

Original Article

A Qualitative Study on Drug Abuse Among University and Medical College Students regarding Motivations and First Encounters

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Abstract

Background: The transition to higher education brings stress, social pressures, and potential for drug use as a coping mechanism. University environments can normalize drug use, while medical students face additional pressures due to their curriculum and potential for self-medication. This qualitative study explores motivations and first encounters with drugs among university and medical college students to understand how these factors contribute to drug abuse in this population. **Objective:** This study employed qualitative methods to investigate the motivations and experiences that lead to initial drug use among university and medical college students. The aim is to understand how social environments, academic pressures, and potential self-medication practices among the students influence these behaviors. **Methodology:** This qualitative study was conducted in the Department of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology, Shaheed Monsur Ali Medical College, Dhaka, Bangladesh from January 2024 and July, 2024 for a period of six months which was employed thematic analysis to explore the motivations and experiences of university and medical college students in Shahbag, Dhaka, Bangladesh, who initiated drug use. Ten participants were recruited through purposive sampling, focusing on students who self-reported current drug use. Data were collected between January and July 2024. **Results:** Thematic analysis revealed students using drugs to cope with academic pressure and stress. Social circles normalized drug use, and students sought perceived benefits like focus improvement. First encounters varied, but peer pressure and curiosity played a role. Importantly, students acknowledged negative consequences. This study offers insights into drug abuse motivations among university and medical students. **Conclusion:** The study informs targeted prevention programs for universities and medical colleges. These programs should prioritize stress management, mental health support, and debunking drug-related myths to prevent initial use and reduce abuse.

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Introduction:

The World Health Organization reports that drug abuse is a significant global public health concern, with far-reaching consequences for individuals, families, communities, and

healthcare systems.¹ Universities and medical colleges, often seen as bastions of academic achievement, are not immune to this pervasive problem. Students within these institutions,

despite their potential and perceived advantages, find themselves susceptible to the allure of illicit substances.²⁻⁵ Understanding the motivations that propel them towards drug use and their experiences during those initial encounters is paramount for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies.

This qualitative study delves into the lived experiences of university and medical college students, aiming to unravel the complex tapestry of factors that contribute to drug abuse within this high-achieving population. We move beyond the sterile world of statistics and charts, seeking instead to capture the voices and stories of individuals who have grappled with the decision to use drugs. While research on drug abuse among university students is extensive, highlighting factors like peer pressure, academic stress, and a desire to experiment, the specific pressures faced by medical college students necessitate a deeper exploration.^{6,7} Their demanding curriculum, coupled with the emotional intensity of their chosen field, may create unique vulnerabilities that warrant further investigation. The transition to higher education, a period marked by increased independence, academic pressure, and the need to establish new social networks, can be particularly stressful. These stressors can create fertile ground for unhealthy coping mechanisms, including drug abuse. The social environment within universities plays a significant role as well. Peer pressure, the desire to fit in, and the normalization of drug use among certain social circles can act as powerful motivators for experimentation. The perception of drugs as a tool for enhancing social interaction, alleviating stress, or even improving academic performance (a particularly concerning trend among medical students) further complicates the issue.⁸⁻¹⁰

Medical college students, however, face an additional layer of complexity. Their notoriously demanding curriculum requires them to dedicate long hours to mastering advanced medical knowledge and skills. This intense academic environment can lead to significant levels of stress, anxiety, and even burnout. Witnessing human suffering on a regular basis during clinical rotations further exacerbates these challenges.^{4,5,10} Beyond the shared pressures with their university counterparts, medical college students contend with a unique environment that can increase their vulnerability to drug abuse. Their studies delve into the pharmacological effects of various substances, potentially leading to a sense of control or a false perception of safety regarding drug use. The "normalization" of drug use, combined with the high prevalence of mental health issues

such as depression and anxiety among medical students, creates a dangerous intersection where self-medication becomes a seemingly viable option.¹¹⁻¹³ The initial encounter with a drug can be a pivotal moment, shaping future patterns of use. Positive or neutral experiences can pave the way for continued exploration, while negative consequences may act as a deterrent. Understanding the context and motivations surrounding these first encounters can provide valuable insights into the decision-making processes of students who initiate drug use. Through qualitative research, we can explore the narratives of students, capturing the emotional state, social context, and perceived benefits that led them to try drugs for the first time. This study aims to shed light on the motivations that propel university and medical college students towards drug use and their experiences during those initial encounters. By delving into the lived experiences of these students, the research seeks to identify the personal and social factors that contribute to the decision to use drugs among university and medical college students, to examine the context surrounding the first encounter with drugs, including the motivations, settings, and perceived benefits or consequences and to compare and contrast the experiences of university and medical college students, identifying any unique pressures or vulnerabilities specific to the medical student population.

This research contributes to the field of drug abuse research by offering a nuanced understanding of the factors that contribute to drug use among this high-achieving population. It delves beyond the statistics to capture the human stories, the complex interplay of pressures, and the motivations that lead students to make choices with potentially devastating consequences. By understanding these factors and the context surrounding first encounters with drugs, we can develop more targeted prevention and intervention strategies specifically tailored to the needs of university and medical college students.

Methodology

Study Settings and Population: This qualitative study was conducted in the Department of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology, Shaheed Monsur Ali Medical College, Dhaka, Bangladesh from January 2024 and July, 2024 for a period of six months. In this qualitative study samples were collected in Shahbag, Dhaka, Bangladesh between January 2024 and July, 2024, employed a thematic analysis approach to delve into the motivations and experiences surrounding first encounters with drug abuse among

university and medical college students. To gain a nuanced understanding of this phenomenon, the research adopted a purposive sampling strategy. Participants were recruited from universities and medical colleges within Dhaka city, specifically targeting students who self-reported current drug use. Inclusion criteria encompassed students enrolled in an undergraduate or postgraduate program at a recognized university or medical college and the willingness to openly discuss their experiences with drug use. This resulted in a total of 10 participants, with 6 students from universities and 4 from medical colleges.

Study Procedure: In-depth interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method. This approach allowed for a deeper exploration of individual experiences and motivations, providing rich and detailed narratives. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility to pursue emerging themes during the interviews. The guide explored key areas such as participants' experiences with drug use, including the types of drugs used, frequency of use, and reasons for initiating use, the social and academic pressures faced by students, both within the university/medical college environment and in their personal lives, the context surrounding the first encounter with drugs, including the setting, motivations, and perceived benefits or consequences, the impact of drug use on participants' academic performance, social life, and mental well-being.

Thematic Analysis: Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes within the interview data. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve the richness of participants' narratives. A rigorous coding process was then undertaken. Initial coding involved assigning codes that captured the essence of each data segment. As the analysis progressed, these codes were reviewed, refined, and grouped into broader thematic categories that reflected the core concepts and experiences expressed by participants.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the research, member checking was employed. This involved sharing a summary of the preliminary findings and inviting participants to provide feedback on the accuracy and completeness of their representation. Additionally, a detailed audit trail was maintained throughout the research process, documenting all methodological decisions, data collection procedures, and analysis steps. By employing in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, this research aimed to capture the lived experiences of university and medical college students struggling with drug abuse. The focus on first encounters

provides a critical window into the decision-making processes and contextual factors that contribute to drug use within this high-achieving population.

Ethical Clearance: All participants provided written informed consent after receiving a detailed explanation of the study's objectives, data collection procedures, and confidentiality measures. To ensure participant anonymity, all identifying information was removed from interview transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms.

Results

This section delves into the key findings of the qualitative study exploring motivations and first encounters with drug abuse among university and medical college students. Thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews revealed several recurring themes that shed light on the complex factors that contribute to drug use within this population.

1. Academic Pressures and Stress

Both university and medical college students emphasized the significant academic pressures they faced. The demands of coursework, deadlines, and the pressure to excel created a constant sense of stress and anxiety. One university student, Sameer (pseudonym), described feeling overwhelmed by academic expectations: "There's this constant pressure to get good grades, to be involved in extracurricular activities, and to land a great internship. It's like you're always on edge, and sometimes drugs just seem like a way to escape for a while."

Medical college students echoed these sentiments, but their experiences were further compounded by the emotional intensity of their chosen field. Witnessing human suffering and the long hours dedicated to clinical rotations added another layer of stress. A medical student, Rasel (pseudonym), shared: "Seeing so much pain and illness takes a toll on you. The pressure to perform flawlessly during rotations is immense. Sometimes, drugs seem like the only way to numb the emotional burden."

2. Social Pressures and Experimentation

The social environment emerged as another significant factor influencing students' decisions regarding drug use. Peer pressure, the desire to fit in, and the normalization of drug use within certain social circles were frequently mentioned by participants. Several students described experimenting with drugs at social gatherings or parties, often influenced by their peers. A university student, Marjan (pseudonym), stated: "There's a real party culture here, and drugs are just part of it. At first, I tried it because everyone else was doing it, and I didn't want to feel left out."

3. Perceived Benefits of Drug Use

Many participants, particularly university students, described using drugs as a coping mechanism to manage stress, anxiety, or social awkwardness. Some students also mentioned using drugs to enhance focus or improve academic performance, a trend more prevalent among medical college students. A medical student, Emily (pseudonym), explained: "The workload in medical school is insane. Sometimes, I felt like I couldn't keep up without using yaba to help me concentrate for longer periods."

4. First Encounters and Motivations

The first encounter with drugs often emerged as a pivotal moment for participants. Positive or neutral experiences with drugs sometimes led to continued exploration, while negative consequences could act as a deterrent. Several students described initiating drug use in social settings, influenced by peers or seeking a sense of belonging. Others mentioned experimenting with drugs out of curiosity or a desire to alleviate stress or anxiety.

5. Differences Between University and Medical College Students

While the core themes of academic pressure, social influences, and perceived benefits of drug use emerged for both university and medical college students, some distinctions were evident. Medical college students placed greater emphasis on the emotional toll of their studies and the "normalization" of prescription drugs within the medical field. They also more frequently described using drugs as a coping mechanism for dealing with the emotional intensity of their chosen profession.

6. Negative Consequences

Despite the perceived benefits some participants initially attributed to drug use, the interviews also revealed a range of negative consequences. These included declining academic performance, strained relationships, and mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. Several participants described feeling trapped in a cycle of drug use and struggling to manage their studies and social lives effectively.

These findings paint a complex picture of the factors that contribute to drug abuse among university and medical college students. The constant pressure to excel, the emotional toll of their chosen fields, and the social environment all play a significant role. Furthermore, the initial motivations and experiences surrounding first encounters with drugs can shape future patterns of use.

Discussion

The findings illuminate the complex web of factors that propel university and medical college students towards drug abuse.

The constant pressure to excel academically, a theme resonating with prior research by stress and drug use among students, creates fertile ground for unhealthy coping mechanisms.² This aligns with another study conducted in the United States of America that identified a positive correlation between academic stress and the misuse of prescription stimulants.⁹ Medical students, burdened by these shared pressures, grapple with the additional emotional intensity of their field. Witnessing human suffering and the long hours dedicated to clinical rotations, as mentioned by participants, add a unique layer of stress, potentially explaining why they more frequently describe emotional burden as a motivator for drug use. This aligns with research done in Lebanon among medical students which highlights the increased prevalence of depression and anxiety among medical students, conditions that can lead to self-medication attempts with drugs.⁴

The social environment emerged as another significant player, influencing students' decisions regarding drug use. Our findings echo research by Ojiaku and Nwokoro on peer pressure and drug use, demonstrating the influence of peer pressure and the normalization of drug use within certain social circles. Students described experimenting with drugs at social gatherings or parties, often influenced by their peers.¹⁴ This underscores the importance of fostering healthy social environments within universities and medical colleges that discourage drug use.

The concerning trend of students perceiving drugs as a tool for enhancing focus or academic performance, more prevalent among medical college students, warrants further investigation. Similar studies on this matter, highlights the potential for dependence and negative health consequences associated with the non-medical use of prescription stimulants.^{6,10}

The first encounter with drugs often emerged as a pivotal moment for participants, aligning with a review article on of psychosocial factors linked to adolescent substance use, which emphasizes the importance of understanding the context and motivations surrounding initial drug use. Positive or neutral experiences, as described by some participants, could lead to continued exploration, while negative consequences could act as a deterrent. These findings highlight the need for intervention strategies that target both preventing initial drug use and mitigating the

risks associated with continued use.^{15,16} While core themes emerged for both university and medical college students, some distinctions were evident. Medical college students placed greater emphasis on the emotional toll of their studies and the "normalization" of prescription drugs within the medical field. This aligns with research titled "Substance Use Among Physicians and Medical Students" which highlights the specific pressures faced by medical students and their increased vulnerability to drug abuse.¹⁷

This study is not without limitations. The qualitative approach provides rich data but may not be generalizable to the entire population. Additionally, self-reported data can be subject to bias. Future research could benefit from employing a mixed-methods approach to gain a more comprehensive understanding. Further exploration is needed on the long-term consequences of drug use on academic performance, mental health, and career trajectories of these students.

Conclusion

The study offers valuable insights for developing multi-pronged prevention and intervention strategies. These strategies should address the academic pressures, social influences, and emotional stressors specific to university and medical college students. Universities and medical colleges have a crucial role to play in fostering healthy campus environments, promoting stress management techniques, and providing accessible mental health resources. Additionally, educational programs aimed at deconstructing the myths surrounding the perceived benefits of drug use are essential for preventing initial drug use and mitigating the risks associated with continued abuse.

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