

Social media conversation about addiction, recovery and stigma

A research paper by
Phoenix Futures and Pulsar



Care to Share 

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Can we better understand the complex relationships we have with drug and alcohol use by looking at social media conversation?

We are particularly interested in the stigma revealed amongst daily social media conversation about drug and alcohol use. What is the impact language is having on people concerned about their own drug and alcohol use? or a loved one's? or on people in sustaining their recovery from addiction?

Stigma experienced by people who use, or have used drugs and alcohol, and the resulting discrimination they experience can cause individuals to feel shame and guilt, which in turn causes delays to accessing support [1]. Stigma also restricts the ability of people in recovery to access the resources, such as jobs, homes and social support, that help sustain their recovery, and can have an enduring effect in complicating the lives of the stigmatised even as treatment improves their symptoms [2].

To explore this topic, we partnered with audience intelligence platform Pulsar. Using their social media monitoring tool, Pulsar tracked all UK conversation on social media about drug and alcohol use, including both formal, medical and informal language. Pulsar tracked this conversation for two months between 1 December 2018 and 31 January 2019, capturing 198,900 public messages from Twitter, forums & blog channels - and analysed the people, attitudes and events driving this discussion. (Full details of the method can be found in the Appendix.)

Key stats:

- There was an average of 1,474 relevant social media posts per day - and 1,626 retweets
- 81% of UK discussion is on Twitter
- 45% of people talking about drugs and alcohol were female and 55% male
- On average conversation was led by younger adults (31% 18-24 and 31% 24-34)
- Conversation was most highly represented in cities: London, Manchester, Glasgow, Liverpool & Edinburgh

Findings

We present five main findings from this analysis and our thoughts on their implications for building a kinder and more compassionate public conversation about addiction issues.

Phoenix will be using these findings to understand attitudes towards drug and alcohol use and build on their programme of activities to reduce stigma. We recognise that eliminating the deeply entrenched stigma in society will be a long-term project requiring a change of attitude, action and language around addiction across society. This paper doesn't aim to provide all the answers we need, but rather to provoke thought. We hope it will encourage and enable other organisations to join us in addressing this important issue.

People frequently use to the word “drugs” as a catch-all term for a wide range of different substances

Different drugs have widely differing chemical structures, and widely differing effects on people depending on their psychological, physical and social wellbeing, and the situation in which they are used. However, we tend to group them all together under one generic term. In the two-month period of the analysis there were 46,251 mentions of “drug” use, misuse or addiction as a generic description.

For example -

“[Artist Ross Muir] used to be a full-time drug addict. He turned his life around and, after one painting went viral, became a successful Scottish artist.”

-- BBC Scotland, 63 RTs <https://twitter.com/BBCScotland/statuses/1075043007529836544>

“Another great [constituency] [#labourdoorstep](#). Drug use, poverty and violence are real concerns here. Don't be fooled by the facade. We need a [#UKLabour](#) government who will address the root causes.”

-- Anon. NHS GP and Labour council candidate, on Twitter

“[I] Genuinely feel like the only person in the world who doesn't do drugs 🙄”

-- Anon. young woman, 18-24, Leeds (55 RTs)

Every drug use experience is unique; however, we tend to describe the vast variety and diversity of drug use, and its impact and potential harm, in very simplistic terms. Whilst it can be a useful conversational shorthand, and is used broadly by everyone from across media, charities, politicians and individuals there is a risk that in grouping such a diverse range of drug use experiences together that we lose sight of the fact that not all drugs are the same. Each experience of drug use can carry a very different experience and highly personalised risk.

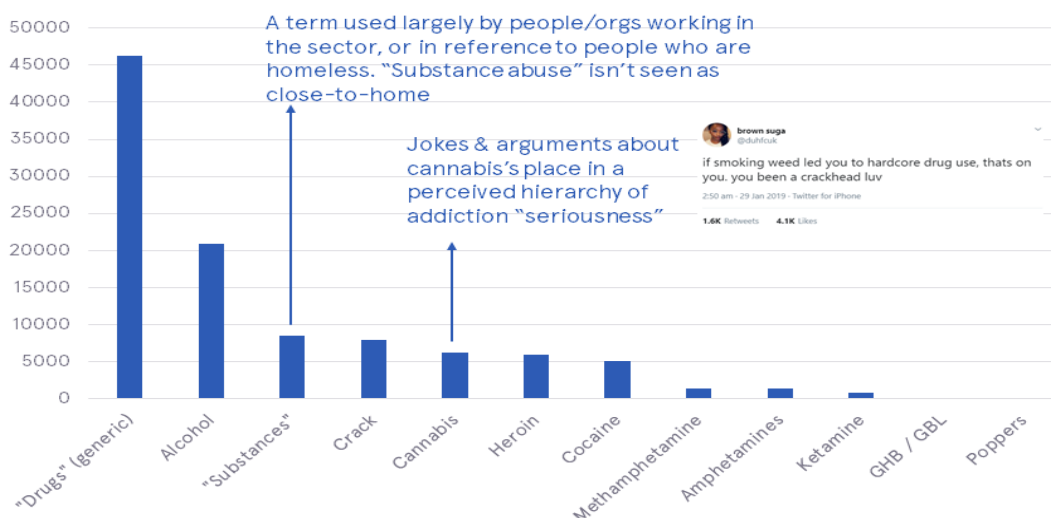


Fig.1 Frequency of substances mentioned

Early attempts at public health campaigns that utilised simplistic catch-all terms such as the 'Just Say No To Drugs' campaign of the 1980s have subsequently been shown to be ineffective. By simplistically grouping all drugs together as having equal harm it wasn't long before the young people targeted by the campaign realised that not all drugs are the same. Some argue the campaign even had the reverse effect by encouraging people to try riskier substances having tried alcohol and tobacco [3]. Recent research on prevention of harm promotes discussion of individual drugs in the specific contexts that are relevant for people's everyday lives [4].

In addition to the catch-all term 'drugs', we also observed a substantial discussion using the catch-all term 'substances'. We observed this use almost entirely by people within the health and social care sector for whom this is a professional norm:

For example,

"#YoungCarersAwarenessDay is @CarersTrust's annual initiative to raise awareness of young people who look after family members with illness, disabilities or substance misuse issues. Find out how you can support #YCAD2019 on 31 January 2019:"
-- NHS England, 156 RTs (256,000 followers)

"We are @haverstocktweet today with Peer Educators Katie, Mohammed and Haverstock's very own Anisah delivering Substance Misuse Awareness using films and resources created by young people!
#PeerEducation #youthaction #camden"
-- Fitzrovia Youth in Action, a youth services project in London

People from outside this professional social care sector do occasionally use the word 'substances'. This most often occurs in social care contexts and conversation and particularly when talking about homelessness. An episode of BBC Question Time in January 2019 spurred particular discussion of "substance abuse", likely because this was the main term being used on the show.

"#bbcqt people don't become homeless because of mental health, substance abuse laziness or moral deficiency, they are homeless because they have no where secure to live, put the cause BEFORE the effect not after."
-- Anon. young woman, 20s, Harrogate, Yorkshire - tweeting in response to BBC Question Time on homelessness

Use of the word 'substances' by professionals attempts to be a more generic and less judgmental approach, as it is a word with less negative connotations than 'drugs'. However, in everyday language the word 'substances' is rarely used. There is therefore the risk of a language barrier between those in need of help and those professionals offering the help.

Key message - we all group different drugs together and use catch-all terms like 'drugs' in everyday language, or 'substances' in professional settings. It is a very useful conversational shorthand. What's more, it's better to talk about drugs, or substances, and their effects than to hide the issue. However, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that every drug use experience is unique.

Phoenix encourages people to think carefully about their own drug use and consider it in the context of their wider life and relationships. When commenting on other peoples' drug use we should remember that not all drugs are the same, no two people are the same and people may use the same drug for very different reasons. In fact, two people who appear outwardly similar may have a dramatically different circumstances around their drug use. In short, we use simple terms, but in reality, these are complex issues that benefit from nuance and insight.

When we look more closely at how people are using the term “crackhead”, we can see that 90% of the time it is not being used to refer to individuals perceived to be using this drug. Instead, the term is used as a simile, and often with some humour or irony intended.

For example,

“Looking unattractive”:

- “I’m starting to resemble a crackhead”
- “Difference is u don’t look like a crackhead with no makeup on Hannah.”
(Anon. young women on Twitter)

As a reference point for general addictiveness:


“YouTube with swipe is like crack to a web addict”
-- Marketing industry influencer Matt Novara (41,000 followers),

The notion of “crackhead super powers”:

“Wait varyd defo has crackhead super powers coz not once did I think he could do a back flip 🤪”
-- Viral tweet about footballer Jamie Vardy of Leicester City, who scored an amazing trick shot goal

While these uses are not actively hostile in nature, they can confirm unhelpful stereotypes about drug use.

Only 10% of the time is the term “crackhead” used to refer to other people as (perceived or supposed to be) using crack cocaine - and here, the usage is strongly negative and stigmatising. It’s very unlikely that these people know the actual substance usage of the people they’re referring to - instead, they’re simply referring to them as “crackheads” as a means of insult:

“I got scratched by some crackhead at work and this is my mum’s reaction ”
[Screenshot of text chat with mother]
-- Anon. young woman, 20s, London, involved in youth charity sector

“Walking around Pompey is like walking through a crackhead, piss and dog shit obstacle course”
-- Anon. man, Portsmouth, England

Key message - Whilst stigmatising terms are used with differing intention, the combined impact may be to dehumanise vulnerable people affected by crack use and reduce the likelihood of them seeking help. The Global Commission for Drug Policy states that ‘Commonly encountered terms such as “junkie”, “drug abuser” and “crackhead” are alienating, and designate people who use drugs as “others” – morally flawed and inferior individuals.’ When combined with the criminalisation of drug use, stigma and discrimination ‘are directly related to the violation of the human rights of people who use drugs in many countries’ [6]

Viral tweets often feature stigmatising language

On Twitter, many of the most shareable messages about people with addiction are those using the most stigmatising language, such as the word “junkie”.

Convinced a junkie to send me a video of him shadow boxing in a jacket before a bought it and he sent this” [Video of man boxing in blue jacket]

-- Twitter user, male, 20s, Scotland.

8,000 RTs & 45,500 likes in total (1849 UK RTs)

a took ma dog out for a walk with his coat on n a junkie called him a poof n a can't stop thinking about it tbh”

-- Twitter user, female, 20s, Scotland

1,600 RTs & 12,600 likes in total (683 UK RTs)

Humour, absurdity and the informal tone make them shareable in social media - previous research has established [7], highly emotionally charged content, whether positive (awe) or negative (anger or anxiety), is the most likely to go viral.

Viral tweets also tend to tap into a particular social media community: “Scottish Twitter” is a community known for tweeting in Scottish dialect and often going viral for humour - gaining retweets from around the world, not just locally. We observed Scottish Twitter is particularly likely to use “junkie” as a term.

We also note the age of people making and sharing these jokes utilising stigmatising language - 45% of the overall audience talking about drug & substance issues is under 25. This contrasts to people actually seeking treatment for drug misuse, where the median age is 40 [8]

Key message – whilst we do not wish to police the use of language, we urge people to consider the potential negative impact of language on vulnerable people.

Dependence on alcohol is talked about – but rarely joked about - online

Discussion of problematic alcohol use takes a much more serious tone and are often driven by people with a public status. The messages that get the most shares talk about alcohol misuse as a serious problem deserving of empathy and government support for treatment services:

“As Christmas gears up again, a quick seasonal request. I choose not to drink alcohol, but there are plenty of people I know out there who can't drink through addiction. This is a hard season for them. Tip: if someone politely refuses an alcoholic drink, don't keep asking :-) x

-- Actor Steven McGann -- gaining 14,145 retweets

<https://twitter.com/StephenMcGann/statuses/1071355421515018240>

“Welcome that NHS bosses now adopting this Labour policy I announced at [#Lab18](#) on hospital alcohol care teams. But these important interventions will be hindered by the deep cuts to community substance misuse services. Public health cuts must be reversed”

-- Labour MP Jon Ashworth -- 299 Retweets (10 Dec)

<https://twitter.com/JonAshworth/statuses/1081485499972440064>

“Delighted to announce today we're giving extra funding to [@NacoaUK](#) - an amazing charity who do so much to help the hundreds of thousands of children in the UK growing up with alcohol-addicted parents who are robbed of a happy, stable home”

-- Matt Hancock, Secretary of State for Health & Social Care

<https://twitter.com/MattHancock/statuses/1076840663122145280>

Stigmatising terms such as “alkie” are much less often used (see fig. 3), even though alcohol is the most used substance in the UK [10]. Perhaps because the issue is more widespread, familiar and closer to home, the conversation takes a more serious tone.

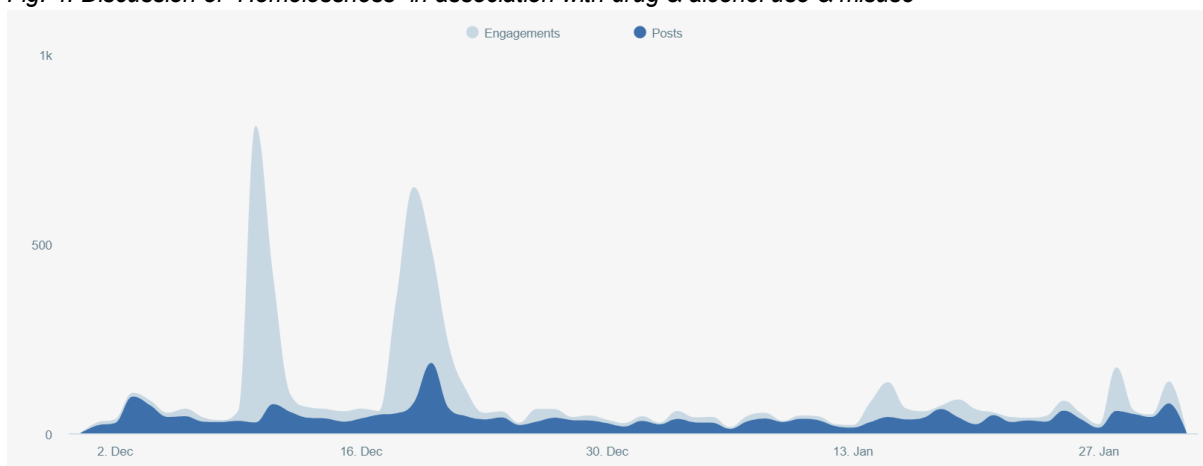
Key message – it is reassuring that the social media conversation around alcohol takes the issues of alcohol harm seriously. Alcohol Change UK estimate approx. 580,00 people in England are dependent on alcohol with only 20% accessing treatment. This more considered language around alcohol harm may help increase this percentage over time.

There is a strong vein of compassion in public discourse for people who are homeless

“Homelessness” features in 3.2% of discussion of drug & alcohol use issues. Conversation is frequently driven through news events:

- 10 Dec 2018: Report released about homelessness in the UK, including the statistic that “over half of all deaths of homeless people last year were due to substance misuse issues or suicide.”
- 18 December 2018: Housing secretary James Brokenshire blames rise in homelessness not on the government’s housing policy, but family breakdown and drug use. (Further press coverage & comment, heavily shared on Twitter)
- 31 January 2019: BBC Question Time covers the homelessness issue, producing a corresponding Twitter buzz on the hashtag #bbcqt discussing homelessness alongside substance misuse.
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Fig. 4: Discussion of “Homelessness” in association with drug & alcohol use & misuse



The response from the public is very supportive in tone:

“ I would rather give someone a hot drink or food than just money. It is a common misconception that all homeless people are drug addicts or alcoholics but that underlying concern will always be there.”
-- Anon. man, 40s-50s, from Newcastle

“EVEN IF some of the Homeless have substance abuse issues (and who could blame them in those circumstances) surely the answer is to help them to recovery and house them and give them some hope of a future worth giving it up for!”
-- Twitter user (woman, 60s, Labour party supporter)

“If I had to sleep on the streets I would be drinking diesel fuel if it took the pain away. Stop blaming drug and alcohol addiction for the homeless tragedy happening under this Tory government.”
-- Twitter user (woman, Labour party supporter). 258 Retweets

Looking at associated social issues where there is a relatively high prevalence of problematic substance use shows that complex social issues can, and are, discussed with compassion and understanding of the wider social determinants of harm and health.

Key message – the drug and alcohol treatment sector can learn from the education around homelessness and mental health that has enabled more educated and compassionate discourse around these issues.

Takeaways

For charities, professionals & organisations in the health and social care sector

- Engaging in social media with educational content, and by showing stories of personal change and recovery within a context of life and relationships, can reduce stigma of problematic substance use by combatting the dehumanisation of people affected by addiction [9]

For journalists and media

- Adding depth and nuance – we all use the term ‘drugs’ and ‘drug use’ as a useful conversational shorthand. However, not all drugs are the same, adding depth and insight to articles on the use of drugs for example referring to substances by name (crack, heroin, alcohol, cannabis) may help educate the reader that drug use is a complex issue.
- Expanding on the environmental context in which problematic drug use thrives e.g. considering social deprivation, homelessness, poor mental health, social exclusion, helps to educate readers on the social drivers and pressures that influence healthy choices.
- People first language – using people first language rather than substance specific language reminds everyone that someone who uses drugs is a person first and should not be defined through the narrow view of a health condition or behaviour.

For social media users

- Recognise that all drug use experiences are unique and consider personal drug use in the context of wider life and relationships.
- Even when using humour consider the vulnerable person that may be negatively affected by seeing that use of stigmatising language in a public forum
- People first language – using people first language rather than substance specific language reminds everyone that someone who uses drugs is a person first and should not be defined through the narrow view of a health condition or behaviour.

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About Phoenix Futures

Phoenix are a charity and housing association which has been helping people overcome drug and alcohol problems for 50 years.

We provide residential, prison, community and specialist services. We believe in being the best, we are passionate about recovery, and we value our history and use it to inform our future.

Phoenix Futures are one of the 100 Best Not for Profit Organisations to Work For

Registered Charity England and Wales No 284880 and Scotland SC039008

Appendix: Method

Pulsar is a social listening platform and research consultancy team based in London and Los Angeles. The Pulsar platform enables users to analyse public social media conversations to gain data-driven insights into online audiences, trends, and customer needs. We designed this study as follows:

Dataset: 198,695 social media posts and retweets

Date range: 1 December 2018 – 31 January 2019

Channels tracked: Public social media conversation on Twitter, forums, blogs, news sites, & YouTube.

Country: UK discussion only

Search design: Data is collected on a keyword-matching basis. Keywords tracked include all mentions of drug use, mis-use and addiction, alongside drug names (both street-names, slang and controlled pharmaceuticals, plus alcohol). We also tracked all mentions of names associated with drug users, such as alcoholic, “drug user”, junkie, crackhead, etc – covering the full range of professional, neutral and stigmatising terms.

Analysis: Data is analysed quantitatively in the Pulsar platform to explore trends such as the most frequently-used keywords, themes, and the most-shared messages. Qualitative analysis of language used, and analysing the audiences talking about this topic enabled us to understand the people, attitudes and events driving this discussion.