



A Comprehensive Study of the Causes of Widespread Addictive Substance Use in Educational Institutions of Iran

* Taha Ashayeri  ** Tahereh Jahanparvar 

* Associate Professor & Faculty Member, Department of History and Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili (UMA), Ardebil, Iran. t.ashayeri@uma.ac.ir

** PhD Candidate in Cultural Sociology, Department of Social Sciences, faculty of Social Sciences, Communication, and Media, Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran Branch, Iran. jparvar@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Addictive substance use (tobacco and drugs) is a socio-cultural issue whose prevalence and normalization among school-age groups and student populations (educational institutions/schools) disrupts development, progress, and human capital, prolongs developmental transitions, causes macro socio-economic disorganization, and—most critically—leads to instability, decline, and the breakdown of the family institution. Accordingly, the primary objective of this research is to comprehensively study the causes of widespread addictive substance use (tobacco and drugs) among students using a meta-synthesis approach.

The research employs a qualitative inductive meta-synthesis method, covering the period from 2003 to 2024. Using non-probability (purposive) sampling, 115 scientific documents (extracted from Noormags, Magiran, and IranDoc databases) were screened, with 74 documents ultimately selected as the sample size. Data were analyzed using **Excel** and **MAXQDA 2022**.

The results indicate that multiple factors contribute to the prevalence of addictive substance use among students, including:

Social factors (family dysfunction, social capital dysfunction, negative role models in delinquent environments, weak family social capital, social disorganization)

Economic factors (economic pressures, economic anomie, welfare-class disparities)

Cultural factors (unhealthy leisure styles; awareness and attitudes; parenting models and methods; normalization of drug use; weak school-student interaction; academic alienation; educational crisis; academic failure; declining religious commitments)

Psychological factors (affection crisis, psychological alienation, behavioral-psychological disorders, lack of individual skills)

Demographic factors (individual factors, education level, occupation)

These findings highlight the complex interplay of structural, cultural, and individual dimensions in the spread of substance abuse among students.

Keywords: Drug Abuse, School Institution, Family Structure, Students, Academic Failure.

Corresponding Author: Taha Ashayeri- T.ashayeri@uma.ac.ir



Introduction and Problem Statement

Drug abuse is a global issue (Shafiq et al., 2006). Substance abuse poses a worldwide challenge with harmful and dangerous consequences for the health, wealth, and well-being of nations. Today, among university students, the use of marijuana, cocaine, hallucinogens, stimulants, and illicit drugs has been on the rise (Kabash et al., 2022). Drug and substance abuse among secondary school students is often deeply linked to peer behavior in schools (Iko et al., 2019). Substance abuse is intensifying, with many users deliberately drawn to it. Excessive drug use leads to addiction, a problem increasingly prevalent in Eastern societies. The most commonly abused substances include heroin, marijuana, and narcotics, with usage peaking among young people (Zaman et al., 2015: 41). Substance abuse is defined as the maladaptive and excessive use of drugs. Traditional beliefs suggest that medical use can temporarily reduce stress and anxiety, but over time, individuals develop low resilience and lose their tolerance when attempting to quit (Gelder et al., 2001). This indicates dependency and addiction, making a return to pre-use conditions nearly impossible. Substance abuse is not limited to altered drug states or psychological dependence; it also includes inappropriate use, such as in sports to enhance performance. Such misuse leads to criminal penalties, social harm, and physical and psychological damage (Shafiq et al., 2006).

Key factors contributing to substance abuse include:

Peer and media influence

Stress and anxiety from exams and school pressure

Curiosity and pleasure-seeking

Access to illegal drugs

Desire for new experiences

Influence of family members (parents, siblings, guardians)

Poor parental supervision

Behavioral problems in school

Experts describe the age range of **17 to 28** as the "**window of vulnerability**", as most young people are influenced by their peers' drug use. The desire for social acceptance and fear of rejection are significant factors in youth substance abuse (Sumani & Magni, 2016). According to the **World Drug Report**, drug users often seek peer approval to join subcultures as a way of gaining group acceptance (Merz, 2018: 87). In this process of social integration, conformity to group norms, shared lifestyles, and collective respect become the criteria for membership. Drug use within these groups becomes a dominant recreational activity, fostering identity and subcultural traditions while spreading addiction.

The widespread dependency on drugs in society suggests a cultural reliance on narcotics, where social values, norms, and attitudes have normalized their use (Emmanuel et al., 2003). Drug consumption is a cultural construct, reinforced by traditions and social values embedded in societal structures. While **social, cultural, psychological, and economic factors** contribute to its prevalence, the **family environment** plays the most critical role in shaping substance abuse behaviors. Parents' addictive habits are easily transmitted to their children (Fu et al., 2012).

Substance abuse is one of the most pervasive and distressing problems faced by educational institutions, with devastating consequences for students. It poses a **real threat** to students, and parents, universities, and economies worldwide rely on the potential of youth, which is often derailed by addiction (Namada & Karimi, 2021). **Global statistics** indicate that in **2018**, around **269 million people** used drugs—a **30% increase from 2009**—with adolescents and young adults constituting the largest group. Seizures of amphetamines quadrupled between **2009 and 2018**, and heroin and cocaine production has reached record highs (UNODC, 2020).



In **Iran**, the use of addictive substances among youth, students, and adolescents is rising. Smoking, tobacco, and drug use in schools can disrupt societal development and cultural stability. Positive social and ethnic attitudes toward drug functions among young men further endanger society. Alongside threats like nuclear war, environmental destruction, and poverty, the world now faces a **drug crisis**. Narcotics and environmental pollution are two challenges that no country can tackle alone. The most profitable businesses today—arms and drug trafficking—are industries of human destruction. Thus, addiction is the most **painful social and culturally destructive crisis**. The excessive rise in drug use has led some to call the last decade the "**Age of Drugs**."

Given its severe impact on **academic, social, psychological, economic, and physiological development**, drug abuse is a critical concern for educational systems. Stakeholders—**doctors, sociologists, religious leaders, counselors, and parents**—must address its consequences in schools through **socio-cultural policies** to restrict easy access to drugs.

Studies conducted by searching the keyword "**student addiction**" in Iranian academic databases (IranDoc, Magiran, Noormags, and Jihad University) reveal numerous fragmented studies on the topic. Due to the lack of a **comprehensive synthesis**, this research employs a **qualitative inductive meta-synthesis approach** to answer the following question:

Main Research Question:

What are the comprehensive reasons behind the prevalence of addictive substance use (tobacco and drugs) among students?

Research Method

Given the nature of the study (systematic review), the research method employed is a **qualitative meta-synthesis**. Within the study period (2003–2024), from a statistical population of **115 documents** sourced from **Noormags, IranDoc, Magiran, and Google Scholar**, **74 studies** were ultimately selected for final analysis through **purposive non-probability sampling** after screening and selection.

For data analysis:

Excel was used for frequency and percentage calculations.

MAXQDA 2022 was utilized for coding and generating tree diagrams.

To assess the quality of the selected concepts, **inter-rater reliability** was measured using **Cohen's Kappa index** ($\kappa = (P_{a o} - P_{a e}) / (1 - P_{a e})$), where:

$P_{a o}$ = Observed agreement

$P_{a e}$ = Expected agreement

The Kappa value ranges between **0 and 1**, with values closer to **1** indicating stronger consensus among evaluators. Given the varying and overlapping concepts identified, the final **Kappa value exceeded 0.71**, confirming high validity based on expert assessments.

The **primary researcher** identified **24 concepts**.

An **external expert** identified **21 concepts**.

Of these, **20 concepts overlapped**, demonstrating strong agreement.

5. Research Findings

5.1 Descriptive Findings

Educational Level:

58% high school students

28% middle school students

14% elementary school students

School Type:



32% public schools
 14% private schools
 24% trustee-run schools
 30% exemplary public schools

Ethnic Composition:

79% Persian
 13% Azerbaijani
 3% Kurdish
 3% Baloch
 2% Lur

Regional Development Level:

44% underdeveloped provinces
 29% developing provinces
 27% developed provinces

Study Type:

86% peer-reviewed articles
 13% Master's theses
 1% doctoral dissertations

Discussion and Conclusion

The use of addictive substances, including tobacco and narcotics, has become widespread across social classes, regardless of gender, place of birth, residence, geographical location, or age. With societal shifts from traditional to modern structures—driven by urbanization, migration, socio-cultural heterogeneity, marginalization, socio-economic crises, generational-value gaps, and dysfunctional social controls—substance abuse has emerged as a critical cultural and disciplinary issue. Economic deprivation, unemployment, and the lack of professional opportunities have further incentivized drug trafficking as a means of financial survival, exacerbating the problem.

The prevalence of substance abuse has plunged the younger generation—students, the future workforce—into a profound crisis. These dangerous and socially destructive substances target Iran's aspiring scholars, hindering national progress, global competitiveness, and fostering toxic lifestyles through what can only be termed "demonic commodities" (varieties of narcotics). Given the life-altering consequences for students, this study employed a qualitative meta-synthesis (2003–2024) to comprehensively analyze the root causes.

Key Findings:

Social Factors

Family dysfunction (parental addiction, domestic violence, emotional instability) directly correlates with student substance abuse.

Erosion of social capital (weakened cohesion, distrust in schools) leads to social exclusion, pushing students toward drugs.

Negative role models replace constructive ones, normalizing deviant behaviors like drug use.

Criminogenic environments (unhealthy, polluted, or delinquent surroundings) inherently promote substance abuse.

Weak familial social capital (emotional detachment, secrecy) leaves students vulnerable to addiction.

Social anomie (breakdown of norms) fosters feelings of alienation and lawlessness, trivializing drug use.



B. Economic Indicators

Financial strain (poverty, unemployment) drives students to seek psychological relief through drugs.

Economic anomie (inflation, inequality, unpredictable markets) normalizes substance abuse.

Class disparities (relative deprivation, unmet basic needs) trigger deviant behaviors like drug use.

C. Cultural Factors

Unhealthy recreation (risky behaviors, alcohol, illicit substances) paves the way for addiction.

Misguided attitudes (viewing drugs as recreational or identity-forming) perpetuate abuse.

Authoritarian parenting (punitive vs. corrective) fuels intergenerational conflict and substance use.

Cultural normalization (tribal or subcultural acceptance of drugs) legitimizes abuse.

School alienation (distrust, academic disengagement) correlates with higher drug use.

Educational crises (systemic failures, unmet student needs) create breeding grounds for addiction.

Academic failure (pressure, low self-esteem) exacerbates psychological distress and drug use.

Declining religious commitment weakens self-control and moral safeguards against addiction.

D. Psychological Factors

Emotional deprivation (lack of familial love/support) drives students toward delinquent peer groups.

Identity crises (low self-esteem, self-alienation) increase susceptibility to drugs.

Behavioral disorders (aggression, defiance) are linked to substance abuse.

Poor coping skills (inability to manage stress, peer pressure) lead to deviant behaviors.

E. Demographic Factors

Gender/residence: Males and urban dwellers show higher addiction rates.

Education/employment: Higher education and stable jobs reduce drug use.

Critical Implications

Neglecting students' socio-familial challenges has allowed addiction to permeate this age group, undermining public health, education quality, and human capital development. Schools, as primary socialization hubs, expose students to peer-driven risk behaviors. Differential association theory explains how students learn substance use from their environment (peers, family, community). Without effective preventive mechanisms—formal (schools) or informal (family)—students easily access drugs. Over time, in the absence of healthy alternatives, drugs become recreational tools within delinquent subcultures characterized by bullying and vandalism.

Families that normalize tobacco/drug use further increase addiction risks. Institutional and informal role models act as social media-like influencers, diluting the perceived dangers of drugs until they become mundane. Academic stressors (exams, college entrance competition) and weak socio-familial support systems heighten vulnerability to drug use as a coping mechanism.

Conclusion

This study underscores the multidimensional roots of student substance abuse, demanding integrated interventions:

Family-centric policies (counseling, parenting programs).

School reforms (mental health support, anti-alienation measures).

Economic equity (poverty alleviation, job creation).

Cultural campaigns (debunking drug myths, promoting healthy recreation).

Community engagement (strengthening social capital, religious/ethical reinforcement).



Only through systemic, collaborative efforts can Iran curb this existential threat to its youth and future development.

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