

Media And Substance Abuse Proliferation In Islamabad, Pakistan



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Abstract: *This research was carried out to explore how the media is instrumental in the rise of substance abuse in Pakistan. Media takes the center stage in strengthening appeal towards commodities and services. In times of boredom and adversity, one often turns to practices that can actually harm their physical, psychological, financial and social life. Drugs and illicit substances which provide the illusory escape from the woes of life, are oftentimes the earliest resort in challenging times. The current study was conducted in Islamabad: the capital of Pakistan. The data were collected from 135 participants who were under specific treatment plans in various rehabilitation centers. The conceptual framework contains “Media Influence” as the independent variable, and “Substance Abuse” as the dependent variable. Chi Square test was used to determine the association between both variables. The results of the study substantiate the assertion that media influence leads to a burgeoning rise in substance abuse by revealing a highly significant association between the independent and dependent variable. While testing the statement whether media influence results in the rise of substance abuse, a highly significant association was found. The study proposes that the tide of substance abuse that is wreaking havoc upon society must be stemmed at the earliest. It has become considerably easy to obtain drugs in the localities of Pakistani cities, owing to a multitude of factors. Media is one of the core factors responsible for the rampant harmful exercise. A multi-pronged strategy must be employed to put an end to the illegal purveying of drugs and also to the miseries it has caused.*

Keywords: Drugs, Substance Abuse, Media Influence

Introduction

Substance abuse is one of the major social problems battering the world today. The drifting of youth towards the illicit use of drugs has raised several red flags and has become a serious concern for governments, the civil society and families. The use of prescription drugs for non-medical purposes is referred to as drug abuse. In a similar context, the use of drugs in certain

ways and dosages that jeopardizes the person or those around them, in terms of health, finances and social capital is also an extension of the phenomenon. The indiscriminate usage of such illicit substances, despite the multifarious risks involved represents a situation of substance abuse and subsequently, dependence (Greenfield et al., 2010; Rowe & Liddle, 2003;

Somani & Meghani, 2016).

Substance abuse occurs in phases, such as the beginning of drug usage or drug acquisition. A person's drug use typically increases after they begin using drugs heavily. When this persists, the individual develops an addiction and becomes dependent on narcotics. The last stage is relapse brought on by abstinence (Abadinsky et al., 2017; Baumrind & Moselle, 2014; Werch et al., 1993).

Among the substances that are commonly abused are sedative pills, alcohol, heroin, marijuana (ganja), tobacco, bhang, hashish (charas), different cough syrups, brown sugar, and cocaine. Drug abuse has detrimental impacts on society as well as upon the person. A person's health is severely harmed by drug abuse (Biswas et al., 2018; Khanh, 2018). In this case, one may argue that drug abuse also has detrimental impacts on one's capacity to make money. The increase in crime is negatively impacted by drug abuse. Drug use impairs a person's capacity for reason, increasing their likelihood of committing crimes (Caliman et al., 2025; Thilagaraj, & Karthikeyan, 2019).

The Minister of State for the Interior of Pakistan claims that over half of students in schools in the nation's capital region were drug users (Shoukat et al., 2025). In 2021, there were 231 million people living in Pakistan, according to World Bank data (World Bank, 2023). Over 64% of the country's population is under 30, and 29% is in the 15–29 age range. Since the 1990s, Pakistan, the world's fifth most populated nation, has seen an increasing youth bulge. The pace with which the practice of substance abuse is being projected on media platforms put this population bracket at a much higher risk of substance abuse (NUST, 2025).

Social media platforms offer opportunities for creating and putting into practice interventions to reduce the likelihood that young people may use drugs (Buller et al., 2019; Capurro et al., 2014). Conversely, other research indicates that students are using drugs more frequently as a result of social media. According to Ezeji et al. (2025), teens who use major social media platforms frequently are more likely to buy

tobacco, use drugs, and drink alcohol than those who either don't use social media at all or use it infrequently.

Social media users are more likely than non-users to smoke, consume alcohol or marijuana, and the risk is larger for those who have seen pictures of young people abusing drugs or alcohol or passing out (Kim et al., 2017; Moyle et al., 2019). Additionally, drug use is common and routinely glorified on social media by celebrities and other individuals (Odenigbo et al., 2025; Vogel et al., 2021). Teens who use social media regularly are exposed to content that may raise their risk of developing drug and alcohol problems, according to a recent study. The majority of content about drug and alcohol use was portrayed positively, according to the study, which examined over 16 million posts from Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, TikTok, and Weibo (Kazemi et al., 2017; Rutherford et al., 2023). Those using online social networking sites in an unhealthy way are more likely to struggle with controlling their emotions and drink excessively (Moewaka et al., 2016). By revealing a connection between increased social media use and alcohol use, another study improves the field of inquiry. The long-term impacts of media exposure to substance-related information on descriptive norms, as these effects were significant throughout adolescence and early adulthood (Brunborg et al., 2017; Cheng et al., 2024). Higher levels of exposure to substance-related content have been associated with positive norms and attitudes around alcohol and drug use (Davis et al., 2019; Hendriks et al., 2018). Even the International Narcotics Control Board's (INCB) 2021 Annual Report reveals mounting evidence of a connection between drug usage and social media exposure (Larik et al., 2024).

The relationship between drug use, exposure to digital content, and social media use has been the subject of numerous researches. Teens are more likely to use drugs if they use social media more regularly and are exposed to more ads and other kinds of information in their postings (Brunborg et al., 2017; Vogel et al., 2021). Another study found a cross-sectional correlation between teens in Canada who use e-

cigarettes and often use social media (Sampasa et al., 2018). Regular exposure to e-cigarette-related content on social media could normalise e-cigarette use (Vogel et al., 2021). Social media posts often depict e-cigarette use as glamorous (Christian et al., 2025). If teenage social media users observe other young people, friends, acquaintances, or influencers using e-cigarettes and appearing happy and well-liked, they may consider this as a behaviour to emulate (Kim et al., 2017; Odenigbo & Ajibo, 2025; Vogel et al., 2021). Three studies have found an association between e-cigarette use and exposure to e-cigarette content (such as social media marketing and/or peer-generated postings); two of the studies included college students (Larik et al., 2024).

The situation doesn't vary when entertainment, marketing, digital media along with social networking sites and other platforms on internet sharing such content is brought into the equation (Kazemi et al., 2017). According to marketing and media study, teens and young adults are greatly impacted by portrayals of alcohol, nicotine, marijuana, and e-cigarette usage (Jackson, et al., 2018). One of the main ways to learn about substance use is through media representations (Odenigbo & Ajibo, 2025; Somani & Meghani, 2016). Juvenile substance usage is significantly impacted by paid industry advertising and media portrayals of substance use, particularly for children who lack firsthand experience (Scott et al., 2025). Danish (2016) reported that students purchased illegal drug through social media apps such as WhatsApp with minimal difficulty. Larrick et al. (2014) also reported that drug dealers use social media apps to buy and sell illegal drugs.

There is a strong correlation between young people's exposure to substance use on social media and their later drug use (Janssen, 2018). Social media use also allows users to learn about the lifestyles and habits of peers who are not in their immediate social circles, such as "influencers"—online users with a large following who are paid to promote a product (Alves et al., 2021). Peer-generated social media messaging, however, can influence teenagers' e-cigarette use even more than marketing and

commercials. In general, social media use is expanding quickly throughout the globe. In addition to practices like substance addiction, worries regarding problematic or abusive social media use have also mounted (Larik et al., 2024). Previous research has connected problematic social media use to higher mental health symptoms and heavy episodic drinking (Schroeder et al., 2025). Students' behavior may be less influenced by peers than that of teenagers, and the impact of social standards may decrease with age (Eisenberg et al., 2014). However, unless they explicitly promote branded products, there are no restrictions on the placement of sustenance products in entertainment media such as music, films, and television (Jackson et al., 2018).

Individual and societal risk perceptions, as well as behavioural intentions, are greatly impacted by exposure to social media content regarding shared interests, such as substance addiction. There seems to be a lot of substance-related content on social media that either openly displays or promotes substance usage. Additionally, since teenagers and young adults are the most vulnerable and frequent users of social media, the ubiquitous accessibility of this content may have deleterious impacts on attitudes, behaviours, and risk perceptions connected to substance use. The most common categories of content are Health, Safety, and Harms, Promotion, Advertisement, and Informative Content (Larik et al., 2024).

Elevated concerns have surfaced regarding the potential ramifications of drug content proliferating on social sites, serving as a catalyst in shaping normative behaviors associated with drug utilization (Batool et al., 2024). This exposure has the potential to increase drug demand among younger people. One overarching study, wherein, the majority of participants were 19 years of age or younger (73%), with a notable 54% of them being female contained affirmative conversations about cannabis, mixed with humorous undertones. In their investigation, the scientists highlighted social media's powerful influence during adolescence's formative years, illuminating its potential to influence drug-related behaviours

(Opara et al., 2026). Alves et al., (2021) and Larik et al. (2024) that media widely promotes drugs related contents. Dozier et al., (2005) that direct cigarette advertisements on TV have been replaced by cigarette-smoking heroes in movies, creating a kind of fantastical connection between concepts of courage, playfulness, and success. While, Strasburger et al., (2008) stated that the media is promoting substance use, giving young people the impression that it is a normal behavior. The most popular sharing platform is YouTube, but young people also use picture-sharing websites (Bello-Bravo et al., 2024). Additionally, users can share images and videos on a variety of other social media platforms that aren't specifically related to sharing visual media. A strong connection exists between YouTube, drug films, and drug education. This conclusion has been reached after thoroughly analyzing the content of 750 drug videos uploaded on various media platforms. Notably, depending on the drug type, only 16% of the drug-related videos were happy (Euphoric); there were no jubilant videos for heroin or crystal meth. Along with legal high

commercials, the survey also found cautionary videos (also known as "vernacular prevention") and "Do-it-yourself" (DIY) videos that offered guidance on tasks like cultivating cannabis. Numerous drug-themed apps are available in app stores, including ones that aim to discourage drug use and let users see the physical damage caused by methamphetamine use (Batool et al., 2024).

Methodology

This research employed a quantitative research design to explore how the media results in the rise of substance abuse in Pakistan. The current study was conducted in Islamabad: the capital of Pakistan. A sample of 135 respondents was selected using convenience sampling method. The data were collected through structured questionnaire from respondents who were under specific treatment plans in various rehabilitation centers. The conceptual framework contains "Media Influence" as the independent variable, and "Substance Abuse" as the dependent variable. Chi Square test was used to determine the association between both variables.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage distribution of Media influence

Statement	Yes	No	Don't know
Media has promoted the trend of drug abuse by showing role models using drugs	115 (85.2%)	18 (13.3%)	2 (1.5%)
The frequent advertisement of mild drugs is increasing the rate of drug abuse	115 (85.2%)	17 (12.6%)	3 (2.2%)
The role of media in prevention of substance abuse has shrunk as no harmful consequences are not shown	90 (66.7%)	42 (31.1%)	3 (2.2%)
Drug abusers come to know about new drugs through media	104 (77.0%)	29 (21.5%)	2(1.5%)
People fancy their favorite media stars and try to mimic them in every way, thereby introducing drugs into their lives	104 (77.0%)	25 (18.5%)	6 (4.4%)
Exposure of children to drug related content on television promotes drug abuse	117 (86.7%)	17 (12.6%)	1 (.7%)
Media advertisements of drugs are generally positive and invite no criticism	105 (77.8%)	28 (20.7%)	2 (1.5%)
Drug can be ordered and purchased through new age media like internet with minimal difficulty	65 (48.1%)	69 (51.1%)	1 (.7%)

Chronic drug abusers keep in contact with drug sellers through media to ensure continuous supply of drugs	98 (72.2%)	36 (26.7%)	1 (.7%)
People see countless messages in print and electronic media advertising the benefits of medicines and drugs	99 (73.3%)	35 (25.9%)	1 (.7%)

Explanation

Table no1 shows the ranked order of media's negative contributions to drug abuse. It is clear from the table, that amongst the total respondents, 115 (85.2%), agreed with the assertion that media has fanned the use of drugs, by presenting role models using drugs, while, 18 (13.3%) of the respondents contradicted the above statement. On the other hand, 2 (1.5%) of the respondents were oblivious to any aforesaid correlation. This statement has been corroborated by the conclusions of Alves et al., (2021) and Larik et al. (2024) that media widely promotes drugs related contents.

Moreover, the table illustrates that 115 (85.2%) of the respondents agreed with the proposition that people resort to drugs after watching mild drugs advertisements, whereas 17 (12.6%) disagreed and 3 (2.2%) of the respondents had no opinion . This statement has been aided by the findings of Dozier et al., (2005) that direct cigarette advertisements on TV have been replaced by cigarette-smoking heroes in movies, creating a kind of fantastical connection between concepts of courage, playfulness, and success.

The findings further present that 90 (66.7%) of the respondent concurred that drug abuse has been increased because of media ignoring its role in the prevention of drug abuse by failing to show it's destructive patterns. Among the total 135 respondents, 42 (31.1%) contradicted this statement while 3 (2.2%) of the respondents reported having no opinion. this statement has been supported by the findings of Strasburger et al., (2008) stated that the media is promoting substance use, giving young people the impression that it is a normal behavior. While, elevated concerns have surfaced regarding the potential ramifications of drug content proliferating on social sites, serving as a catalyst in shaping normative behaviors associated with drug utilization (Batool et al., 2024).

Moreover, the tables presents that 104 (77.0%) of the respondents endorsed the proposition that drug abusers come to know about new drugs through media, whereas (21.5%) repudiated the statement and 2 (1.5%) of the respondents remained neutral. The statement is being aided by the specific conclusions of Micheal (2011) that the media is drawing the attention of drug addicts to new drugs. Bryan (2025) also opined that the media promoting drugs often lacks risk information.

Furthermore, it's evident from the table above, that 104 (77.0%) of the respondents consented to the premise that substance abuse can partly be spawned by mimicking celebrities. 25 (18.5%) of the respondents disaffirmed this statement, while 6 (4.4%) of the respondents had no idea about it. This statement has been facilitated by the conclusions of Lathan et al. (2021) states that people imitate the drug related act of models and celebrities. The table further shows that 117 (86.7%) of the respondents supported the claim that exposure of children to drug related content on television promotes drug abuse, whereas 17 (12.6%) of the respondents debunked the statement and 1 (.7%) didn't share their stance. This statement has been corroborated by the findings of Strasburger (2010) and Nunez-Smith et al. (2010) that the media plays a role in involving children in drug use.

Furthermore, the table presents that among the total respondents, the majority 105 (77.8%) believed it to be true that media air a series of positive advertisements about drugs, while 28 (20.7%) contradicted and 2 (1.5%) shared no opinion. Farrelly et al. (2005) that direct cigarette advertisements on TV have been replaced by cigarette-smoking heroes in movies, creating a kind of fantastical connection between concepts of courage, playfulness, and success. While, Strasburger et al. (2008) stated that the media is promoting substance use,

giving young people the impression that it is a normal behavior.

In a similar vein, 65 (48.1%) of the respondents agreed to the assertion that drug can be ordered and purchased through new age media like internet with minimal difficulty, while 69 (51.1%) of them contradicted this statement, whereas, 1 (.7%) of the respondents had no perception about it. this statement has been supported by the findings of Jackson, et al. (2018) stated that teens and young adults are greatly impacted by portrayals of alcohol, nicotine, marijuana, and e-cigarette usage. Danish (2016) reported that students purchased illegal drug through social media apps such as WhatsApp with minimal difficulty. Larrick et al. (2014) also reported that drug dealers and abuser use social media apps to buy and sell illegal drugs.

Furthermore, the study illustrates that 98

(72.2%) of the respondents endorsed the idea that Chronic drug abusers keep in contact with drug sellers through media to ensure continuous supplies of drugs, while 36 (26.7%) refuted the above statement. Moreover, 1 (.7%) of the respondents reported no opinion. This proposition has been supported the findings of Sanden et al. (2022) and Larrick et al. (2014) that drug abuser use social media apps to buy illegal drugs. The table further shows the positive consent of 99 (73.3%) of the respondents towards the statement that people see countless messages in print and electronic media advertising the benefits of medicines and drugs. Notwithstanding, 35 (25.9%) of the respondents debunked this statement, while 1 (.7%) expressed no opinion. Doyle (2023) and Mintzes (2012) stated that people see numerous messages in social media apps and TV advertising the benefits of medicines and drugs.

Table 2: Bi- Variate Analysis of Media influence and Substance abuse

Statement	Chi square / P Value
Media has promoted the trend of drug abuse by showing role models using drugs	$\chi^2=97.139$ (p=0.000)
The frequent advertisement of mild drugs is increasing the rate of drug abuse	$\chi^2=114.021$ (p=0.000)
The role of media in prevention of substance abuse has shrunk as no harmful consequences are not shown	$\chi^2=179.624$ (p=0.000)
Drug Abusers come to know about new Drugs through media	$\chi^2=131.270$ (p=0.000)
People fancy their favorite media stars and try to mimic them in every way, thereby introducing drugs into their lives	$\chi^2=222.157$ (p=0.000)
Exposure of children to drug related content on television promotes drug abuse	$\chi^2=79.162$ (p=0.000)
Media advertisements of drugs are generally positive and invite no criticism	$\chi^2=127.506$ (p=0.000)
Drugs can be ordered and purchased through new age media like internet with minimal difficulty	$\chi^2=74.986$ (p=0.000)
Chronic drug abusers keep in contact with drug sellers through media to ensure continuous supply of drugs	$\chi^2=136.209$ (p=0.000)
People see countless messages in print and electronic media advertising the benefits of medicines and drugs	$\chi^2=131.911$ (p=0.000)

Explanation

The data presented in table 2 encompasses the association between media and drug abuse. The recorded responses are given below. The study exhibits the presence of a highly significant association ($p=0.000$) while analyzing the statement of media playing a contributing role towards the ascending use of drugs, through serials showing role models using drugs. The table further a strong statistically significant association ($p=0.000$) while analyzing the statement of frequent advertisements exhorting towards substance abuse. While testing the association between the failure of media to curtail the pace of substance abuse through airing its deleterious consequences and the hike in the harmful practice, a highly significant association ($p=0.000$) was revealed.

The table further shows the presence of a statistically significant association ($p=0.000$) between knowledge about the new drugs in markets through media, the rise in the trend of substance abuse. Moreover, the table shows the presence of a highly significant association ($p=0.000$) while analyzing the statement of people trying to become like their favorite media stars, and adopting their bad habits on screen. The table further shows the presence of a highly significant association ($p=0.000$) between the perceptions of children's exposure to drug related contents on mass media and its role in a significant rise in substance abuse. Moreover, a highly significant association ($p=0.000$) was discovered while analyzing the statement of media ignoring its role in criticizing the use of drugs. Additionally, a highly significant relationship ($p=0.000$) was discovered while analyzing the proposition that drugs can be ordered and purchased through the new age media with minimal difficulty. It is evident from the table above, that a highly significant association ($p=0.000$) existed while analyzing the statement of drug abusers keeping in an uninterrupted contact with dealers through internet and new age media, thus, ensuring continuous supply of illicit substances. The table further illustrates that a highly significant association ($p=0.000$) was being found while analyzing the statement of people visualizing

countless messages on print and electronic media, ensuring the benefits of mild drugs and medicines.

Conclusion

The findings of the study reflect heavily upon the various ways in which media, which is considered an important pillar of the state, can add to woes of millions of its users. The study points to the specific loopholes exploited within the frameworks of the various media modalities, which can become a source of negative inspiration and destructive exposure. The way advertisements promote the use of drugs such as analgesics, laxatives, anti-depressants and cigarettes, give birth to a much greater problem that is not easy to tackle. Media also has ignored its primary role of educating the masses regarding the destructive role substance abuse can play, and the miseries it can bring about. From advertisements of drugs, acting as a source of motivation towards substance abuse, and showing movie stars who don't have to answer for their excesses to provision of platforms for acquiring drugs, media has its own share of complicity in the problem of substance abuse. Regulation of media by putting on reasonable limitations shall be made a priority. Movies, clips and excerpts glorifying drugs shall be censored. Podcasts, talk shows and other programs centered on healthy lifestyles shall be encouraged to air.

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