Youth Substance Abuse: Risk Factors and Pathways

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Abstract: <u>*Background*</u>*: Youth substance use is a serious social and public health issue. Teens, particularly those in early to mid-teen years, are susceptible to trying alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, which can impair their health, school performance, and well-being. In India, research indicates that most initiate the use of substances early in life, usually while they are still in school. Contributing factors are peer pressure, family, cultural environment, and media exposure.* <u>*Objectives*</u>*: The investigation intended to identify social and cultural risk factors and causes of adolescent substance use aged 15–17 years in Darjeeling, West Bengal. It also intended to explore how these adolescents cope with peer, family, and societal pressures, and uncover protective factors that prevent them from using substances.* <u>*Methods*</u>*: The study was done in Darjeeling, which is famous for its cultural diversity, tea gardens, tourism, and urban culture. Semi-structured interviews were carried out, using a qualitative method, on 15 adolescents of diverse backgrounds. Data collected were analysed thematically to look for patterns and information about substance use.* <u>*Results*</u>*: Five themes were recognized: family and cultural history, peer and social pressure, personal and academic stress, media, and coping styles. Though most adolescents experienced pressure, some pushed back against drug use by establishing goals, staying away from risk-peer groups, and controlling themselves.* <u>*Conclusion*</u>*: Resilience and sound coping styles are the key in averting substance use. Results can help educators, families, and policymakers in developing culturally competent prevention programs.*

Keywords: Adolescents, Substance Use, Social Influence, Cultural Factors, Peer Pressure, Darjeeling, Resilience.

1. Introduction

Substance abuse is a significant problem affecting adolescents everywhere. This time of life is full of rapid physical, emotional, and social changes, and young people are highly influenced by their friends, family, and environment. Curiosity, a desire to experiment, and the need to "fit in" often lead them to try things like alcohol, cigarettes, cannabis, or even newer trends like vaping. For some, this experimentation becomes a habit and a serious problem.

In India, youth substance abuse is a growing concern in both rural and urban areas. The National Survey on Extent and Pattern of Substance Use in India (2019) found that alcohol and tobacco are the most used substances, followed by cannabis and inhalants. The survey also found that a significant number of users started during their teen years, which shows that prevention efforts really need to focus on understanding why young people start using substances in the first place.

Many studies have explored the causes and risk factors for adolescent substance use. Many researchers agree that peer pressure plays a huge role, since adolescents often feel they have to join in to be accepted by their friends or older peers. For example, a study by Singh and Kaur (2019) found that peer influence was one of the strongest predictors of when young people started using substances.

Another key factor is the family environment. Families where alcohol is used regularly or openly during festivals can unintentionally make substance use seem normal. Das and Tripathi (2020) explained that when kids see substance use at family gatherings, they're more likely to think it's an acceptable part of life.

Academic stress has also been linked to substance use. Students in grades 10 and 12, who face tremendous pressure to do well in board exams, often feel anxious. Sharma (2021) reported that some students use substances to calm themselves during stressful times, even though it only provides temporary relief.

You can't ignore the influence of media and social media either. Movies and ads often portray smoking and drinking as glamorous or fashionable. Gupta and Ray (2022) pointed out how Bollywood films normalise alcohol consumption by showing it as stylish. With platforms like Instagram, adolescents are also constantly exposed to images of peers and celebrities partying with alcohol, creating indirect pressure to "keep up."

However, not all influences are negative. Some studies have shown that adolescents can develop resilience and coping mechanisms. Bhatia (2018) found that young people with clear future goals, supportive networks, and positive coping strategies are less likely to fall into substance abuse even when exposed to risk factors.

Darjeeling offers a unique cultural setting for exploring these issues. The area is home to diverse communities, and alcohol often plays a part in festivals like Dashain, Tihar, and Losar, which young people see from an early age. At the same time, exposure to tourism, modern lifestyles, and social media brings new pressures into their daily lives. This mix of tradition and modernity makes Darjeeling a critical place to study how risk factors and protective pathways interact.

2. Research Gap

While youth substance abuse has been studied a lot in India, most of the existing research is quantitative and focuses on big cities. These studies give us valuable data on how many young people use substances, but don't really explain the social and cultural reasons behind it. Very few studies focus on smaller towns like Darjeeling, where traditional and modern influences are at play.

On top of that, the adolescents' voices are often missing. Their experiences are usually represented through surveys and statistics rather than their direct stories. This study fills that gap using a qualitative approach, letting young people share their experiences in their own words. By focusing on Darjeeling, the research shows how cultural rituals, family practices, peer groups, academic pressures, and media influences all work together to shape substance use. It also identifies resilience and coping strategies, which are less discussed in existing literature but are just as crucial for prevention and intervention.

Research Questions
The following questions guided the study:
- What are the main risk factors influencing adolescents in Darjeeling to start using substances?
- How do peer groups, family practices, cultural traditions, and media exposure shape adolescents' attitudes toward substance use?
- What positive coping mechanisms do adolescents use to resist or manage substance use?
- How can the findings be used to support families, schools, and communities in preventing youth substance abuse?

Research Objectives
The main goals of this study were to:
- To explore the social, cultural, and personal factors that contribute to substance use among adolescents in Darjeeling.
- To understand how peer pressure, family practices, cultural traditions, and media exposure influence substance use in adolescents.
- To look at the role of academic stress and pressure to perform.
- To provide insights to help families, schools, and communities create culturally sensitive prevention and support programs.

3. Methodology

This study was conducted with 15 adolescents aged 15 to 17 who lived in Darjeeling town and the nearby semi-urban areas. The participants included boys and girls from various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Some had tried alcohol, cigarettes, or other substances themselves, while others had only seen these behaviours in their families, among their friends, or during community festivals.

The participants were selected with the help of local NGOs, de-addiction centres, and community leaders who identified adolescents who were comfortable talking about the topic. Their support was crucial because substance use is often a sensitive and private matter, and it was essential to gain the trust of both the young people and their families.

The data was collected over 2 months, in May and June 2025. Interviews were held in safe and familiar locations like NGO offices and community halls, where participants felt comfortable and free from judgment. Since the participants were minors, the researcher first got informed consent from their parents or guardians. Asset was also taken from the adolescents themselves, ensuring they understood the study's purpose and chose to participate independently. The participants were told their participation was voluntary, they could withdraw at any time, and their identities would remain confidential.

As many participants were uncomfortable with being recorded, no recording was done. Instead, the researcher took detailed notes in Nepali and Hindi, in which the adolescents were most comfortable speaking in. The notes were then carefully translated into English for analysis, carefully preserving the original meaning and expressions.

The study used a qualitative research design to explore the experiences and perceptions of the adolescents rather than just counting or measuring them. This approach allowed the young people to share their stories in their own words, giving a deeper understanding of the cultural and social factors which led to substance use.

The study used purposive sampling, which means adolescents were selected based on their ability to give relevant and meaningful insights into the problem. The inclusion criteria were that participants had to be between 15 and 17, live in Darjeeling or nearby, and either use substances themselves or be aware of substance use through their peers, family, or community. Exclusion criteria included adolescents outside this age range, those whose parents didn't consent, or those with health conditions that made participation unsafe.

The primary data collection tool was a semi-structured interview guide. The guide had a broad framework of topics but didn't limit participants to fixed questions, so they were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences. The topics covered included peer pressure, family influence, cultural rituals involving alcohol, academic stress, and the role of media and social media. The flexible format allowed the researcher to explore areas that the participants brought up themselves, such as asking follow-up questions if a participant mentioned trying alcohol at a festival.

Careful ethical considerations were made due to the topic's sensitive nature and the participants' age. We didn't record names or identifying details, and each participant was identified only with a code like P1 or P2. All notes were stored securely and were only accessible to the researcher. The study was approved by an academic institution and supported by local NGOs. Participants were assured that their responses would be used only for educational purposes and would not be used to harm them in any way.

This methodology, which included careful participant selection, the use of local languages, safe discussion spaces, and strong ethical safeguards, made it possible to get genuine and honest responses from the adolescents.

Data Analysis
The data analysis process started as soon as the fieldwork was done. Since the study was qualitative, the focus wasn't on numbers but on carefully reading the adolescents' words and finding common patterns.

The interviews were held in safe spaces in Darjeeling town and nearby semi-urban areas, like NGO centres, school counselling rooms, and community halls. Choosing these

locations was important so participants felt safe and respected. The conversations were mostly in Nepali and Hindi, the languages the adolescents were most comfortable with, which allowed them to express their feelings openly.

The study used a semi-structured interview guide, giving a broad framework of questions and letting participants share their experiences freely. The guide covered peer influence, family environment, cultural rituals, academic pressure, and media exposure. The researcher also let participants bring up their own perspectives.

Since most participants were uncomfortable with recordings, we made no audio recordings. Instead, the researcher kept detailed field notes in Nepali and Hindi, capturing what was said and non-verbal expressions and hesitations. These notes were later translated into English for analysis. We took great care in preserving the meaning of cultural words and phrases in the translation.

The analysis followed a manual coding process to let the researcher engage closely with the text. The process began with reading and re-reading the field notes in both Nepali and Hindi, and then the English translation. The English text was then looked at line by line to identify essential statements, which were given a code, a short phrase that captured their meaning.

Next, the codes were grouped into sub-themes. For example, codes like *"friends encourage me," "peer insistence,"* and *"seniors as role models"* were grouped under the sub-theme peer influence. Similarly, *"alcohol in festivals"* and *"family members drink"* were grouped into family and cultural contexts. These sub-themes were then combined into broader themes that represented the main patterns in the data.

The final major themes emerged: Peer and Social Influences, Family and Cultural Context, Personal and Academic Pressures, Media and Social Influence, and Resilience and Coping Strategies. This step-by-step process ensured the analysis was accurate to the adolescents' voices, from

language to codes and from codes to broader themes. By using the original languages and coding manually, the researcher stayed close to the cultural context and avoided losing meaning in translation. This analysis highlighted both the risks and the protective factors of substance use among young people in Darjeeling.

4. Results and Discussion

Demographic Details

Participant	Age	Gender	Class
P1	15	Male	10
P2	16	Female	11
P3	15	Male	9
P4	17	Female	12
P5	16	Male	11
P6	17	Female	12
P7	15	Male	10
P8	16	Female	11
P9	17	Male	12
P10	15	Female	9
P11	16	Male	10
P12	17	Female	11
P13	15	Male	9
P14	16	Female	10
P15	17	Male	12

The table shows the demographic details of the 15 participants in this study, shown as P1 to P15. Their ages range from 15 to 17 years, which is the time when most teenagers are curious and also face different pressures from school, friends, and family. Both boys and girls took part, and they were studying in classes from 9 to 12. Using codes like P1, P2, and so on keeps their names private while still making it easy to follow their views in the findings. This mix of ages, genders, and class levels shows that the study included young people with different backgrounds and experiences, giving a broader picture of how substance use affects adolescents in Darjeeling

5. Results

Participant	Basic Theme	Organizing Theme	Global Themes	Verbatim
P1	Friends encourage me	Peer pressure	Peer & Social Influences	"Most of the time it is my friends who tell me to try, and I feel left out if I don't."
P2	Seniors as role models	Social modelling	Peer & Social Influences	"When seniors do it in school, we feel like it is okay for us too."
P3	Family members drink	Family exposure	Family & Cultural Context	"At home, I see my uncle drinking, so it feels like part of life."
P4	Alcohol in festivals	Cultural normalization	Family & Cultural Context	"In our culture, drinking during celebrations is very common."
P5	Stress from exams	Academic stress	Personal & Academic Pressures	"Whenever exams come, I feel like taking something to relax."
P6	Pressure to perform	Achievement anxiety	Personal & Academic Pressures	"The pressure to perform sometimes pushes me to these things."
P7	Movies make it glamorous	Media glamorization	Media & Social Influence	"In movies, they show smoking and drinking as stylish, so young people think it's cool."
P8	Social media parties	Social media influence	Media & Social Influence	"On Instagram, everyone posts parties with drinks, and it feels like we should also do it."
P9	Think about goals	Future orientation	Resilience & Coping Strategies	"Whenever I am tempted, I remind myself of my dreams and future."
P10	Avoid repeating mistakes	Self-regulation	Resilience & Coping Strategies	"I tell myself not to do it again because it can affect my studies."
P11	Avoid friends who use	Coping mechanism	Resilience & Coping Strategies	"I stay away from the group when they do it, so I don't get influenced."

P12	Family celebration exposure	Cultural permissiveness	Family & Cultural Context	"During every puja, alcohol is on the table."
P13	Peer insistence	Peer conformity	Peer & Social Influences	"If I say no, they call me boring."
P14	Academic workload	Stress factor	Personal & Academic Pressures	"The syllabus pressure is too much, it makes me anxious."
P15	Online influence	Media role	Media & Social Influence	"Scrolling reels, I see celebrities with drinks—it looks cool."

The findings of this research show the various social and cultural factors that influence substance use in adolescents aged 15 to 17 in Darjeeling. The study is based on semi-structured interviews with 15 participants, and it shows how young people understand and interact with substances in their daily lives. Some participants talked about their own experiences with alcohol, smoking, or cannabis, while others discussed seeing these behaviours in their friends, family members, or in the media. The findings are presented in themes, with detailed explanations and supporting quotes from the participants to show their real experiences.

Peer & Social Influences
This theme shows how friends and peers in school or social circles influence young people. Often, students try substances not because they want to, but because they're afraid of being different or left out. Peer groups create both direct and indirect pressure.
- **Peer Pressure**: A participant shared, *"Most of the time it is my friends who tell me to try, and I feel left out if I don't"*. This shows that friends directly ask them to try substances, and the fear of exclusion makes it hard to say no. Another participant said, *"If I say no, they call me boring"*. This shows how important social acceptance becomes and how refusing can lead to negative comments from peers.
- **Social Modelling**: A participant explained, *"When seniors do it in school, we feel like it is okay for us too"*. This shows that watching older students use substances makes it seem acceptable and even normal to follow their example.

Family & Cultural Context
- This theme highlights how family members and cultural traditions make alcohol use seem normal. Young people learn by observing adults, and when they see alcohol used in cultural celebrations, it eventually becomes a regular part of their lives.
- **Family Exposure**: A participant said, *"At home, I see my uncle drinking, so it feels like part of life"*. This shows how seeing relatives drink regularly makes substance use appear natural within the family.
- **Cultural Normalisation**: One participant stated, *"In our culture, drinking during celebrations is very common"*. This explains how cultural celebrations make drinking appear normal and accepted in society. Another participant noted, *"During every puja, alcohol is on the table"*, which highlights that alcohol is openly present in religious and family gatherings, showing it's a permitted practice at home.

Personal & Academic Pressures
- This theme focuses on how school-related stress and the pressure to perform can lead young people to use unhealthy coping methods. School life, with its exams, expectations, and heavy workload, creates emotional stress.

- **Academic Stress**: A student said, *"Whenever exams come, I feel like taking something to relax"*. This statement shows that exams create stress and tempt students to find ways to calm themselves.
- **Achievement Anxiety**: A participant noted, *"The pressure to perform sometimes pushes me to these things"*. This indicates that the pressure to get good grades leads to thoughts of using substances.
- **Stress Factor**: One participant shared, **"***The syllabus pressure is too much, it makes me anxious"*. This highlights how a heavy academic workload increases anxiety and stress, which can lead to risky behaviours.

Media & Social Influence
- This theme explains how media, including movies and social media, strongly shape how young people view substance use. The media normalises the use of substances by showing it as glamorous, fun, or stylish.
- **Media Glamorization**: A participant said, *"In movies, they show smoking and drinking as stylish, so young people think it's cool"*. The participant describes how films present substances in a positive and appealing way.
- **Social Media Influence**: A student stated, *"On Instagram, everyone posts parties with drinks, and it feels like we should also do it"*. This shows the evident influence of social media, as students feel pressured to copy what they see online.
- **Online Influence**: One participant noted, *"Scrolling reels, I see celebrities with drinks—it looks cool"*. This demonstrates how online platforms and celebrity content can make alcohol seem desirable.

Resilience & Coping Strategies
This theme shows the positive side, where young people find ways to stay away from substances. They try to focus on their future, practice self-control, and avoid risky groups. These coping strategies are essential because they protect them from negative peer and social influences.
- **Future Orientation**: A participant shared, *"Whenever I am tempted, I remind myself of my dreams and future"*. This shows how thinking about one's goals helps to avoid temptation.
- **Self-Regulation**: A student explained, **"***I tell myself not to do it again because it can affect my studies"*. This shows how personal discipline and awareness help in resisting substance use.
- **Coping Mechanism**: A participant said, *"I stay away from the group when they do it, so I don't get influenced"*. This shows a practical strategy of physically distancing oneself from peers who use substances.

6. Discussion

This study set out to understand why adolescents in Darjeeling use substances. The findings clearly show that it's

not caused by just one thing, but by a combination of many social, cultural, personal, and environmental influences.

Peer and Social Influences
One of the strongest findings was the influence of friends and peer groups. Almost every participant mentioned that their first experience with alcohol, smoking, or other substances was with their friends. Some said they felt left out if they refused, while others felt proud or "cool" when they joined in. This shows how powerful peer groups are in shaping young people's decisions. During adolescence, friendship and peer acceptance are significant, and many participants gave in to peer pressure to avoid being teased or excluded. The environment in schools and among peer circles plays a significant role in making these behaviours seem normal. However, some participants actively resisted peer pressure by avoiding certain groups or focusing on their future goals, which showed that not all young people are negatively influenced.

Family and Cultural Context
Another key finding was the role of family and culture. Many participants grew up seeing alcohol use at home during family get-togethers, festivals, or in daily life, so to them, it didn't seem like a bad thing. A few even mentioned that elders offered them alcohol on special occasions. This highlights how family and culture make a big difference, because if alcohol is already a regular part of life at home, a young person won't see it as harmful. For many participants, their first exposure to substances happened at home, not with friends. This is an important finding, as we often only blame friends, but family and cultural practices are also responsible. However, some participants shared that their parents guided them to stay away from these habits, showing that families can also play a protective role.

Personal and Academic Pressures
Academic stress was another important theme that came out of the data. Participants often talked about exams, heavy workloads, and the constant fear of not doing well. Some mentioned using substances like alcohol or smoking to relieve stress or relax. This shows that adolescents are under a lot of pressure during their school years. The pressure to succeed and meet expectations can become overwhelming, and substances become a way to escape. Stress didn't only come from school, though; some participants also mentioned family conflicts or feeling lonely as reasons for their substance use, showing that adolescence is a sensitive time when both school and family factors can create internal pressure.

Media and Social Influence
The role of media and social media was also very strong in shaping participants' views. Many adolescents explained that movies and TV shows often made smoking and drinking look glamorous. On social media platforms like Instagram, they see pictures of parties and drinks every day, which gives them the impression that this behaviour is a normal part of youth culture. One participant said that seeing celebrities with drinks in reels made it look "cool," and another felt pressured to do the same after seeing friends post about partying on Instagram. This shows how constant online exposure pushes young people toward curiosity and experimentation. With the rise of social media, the influence is even stronger because

young people see not only celebrities but also their own friends engaging in these activities.

Resilience and Coping Strategies
A positive finding of the study is that not all adolescents gave in to substance use. Some showed resilience by staying away from groups that used substances or by focusing on their future goals. For instance, a few chose to focus on sports or studies to keep themselves busy and away from risky habits. This shows that young people aren't always helpless victims of pressure. With awareness and self-discipline, many can make positive choices, which is encouraging because it means that prevention programs can work if they're designed to build these coping skills.

Overall Discussion
When all the themes are combined, it's clear that youth substance use is the result of multiple pressures from peers, family, academics, and media. However, there are also protective factors, like personal awareness, future goals, and healthy coping strategies. The study highlights the importance of looking at the problem in a balanced way, it's not just the fault of friends, the media, or the family, but a mix of all these influences. It's clear that interventions should focus on strengthening the protective side, with peer education, family awareness, stress management in schools, and media literacy all playing important roles. Most importantly, young people themselves need to be guided in building their self-control and resilience so they can make healthy decisions even when surrounded by negative influences.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings, here are some recommendations for schools, families, communities, and policymakers:
- **School-Based Awareness Programs:** Schools should hold regular workshops and counselling sessions to educate students about the risks of substance use. These programs should also focus on teaching adolescents peer refusal skills and how to confidently say no to peer pressure.
- **Parental and Family Engagement:** Parents and guardians need to be more aware of how their own drinking habits and cultural practices influence adolescents. Community discussions and family awareness programs can help reduce the normalisation of alcohol during rituals and festivals.
- **Stress Management Support in Schools:** Since academic pressure was a key trigger, schools should provide counselling services, stress management workshops, and relaxation techniques to help students cope in healthy ways instead of turning to substances.
- **Media Literacy Programs:** Because movies and social media were found to glamorise substance use, media literacy should be introduced at school. Adolescents can be taught to critically evaluate what they see online and in films so they don't blindly follow risky trends.
- **Strengthening Resilience and Coping Skills:** Community organisations and NGOs can design programs that focus on building self-confidence, goal setting, and resilience in adolescents. These programs can highlight positive role models and encourage healthy alternatives like sports, arts, and youth clubs.

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- **Policy and Community Involvement:** Policymakers should work with schools, NGOs, and local communities to create a supportive environment for adolescents. This includes stricter monitoring of substance availability to minors and creating safe community spaces for young people to engage in positive activities.

8. Limitations of the Study

1) Since the research was carried out only in Darjeeling and nearby areas, the cultural and social influences may be different from other parts of India.
2) The information came from interviews, and some participants may not have shared everything openly due to the sensitive nature of the topic.
3) As most participants did not agree to be recorded, the data relied on field notes, which might have missed some details.

9. Conclusion

This study is aimed to explore the risk factors and pathways of youth substance abuse in Darjeeling among adolescents aged 15 to 17. Through interviews, the research successfully captured the personal experiences and voices of young people. The findings show that youth substance use in this region is shaped by a complex combination of social, cultural, academic, and media influences.

The strongest pattern was the role of peers and social groups. Many participants shared how friends and older students encouraged or pressured them to experiment. The need to fit in and avoid being called "boring" often made it hard to say no. In addition to peers, the family and cultural environment also played a large part, as alcohol was frequently present at festivals and family gatherings, making it seem normal and acceptable.

Academic stress and performance pressure also emerged as important triggers. Exams, heavy workloads, and the fear of failure often pushed students toward substances as a way to cope with anxiety. The influence of media and social platforms was also obvious, with participants describing how movies and social media posts made substance use look glamorous and fashionable.

However, the study also found that not all adolescents gave in to these pressures. Many showed resilience and coping strategies, such as avoiding risky groups, focusing on their long-term goals, or reminding themselves of the negative effects of substances on their education and future. This shows that while risks are high, protective factors do exist and can be strengthened.

In conclusion, youth substance abuse in Darjeeling is not caused by one single factor, but by multiple interacting pathways. At the same time, the presence of resilience shows that interventions should not only focus on the risks but also on building the strengths and awareness that young people already have.

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