

Interplay of Media Platforms on Drug-related Perceptions and Behavioral Practices among Generation Z in Pakistan: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT: The present study investigates the influence of media on Generation Z's perceptions of drug use in Pakistan. It analyzes the impact of print media, social media, TV channels, and outdoor advertisements on their substance use behaviors. With rising concerns over drug use among Gen Z, understanding the media's role is crucial for developing effective prevention strategies. To conduct the study, a qualitative research design was utilized. Semi-structured interviews were held with 20 drug users from Generation Z, aged 18 to 28, in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Participants, ten males and ten females, were chosen through purposive sampling. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically. Key patterns and interpretations were identified. Findings identified four major influences: (1) entertainment media either normalized or glamorized the drug use, (2) social media has emerged as the powerful source for the trend setting, peer influence and repeated exposure, (3) news channels and print media has intensified the fear and stigma through sensational reporting, (4) outdoor advertising had indirectly reinforced the risk-oriented lifestyles of gen Z. Participants illustrated experiencing desensitization, internal conflict, curiosity, and ambivalence due to mixed media messages. They expressed a strong desire for youth-oriented, realistic, and non-judgmental preventive content. The media significantly influences young adults' perceptions of substance use in Pakistan through social norms and emotional responses. The study emphasizes the need for culturally relevant, evidence-based prevention strategies across digital and non-digital platforms, enhancing youth media literacy and promoting responsible media portrayals. These insights can guide policymakers, media stakeholders, and educators in developing effective community interventions and drug awareness campaigns.

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Introduction

Drug use among Generation Z has become a vital community health issue across the world, and Pakistan is no more an exception. The country is experiencing the helm of rapid urbanization, evolving youth identities, socio-cultural

changes, influences shaping perceptions, and shifting family dynamics. Hence, over the last few decades, the behaviors around substance use have also grown more obscure and deeply entangled with the media environments. Gen Z is the abbreviation of Generation Z, which is informally known as Zoomers. It is the generation born between 1997 and 2012, and they are currently between the ages of 13 and 28. The youngest Gen Zers are thirteen years old in 2025, while the oldest Gen Zers are twenty-eight years old, starting their post-education phase with careers and possibly families.

In the current study, individuals aged between 18 and 28 years old were recruited. This is an imperative era of life, as it is a particularly vulnerable developmental stage encompassing identity exploration, heightened peer influence, and amplified exposure to external social pressures. In this receptive period of life, information sources such as print media, television, social media platforms, and outdoor advertising can play a major role in determining how individuals view, engage with, and interpret the idea of substance use.

Social networking sites provide opportunities for young people for social interaction, self-expression, and identity development, and make these platforms important spaces in which young users negotiate how they present themselves and interpret the content shared by others (Livingstone, 2008). Mass media can play a vital role in shaping young people's perceptions, knowledge, and attitudes regarding substance use, particularly through how substance-related behaviors and their consequences are portrayed (Jackson et al., 2018).

Entertainment media often normalizes or glamorizes drug use (Degenhardt et al., 2016), while news outlets convey drug issues through fear-based narratives that may reinforce stigma. Fear-based messaging in news and print media increased awareness but also reinforced stigma, potentially discouraging help-seeking (Hanif et al., 2023).

Substance use among Pakistani youth is a multifaceted social and public-health concern, influenced by interacting psychological, socioeconomic, familial, peer-related, and cultural factors, thereby requiring prevention and intervention strategies that extend beyond punitive approaches (Bukhari, 2023).

Drugs bring on changes and disturbances in physical and emotional behaviors. The cigarette is a commonly used, quite efficient, and highly engineered drug delivery system. By inhaling each puff of tobacco smoke, nicotine swiftly reaches peak levels in the bloodstream. It is rapidly absorbed through the lungs and delivered to the brain within seconds. Per cigarette, one to two milligrams of nicotine are taken by the average smoker. The cigarette is revealed as a symbol of status in most Pakistani dramas, advertisements, and entertainment media.

Over the last two decades, the world has seen a rush of social media apps, which has brought about a transformative shift. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Snapchat, and YouTube have redefined how young people encounter information about drugs. These landscapes provide a lot of diverse opportunities, such as peer networks, entertainment content, influencers' lifestyles, memes, or awareness campaigns.

Social media is algorithm-driven in nature, visually engaging, heaps on exposure, and exceedingly interactive. It makes these platforms not only sources of information but active hubs where attitudes and identities are formed, displayed, and negotiated. Across urban and rural settings of the country, drug use is affecting not only individuals, but the families and communities as well. In addition, media plays a vital role in how the public understands social issues. In order to develop culturally informed prevention strategies, it is essential to explore these perspectives. Within the country's context, it is crucial to cultivate more responsible media portrayals and escalate public health communication.

There are chances that sometimes the impact of these portrayals is not well understood, mainly from the audience's perspective, or may not be well transmitted by the media itself. For instance, the messages whose purpose is to warn about substance use may coincidentally reinforce the stigma, or may aggravate curiosity. It may also contradict lived realities and may be interpreted differently across regions and social groups.

Although strong influences are present, there remains an apparent gap in Pakistan's academic literature about how Gen Z individuals interpret and internalize media messages about substance use. Most of the studies focus on treatment challenges, socio-cultural risk factors, or epidemiological trends, while giving far less attention to the nuanced interplay between media exposure and the perceptions of young adults. The lived experiences of Gen Z (which are the true individuals who are navigating the versatile media landscapes of this era) are rarely explored qualitatively.

By employing a qualitative approach, the study aims to capture the depth, diversity, and emotional texture of Generation Z. It offers insight into how assorted media platforms influence personal choices, social acceptability, and understanding of drug risk. What meanings individuals assign to these portrayals and in result, how these meanings may affect community conversations, social norms, and everyday decisions.

Socially responsible, effective, and culturally grounded media strategies are essential to be designed for drug prevention. The research seeks deeper insight, which may inform policy development, public health communication, and media production practices in the country. In due course, it contributes to the broader perspective of the role of media in determining health-related behaviors, also focusing on the importance of evaluating how messages about substance use reach and resound with youth audiences.

Rationale of the Study

Media platforms such as television channels, social media, print media, and outdoor advertising are all major sources of information and imagery that form public discourse. Yet, despite their influence, there is limited in-depth understanding of how people in Pakistan actually infer media messages about substance use, and how these interpretations may affect attitudes, stigma, and behaviors. Purpose of the study is to examine how four media podiums which are television (cable & broadcast), social media (influencer's content & user generated posts), print media (magazines & newspapers), and outdoor advertising (i.e. billboards) represent and then shape perceptions, behavioral intentions, and attitudes regarding the drug use among gen Z in the country, as Pakistan is having 60 to 65% of its population below the age of thirty, which swank of the largest population of Gen Z in the world.

Most of the existing literature focuses on exploring statistical associations and effects of media measured by surveys, which leaves a critical gap in qualitative and experience-based insights. Messages from media are not only received, but are resisted, negotiated, and made meaningful within the context of culture, religion, economy, and social structure. As the country has a collectivist culture, here the family honor, norms around morality, youth behavior, and community reputation are strong constructs; due to these factors, the interpretations may vary widely across genders, age groups, and social backgrounds.

A qualitative study helps to investigate the deeper perspectives and inner voices of individuals and communities. As a result, it opens the door to effective prevention, public health messaging, and media policies. This approach permits exploration of the latent consequences of media influences, for instance, stigmatization, curiosity, normalization, and fear-based reactions among young adults. This method offers nuanced insights into meaning-making processes (Morgan, 1996). The purpose of the present study is to enlighten the contextually grounded

perspective that may help and support media practitioners, educators, and policymakers to develop more culturally attuned, conscientious, and thorough communiqué strategies.

Literature Review

Traditional media outlets in Pakistan, such as TV dramas, news broadcasts, magazines, and newspapers, have been influential in depicting social issues, including drug addiction. These portrayals sometimes underscore moral, religious, or legal consequences. On the other hand, these portrayals sensationalize drug-related themes that unintentionally normalize certain behaviors in different ways.

Meanwhile, the rise of billboards across major cities and outdoor promotional content adds another layer of environmental exposure. It subtly reinforces the narratives about youth culture, nightlife, or recreational habits that may overlap with risk-taking tendencies and behaviors.

International evidence indicates that fictional portrayals normalize risky behaviors (Strasburger et al., 2010). Social media emerged as the most influential medium, supporting Slater's reinforcing spirals model (2007), wherein media selection and peer norms interact to shape identity and behavior.

Twenty percent of students in medical colleges and universities are involved in drug use. Six months ago (May, 2025), the Anti-Narcotics Force stated that 17 million students aged 18 to 31 are battling drug addiction. A campaign across 237 universities led to 31 arrests and 140 kg of drugs seized, which is an alarming situation. Rehabilitation billboards either use contact numbers, help cues, or are limited to treatment rather than harm reduction or prevention. Whereas commercial billboards sometimes inadvertently heroicize alcohol related ads and create associative cues. Media through television, digital platforms, print journalism, and advertising serve as a key socialization instrument that shapes attitudes toward health behaviors, including substance use (Wakefield et al., 2010).

Social media platforms magnify peer-driven content and shape norms through viral trends and unfiltered communication (Basit et al., 2025). Studies from Pakistan confirm that Gen Z encounters drug-related metaphors and discourse across multiple channels (Anderson et al., 2009; Rafique et al., 2024).

Theoretical Framework

Some of the eminent psychological theories endowed the current study with an inclusive framework, as discussed below.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 2001)

Bandura's Social Learning Theory embodies media platforms as a model for behavior. This framework provides insight into how individuals learn attitudes and behaviors from the content of media. Individuals model or imitate characters presented in dramas, films, or influencers on social media, who may glamorize or normalize substance use. Vicarious reinforcement also plays a vital role when individuals see characters facing no consequences after drug use; instead, they are shown as "cool", and then viewers may interpret this behavior as acceptable. Furthermore, identification is another crucial part. Young individuals may adopt behaviors similar to trendy TV or film celebrities, TikTok creators, YouTube vloggers, or musicians. Entertainment media sometimes depict drugs as a part of privileged and elite lifestyles, which has a profound effect on the viewers.

Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976)

This theory, given by Gerbner, spotlights the concept that persistent and long-term media exposure generates perceptions of reality. TV dramas associating substance use repeatedly with the rich and elite class may produce beliefs such as drug use is common in the upper class of society. A heavy and sensational focus of news channels on narcotics raids may fabricate a sense of extensive threat. Outdoor advertisements with anti-drug messages may nurture a public health perspective. In Pakistan, television viewership is tremendously high, which shapes collective beliefs over time.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Blumler & Katz's, 1974)

This theory, given by Blumler and Katz's (1974), helps in understanding why people make use of certain media and how motivations form their interpretations. How individuals seek information and learn about drug risks through health campaigns or news. Secondly, people may encounter drug themes in online short videos or music videos. Social integration is another factor; social media platforms create peer communities where substance use may be normalized or stigmatized. In Pakistan, social media is used progressively more for belonging, identity, and self-expression, particularly among urban youth.

Public Sphere Theory (Habermas, 1989)

This theory was developed by German sociologist Jürgen Habermas. It points towards an area in social life where people come together to discuss and identify societal problems via open dialogue and debate. It takes media as a site for public debate. Talk shows, social media discussions, and op-eds build narratives of morality, criminality, or public health concerns. Moreover, the power dynamics, i.e., religious groups, private media houses, state broadcasters, and advocacy organizations, shape leading narratives. In Pakistan, media discourse sometimes merges religion, morality, public health, and security in complex ways.

Critical Cultural Framework (Horkheimer, 1972)

Critical theory, proposed by Max Horkheimer, is a social theory marked by critiquing and changing society as a whole, in contrast to understanding and explaining it only. It examines how dominant structures in society influence objective truth by arguing that knowledge is shaped by social context and power relations. This is admirable for qualitative work, exploring societal meaning-making, identity, and stigma. It matters how media represents and portrays drug users, e.g., victims, criminals, or misguided youth. Media may construct stigma by intensifying shame, guilt, or marginalization. It may build cultural narratives through stories linking drug use to urban decay, moral decline, or Westernization. In Pakistan, social class and cultural anxieties are often tied to substance use by media.

Method

The current study explored the lived experiences and interpretations of drug-related media messages of Gen Z. A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify, analyze, and report the inferred themes from participants' given information.

The target population comprised drug users among Gen Z, residing in Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) and its twin city, Rawalpindi. Through a purposive sampling technique, twenty participants aged 18 to 28 years were recruited for the study, including ten males and ten females, to ensure gender equity. Participants varied in media exposure patterns, educational background, and socio-economic status. Participants with any physical or mental problems were excluded from the sample.

Interview Execution

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person, lasting about 55 to 60 minutes each. Semi-structured interviews provide a flexible yet systematic approach for exploring participants’ experiences and perspectives in depth while allowing the researcher to maintain consistency across interviews (Kallio et al., 2016).

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect confidentiality. Interviews were conducted in a comfortable room with a peaceful environment, without causing any harm to each participant. They were informed that they had the right to withdraw at any stage.

Interviews were audio-recorded, and verbatim transcripts were produced. Transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis. The analytical procedure involved six steps: getting familiar with the data, creating initial codes, looking for themes, reviewing those themes, naming and defining the themes, and producing the final description.

For the development of themes, inductive coding was employed, and a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was conducted to ensure careful documentation and insightful, transparent themes.

Results

The key themes and findings synthesized in the qualitative study are as follows:

Table 1
Main Themes and Sub-Themes

Main Themes	Sub-Themes
Glamorization in entertainment media	Normalization of drug use Attractive lifestyle and behavioral influence.
Peer influence and trend formation on social media	Peer validation and social normalization Influencers, viral trends, and behavioral modeling.
Fear-based and sensational reporting in the news	Fear, awareness, and perceived consequences. Stigma, moral judgment, and social rejection.
Lifestyle messaging through outdoor advertising	Aspirational lifestyle and indirect drug-related cues. Gaps in prevention and awareness messages

Theme 1: Glamorization in Entertainment Media

The first theme was participants' perceptions of portrayals of drugs in films, TV dramas, music videos, and other entertainment media. Repeated representations were thought by participants to make substance use normalized, especially when smoking, drinking, and engaging in risky behaviors were linked to the idea of being attractive, having a high social rank, being happy, and living a good life.

Subtheme 1: Normalization of Drug Use

Repeated exposure was seen as one of the many ways in which substance use might become routinized. Parties, friendships, emotional situations, and day-to-day interactions were often intertwined with drug-related behaviors, with little focus on the consequences.

Extract 1: Participant No. 3 (Male) stated:

“You watch it in dramas and movies all the time, and after a while it doesn’t seem like a big deal. Someone gets stressed, they smoke, someone goes to a party and drinks; it’s not big news.”

The participants distinguished between the direct promotion of drugs and indirect exposure of viewers to these drugs.

Extract 2: Participant No. 8 (Female) explained:

“A drama does not persuade you to take drugs, but when you see stylish characters smoking over and over again, you become accustomed to it: The message is indirect.”

Multiple roles can also lead to assumptions about the use of drugs among young people.

Extract 3: Participant No. 12 (Female) described:

“We see in the media that almost all people of this age are doing these things, but in reality, maybe not.”

In this way, participants considered normalization to be a process that unfolds over time and with repeated exposure; substance use was perceived as less unusual and less socially unacceptable.

Subtheme 2: Attractive Lifestyle and Behavioral Influence:

One group of participants highlighted the strong links between the representation of drugs and money, confidence, freedom, parties, and fashionable lifestyles. These representations were seen as having the potential to arouse interest in young viewers.

Extract 4: Participant No. 6 (Male) stated:

“In music videos, you'll find fancy cars, parties, fancy clothes. People who are fashionable, and smoking and drinking are part of their lifestyle, which may make them think that it's an expression of being successful or being cool.”

One factor that was suggested as a pathway from media exposure to behavioral experimentation was curiosity.

Extract 5: Participant No 15 (Female) said:

“If it's always presented as fun and the downside isn't included, some youth will inevitably be curious and might consider trying it”.

Participants also felt that the lack of consequences was a problem.

Extract 6: Participant No. 17 (Male) explained:

“Enjoyment is shown but often not consequences of drugs, which include addiction, health issues, and impact on family.”

Thus, the results have shown that participants believed that the presence of an attractive image and limited representation of consequences were important mechanisms of influence of media.

Theme 2: Peer Influence and Trend Formation on Social Media

The second theme was “social media as an influential environment for Gen Z,” where Gen Z was introduced to peers and influencers, viral trends, humor, and lifestyle content through TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and other platforms. Such exposure was seen as having the ability to influence social norms and intentions to behave.

Subtheme 1: Peer Validation and Social Normalization

Peer-generated content was seen to have a significant effect by involving people of similar ages and social backgrounds.

Extract 7: Participant No. 2 (Female) said:

“When an actor does something, you know it is a movie. When classmates or people of your own age post it, you start feeling that maybe this is becoming normal in your generation.”

Likes, comments, and shares were also perceived as signals of social approval.

Extract 8: Participant No. 9 (Male) described:

“If someone uploads a vaping video, and everybody comments that he looks cool, there's social approval; no one is telling you directly to do it, but the reaction means that it's being accepted.”

Participants also talked about a wish to belong to peer groups.

Extract 9: Participant 14 (Female) narrated:

“It can create an indirect pressure if everyone online appears to be having fun, and someone feels like they aren't having fun without doing these things.”

Peer influence was therefore conceptualized as being beyond pressure and included social comparison, belongingness, and validation.

Subtheme 2: Influencers, Viral Trends and Behavioral Modeling

The presence of influencers was considered a potential behavioral model because followers often mimic their behavior.

Extract 10: Participant No. 1 (Male) said:

“Followers copy influencers' clothes, language, and lifestyle. If they casually show vaping or smoking, some people may copy that too.”

The high speed and repetition of short-form media content were also emphasized.

Extract 11: Participant No. 11 (Female) explained:

“On TikTok, or reels, one trend always seems to pop up out of nowhere; even if you don't look for it, you continue to see similar videos, and it can stir up curiosity.”

But the participants did not believe that the media has the same effect on everyone.

Extract 12: Participant No. 20 (Male) stated:

“Social media can influence people, but it cannot force everyone. Family, awareness, and personal values matter. Someone already surrounded by drug-using friends may be affected more.”

The descriptions indicated the influence of digital media on existing peer relationships, knowledge, and individuals' circumstances.

Theme 3: Fear-Based and Sensational Reporting in News and Print Media

The third theme was related to the participants' perception of television news, newspapers, magazines, and digital journalism. These sites were seen as often linking drugs with arrests, raids, crime, death, and addiction. Participants had mixed feelings on fear-based reporting, viewing it as potentially preventative but stigmatizing.

Subtheme 1: Fear, Awareness and Perceived Consequences

Some participants thought that if there are stories about severe outcomes, it might deter some experimentation.

Extract 13: Participant No. 7 (Male) said:

“When news shows that drugs destroyed someone's health or caused an arrest, it creates fear. That kind of message can discourage people.”

But too much sensationalism was seen as being "lacking in understanding".

Extract 14: Participant No. 13 (Female) explained:

“Sometimes, news channels make things too dramatic; they get attention, and people still don't know why addiction begins or where they can get help.”

Participants liked to be made aware of the consequences in conjunction with useful information.

Extract 15: Participant No. 18 (Male) reported:

“Fear is going to get them temporarily stopped for a while, but being aware is going to be more important; people should know the consequences and what to do if they see someone using drugs.”

Therefore, the participants felt that informative and educational communication was more constructive than fear.

Subtheme 2: Stigma, Moral Judgement and Social Rejection

Participants felt that a constant negative image of drug users could further exacerbate the stigma.

Extract 16: Participant No. 4 (Female) said:

“Drug users are presented mostly as criminals or bad people; very little is heard about the cause of the person becoming a drug user or if there was a need for psychological or medical treatment.”

Another factor influencing perceptions was religious and cultural values. Participants believed that religion could be protective and separated religious taboos from social condemnations.

Extract 17: Participant No. 10 (Male) explained:

“Our religion discourages intoxicants, and that can protect people. But we should focus on saying that the behavior is wrong rather than saying that the person is a criminal and has no chance to recover.”

Social stigma was also seen as a challenge to seeking help.

Extract 18: Participant No.16 (Female) reported:

“Media's portrayal of drug users as shameful individuals makes it even more important not to speak to those who hide addiction for fear of judgment”.

As a result, the participants felt that Pakistani cultural and religious norms could deter substance use and that social judgment can further marginalize and limit treatment-seeking.

Theme 4: Lifestyle Messaging Through Outdoor Advertisement

The fourth theme was participants' perceptions of commercial billboards, public wall messages, rehabilitation ads, and anti-drug campaigns. There were two types of lifestyle cues (indirect & explicit prevention messages) that were differentiated across participants.

Subtheme 1: Aspirational Lifestyle and Indirect Drug-Related Cues

The participants did not, generally, see the term "outdoor advertising" as referring to the direct sale of illegal drugs but placed the commercial images in the context of nightlife, freedom, status, and risk-taking settings.

Extract 19: Participant No. 5 (Male) reported:

“A billboard may not show drugs directly, but sometimes it promotes a party lifestyle involving freedom, enjoyment, and status, which people can associate with smoking or drinking.”

These indirect representations are challenging to identify for participants.

Extract 20: Participant No. 19 (Female) explained:

“Indirect messages are difficult because you do not recognize them as drug-related. You just see attractive people enjoying a lifestyle, but that lifestyle may carry other meanings.”

However, media in the immediate outdoors was seen as less influential than regular digital media.

Extract 21: Participant No. 11 (Female) said:

“I see the billboards too, but they don't change my life like social media. When you see a billboard, it's only a second, and when you see your phone throughout the day, it's a whole day of life-changing.”

Perceived influence of OOH, therefore, was more associated with indirect than repeated personal exposure.

Subtheme 2: Gaps in Prevention and Awareness Messages

Participants found anti-drug messages and drug rehab advertisements, but many felt current anti-drug campaigns were lacking. The message was frequently limited to a warning, slogan, helpline, or treatment information.

Extract 22: Participant No. 6 (Male) reported:

“I have seen signs against drugs and rehabilitation ads, but mostly they are about how drugs are bad, and for treatment a phone number is given. They would not tell me what to do before I got addicted.”

Participants called for prevention campaigns that touch on the stages of drug use, and that speak to young people in a language that resonates with them.

Extract 23: Participant No. 15 (Female) explained:

“Rather than just repeating the mantra ‘Say No To Drugs’, they should demonstrate real-world scenarios and explain the process by which drug use can escalate into addiction. It is important to educate young people about how experimentation can turn into an actual problem.”

It was also believed that using more than one media platform would be necessary to achieve effective preventive communication.

Extract 24: Participant No. 20 (Male):

“One billboard isn't enough. Instagram, TikTok, the University, TV and public places are the places where people should be aware of where to get confidential help.”

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the perception of drug-related messages in the media by the members of Generation Z in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan. Participants felt that substance use was being perpetuated in films, TV dramas, and music videos, where it became normal to use drugs and alcohol, be confident, wealthy, free, enjoy it, and have a high social status, and where the risks of substance use were not often portrayed. Likewise, the majority of social media posts about substances are positive in their depictions, such as through humor, relaxation, and sociability (Rutherford et al., 2023). Adolescents have also reported that the portrayal of substance use online is mature, glamorous, carefree, and recreational (Hashemi & Vogel, 2024). Media does not directly promote drug use, but frequent positive depictions can make drugs seem less serious. Young people who use social media regularly and consume risk messages are more likely to engage in alcohol, tobacco, vaping, and drug behaviors (Purba et al., 2023). But media exposure is not a standalone cause, as family relationships, peer environments, psychological issues, socioeconomic factors, and availability of substances also make an impact on drug use (Nawi et al., 2021).

The study supported the social learning theory, the cultivation theory, uses and gratifications theory, public sphere theory, and critical cultural framework theory. The influence of social media was seen as especially potent, as it featured repetition, peer acceptance, modelling by influencers, and social comparison. Users saw them as more genuine than the fictional characters, and “likes,” “comments,” and “shares” indicated social approval. This is in line with the evidence that adolescents are more likely to believe adolescent posts than formal prevention messages (Hashemi & Vogel, 2024). Alcohol consumption may also be more strongly associated with peer-generated substance content than with marketer-generated content (Purba et al., 2023). The participants also shared that the content is frequently seen on TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube, but was not looked up intentionally. This is troubling given the fact that about three-quarters of social media substance-related content is positive, and only the negative consequences of substance use are given little attention (Rutherford et al., 2023). However, family values, religion, education, personal awareness, and offline friendships were cited as factors that can increase or decrease vulnerability. Other risk factors for drug use among young people are poor parental supervision, family conflicts, psychological problems, and peers who use drugs (Nawi et al., 2021). The influence of social media should be viewed, therefore, as an intervention into young people's social and personal contexts.

Another finding was that there was a conflict between prevention and stigmatization in news, print, and outdoor advertising. Participants thought news reports focusing on crime, arrest, sickness, and death could deter experimentation and may also label users of drugs as criminals or morally unsound. Media framing has focused on crime, personal responsibility, and moral failures, and it has been limited in its attention to treatment and recovery (Ghosh et al., 2022). These stories can dehumanize people who use drugs and encourage punishment, exclusion, and inadequate health system responses (Habib et al., 2023). The stigma associated with substance use can then hinder treatment-seeking and social reintegration (El Hayek et al., 2024). The participants also felt that billboards and short anti-drug slogans were less effective than digital content, and they liked the realistic stories, confidential support information, and multi-platform campaigns more. When messages are overly negative and/or abstinence-only, these messages may lose credibility if they are in conflict with what youth observe (Hashemi & Vogel, 2024). Media campaigns in combination with school education, parental involvement, community participation, and accessible services may therefore be more effective in preventing exposure (Gates et al., 2026). In Pakistan, prevention messages must therefore be culturally appropriate, non-stigmatizing, and youth-centered, and linked to available services such as psychological, medical, and rehabilitation services that are available in a confidential manner.

Limitations

- The study is regional and has a limited sample size.
- Generalizability in rural populations may be reduced due to the urban focus in this study.
- Media portrayals can vary across provinces.

Future Directions

- Future studies can explore rural perspectives.
- Upcoming studies may compare gender specific experiences.
- Imminent research may examine differences across socio-economic groups.
- Mixed- method studies should be conducted for deeper investigation.
- Longitudinal methodologies can be adopted to capture perceptions over time and ages.

Practical Implications

The following are some of the practical suggestions:

a) For public health communicators and media producers:

- Guidelines should be implemented by entertainment industries to reduce glamorized portrayals of drug use.
- Digital platforms should be utilized by public health organizations to develop targeted social media campaigns.
- Schools, colleges, and universities should integrate media literacy in education.
- Implement national drug prevention and awareness programs for students, teachers, and parents.
- Engage Gen Z in designing intervention materials.

b) For service providers and policymakers:

- Persistent multi-platform public health campaigns should be supported by service providers and policymakers and should include evaluation components for harm reduction.
- The content that encourages illegal supply of dangerous substances should be carefully regulated and monitored.
- Gen Z-friendly, sustained, and well-designed public health messaging across platforms should be initiated.
- To generate the most productive influence on perceptions and behaviors, emphasis should be given to accessible services while partnering with peer networks on social media.

Conclusion

Diverse forms of media play a considerable role in forming perceptions and behaviors related to substance use among Gen Z in Pakistan. Normalization, peer validation, glamorization, and fear-based descriptions are the salient influences gained from exposure to numerous channels. Synchronized, coordinated, and culturally grounded prevention strategies and interventions are necessary to deal with such influences effectively. Government and non-Government agencies should coordinate to take preventive precautionary measures for Generation Z. Particularly, this is a need of the hour to counsel young people about the positive use of social media regarding substance-related segments not only in schools, colleges, and universities but also in community settings.

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