Strengthen public-private cooperation with platforms
- Enhance early-warning systems and AI-assisted monitoring
- Increase digital OSINT and financial tracing capacity
- Foster regional/international cooperation
- Develop targeted prevention (youth, family, adults...)



Contact:

M. Aymeric Salamone
Regional Law Enforcement Expert
UNODC OGCCR
Email: *aymeric.salamone@un.org*