



THE IMPACT OF PEER PRESSURE AND SOCIAL NETWORKING ON
SUBSTANCE USE AMONG YOUTH IN PESHAWAR

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Abstract

Substance use among youth has become a challenging global public health concern. The issue is influenced by social and environmental factors. This study investigates the impact of peer pressure and social networking on substance use. Using Social Learning Theory as a foundation, the study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional approach, using standardized instruments: the Peer Pressure Resistance Questionnaire (PPRQ), the Social Networking Addiction Scale (SNAS) and the Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST-20). A sample of 200 male in-patients diagnosed with substance use disorder was drawn from the Alkhidmat Psychiatric and Drug Rehabilitation Center in Peshawar. Descriptive statistics indicated moderate levels of peer pressure ($M = 78$), social networking use ($M = 62.72$), and a high risk of substance use ($M = 29.71$). Regression analysis revealed that peer pressure positively predicted substance use ($\beta = .26$, $t(197) = 3.13$, $p = .002$), while social networking use was a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -.23$, $t(197) = -2.82$, $p = .005$). Peer pressure and social networking use demonstrated a substantial positive correlation ($r = .54$, $p < .001$). Intervention programs should promote youth resilience to peer pressure, responsible social media use, and healthy activities.

Keywords: Substance Use, Youth, Peer Pressure, Social Networking, Social Learning Theory, Drug Addiction, DAST-20, PPSQ, SNAS.

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INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, peer influence and social networks play a pivotal role in shaping youth behaviors and decision-making skills. These skills are being influenced by the rising trend of substance use. Substance use among youth is a growing global concern, with significant implications for physical and mental health, as well as broader social, psychological, and economic challenges. Youth represent the future of a nation, and adolescence is a critical developmental period marked by emotional, psychological, and physical transitions. During this phase, individuals are highly driven to explore, establish identity, gain autonomy, and seek peer acceptance. Degenhardt et al. (2016) found that young adults are particularly prone to substance use due to curiosity, susceptibility to peer pressure, a desire for experimentation, and rebellion against authority figures. Development in this stage occurs largely through social learning via peers and increasingly through social media platforms, which significantly heighten the risk of exposure to substance-related influences.

In today's digital age, the majority of youth are heavily engaged with social media, which has a profound influence on their behaviors, attitudes, and decision-making, particularly in relation to experimentation with substances. Shahnawaz and Rehman (2020) emphasized that constant online connectivity has led to social networking addiction, where individuals remain online around the clock. Belle Wong (2023) reported that users spend an average of 2 hours and 27 minutes on social media daily, with 39% showing signs of addiction. Influencers on these platforms often glorify drug use, portraying it as trendy or aspirational, which can mislead vulnerable youth. Social engagement through comments, likes, and shares further reinforces these risky behaviors. Additionally, youth are highly sensitive to peer acceptance and criticism. Peer pressure, whether direct (e.g., being offered drugs) or indirect (e.g., observing peer behaviors), plays a substantial role in normalizing substance use within social groups.

Peer influence has emerged as one of the most significant contributors to youth substance use. Somani and Meghani (2016) noted that substance abuse is more prevalent in the presence of risk factors like peer pressure, poor parenting, poverty, and early mental health issues. As youth form social networks in both real life and online, their behaviors, attitudes, and norms are shaped accordingly—often in ways that promote drug use. Luikinga et al. (2018) highlighted that adolescents, in particular, are the most vulnerable group for developing substance use behaviors, driven by curiosity and a lack of awareness. Despite numerous studies on addiction, the specific roles of peer influence and social networking remain under-explored.

Social media, internet access, and photo-sharing apps have drastically reshaped youth social interaction. According to Buja et al. (2018), 76% of American teenagers (13–17 years old) use social media, with Instagram (52%) and Snapchat (41%) being particularly popular. These platforms allow for easy exposure to drug-related content and misinformation. Miller et al. (2021) observed that young users are exposed to images and videos that glamorize drug use, often without understanding the associated harms. Furthermore, Costello and Ramo (2017) noted that online platforms provide accessible information on drug acquisition and use.

Social networking sites promote risky behaviors through normalizing unhealthy choices, often portraying them as acceptable or desirable. This widespread exposure can contribute to behavioral addiction and has been linked to clinical disorders related to compulsive internet use (Andreassen, 2015). A study by Roberson et al. (2018) found that

alcohol-related content shared among friends online influenced college students' drinking behaviors. Substance use disorder, as defined by the American Psychological Association, is a cluster of cognitive, behavioral, and physiological symptoms indicating continued substance use despite significant problems (Galanter, Kleber & Brady, 2015). The World Health Organization (2004) associates substance abuse with crime, poor academic performance, risky behaviors, and financial hardship. Layman et al. (2022) emphasized that early and frequent substance use predicts a higher risk of long-term abuse. The youth stage involves critical connections at individual and social levels, making them more susceptible to environmental and peer influences. As stated by Nawi and colleagues (2021), use of psychoactive substances is found high in youth as compared to the old age groups. At youth, the young individual's growth process involves building connections at individual and multiple levels within the environment they are associated with. During adolescence, the variety and timing of the substance acts as a potential risk throughout this stage of life. A study conducted by (Nath et al., 2022) showed that young people are prone to get persistent effects of substance use such as mental health issues, poor academic results, substance use disorders and addiction to different substances. The study dealt with assessment of substance abuse as a public health emergency, its factors and results which were seen among adolescents. Having severe long term implications the use of substances among young individuals is a risky public health concern.

This study aims to investigate the impact of peer pressure and social networking on substance use among youth in Peshawar. It is significant because youth are the backbone of society, and understanding the factors influencing their behaviors is vital for effective prevention. The study explores face-to-face interactions and online networking to identify why substance use is increasing and how social and peer dynamics contribute. Findings will assist educators, policymakers, parents, and mental health professionals in developing informed interventions. This research also contributes to academic disciplines including developmental psychology, social psychology, and media studies. This study seeks to investigate the dual influence of peer pressure and social networking on substance use among adolescents and young adults. Specifically, it aims to examine the extent to which peer pressure contributes to the initiation and continuation of substance use behaviors, and to explore how social networking platforms may normalize or even encourage such behaviors through the glorification of risky lifestyles. Additionally, the study intends to identify and propose effective prevention strategies to reduce substance use among youth. Based on these objectives, the study hypothesizes that there is a significant relationship between peer pressure and substance use among young adults, and that a similar significant relationship exists between social networking and substance use. By analyzing these associations, the research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the social dynamics that fuel substance use, and inform interventions that can mitigate its prevalence in youth populations.

SAMPLE

Sample of the current research comprised of 200 male participants. These participants were male in-patients of Alkhidmat psychiatric and drug rehabilitation center diagnosed with substance use disorder. Their ages were between 16-25 years. Mostly participants belonged to different areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The sample was selected using a purposive sampling method.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The following instruments were used for the data collection.

DRUG ABUSE SCREENING TEST (DAST-20)

The Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST) is a self-report screening tool used to assess drug use, excluding alcohol and tobacco. Developed by Dr. Harvey A. Skinner in 1982 at the Addiction Research Foundation, it consists of 20 yes/no items that indicate the severity of drug-related problems. Modeled after the Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test, it assesses behaviors such as continued use despite problems, legal issues, and relationship difficulties. A “yes” response typically scores one point, with higher scores reflecting greater drug-related issues. The DAST has demonstrated good reliability, with a Cronbach’s alpha above 0.8 (Skinner, 1982).

PEER PRESSURE QUESTIONNAIRE – REVISED (PPQ-R):

The PPQ-R is a validated instrument designed to measure the level of susceptibility to peer pressure in adolescents and young adults. Developed by Sunil Saini and Sandeep Singh, it is a 29-item self-report scale rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). It assesses dimensions such as conformity, resistance to peer influence, and perceived peer expectations. Sample items include "I cannot say NO to my friends even if my parents do not agree" and "I find it difficult to escape peer pressure". The scale consists of five subscales, with higher scores indicating greater peer pressure in each domain. The PPQ-R has strong reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.93 (Saini & Sand, 2016).

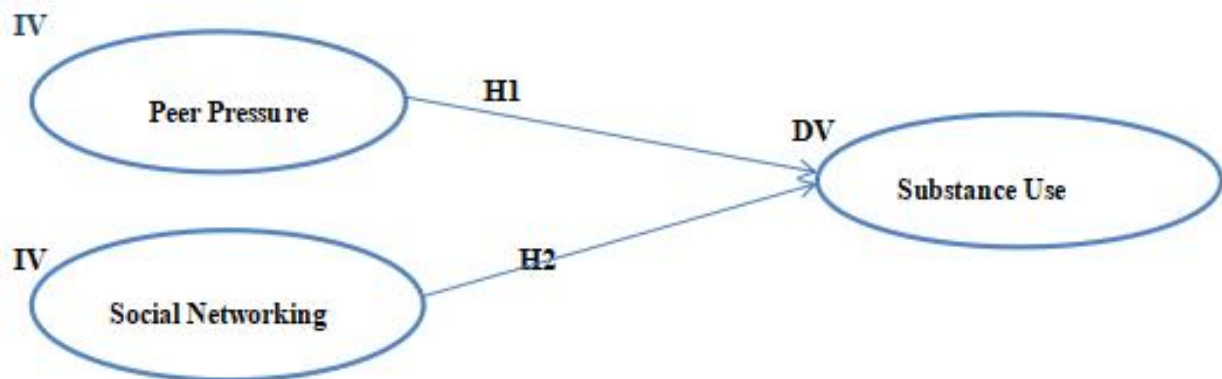
SOCIAL NETWORKING ADDICTION SCALE (SNAS):

The SNAS is a standardized scale developed to measure the extent of problematic or addictive use of social networking sites. It is developed by M. G. Shahnawaz and Usama Rehman. It includes items rated on a Likert scale that capture aspects such as excessive time spent online, compulsive checking, and interference with daily activities. It has retest reliability of 0.88 (Shahnawaz & Rehman, 2020)

PROCEDURE

Prior to data collection permission was taken from the Alkhidmat Drug Rehabilitation and Psychiatric Center. 200 Participants were in-patient who was diagnosed with substance use disorders of ages 15-25. Only male participants were included in the sample due to lack of female participants in drug rehabilitation center in Peshawar. Informed consent was taken and participants were assured about the confidentiality of their responses. At the end they were thanked for their cooperation in data collection. The data was taken in a respectful way minimizing the chances of any harm to the patients.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK





RESULTS

Statistical analysis techniques such as descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, regression analysis, and ANOVA and T- test were used to analyze the collected data and identify the impact of peer influence and social networking on substance use among youth.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	200	1.00	2.00	1.5300	.50035
Education	200	1.00	3.00	1.9550	.76544
SES	200	1.00	3.00	1.7050	.68580
Area	200	1.00	2.00	1.5600	.49763
PPSQ	200	53.00	105.00	78.0000	10.12783
SNAS	200	47.00	76.00	62.7150	6.42027
DAST	200	23.00	38.00	29.7050	3.28664
Valid N (listwise)	200				

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for peer pressure (PPSQ), social networking use (SNAS), and drug abuse (DAST) scores among 200 participants. The sample had an almost even distribution of age groups (M = 1.53, SD = 0.50) and area (M = 1.56, SD = 0.50), with mostly lower to mid-level education (M = 1.96, SD = 0.77) and lower SES (M = 1.71, SD = 0.69). Peer pressure scores were moderately high (M = 78.00, SD = 10.13), social networking use was moderate (M = 62.72, SD = 6.42), and substance use risk was comparatively high (DAST M = 29.71, SD = 3.29).

TABLE 2 REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Coefficients					
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	T
1	(Constant)	25.525	1.638		15.586
	PPSQ	.078	.025	.258	3.134
	SNAS	-.032	.011	-.232	-2.822

a. Dependent Variable: DAST
To find out if peer pressure (PPSQ) and social networking use (SNAS) significantly predicted substance use (DAST scores), a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. The overall model was statistically significant ($p < .001$), explaining a significant portion of the variance in drug abuse scores. Peer pressure emerged as a significant positive predictor of substance use ($\beta = .26$, $t(197) = 3.13$, $p = .002$), indicating that higher peer pressure is linked to increased risk of drug abuse. Conversely, social networking use was a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -0.23$, $t(197) = -2.82$, $p = .005$), showing that greater use of social networking was associated with lower substance use levels when controlling for peer pressure. These results reflect the complex influence of social factors on substance use among youth in Peshawar.



TABLE 3. ONE-SAMPLE TEST

	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
PPSQ	108.916	199	.000	78.00000	76.5878	79.4122
SNAS	63.095	199	.000	98.31500	95.2423	101.3877
DAST	132.080	199	.000	28.42000	27.9957	28.8443

One-sample t-tests were conducted to determine whether the mean scores of peer pressure (PPSQ), social networking use (SNAS), and drug abuse (DAST) significantly differed from a test value of zero. As expected, all three variables yielded statistically significant results, since zero is not a realistic or meaningful expected value for these measures. For peer pressure, the mean score was significantly greater than zero, $M = 78.00$, $SD = 10.13$, $t(199) = 108.92$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [76.59, 79.41]. Similarly, social networking use showed a mean significantly above zero, $M = 98.32$, $SD = 22.04$, $t(199) = 63.10$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [95.24, 101.39]. For drug abuse, the mean score also significantly exceeded zero, $M = 28.42$, $SD = 3.04$, $t(199) = 132.08$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [27.99, 28.84]. These results confirm the presence of measurable levels of peer pressure, social networking engagement, and substance use among the participants.

TABLE 4 PEARSON CORRELATION

	PPSQ	SNAS	DAST
PPSQ	1	.542** .000	.132 .062
SNAS	.542** .000	1	-.093 .192
DAST	.132 .062	-.093 .192	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The above table indicates Pearson correlation among all variables. There was a significant positive correlation between peer pressure and social networking use, $r(198) = .54$, $p < .001$, indicating that individuals reporting higher peer pressure also tended to report greater use of social networking. The correlation between peer pressure and drug abuse was positive but not statistically significant, $r(198) = .13$, $p = .062$, suggesting a weak relationship that did not reach conventional significance. Similarly, the correlation between social networking use and drug abuse was negative and non-significant, $r(198) = -.09$, $p = .192$, it indicates that there is no relationship.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the impact of peer pressure and social networking use on substance use among youth in Peshawar. Although social networking use did not significantly correlate with substance use at the bivariate level, it significantly predicted lower substance use in the regression model after controlling for peer pressure. This suggests that in this sample, higher engagement with social networking might serve as a distraction or substitute for physical peer group interactions, potentially reducing exposure to drug-using peers. According to the findings, peer pressure significantly predicted substance use, aligning with existing literature that underscores peer influence as a central factor in adolescent drug use. For instance, Simons-Morton and Farhat (2010) reported that

adolescents exposed to peer pressure were more likely to engage in risky behaviors, including substance abuse. Similarly, a study by Maxwell (2002) emphasized that peer-related norms and behaviors play a crucial role in initiating and maintaining drug use, especially in collectivist cultures like Pakistan where peer conformity is often emphasized (Zaman et al, 2024).

Interestingly, the current findings showed a significant negative relationship between social networking use and substance use, which contrasts with several prior studies. For example, Moreno et al. (2011) found that exposure to substance-related content on social media platforms was positively associated with higher levels of drug use among adolescents. Similarly, a study by Nesi et al. (2017) indicated that problematic social media engagement could exacerbate risky behaviors, including substance use, due to exposure to peer modeling and normative influences online. The contradiction in our findings might be attributed to contextual differences; in the current sample, social networking may serve more as a distraction or coping tool rather than a risk enhancer, possibly reducing opportunities for physical peer influence and substance access (Kiani, Ahsan & Khattak, 2024). Moreover, while peer pressure and social networking use were significantly correlated, the association between social networking and drug abuse was non-significant (Roberts, Odumodu & Uye, 2024). This further supports the notion that virtual peer interactions may not necessarily translate into behavioral imitation concerning substance use in certain cultural or socioeconomic settings.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This research offers valuable insights into the impact of peer pressure and social networking on youth substance use but has several limitations. It focused only on males, excluding female participants. The sample from Peshawar may not represent all regions or cultural groups in Pakistan. Other social and environmental factors were not explored, and the cross-sectional design limits causal conclusions.

CONCLUSION

The findings highlight the significant effects of peer pressure and social networking on substance use among youth in Peshawar. Regression analysis showed that peer pressure positively predicted substance use, while social networking was a significant negative predictor when controlling for peer pressure. Although neither variable correlated significantly with substance use at the bivariate level, a strong positive correlation was found between peer pressure and social networking use.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors are well informed and declared no competing interests.

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