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Marijuana Use and Social Relationships among University Students and Recent Graduates: A Qualitative Study of District Lahore

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Abstract

Marijuana use among university students is a complex social and behavioral issue that may influence peer relationships, intimate relationships, emotional well-being and everyday university life. The present qualitative study explores the relationship between marijuana use and social relationships among university students in District Lahore. Data were collected through in-depth, one-to-one interviews with nine participants who had experience of marijuana use. Purposive and snowball sampling were employed to access participants for whom the subject was personal and sensitive. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns within participants' narratives. The findings reveal a dual and context-dependent effect of marijuana on social relationships. Some participants described increased emotional openness, physical comfort and stronger feelings of intimacy, while others reported becoming more introverted, losing interaction with non-using friends and narrowing their social circles. Marijuana was frequently described as a coping mechanism for work stress, study pressure, anxiety, depression, grief and chronic pain. Curiosity and peer influence were important factors in initiation, while perceived relief helped maintain use. Participants also reported physical and sensory effects such as dry mouth, improved appetite, emotional numbness and relief from pain. When marijuana was unavailable, some participants described restlessness, irritability, anxiety, slight paranoia, sleep difficulties, frustration and helplessness. The study concludes that marijuana use among university students should be understood within its wider social, emotional and peer context. University-based interventions should strengthen healthy coping strategies, positive peer influence, mental health support and healthy social relationships.

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Introduction

University life is an important period of social and personal development. Students move toward greater independence, establish new peer networks, experience academic pressure and develop intimate relationships. These changes make the university environment an important setting for understanding substance use and its social consequences. Emerging adulthood is characterized by

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identity development and changing social roles, which can influence health-related decisions and patterns of social behavior (Arnett, 2007).

Marijuana use has been associated in the literature with a range of academic, psychological and social outcomes. Research has identified peer influence, stress and other social and individual risk factors as important contributors to substance use among young people (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992). Studies have also reported associations between persistent cannabis use and neuropsychological or academic outcomes (Hall & Degenhardt, 2009; Meier et al., 2012). At the same time, social relationships remain an important source of emotional support, belonging and resilience for university students (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2015).

The relationship between marijuana use and social relationships is not necessarily one-directional. Students may encounter marijuana through friends or social networks, while stress, anxiety, grief or relationship difficulties may subsequently encourage continued use. In turn, continued use may alter the composition and quality of social networks. The thesis underlying this article similarly identifies a bidirectional relationship in which social circumstances can influence marijuana use and marijuana use can shape subsequent social experiences.

Peer influence is particularly relevant during late adolescence and early adulthood. Social Learning Theory suggests that behavior can be learned through observation, imitation and reinforcement (Bandura, 1977). Within a university setting, observing peers use marijuana and seeing it associated with relaxation, belonging or pleasurable experiences may reduce perceived barriers to experimentation. The present study therefore examines not only the consequences of marijuana use but also the social circumstances surrounding its initiation and continuation.

A second important perspective is Stress and Coping Theory. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explain coping as the ways individuals respond to situations that they perceive as stressful. The thesis findings show that several participants used marijuana to manage stress, anxiety, grief, study pressure or physical discomfort. Understanding marijuana use through this lens helps explain why a substance may be perceived as helpful in the short term even when participants later describe negative experiences.

Despite the growing literature on marijuana use, there remains a need for context-sensitive qualitative research that examines how students themselves understand changes in their social relationships. Quantitative studies can identify patterns and associations, but in-depth interviews can reveal the meanings participants attach to use, social connection, coping and withdrawal. The present study addresses this need by focusing on university students and young adults with marijuana-use experience in Lahore.

Literature Review

The relationship between marijuana uses and social relationships among university students has received attention from researchers working across substance use, developmental psychology, sociology and public health. University students occupy a distinctive social and developmental position: they are gaining independence, forming new peer networks, managing academic and emotional pressures and developing more mature interpersonal and intimate relationships. These changes can shape patterns of substance use, while substance use itself may influence the way students participate in and experience their social environments. The literature therefore suggests that marijuana use should not be considered only as an individual behavior; it is also embedded in peer relationships, social norms, coping processes and the wider university environment.

The transition into university is commonly associated with increased autonomy and changes in social roles. Arnett (2007) describes emerging adulthood as a period in which individuals explore

identity, relationships and future directions. For university students, this period may involve the development of new friendships and social groups while simultaneously adjusting to academic demands and reduced parental supervision. Such circumstances can create opportunities for both healthy social development and experimentation with behaviors such as substance use.

Existing research has identified social and individual factors as important influences on substance use among young people. Hawkins, Catalano and Miller (1992), for example, emphasize the role of peer relationships, social environment and other risk factors in the development of problem behaviors. In the university context, these influences may be particularly relevant because students spend considerable time with peers and may encounter new social expectations concerning substance use.

Peer influence is one of the recurring themes in research on substance use among young people. Social groups can shape perceptions of what is acceptable, desirable or normal and individuals may adopt behaviors that are modeled or reinforced within their peer environment. Bandura's (1977) social learning perspective provides a useful framework for understanding this process because behavior can be learned through observation, imitation and reinforcement.

The importance of peer networks is also relevant to the present study because marijuana use may begin within a social setting rather than in isolation. Friends may introduce an individual to marijuana, provide access to it or normalize its use. At the same time, continued use can change the composition of an individual's social network. Students who use marijuana may increasingly spend time with other users, while relationships with non-using friends may become less frequent or less comfortable. Thus, peer influence can operate in both directions: social networks can contribute to marijuana use and marijuana use can subsequently reshape those networks.

Social relationships provide students with emotional support, belonging, companionship and practical assistance. Holt-Lunstad, Smith and Layton (2015) emphasize the importance of social relationships for health and well-being, suggesting that the quality and availability of social connections are important aspects of individual functioning. Within university life, friendships and intimate relationships can therefore influence how students respond to stress and adjust to changing academic and social circumstances.

The association between marijuana use and relationships is not necessarily uniformly negative or positive. Some individuals may experience greater emotional openness or perceived social comfort while using marijuana, particularly in settings where its use is shared and socially accepted. Other individuals may become withdrawn, less communicative or increasingly separated from people who do not use marijuana. Hall and Degenhardt (2009) note that cannabis use can be associated with a range of social, psychological and functional outcomes, while the direction and intensity of these effects may vary across users and contexts.

This context-dependent pattern is important for qualitative research because participants may describe experiences that differ substantially from one another. Rather than assuming that marijuana inevitably strengthens or damages relationships, it is more appropriate to examine how use interacts with the particular social circumstances of the individual.

Stress and coping provide another important perspective for understanding marijuana use among university students. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping framework proposes that individuals respond to stressful circumstances through cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage demands and emotional responses. Students may experience academic pressure, relationship difficulties, financial concerns, family problems, grief, anxiety or other challenges that require coping

strategies.

Within this context, marijuana may be perceived by some users as a means of relaxation, emotional escape or temporary relief. Such perceived benefits can contribute to continued use even when negative consequences are also present. The coping perspective does not necessarily mean that marijuana is an effective long-term solution; rather, it helps explain why an individual may continue a behavior that provides immediate subjective relief. This is particularly relevant to the present study because participants described marijuana in relation to stress, emotional difficulties and other pressures in their everyday lives.

Research on cannabis-related outcomes also indicates that use can influence interpersonal functioning in different ways. Meier et al. (2012) reported associations between persistent cannabis use and changes in neuropsychological functioning, highlighting the possibility that sustained use may have consequences beyond the immediate experience of intoxication. Hall and Degenhardt (2009) similarly discuss a range of possible social and psychological consequences associated with cannabis use.

From a relationship perspective, these effects may become visible through changes in communication, emotional availability, social participation or reliability. In some circumstances, shared use may create a sense of companionship or group belonging. In others, frequent use may contribute to withdrawal from non-using friends, conflict or reduced participation in ordinary social activities. The existing literature therefore supports examining both the perceived benefits and the perceived costs of marijuana use rather than treating all social outcomes as identical.

One potentially important consequence of repeated marijuana use is a change in patterns of social interaction. When substance use becomes closely connected to particular people or settings, users may spend more time within those networks and less time in other social environments. This can gradually narrow an individual's circle of interaction. Such changes may be especially important among university students, for whom peer networks are central to everyday academic and social life.

The literature also suggests that substance-related experiences can include psychological and behavioral reactions when a preferred substance is unavailable. These experiences may affect mood, routines and interpersonal behavior. In the present research, participants' accounts of restlessness, irritability, anxiety, sleep difficulty, frustration or helplessness are therefore considered alongside their descriptions of social relationships. This allows the study to examine marijuana use as part of participants' broader lived experiences rather than as an isolated behavior.

Theoretical Relevance to the Present Study

Several theoretical perspectives contained in the thesis provide a useful basis for interpreting the relationship between marijuana use and social relationships. Social Learning Theory helps explain how peer observation, imitation and reinforcement may contribute to initiation and continuation of use (Bandura, 1977). Stress and Coping Theory helps explain why students may turn to marijuana when facing academic, emotional or relationship-related pressures (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem Behavior Theory provides a broader perspective by considering how individual characteristics, perceived environments and behavioral patterns can interact.

Attachment-related perspectives are also relevant because patterns of closeness, trust, emotional expression and support may influence how individuals experience interpersonal relationships.

Together, these perspectives support a multidimensional interpretation of marijuana use in which individual motives, social environments, coping processes and relationship experiences are interconnected.

Research Gap

Although previous research has examined cannabis use, peer influence, psychological outcomes and social functioning, there remains a need to understand how university students themselves describe the relationship between marijuana use and their everyday social lives in the local context of Lahore. Much of the broader literature identifies associations between substance use and social or psychological outcomes, but quantitative associations alone may not capture the meanings students attach to their experiences, including perceived intimacy, emotional openness, withdrawal, peer influence, coping and changes in social circles.

The present qualitative study addresses this gap by focusing on the lived experiences of university students and young adults in District Lahore. Through in-depth interviews, the study examines how participants understand the role of marijuana in their friendships, intimate relationships, emotional lives, coping strategies and wider social interactions. The qualitative approach is particularly suitable for identifying the variation and complexity that may be missed when social consequences are treated as uniformly positive or negative.

Materials and Methods

The study employed a qualitative research design. The purpose of the design was to explore participants' lived experiences and perceptions rather than to calculate prevalence or establish statistical relationships. The thesis describes qualitative research as particularly suitable for sensitive substance-use topics because it allows the researcher to explore the personal and contextual reasons underlying behavior.

The study population consisted of university students and recent graduates with a history of marijuana use in the university environment in Lahore. Nine participants ultimately took part in the interviews and all participants were between 21 and 26 years of age. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct experience relevant to the research questions, while snowball sampling helped reach additional participants through trusted referrals. These approaches were considered appropriate because marijuana use can be difficult to discuss openly due to stigma, privacy concerns and fear of judgment.

Data were collected through private, one-to-one interviews. The interview process was structured but flexible, allowing participants to describe their experiences and enabling the researcher to use probing questions when an answer required clarification or further detail. Questions focused on reasons for initiation and continued use, social relationships, intimate relationships, emotional experiences, perceived physical effects and experiences when marijuana was unavailable.

Ethical considerations were particularly important because of the sensitive nature of the topic. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of participation. Confidentiality was maintained and participants were encouraged to discuss only information with which they were comfortable. The thesis also notes that recruitment was challenging because people were reluctant to discuss personal marijuana-use experiences.

The interview material was analyzed thematically. Recurring ideas and experiences were organized into major themes and sub-themes. This approach allowed the study to preserve the participants' narratives while drawing together common patterns across the nine interviews.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Profile (n = 9)

Study Design	Participants	Location
Qualitative	9 university students / young adults	District Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan

The nine participants were between 21 and 26 years of age. Five were students, two were fresh graduates and two were graduates. Five participants were single, two were in committed relationships and two were married. The demographic profile places the participants within a life stage characterised by academic demands, changing peer relationships and increasing independence.

Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis produced five major areas of findings: marijuana as a coping mechanism and its impact on mental state; varied effects on social engagement and intimate relationships; motivations for initiation and continued use; perceived physical and sensory effects; and experiences associated with the absence of marijuana. The findings demonstrate that participants did not experience marijuana in a single uniform way. Instead, its meaning and perceived effects varied according to emotional circumstances, social context, relationships and physical needs.

Table 2

Major Themes Emerging from the Interviews

Participant	Gender	Age	Occupation	Relationship Status
1	Female	26	Fresh Graduate	Single
2	Male	24	Student	Single
3	Male	25	Student	Committed
4	Male	23	Student	Single
5	Female	24	Graduate	Married
6	Male	21	Student	Single
7	Male	26	Fresh Graduate	Married
8	Female	25	Student	Single
9	Female	23	Student	Committed

Marijuana as a Coping Mechanism and its Impact on Mental State

The most prominent theme was the use of marijuana as a coping mechanism. Participants described using it to manage stress, anxiety, depression, study pressure and grief. For some, marijuana represented an immediate way to obtain psychological distance from difficult circumstances. Participant 1 described starting use during a period of work-related stress and anxiety and initially experiencing it as an 'escape from reality.' Participant 6 similarly described marijuana as a way to cope with study pressure, referring to it as a temporary 'mental pause button.' Participant 2 reported using marijuana following the death of a friend as a temporary escape from grief.

These narratives are consistent with Stress and Coping Theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which emphasizes the role of coping responses when individuals perceive demands as difficult to manage. The findings suggest that marijuana was often valued for the immediate relief it appeared to

provide. However, participants also described negative experiences when they could not use it, including aggression and depressed feelings, panic and anxiety, restlessness, irritability, paranoia and frustration. Thus, the same behavior that was initially perceived as coping could become part of a continuing cycle in which the absence of marijuana itself became distressing.

The findings should not be interpreted as establishing a clinical diagnosis of dependence for every participant. Rather, they document participants' own descriptions of difficulty when marijuana was unavailable. This distinction is important in qualitative research because the purpose is to represent lived experience rather than to make clinical diagnoses from interview narratives.

Varied Impacts on Social Engagement and Intimate Relationships

The effect of marijuana on social engagement was mixed. Participant 1 reported increased emotional openness and physical comfort in intimate moments, describing a perception of greater connection and satisfaction with a partner. Participant 8 similarly reported that marijuana helped her regain comfort with touch and enhanced physical and emotional bonding. These accounts indicate that some participants perceived marijuana as a social or intimate facilitator in particular contexts.

In contrast, Participant 7 described becoming more introverted after marijuana use, losing interaction with many friends and becoming mainly connected to friends who also used marijuana. This finding is particularly important because it illustrates how marijuana may simultaneously strengthen a narrow peer connection while weakening broader social networks. The participant's account suggests social narrowing rather than a simple increase or decrease in sociability.

The findings are compatible with Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), because continued interaction with peers who use marijuana can reinforce both the behavior and the associated social identity. They also reflect the thesis discussion of social selection, in which people may increasingly associate with others who share similar patterns of behavior. The result can be a smaller social circle and reduced contact with non-using friends who might otherwise provide alternative forms of support.

Motivations for Initiation and Continued Use

Participants reported several reasons for starting and continuing marijuana use. Curiosity and peer influence were clearly identified in Participant 9's account. She explained that she was curious because people around her were using marijuana and decided to try it. This illustrates the role of observational learning and peer acceptability in initiation. When a behavior appears common within a valued social group, experimentation may seem less risky or unusual.

Personal stress was another motivation. Participant 1 linked use to work stress and anxiety and described feeling relaxed after use. Participant 5 described chronic pain management as the primary reason for use and reported that it helped with muscle pain and made daily life easier. These accounts demonstrate that marijuana use cannot be understood only as recreational behavior. Participants attached different functional meanings to it, including emotional relief, social influence and perceived pain management.

Taken together, the findings suggest that initiation and continuation may involve different but overlapping mechanisms. Peer influence may introduce a student to marijuana, while the perceived ability to reduce stress or discomfort may subsequently strengthen continued use. This combination supports the thesis application of Social Learning Theory and Stress and Coping Theory.

Perceived Physical and Sensory Effects of Marijuana

Participants described both positive and negative physical and sensory effects. Participant 7 reported chronic dry mouth but also a noticeable improvement in appetite. Participant 4 described a

'strange kind of peace' and emotional numbness, explaining that things that normally caused concern seemed less troubling. Participant 8 emphasized that for her the experience was less about becoming 'high' and more about profound relief from pain.

These subjective experiences matter because they influence how users evaluate the substance. A person who associates marijuana with calmness, emotional distance, improved appetite or pain relief may perceive immediate benefits even when other consequences are present. The findings therefore support a balanced understanding of substance use that recognizes participants' perceived benefits while also considering the risks and difficulties they described.

Experiences When Marijuana Was Unavailable

Participants described several difficulties when marijuana was unavailable. Participant 1 reported restlessness and irritability and difficulty settling down. Participant 7 reported slight paranoia and trouble sleeping. Participant 8 described frustration and helplessness when pain returned. Participant 1 also described anxiety and depressive feelings in periods when she could not use marijuana.

These accounts indicate that the perceived benefits of marijuana were accompanied by difficulties during non-use for some participants. The pattern is relevant to the concept of negative reinforcement: if using marijuana removes an unpleasant state, the relief may strengthen the likelihood of using it again. At the same time, because the study is based on self-reported qualitative experiences, these findings should be described as reported withdrawal-like or non-use experiences rather than as clinical determinations of cannabis use disorder.

Implications for Universities and Social Policy

The findings have practical implications for universities. First, prevention should not rely exclusively on punitive messages. Because participants frequently connected marijuana use with stress, anxiety, grief, study pressure and pain, student support services should provide accessible alternatives for coping with these problems. Counseling, stress-management programs, resilience activities and early psychological support may reduce reliance on substances as a primary coping response.

Second, peer influence can be used positively. Peer-led awareness programs, substance-free recreational activities, mentoring and supportive student groups can create alternative sources of belonging. This is particularly relevant to participants who described their social circles becoming centered on marijuana use.

Third, mental health and substance-use support should be connected. A student who uses marijuana to cope with anxiety, grief or academic pressure may require assistance with the underlying difficulty rather than advice about substance use alone. Finally, universities should promote healthy communication and relationship skills so that students have non-substance-based ways of managing intimacy, conflict, loneliness and social anxiety.

Limitations of the Study

The study has several limitations. The sample included only nine participants and was selected through purposive and snowball sampling; therefore, the findings are not statistically generalizable to all university students in Lahore. The subject is sensitive and the researcher reported difficulty in recruiting people willing to discuss their experiences openly. The study also relied on self-reported narratives, which may be affected by memory, privacy concerns or social desirability. Finally, the qualitative design provides depth and context but does not measure prevalence or establish causal relationships.

Conclusions

The study demonstrates that marijuana use and social relationships among university students are closely interconnected but not in a uniform way. Some participants perceived increased emotional openness, physical comfort and intimacy, whereas others experienced introversion, loss of interaction with non-using friends and a narrowing of social networks. These contrasting experiences indicate that the social consequences of marijuana depend on the context and meaning attached to use.

A central finding is that marijuana was frequently used as a coping mechanism. Participants associated use with relief from work stress, study pressure, anxiety, grief and chronic pain. Curiosity and peer influence were also important in initiation. However, when marijuana was unavailable, some participants reported restlessness, irritability, anxiety, paranoia, sleep difficulties, frustration and helplessness. The findings therefore illustrate the tension between short-term perceived benefits and longer-term social and emotional difficulties.

Overall, the study supports a comprehensive rather than one-dimensional response to marijuana use among university students. Effective prevention should address peer environments, emotional stressors, coping skills, mental health needs and social connectedness at the same time. Future research should use larger and more diverse samples and, where possible, longitudinal designs to examine how marijuana use and social relationships change over the course of university life.

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