

Ritual, Identity, and Addiction: An Anthropological Study of Substance Use in Indian Youth Culture

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Abstract

This study described substance use among Indian youth because a cultural as well as social ritual shaped with the help of identity, modernity, as well as socio-economic pressures. Using anthropological and social identity theories, it analysed the Punjab opioid crisis to reveal addiction as a collective response to alienation, globalization, and changing gender roles in contemporary India.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Issues of cultural changes, identity crises, and economic instability have all contributed to the rise of substance misuse as a major social problem among young Indians in recent years. Social isolation, shifting family values, and high unemployment rates are some of the problems that today's youth face in our increasingly urbanised and globally linked environment (Christie, 2021). Because of these factors, drug use becomes more acceptable as a means of coping and fitting in with loved ones. Instead of viewing drug usage as an individual issue, this research takes an anthropological approach, which views it as a ritualised means by which societies construct their identities (Alexandrescu, 2024). The opioid crisis in Punjab is an example of how addiction mirrors broader societal and cultural changes.

1.2 Research Aim

This study aims to explore how substance use among Indian youth functions as a cultural and social ritual shaping identity, belonging, and resistance. It seeks to understand addiction not merely as deviance but as a symbolic response to modernity, alienation, and socio-economic transformations in contemporary India.

1.3 Research objectives

- To analyse how anthropological theories, particularly those of ritual and identity, can be applied to interpret the cultural meanings and social functions of substance use among Indian youth.
- To examine the opioid crisis in Punjab as a case study reflecting the relationship between addiction, unemployment, migration, and youth dislocation.
- To investigate how modernity, globalization, and changing gender dynamics influence the emergence of addiction as a form of identity construction and social expression within Indian youth culture.

1.4 Research question

- How do anthropological theories of ritual and identity explain the cultural meanings of substance use among Indian youth?
- In what ways does the opioid crisis in Punjab reflect broader socio-economic and psychological dislocations among young people?
- How have modernity, globalization, and shifting gender roles influenced patterns of addiction and identity formation in Indian youth culture?

1.5 Problem statement / Rationale of the research

The cultural and social aspects of addiction have not received enough attention in the Indian setting, in contrast to the medical and psychological approaches that are more commonly used to study it (Bhawalkar *et al.* 2024).

In January, researchers from the National Drug Dependence Treatment Centre (NDDTC) at AIIMS surveyed ten districts in Punjab and found that 76% of the province's opioid users were between the ages of 18 and 35 (Udayakumar, 2016). A number of prescription pain relievers, as well as morphine and heroin, are opioids. According to 2013 statistics from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 51.6% of Punjabi youth abused drugs, which is 18 times greater than the national average (Udayakumar, 2016). On a daily basis, the 2.3 lakh opioid abusers in the state spend almost 20 crores of rupees on pills (Udayakumar, 2016). Substance abuse among young people is not just a deviant activity, but a culturally rooted problem impacted by ritual, identity, and belonging. This is the goal of this research.

1.6 Significance

By recasting substance abuse as a significant cultural practice among young Indians, this research adds to what is known about addiction from an anthropological and sociological perspective. It shed light on how community workers, educators, and lawmakers may better combat addiction by implementing intervention tactics that are both culturally sensitive and socially rooted.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Anthropological Theories of Ritual and Identity in Understanding Substance Use

The notion of liminality, its possible analytical uses, and Turner's initial introduction and development of it inspired several of his organisational anthropology colleagues (Hagggar, 2025). According to Turner, the *communitas* of a community is its strongest aspect. As a rite of passage, it brings the whole community together for a meaningful experience that strengthens the bonds of belonging. Symbolic "sources of illumination" are necessary for individuals to locate themselves within a culture's own system of meaning (Clifford Geertz) (Janik, 2025). On the other hand, symbols are the driving forces behind social movements, as Victor Turner put it, "determinable influences inclining persons and groups to action" (Hudson *et al.* 2025). Geertz represents the interpretive approach to symbolic anthropology, whereas Turner represents the symbolic approach.

In support of this view, social identity theory details the ways in which a person's sense of self develops in relation to their group membership. In most cases, the initiation of drug use among youths is accompanied by the discovery

of a subculture that provides a sense of belonging and differentiation from mainstream society. Drug use rituals provide social order and meaning among peer networks, as pointed out by Edland-Gryt (2021).

2.2 The Opioid Crisis: Addiction, Unemployment, and Youth Dislocation.

There has been a public health catastrophe due to the disturbing surge in opioid abuse over the last 25 years, with the most noticeable manifestation being the tremendous spike in drug overdose fatalities. From 2001 to 2016, the overdose fatality rate increased by 345%, with yearly rises in overdose fatalities being especially steep since 2015 (Jalali *et al.* 2020).

Dart *et al.* (2021) commented that opioid prescription prevalence and opioid misuse, defined as the use of opioids outside of the directions of a prescribing physician, are both predictably and robustly correlated with employment-related characteristics, such as difficult working conditions and unemployment. Globalisation as well as the falling status of farming have shattered conventional masculine identities, according to Hammersley (2021), putting young men in a precarious position of uncertainty. All the more so when many young people have the "migration dream" and want to one day leave the country (Setrana, 2021).

2.3 Modernity, Globalization, and Gender in the Construction of Youth Addiction

Traditional standards about achievement, gender, and belonging have been transformed by modernity and globalisation, which have significantly altered the social environment for young people. A rising number of public health risks are related to poor physical and mental health, and social isolation and discrimination are two of these concerns. Culture has an effect on how individuals experience, comprehend, and communicate discomfort associated with traumatic experiences. It has been found that a high correlation exists between positive psychological well-being and a well-developed identity.

An increase in the number of men who are unemployed might give rise to a sense of crisis among males because work is inextricably related to the male identity. Taking into account the distinctively masculine characteristics of men and basing service design and engagement on three components is an effective method (LOK *et al.* 2025). As a ritual that embodies both engagement with and critique of contemporary life, drug use provides a way to traverse these changes (Robertson *et al.* 2021). Gender norms are changing, and with them, what it means to be a man for young men. The modern period, according to Charteris *et al.* (2022), is one of "manufactured uncertainty," in which people are perpetually faced with the challenge of balancing risk and identity. Substance abuse becomes a modern form of expression and a means of coping within this setting.

Substance abuse becomes an integral part of idealised lifestyles promoted by the worldwide media, which further glamorises hedonism and transgression. Complex emotional landscapes are created when local traditions and global influences are blended, leading to hybrid identities (Aanayo *et al.* 2023). Addiction becomes a means of escape and a performance of identity within these identities. Therefore, Vitalis *et al.* (2024) suggested that addiction in a country's young culture mirrors the paradoxes of modernity—where gender redefinitions, socio-economic instability, and globalisation all work together to mould new kinds of ritualised conduct and cultural significance.

2.4 Theory

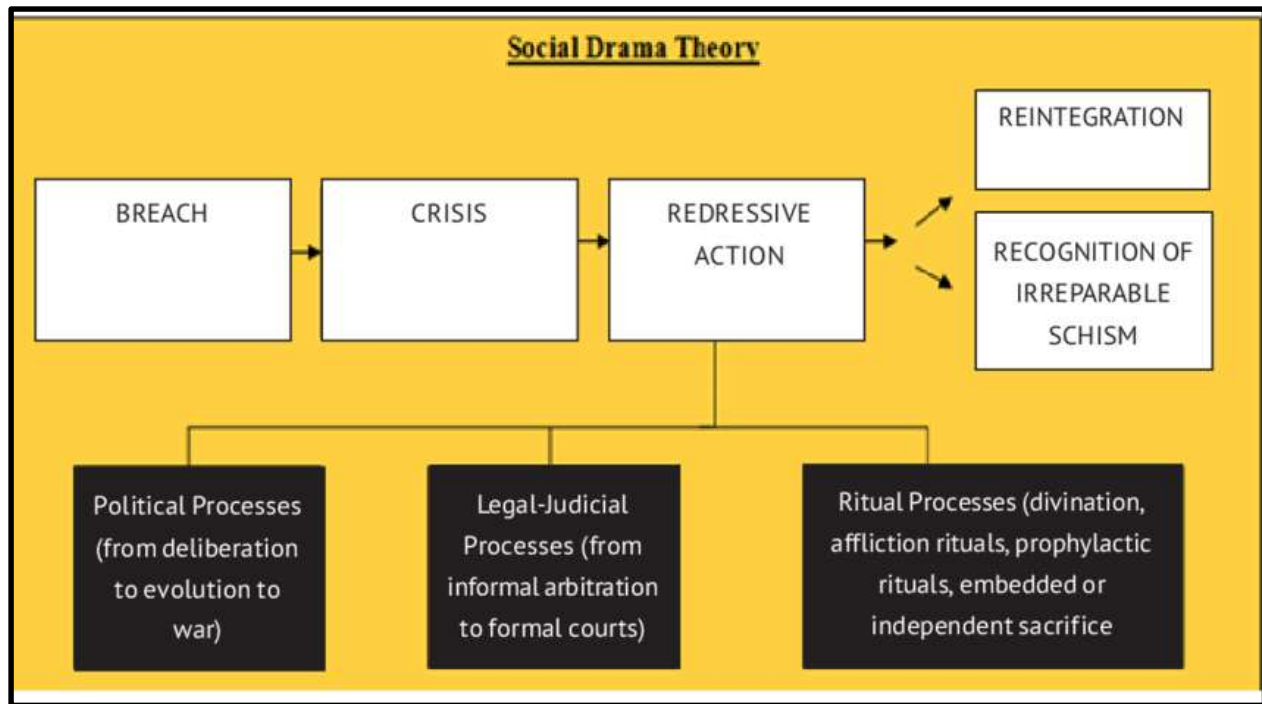


Figure 1: Victor Turner's theory

(Source: Wajabula, 2023)

This study examines the cultural aspects of substance use among Indian teenagers by mainly drawing on Victor Turner's theory of ritual and social identity theory. Youth substance abuse is reflective of the liminality idea proposed by Turner (1969) as a means by which people negotiate times of transition and uncertainty through ritualised activities (Wajabula, 2023). Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory adds to this by demonstrating how one's involvement in a group affects one's sense of self (van Knippenberg, 2023). Amidst social upheaval and economic hardship, substance use becomes a communal and individual ritual, serving to solidify one's place within peer subcultures while simultaneously representing defiance, solidarity, and rebellion.

2.5 Literature Gap

Few studies integrate anthropological theories to explain how addiction expresses youth alienation and belonging. This research bridges that gap by contextualizing substance use within India's socio-cultural and economic transformations. In addition, existing research on drug abuse in India primarily adopts medical or psychological perspectives, overlooking its cultural, ritual, and identity-based dimensions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy

The interpretivist approach to sociology is defined as a way of looking at things through the lens of the cultural beliefs, conventions, and values of the community in which they occur (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). In this research, the researcher used interpretivism research philosophy. This approach was used to understand how addiction functioned as a social ritual and identity marker among Indian youth, interpreting behaviours through participants' lived experiences and societal influences rather than relying on objective or quantitative measures.

3.2 Research Approach

Most people picture scientists working with a deductive method to solve a problem. In this research, the researcher followed a deductive research approach.

These theoretical frameworks guided the analysis of secondary data to test how well existing concepts explained substance use patterns among Indian youth, particularly within the socio-cultural context of Punjab's opioid crisis.

3.3 Research Design

The goal of conducting exploratory research is to fill in the gaps in our knowledge of a hitherto unexplored phenomenon by identifying and analysing its underlying causes, correlations, and reasons (Gloc, 2024). The researcher sought to explain how unemployment, globalization, and masculinity shifts contributed to addiction, using theoretical interpretation to uncover underlying cultural meanings and interconnected social factors influencing youth behaviour.

3.4 Data Collection

In order to address certain enquiries, resolve particular issues, or arrive at well-informed conclusions, data collection is a methodical procedure (Mazhar *et al.* 2021). The researcher relied on secondary data, including academic journals, government reports, and credible online publications on substance use and youth culture in India.

3.5 Data Analysis

One way to examine qualitative data is through the use of thematic analysis. It is most commonly used with collections of texts, such transcripts or interviews (Morgan, 2022). When analysing data, researchers look for recurring themes, which can be anything from topics to ideas to patterns of meaning.

The researcher used thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and concepts across the collected literature. Themes such as ritualized behaviour, identity construction, masculinity, and social alienation were coded and interpreted.

3.6 Inclusion & Exclusion

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Source Type	Academic journals, books, government reports.	Blogs, news articles, or non-academic sources.
Focus Area	Studies on youth, ritual, identity, and addiction in India.	Purely clinical or pharmacological studies.
Time Frame	2010–2025 publications.	Studies before 2010 (except classic theories).

Table 3.1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

(Source: Author)

3.7 Boolean operators

Operator	Search String Example	Purpose
AND	“Youth AND Addiction AND India”	Narrows search to include all terms.
OR	“Substance use OR Drug abuse”	Broadens search to similar terms.
NOT	“Addiction NOT Alcohol”	Excludes unwanted topics.

Table 3.2: Boolean Operators

(Source: Author)

3.8 Ethics

Avoiding deceit, obtaining informed consent, safeguarding anonymity and secrecy, minimising harm, and allowing the right to withdraw are the key principles of research ethics (Ali *et al.* 2025).

The researcher adhered to ethical standards by ensuring all secondary sources were properly cited and drawn from credible, publicly available materials.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Findings

Theme 1: Anthropological theories, particularly those of ritual and identity, can be applied to interpret the cultural meanings and social functions of substance use among Indian youth

Author	Year	Methodology	Findings
Ghosh <i>et al.</i>	2024	interviews	The importance of social norms in determining drug use among first-year college students is shown by our findings. According to social norms theory, pupils act in ways that they think their classmates would act. Consistent with previous research showing that false beliefs about the substance use of one's peers might encourage similar actions in others, this study highlights the substantial role both descriptive and injunctive norms play in normalising substance use.

Kaur <i>et al.</i>	2020	Primary	It is crucial to bring attention to the socio-psychological and cultural issues, such as peer pressure, drug availability, and unemployment, because the findings show that these are potent stimulants for substance addiction and relapse.
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Table 4.1: Theme 1

(Source: Author)

Theme 2: Opioid crisis in Punjab as a case study reflecting the relationship between addiction, unemployment, migration, and youth dislocation.

Author	Year	Methodology	Findings
Avasthi <i>et al.</i>	2019	primary	The 'hidden population' of drug users in the Indian state of Punjab was studied using two separate but complimentary methods: the Rapid Assessment Survey (RAS) and the Punjab Drug Use Monitoring Survey (P-DUMS). This hard-to-reach Punjabi group has a serious opioid addiction issue and very little access to treatment. Addictive usage of prescription opioids is another cause for concern.
Sachdeva <i>et al.</i>	2025	Secondary	A shift away from enforcement-only approach is necessary to tackle addiction in Punjab. Public health services, mental health resources, and educational outreach should supplement law enforcement. A state-funded peer recovery coaching program patterned after Project Samvedna and the expansion of mobile rehabilitation clinics to rural regions are two of our top recommendations. Punjab can only conquer this long-standing dilemma by implementing a multi-sectoral strategy that is grounded in evidence.

Table 4.2: Theme 2

(Source: Author)

Theme 3: Modernity, globalization, and changing gender dynamics influence the emergence of addiction as a form of identity construction and social expression within Indian youth culture.

Author	Year	Methodology	Findings
Venkatesh <i>et al.</i>	2024	Primary and multicentric cross-sectional study	The complicated situation of substance use is influenced by many different factors. The purpose of this research is to identify the frequency and factors that contribute to substance abuse among young people in India who visit primary care clinics. It is critical to intervene specifically because there is a high rate of substance abuse among young people visiting healthcare facilities in India. This complicated public health issue can be effectively prevented with the use of insights into determinants.
Biswal <i>et al.</i>	2024	Qualitative	India has a significant treatment gap of 73% and an increasing problem with illicit drug usage. The patient understands of their illness, their decision to seek care, and their progress through therapy and recovery can be greatly enhanced by the use of explanatory models. No socio-cultural explanatory model has been produced in any of the research that have looked at drug misuse among Indian adolescents. In order to gain a better understanding of the social context, self-perception, and causal beliefs surrounding teenage drug misuse in India, our study set out to create an explanatory model.

Table 4.3: Theme 3

(Source: Author)

4.2 Analysis

Theme 1

An explanation of the literature review Bringing emphasis to the agency of rites in bringing about social change, which he considered as their primary purpose, Turner exposed the complexity and changeability of ordinary social life (Haggar, 2025). Through symbolic acts like group drug use, youth express liminality and communitas, navigating social uncertainty and asserting individuality within peer culture (Ghosh *et al.* 2024). Thematic analysis defined how substance use among Indian youth represents a ritualized practice embedded in cultural meaning and

identity formation. Thus, the analysis linked ritual theory to identity construction, showing addiction as a culturally coded response to alienation and societal transition in modern India.

Theme 2

According to research on the topic, drug misuse serves as a combination of resistance and acceptance, with addiction symbolising the shared experiences of hopelessness and solidarity among marginalised youth. The bulk of Punjab's opioid users were young adults (those between the ages of 18 and 35), according to a January survey by researchers at the NDDTC of the AIIMS (Udayakumar, 2016). Thematic analysis defined the Punjab opioid crisis as a manifestation of structural dislocation rooted in unemployment, migration pressures, and changing masculinities (Avasthi *et al.* 2019). This analysis illustrates how the Punjab case exemplifies the intersection of social stress, identity loss, and limited opportunity, reinforcing that addiction serves as a ritual of coping within disrupted social frameworks.

Theme 3

Substance abuse is a complex issue with many underlying causes. The goal of this study is to determine how often substance misuse occurs and what variables lead to it among primary care clinic-visiting youths in India. There is a growing problem with illicit drug usage in India, and the treatment gap is rather large at 73% (Biswal *et al.* 2024). The use of explanatory models can significantly improve the patient's comprehension of their condition, their choice to seek care, and their progress during therapy and recovery. A review of the relevant literature revealed that contemporary media, consumer culture, and altering notions of masculinity all contribute to the promotion of substance use as a representation of contemporary lifestyle and social belonging.

In the study conducted by Charteris *et al.* (2022), the findings suggested that exposure to global trends and urban pressures contributed to the development of identity conflicts, wherein addiction became a symbol of self-expression and escape.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1 Conclusion

Practical research demonstrates that certain addictions or components of addictions can be affirming, creative, and sustainable, at least at the individual level; ethnographic studies demonstrate that drug users' lived realities and self-identities have cultural order and socially created purpose and meaning; and anthropological research has contributed to the development of addiction science. Worldwide, anthropological study on drug-related topics has been considerably enhanced due to the human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome outbreak. Through anthropological interpretation, addiction emerged as a symbolic response to alienation, unemployment, and changing gender roles in modern India. The opioid crisis in Punjab highlighted how addiction reflects collective dislocation and loss of purpose. Moreover, globalization and media influence have redefined addiction as a tool of self-expression and belonging.

5.2 Study Limitations

This study relied exclusively on secondary data, limiting direct engagement with affected individuals. Regional variations within India were not deeply explored, and the absence of primary interviews restricted insights into personal narratives and lived cultural experiences. The findings were interpretive rather than empirical, depending on existing literature and reports.

5.3 Future Scope

Future research should include primary fieldwork, interviews, and ethnographic studies to capture lived experiences of addiction among Indian youth. Additionally, integrating digital ethnography could reveal how online communities and social media shape youth identity and substance-related behaviours. Comparative studies across regions and genders can deepen understanding of cultural nuances.

5.4 Recommendation

Policymakers and health professionals should incorporate cultural and social dimensions into addiction prevention programs. It is also possible for it to contain sociocultural demands and preferences, which can be incorporated into the prevention intervention that is culturally customised. It has been demonstrated that prevention programs and policies that are founded on good evidence-based principles are able to considerably reduce substance abuse and the harms that are associated with it (Berengüí & Castejón, 2023). It will be of the utmost importance to encourage professionals to include the fundamental principles of health promotion and, as a result, to take action against social injustice and stigma. Collaboration between anthropologists, sociologists, and public health experts is essential for designing holistic approaches that view addiction as both a social and psychological phenomenon (Wong *et al.* 2021).

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