

The use of pharmacological psychostimulants among young people in a festive context

Uso de psicoestimulantes farmacológicos entre jovens em contexto festivo

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ABSTRACT | OBJECTIVE: To analyze the use of pharmacological psychostimulants among young people in festive contexts. **METHODS AND MATERIALS:** This study is an exploratory research with a qualitative approach, conducted in the municipality of Salvador, Bahia. The study population consisted of young individuals who use methylphenidate or lisdexamfetamine in festive contexts. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the thematic content analysis technique. **RESULTS:** A total of 12 young participants, with an average age of 27 years, predominantly male, took part in the study. Lisdexamfetamine dimesylate (Venvanse) was the most commonly used psychoactive drug. The acquisition primarily occurred through friends, who also influenced consumption patterns. The experiences reported were described as pleasurable, particularly when associated with alcohol consumption. **CONCLUSION:** It is concluded that the phenomenon studied involves social, cultural, and individual dimensions, requiring intersectoral actions for control, education, and harm reduction. Health professionals play a key role in promoting rational use and in providing care focused on health protection.

KEYWORDS: Recreational Drug Use. Young Adult. Lisdexamfetamine Dimesylate. Methylphenidate. Self-Medication.

RESUMO | OBJETIVO: Analisar o uso de psicoestimulantes farmacológicos entre jovens em contexto festivo. **MÉTODOS E MATERIAIS:** Este trabalho consiste em uma pesquisa exploratória, com abordagem qualitativa, realizada no município de Salvador, Bahia. A população de estudo foi composta por jovens que fazem o uso do metilfenidato ou lisdexanfetamina em contextos festivos. Os dados foram obtidos por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas e analisados segundo a técnica de análise temática de conteúdo. **RESULTADOS:** Participaram 12 jovens, com média de 27 anos, predominando o sexo masculino. O dimesilato de lisdexanfetamina (Venvanse) foi o psicofármaco mais utilizado. A aquisição ocorreu majoritariamente por meio de amigos, que também influenciaram o consumo. As experiências relatadas foram descritas como prazerosas, especialmente quando associadas ao uso de bebidas alcoólicas. **CONCLUSÃO:** Conclui-se que o fenômeno estudado envolve dimensões sociais, culturais e individuais, demandando ações intersetoriais de controle, educação e redução de danos. Destaca-se o papel dos profissionais de saúde na promoção do uso racional e no cuidado voltado à proteção da saúde.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Uso Recreativo de Drogas. Adulto Jovem. Dimesilato de Lisdexanfetamina. Metilfenidato. Automedicação.

1. Introduction

The non-prescribed use of pharmacological psychostimulants has become a growing phenomenon in recent years, especially among young people. Although these medications have specific therapeutic indications, a significant increase in consumption without a prescription has been observed, motivated by varying purposes, such as improved cognitive performance, weight control, seeking greater physical disposition in daily activities, and for reasons related to leisure and enjoyment in festive contexts¹.

Among the main representatives of this class of psychoactive drug, we highlight methylphenidate and lisdexamfetamine, which are widely used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). These drugs act in the central nervous system by increasing the availability of neurotransmitters such as dopamine and noradrenaline, involved in attention, controlled behavior, and impulsiveness processes. These mechanisms explain their therapeutic effects but are also the base for the stimulating effects sought in non-therapeutic use contexts².

Within this scenario, recent research has demonstrated that non-prescribed use of psychostimulants by young people extends beyond the academic environment and has become incorporated into socialization and leisure practices, especially among young adults. The studies available in literature indicate that prescribed stimulants, such as methylphenidate and amphetamine derivatives, are being used to remain awake, intensify physical disposition, and enhance social experiences, especially in festive contexts^{3,4}.

This consumption pattern has been associated with normalizing the use of controlled medication as a resource to manage tiredness, stress, and contemporary social demands, revealing a complex phenomenon which articulates expectations for performance, the culture of productivity, and body self-management practices⁵. Furthermore, the combination of these drugs with other psychoactive substances, especially alcohol, has been described as a factor which increases risk-taking behavior and damages health, reinforcing the need for preventive approaches which consider the sociocultural contexts in which this use takes place^{3,6}.

Despite significant scientific production on the clinical use of psychostimulants to treat neuropsychiatric disorders, major gaps remain with regards to understanding its recreational use, particularly in festive contexts. The investigation of this phenomenon, considering its social, cultural, and individual determinants, is fundamental in order to supplement actions to promote health, health education, surveillance, and harm reduction. Considering the above, the objective of this study is to analyze the use of pharmacological psychostimulants among young people in a festive context.

2. Methodology

This exploratory research has a qualitative approach, conducted in the municipality of Salvador, Bahia. The study population comprised young people who reported use of methylphenidate or lisdexamfetamine in festive contexts. The selection of an exploratory design was appropriate since it enabled greater familiarity with the phenomenon investigated, contributing towards making it clearer and more understandable, in addition to furthering and understanding the use of psychostimulants in festive contexts. Furthermore, the qualitative approach enabled us to explore subjective, social, and cultural dimensions related to this pattern of consumption⁷.

Data collection took place between March and May 2025, through semi-structured interviews conducted from a script comprising two thematic parts: (1) the participants' sociodemographic characteristics, and (2) open-ended questions focused on understanding the use of stimulant psychoactive drugs in festive contexts.

Participant selection took place using the chain-referral or snowball sampling technique. Initially key informants were identified from the researchers' personal contact network, who recruited other potential participants with the required profile, and who, in turn, also suggested new contacts. The following were adopted as inclusion criteria: having used stimulant psychoactive drugs in festive contexts at least once in their life and being within the 18 to 29 age range. The following were established as exclusion criteria: the use of psychostimulants exclusively for study or work and with a prescription.

The interviews were held face-to-face or online, according to the participants' preference. The initial invitation took place through contact via WhatsApp, and the informed consent form (ICF) was also forwarded to them at this time for reading. Following expression of interest, the date, time, and location to hold the interviews was scheduled, in accordance with each participant's availability.

The face-to-face interviews were held in the locations selected by the participants, with the aim of ensuring privacy and comfort, and with any associated travelling conducted by the researcher. The average interview duration was 30 minutes, and they were recorded with the assistance of two mobile devices. The interviews were fully transcribed later, retaining the terms and expressions which the participants used. We conducted the data analysis according to the thematic content analysis technique proposed by Minayo, comprising the following stages: (1) pre-analysis, and floating reading the material; (2) exploration of the material, identifying the context units and constructing analytical categories; and (3) processing the results, with an interpretative summary of the findings⁸.

The study was conducted in compliance with the ethical precepts established by Brazilian National Health Council Resolution No. 466/2012 (Conselho Nacional de Saúde - CNS), which regulates research involving human beings. The Bahian School of Medicine and Public Health (Escola Bahiana de Medicina e Saúde Pública - BAHIANA) Ethics in Research Committee approved this research under CAAE N° 85923225.0.0000.5544.

3. Results

The study population comprised 12 young people aged between 23 and 29, with the average age of 26.7. A male predominance (10 participants) was observed, while two were female, and all self-declared as cisgender. In relation to self-declared color/race, seven participants identified themselves as white, two as Asian, and three as mixed-race.

With regards to their level of education, five participants were university graduates, and one

of these also referred to having obtained a post-graduate qualification; three participants reported that they were studying for a degree at the time of the research, and four had completed secondary education. In respect to their monthly income, six participants reported an income of between three and six minimum salaries; three of up to three minimum salaries, and three of over six minimum salaries. All the participants reported having used lisdexamfetamine dimesylate, while only two mentioned having used methylphenidate in festive contexts.

The interview results were organized in two analytical categories: (1) First contact and forms of access: contexts for starting psychostimulant use at parties; and (2) Warnings and precautions: adverse effects and use management practices.

3.1 First contact and forms of access: contexts for starting psychostimulant use at parties

In relation to how the medication was acquired, the accounts demonstrated that access mainly took place informally, through friends who had a prescription or provided contacts for pharmacies which sell products without a prescription. Some of the participants reported that they had received the medication directly at parties, either for free, or purchasing it from third parties at the celebratory setting.

"They were always offered to me at parties; it's something that everyone uses now" (E6).

"Usually someone has it at a party and gives it to me, or I ask a friend, who I know has them, for a tablet before going to a party, and I take it with me to take there" (E7).

"The first time I took one, a friend offered it to me, but later on I started to buy them at parties. There are people who sell tablets" (E11).

With regards to the first experience of using this medication at parties, the majority described positive effects, such as increased energy, euphoria, extended physical resistance, a better mood, and feeling of controlled drunkenness. It was recurrently reported that the participants drank less alcohol when taking psychostimulants but felt the effects of the party more intensely. This pattern suggests a feature attributed to the medication as a possible intensifier of the enjoyable festive experience.

"An incredible experience repeated more times; it really helps to control the level of drunkenness" (E1).

"Man, I was euphoric; life was beautiful; I spoke a lot with everyone; and had infinite energy" (E12).

"Really good; I felt that I had the energy for a thousand hours of partying. And it was even economical in some ways; I didn't need to buy alcoholic drinks all the time to liven me up" (E11).

3.2 Warnings and precautions: adverse effects and use management practices

Despite the predominance of positive accounts, some participants described significant side effects. Among the most quoted unwelcome effects are extended insomnia, excessive sweating, a feeling of low blood pressure, and the need to use anxiolytic medication to reverse the state of excitement. These effects, although they had not prevented the participants from using them, were recognized as warning signs, mainly when associated with frequent use or high doses.

"Once, when I took two 70mg Venvanses, I had cold sweats and low blood pressure" (E1).

"Not the unwelcome (effect) of feeling bad but I couldn't sleep for almost two days and had to take Rivotril" (E6).

"At the party, among the craziness, no, only afterwards; I couldn't sleep the next day and went to work on Monday without having slept" (E12).

When questioned about care related to use of the medication, many showed a degree of awareness about the risks, especially of mixing it with alcohol, and the potential for dependence. However, in most cases, this awareness was not reflected in effective prevention practices. Some of the interviewees reported the adoption of subjective control strategies, such as limiting the number of tablets, or restricting use to special occasions, although they also admitted that these practices were not followed systematically.

"I don't have many because sometimes I take them with alcohol, but I am careful, and avoid taking them in excess" (E2).

"What I know is that it is used for those who are diagnosed with ADHD; it shouldn't be self-medicated, but care should be taken to not take a higher quantity than needed, and be careful to not become addicted, because there are people who live on this every day, including many doctors, and when you stop taking them, I know there is a rebound effect initially, as the body was used to the energy and a high level of focus" (E3).

"The only thing I know is that you cannot take them with alcohol, but everybody does, and I have never seen anything happen to anyone" (E7).

4. Discussion

Analysis of the statements given by the twelve participants interviewed reveals important nuances in the use of pharmacological psychostimulants. The data collected indicates a common pattern of recreational use associated with the desire to extend energy levels, increase the state of alertness, and reduce the inhibiting effects of alcohol during parties. Thus, these medications, which were originally prescribed to treat ADHD, have been assigned a new meaning in social spaces, as enhancers of festive performance and pleasure, even among individuals who do not have a prescription.

The predominance of young individuals who self-identified as White can be understood in light of the racial inequalities that shape access to goods, services, and consumption practices within the Brazilian context. Current literature indicates that the use of pharmacological psychostimulants among young people is influenced by socioeconomic, racial, and educational factors, being more prevalent among White students enrolled in higher education^{9,10}. The predominance of participants from more privileged socioeconomic strata may also be related to the high cost of these medications, particularly within the non-prescription market. Furthermore, gender norms influence risk perception and management, with men tending to minimize such risks, which may contribute to risk-taking behaviors in recreational settings without compromising adherence to substance use as a strategy for sociability and performance¹¹.

We would like to highlight at this point that although the participants frequently mentioned the association with alcoholic drinks, they indicate drug use as a strategy to reduce alcohol consumption. In addition, recent studies demonstrate that alcohol consumption among young adults has shown a downward trend in various sociocultural contexts, compared with previous generations. This reduction has been attributed to factors such as greater awareness of health risks associated with the substance, changes in socialization norms, and greater value to healthier lifestyles, reflecting a change in epidemiological behavior in contemporary youth¹².

Easy access to psychoactive drugs reflects contemporary sociocultural aspects resulting from the combination of insufficient inspection and fragmented policies which favor the irregular sale of these medications and expansion of self-medication practices¹³. These elements are also linked to the phenomenon of the medicalization of life, through which the social, cultural, and subjective dimensions of existence become progressively framed as objects of biomedical intervention. In this context, psychoactive drugs start to occupy a central place as resources to increase productivity, heighten physical resistance, and promote feelings of well-being in different socialization contexts, including leisure and parties¹⁴. The subjective experiences which the participants reported are registered in this setting, in which the narrative highlights positive feelings, reproducing a discourse of optimizing the body, characteristic of contemporary contexts, characterized by high demands for performance, productivity, and appearance¹⁵.

In this process of assigning new meaning to their use, pharmacological psychostimulants start to occupy an ambiguous position in festive contexts, being situated in a border area between medication and a recreational substance. As long as their consumption is detached from a therapeutic purpose and is primarily orientated towards production of the desired effects, these drugs become incorporated into the dynamics of consumption typical at parties and social events, approaching the logic which organizes the use of other psychoactive drugs^{3,6}.

From this perspective, the symbolic status of medication is progressively reconfigured, making

space for the collective experience of use, mediated by peers, informal circulation norms, and expectation of social performance, which contributes towards trivialization of risks and the naturalization of non-therapeutic consumption^{10,16}. Furthermore, it is important to consider that the non-prescribed use of these psychostimulants is associated with the occurrence of adverse side effects, such as insomnia, tachycardia, anxiety, irritability, and risk of dependence, especially when combined with alcohol, which reinforces the need for problematization and advice on the risks of this practice^{10,17}.

Thus, the use of pharmacological psychostimulants in festive contexts among young people cannot only be understood as an individual or deviant practice, but a socially produced phenomenon inscribed in contemporary dynamics which articulate the medicalization of life, the culture of performance, and valuing productivity of the body. This context challenges traditional approaches centered exclusively on the biomedical or normative model, requiring reading that considers the sociocultural contexts in which these practices are constructed and legitimized.

Among the limitations of this study, we highlight the use of the snowballing technique which, although effective in reaching participants who are difficult to access, it may introduce a selection bias and reduce sample diversity. This should be considered when interpreting the findings and extrapolating the results for other contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the use of pharmacological psychostimulants in festive contexts among young people predominantly takes place recreationally, associated with the desire to extend energy levels, increase the state of alertness, and intensify the festive experience, frequently in conjunction with the consumption of alcohol. Medications which were originally prescribed to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have been assigned a new meaning as enhancers of festive performance and pleasure, with access being predominantly informal, mediated by friendship networks.

The sociodemographic characterization of the sample revealed the predominance of young men, self-declared as white, with an average to high level of education, and intermediary levels of income, demonstrating the influence of social determinants in access, and normalizing the non-therapeutic use of psychostimulants. The narratives also indicate a logic of “conscious use”, based on subjective control strategies which do not translate into effective prevention practices, particularly when considering concomitant use with alcohol.

It is concluded that the recreational use of psychostimulants in festive contexts represents a complex phenomenon, permeated by social, cultural, and individual dimensions. The trivialization of consumption and fragility in perceiving the risks reinforce the need for public policies, awareness-raising actions, and educational interventions focused on damage reduction, as well as care strategies, particularly in the field of nursing, which promotes the rational use of medication and protection of collective health.

Disclosure of AI use

The authors declare that the generative artificial intelligence tool ChatGPT was used exclusively for grammatical revision, language refinement, and improvement of the manuscript’s textual clarity. The tool was not used for data analysis, interpretation of results, or generation of original scientific content. All content was fully reviewed and validated by the authors, who take full responsibility for the manuscript.

Authors’ contributions

The authors declare they have made substantial contributions to the work in terms of research concept and design; data acquisition, analysis or interpretation for the work; and drafting or critical review of relevant intellectual content. All the authors approved the final version for publication and agreed in taking public responsibility for all aspects of the study.

Competing interests

No financial, legal, or political conflict involving third parties (government, companies, and private foundations, etc.) was declared for any aspect of the work submitted (including, but not limited to, grants and funding, participation on an advisory board, study design, manuscript preparation, and statistical analysis, etc.).

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