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Marijuana Use and Social Relationships among University Students: A Case Study of District Lahore

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Abstract
This study explores the psychological and emotional motivations behind marijuana use among university students in Lahore, Pakistan. Specifically, it investigates how students use marijuana as a coping mechanism to manage stress, anxiety, grief, and academic pressure. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with nine university students aged between 21 and 26 who reported active or past marijuana use. Thematic analysis revealed that students often turn to marijuana for temporary emotional relief, using it to escape psychological distress caused by academic burdens, emotional pain, and social expectations. However, while marijuana initially provides perceived relief, it also contributes to increased dependency and negative emotional states in the absence of use. Findings suggest an urgent need for integrated mental health support systems, awareness programs, and non-substance-based stress management interventions in university settings. This study adds nuanced understanding to the socio-psychological dimensions of marijuana use and offers insights for policymakers, educators, and health professionals.

Keywords: *Marijuana, University Students, Stress, Anxiety, Grief, Coping Mechanism, Lahore, Qualitative Research*

1. Introduction

Marijuana use among university students has emerged as a pressing concern globally and in Pakistan. In Lahore, a city characterized by intense academic competition, social transitions and cultural expectations, the phenomenon of marijuana use is increasingly being understood through the lens of emotional regulation and

coping. Students often find themselves under immense psychological strain and in the absence of sufficient institutional or familial support, marijuana is perceived by some as a tool for relief. The transitional nature of university life, involving the shift from adolescence to adulthood, often brings a host of stressors—academic expectations, identity struggles, career anxieties and emotional conflicts. These can lead to increased vulnerability to substance use (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Hall & Degenhardt, 2009).

Unlike recreational motivations often cited in Western literature, many students in Pakistan, particularly in Lahore, report using marijuana to manage internal emotional challenges such as stress, grief, anxiety and academic pressure. This pattern reflects what Lazarus and Folkman (1984) conceptualized in their Stress and Coping Theory: individuals under duress often employ emotion-focused coping mechanisms when they feel unable to change the stressful situation itself. Marijuana, in this case, offers temporary psychological relief rather than serving as a source of pleasure or recreation. Furthermore, in a society where mental health support is both stigmatized and inaccessible for many, self-medication with substances becomes a practical, albeit harmful, alternative (Khan et al., 2021; Cohen et al. 2015).

The rapid urbanization of Lahore, its expanding university culture and peer-driven social environments further complicate the issue. Many students are exposed to marijuana through peer groups, with usage becoming normalized as a response to stress (Hawkins et al., 1992). Social Learning Theory (Akers, 1998) supports this observation by explaining that behaviors are learned through observation and modeling within social contexts. Students see their peers using marijuana to cope with academic or emotional stress and they begin to imitate this behavior, especially when it appears to offer relief. The normalization of marijuana use in certain university subcultures makes it easier for individuals to justify or rationalize their own engagement with the substance (Humensky, 2010); Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

The stigma surrounding psychological distress in Pakistan also plays a role in pushing students toward marijuana use. Instead of seeking counseling or speaking openly about their issues, many students silently endure emotional turmoil (Creswell, 2014; Haines-Saah et al. 2015). In this silence, marijuana becomes a refuge a way to quiet anxiety, ease sleeplessness, or dampen the emotional weight of grief. For instance, Bonn-Miller et al. (2007) noted that in populations with high emotional vulnerability, marijuana is frequently used to escape uncomfortable mental states. However, this relief is temporary and the cycle of dependence can lead to greater emotional instability in the long run.

This study is particularly relevant in the Pakistani context, where discussions around drug use remain taboo and research is sparse. Qualitative studies exploring personal experiences with marijuana are virtually nonexistent in the region, especially among the university-going population. By focusing on students in Lahore, this research brings localized insight into how and why young adults turn to marijuana when facing stressors such as anxiety, grief, academic burdens, or emotional disconnection. The narratives presented in this study provide a deeper cultural and psychological understanding of the motivations behind marijuana use in Pakistan's university settings. These insights are essential for developing tailored interventions that address not only the act of drug use but also the underlying emotional needs that lead students toward such choices.

2. Review of the Literature

Previous studies globally have highlighted the connection between marijuana use and psychological coping strategies among university students. Researchers have found that marijuana is commonly used to relieve symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression (Buckner et al., 2007). University life, especially in South Asia, presents a range of pressures including high parental expectations, economic challenges and academic competition—all of which can serve as stressors. Students may feel overwhelmed and unable to cope, leading them to experiment with or rely on substances such as marijuana (Caldeira et al., 2008; Arnett, 2000).

In many cases, marijuana is used not to induce euphoria but to suppress or escape from psychological discomfort. This finding is supported by Lee et al. (2009), who argued that marijuana can function as a form of avoidance coping. Students use it not to seek pleasure, but to delay confronting emotional pain, academic stress, or social difficulties. In societies like Pakistan where open conversations about mental health are rare, such coping strategies become even more common.

Furthermore, grief has been identified as a significant trigger for marijuana use. Students who lose close friends or family members may turn to marijuana to suppress feelings of sadness and emptiness. They may find it difficult to express their emotions or seek help due to cultural stigmas surrounding emotional vulnerability. This aligns with the findings of Bonn-Miller et al. (2007), who reported that marijuana is often used to blunt grief-related emotions and facilitate a temporary sense of peace or numbness.

Peer influence plays a critical role in marijuana initiation. According to the Social Learning Theory (Akers, 1998), individuals often emulate the behaviors of those in their immediate environment, particularly if those behaviors appear to offer relief or acceptance. In university campuses, where social belonging is crucial, students may use marijuana to fit in or feel connected with others. Simons et al. (2005) emphasized that students who observe their peers using marijuana in response to stress are more likely to adopt similar behaviors themselves, especially when marijuana use is not met with serious social or academic consequences.

The literature also identifies curiosity as a motivation for marijuana use, particularly when students perceive it as relatively harmless or helpful in enhancing mood, creativity, or focus. In this context, marijuana becomes part of a larger narrative of self-exploration that many students undergo during university life. However, this experimentation is not without risk. Once marijuana becomes linked to emotional regulation, students may become dependent on it to navigate difficult periods, leading to further psychological strain (Turner et al., 2018).

Despite the wealth of global research, there remains a notable lack of studies from Pakistan that explore marijuana use through the lens of emotional and psychological coping. Most available literature focuses on epidemiological data or legal frameworks, neglecting the personal, emotional realities of users. This study fills this gap by using a qualitative approach to explore how marijuana functions as a coping tool for stress, grief, anxiety and academic pressure among university students in Lahore. It aims to add a culturally relevant dimension to the broader discourse on student drug use, highlighting the emotional drivers behind the behavior and offering insights for targeted mental health interventions within Pakistani universities.

3. Research Design and Methodology

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to deeply understand the lived experiences of university students in Lahore who use marijuana to cope with emotional and psychological challenges. This design allowed the researcher to focus on subjective experiences and the meanings participants attach to their behavior, making it well-suited for exploring sensitive, complex issues like substance use and emotional coping.

Participants were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Initially, individuals who had self-reported marijuana use linked to stress, anxiety, grief, or academic pressure were identified purposefully. These participants were then asked to refer others with similar experiences, allowing the researcher to access a broader and often hidden population. This approach helped reach students who might otherwise be reluctant to come forward due to stigma or fear of legal repercussions.

A total of nine participants, ranging in age from 21 to 26 and consisting of both current students and recent graduates, were included in the study. The demographic diversity of participants allowed the research to capture a wide spectrum of emotional and academic pressures influencing marijuana use. Most participants were unmarried and living independently, either in hostels or shared accommodations, highlighting the contextual factors contributing to their stress and vulnerability.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in private, confidential settings. Interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and were guided by open-ended questions and probes designed to elicit detailed responses. The conversational nature of the interviews allowed participants to express their thoughts freely and reflect on their personal experiences without fear of judgment.

Ethical considerations were given paramount importance throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Pseudonyms were used in all transcriptions and subsequent analyses. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without any consequences. For those who exhibited emotional distress during interviews, referrals to counseling services were provided.

The collected data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, emotional triggers and coping narratives. The analysis focused on understanding the emotional logic behind marijuana use and the consequences participants experienced during use and withdrawal. The methodological rigor, combined with ethical sensitivity and participant-centered inquiry, ensured that the findings accurately reflected the emotional realities of marijuana users in university settings.

4. Findings and Analysis

This section presents the lived experiences of nine university students from Lahore who have used marijuana, exploring the complex reasons behind their use and the resulting impacts on their mental state, physical well-being and social relationships. Thematic analysis revealed several core themes that reflect both the psychological drivers and the socio-emotional consequences of marijuana use. The participants' voices are included to retain the authenticity and depth of their experiences.

4.1 Marijuana as a Coping Mechanism and Its Impact on Mental State

Many participants shared that marijuana served as a tool for psychological relief, helping them manage academic stress, emotional pain, or anxiety. However, what began as coping often turned into dependency, exacerbating the problems they sought to manage.

Participant 1 (26-year-old female, fresh graduate) shared:

"I was very stressed about my work and always feel anxious. Then one of my friends suggested marijuana. At first, it felt like an escape from reality, but once I got addicted, I became aggressive and depressed when I couldn't use it."

She further elaborated on the withdrawal symptoms:

"When I tried to quit, my sleep pattern got disturbed—I couldn't sleep at all. My digestive system also reacted badly. I felt like my body needed it to function."

Participant 6 (21-year-old male student) explained how he began using marijuana as a way to cope with academic pressure:

"Mostly just trying to cope with all the study pressure, you know? It felt like a way to hit a mental 'pause button' from everything."

Similarly, *Participant 2* (24-year-old male student) began using marijuana following the death of a close friend:

"After my friend passed, it was just... a way to cope with the grief. It offered a temporary escape from all the emptiness."

These narratives reflect marijuana's appeal as a self-prescribed coping mechanism, albeit with adverse psychological consequences. The initial relief was often replaced with heightened anxiety, depression and aggressive tendencies, underscoring the duality of marijuana as both a balm and a burden.

4.2 Varied Impacts on Social Engagement and Intimate Relationships

Participants described a spectrum of effects on their social lives. While some felt marijuana use enhanced intimacy and emotional connection, others experienced social withdrawal and isolation.

Participant 1 noted:

"It increased emotional openness and physical comfort and gave more pleasure in intimate moments. It helped both partners for better satisfaction."

Participant 8 (25-year-old female student) also shared:

"The use of marijuana helped me to regain comfort with touch with my partner and enhanced our physical and emotional bonding."

However, this intimacy-enhancing effect contrasted with the experience of *Participant 7* (26-year-old married male):

"I became introvert after using marijuana. I lost interaction with most of my friends and am no longer interested in meeting new people. Now I only have those friends who use marijuana with me."

These conflicting experiences reflect how marijuana use can both enhance and diminish social functioning, often depending on individual context and the trajectory of use.

4.3 Motivations for Initiation and Continued Use

Several participants described how their marijuana use began through curiosity or social influence and later became habitual due to its perceived benefits in managing stress, anxiety, or pain.

Participant 1 admitted:

"Stress from work and anxiety was the major factor that led me to use marijuana. After using it, I felt relaxed and fresh—no anxiety at all."

Participant 5 (24-year-old married female graduate) revealed:

"I was a patient of chronic pain. It helped a lot with my muscle pain, making daily life much easier."

Meanwhile, *Participant 9* (23-year-old female student) said:

"Honestly, it was a mix of curiosity and what my friends were doing. Everyone around me was trying it, so I figured, why not give it a go?"

These responses align with theories of social learning and self-medication, where marijuana is used both under social pressure and for symptom relief.

4.4 Perceived Physical and Sensory Effects of Marijuana

Participants experienced a range of physiological and sensory responses. Some found marijuana beneficial for pain relief and appetite enhancement, while others suffered from side effects.

Participant 7 reported:

"The main thing was a pretty chronic dry mouth. But on the flip side, my appetite definitely got a lot better."

Participant 4 (23-year-old male student) noted:

"It's a strange kind of peace, almost an emotional numbness. Like, things that usually bother me just… don't, which can be really calming."

Participant 8 expressed:

"For me, it's not so much a 'high' as it is a profound relief. It's the moment my pain subsides and I can just exist without discomfort, which is truly liberating."

These experiences demonstrate marijuana's dual role as both a soothing and numbing agent—desired by some, distressing for others.

4.5 Managing the Absence of Marijuana and Withdrawal Experiences

When deprived of marijuana, most participants reported experiencing physical and psychological withdrawal symptoms, revealing a cycle of dependence.

Participant 1 described:

"I get pretty restless and irritable. It's just hard to settle down and relax without it."

Participant 7 said:

"I notice a slight paranoia creeping in and I definitely have trouble sleeping."

Participant 8 admitted:

"Mostly, I experience frustration and helplessness. It's just hard to cope when the pain comes back."

These testimonies highlight the withdrawal challenges faced by users, many of whom began using marijuana as a coping mechanism but later found themselves trapped in dependence.

These findings suggest a paradoxical relationship between marijuana and well-being: while it may offer temporary comfort, its prolonged use often undermines mental stability and social integration. For university students navigating academic, emotional and social transitions, marijuana becomes both a tool of self-regulation and a source of new vulnerabilities. This duality underscores the urgent need for compassionate, evidence-based interventions that offer healthier coping alternatives and foster social resilience.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how university students in Lahore use marijuana to manage emotional challenges such as stress, anxiety, grief and academic pressure. Findings indicate that while marijuana offers temporary emotional relief, it also contributes to emotional dependence, impaired social functioning and negative withdrawal experiences.

There is a pressing need for integrated mental health services within universities to offer alternative coping mechanisms. Counseling, peer support groups, stress management workshops and awareness campaigns can serve as preventive and rehabilitative tools. Educational institutions and policymakers must collaborate to de-stigmatize mental health discussions and make psychological support accessible.

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