10-1-2024

Perceptions of Non-Using College Students' Likelihood to Use Nonprescription or Prescription Stimulants

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

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MS, Walden University, 2017

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Philosophy

Clinical Psychology

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Abstract

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has highlighted the risk of non-users among college students using illegal prescription stimulants due to misinformation and incorrect assumptions. This qualitative study aimed to explore the perspectives of college students who do not use stimulants on perceived risks, social acceptability, opportunity experiences, and likelihood of using stimulants. The study addressed factors that either encourage or discourage students from using stimulants, as well as the internal and extrinsic incentives associated with this activity, using a phenomenological paradigm. Twelve southern Ohioan students who were not users were interviewed using a structured interviewing technique, which was consistently applied throughout the study. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and commonalities in the data. Those who refrained from using stimulants showed a high degree of awareness of the detrimental impacts of doing so, including the possibility of addiction and adverse health outcomes. Social unacceptability, which was founded on personal values and cultural norms, presented a challenge. As seen by the significant resistance to peer pressure despite repeated drug offers, academic integrity and personal health were emphasized over perceived short-term gains. The study results emphasize the importance of comprehending non-users' viewpoints regarding the potential drawbacks of stimulant use to develop focused actions and strategies to lessen abuse in academic settings. These insights broaden positive social change through an understanding of the factors influencing student opinions and provide the foundation for preventative interventions that assist at-risk children in leading healthy, drug-free lives.

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Dedication

For my mother who is my anchor and my friend. Thank you for being there for me through this journey. I will never forget your kindness, honesty, and truth. To the students who undergo great stress, having to perform academically and athletically, please know that you are not alone. You are valued, not because of what you do or what you know but because of who you are and the uniqueness that resides in you. You are valued because of the greatness you possess internally. You were fearfully and wonderfully created (Psalms 139:14). Your worth comes from the essence of you, your integrity, hope, faith, and love. Know that the struggles that you face now, you will not have to face alone. Turn to people who care, family, friends, faculty, teachers, and counsellors, instead of substances.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In the United States, there has been a persistent problem on college campuses with stimulant drug use (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). Examples of stimulants include dextroamphetamine (Dexedrine) used to treat attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in adults and methylphenidate (Ritalin, Concerta), used to treat ADHD in both adults and children. In a survey of 219 college students, 91.8% consumed stimulants orally, 12.3% of these students snorted them, 44.3% students had been prescribed them, 30.1% were given stimulants by someone else, 17.8% purchased stimulants from someone, and 6.4% bought prescription stimulants online (Fairman et al., 2020). Furthermore, the researchers found that 35.6% of participants were approached by someone to buy stimulants and said yes, 19.6% reported sharing stimulants with other students without receiving pay, and 9.1% reported receiving money for their stimulants.

The drug use problem on many college campuses has affected enrollment, education, mental and physical health and contributes to safety issues on campuses (Davis et al., 2018). Much of the established research to-date has been merely descriptive in nature, focused only on the type of drugs and the percentage of students using them (see Fairman et al., 2020). Though approximately 10% of all college students in the United States use stimulants (CDC, 2021), there has been little research regarding the perceptions of students about how they are introduced to stimulant drugs and what contributes to their motivation and decision to use them (Allen et al., 2017). Such information is needed to implement preventive programs to help students who are at risk of using.

The types of stimulant misuse students observe, referred to as opportunity experiences, on college campuses may affect their perceptions and likelihood to use (Allen et al., 2017). For example, students who observe peers' taking stimulants to advance academically may be influenced to also use them, thus increasing the social acceptability of use (Bouchrika, 2021). Thus, this research study focused on the perceptions of non-using students, as opposed to those students who already have a history of use, regarding their motivation of using illegal prescription and nonprescription stimulants. This included its social acceptability and opportunity experiences they may have encountered. The results obtained are useful to promote social change by educating students about the risks and consequences of using stimulants.

In this chapter, an introduction to the study is provided. First, a brief background of the research topic is discussed, followed by the identification of the problem addressed in this study. The purpose of the study is then established, and the research questions of the study are presented. The theoretical framework and methodology are then discussed, followed by the definitions of certain key terms that were used in the study. The assumptions, scope and delimitations, and limitations of the study were then described, and finally the significance of the study was discussed. The chapter ended with a summary.

Background

Between 1999-2021, approximately 500,000 people died due to overdose of opioid and prescription stimulant use (CDC, 2021). However, most research regarding drug use on college campuses has focused on alcohol and marijuana, neither of which is a stimulant or opioid (Alley et al., 2020). Although there are escalating rates of illegal prescription drug use among students (Holt et al., 2018), there remains a gap in research concerning non-using students' perceptions and concerns about using stimulants.

College campuses are prime environments for students to consider drug use (Allen et al., 2017). Specific to stimulant use, many students believe that their use will enhance academic learning (Amelia et al., 2017; Hequembourg, 2017). Common prescribed stimulants, such as dextroamphetamine (Dexedrine), amphetamine (Adderall), and methylphenidate (Ritalin), may be prescribed to individuals who suffer with depression, ADHD, hyperactivity, and narcolepsy, that is, daytime sleepiness (Schulenberg et al., 2021). Stimulants increase the effects of nerve cells that transport chemical messages throughout the brain by enhancing nerve activity, making individuals feel more observant, vigorous, and experience a "high" (CDC, 2021). Although stimulants do increase brain activity, there is no research to support that students do better academically using them (Arria et al., 2017).

Stimulant use is also increasing on college campuses due to increased accessibility and social acceptance and attitudes concerning the presumed low risk associated with their use (CDC, 2021; Schepis et al., 2020). Students on college campuses have reported that opportunities to use drugs and experiencing high stress from self, family, and school to perform academically were motivating factors that contributed to the likelihood that students would use stimulants (Allen et al., 2017). Students have also reported that they enjoyed how stimulants made them feel, and many accepted stimulants from someone they knew believing stimulants were safe because of the relationship (Schepis et al., 2020). However, many non-users are unfamiliar with the risks of nonprescription stimulants (Hequembourg, 2017). According to the CDC (2021), there were 16,236 drug overdose deaths involving prescription stimulants and opioids in 24 states and DC. Further, overdose in the United States has escalated by nearly 5% from 2018 to 2019 and has increased fourfold since 1999.

Problem Statement

Non-using college students may be at risk of engaging in illegal, non-prescription stimulant drug use due to distorted perceptions and false information (Harries et al., 2018). Among a sample of 243 college students, low perceived risk and high social acceptability were factors that motivated the students to use drugs (Gallagher, 2018). Students have reported believing stimulants were safer than other drugs, were socially acceptable, and provided greater opportunity experience to use than other drugs (Arria et al., 2019).

There are significant concerns for students at risk of engaging in drug use (Alley et al., 2020). There was an increase in non-prescription/prescription drug use on college campuses for students ages 18-34 and between the years 2002-2014 (Daniels-Witt et al., 2017). However, there is a gap in the research regarding the connection between when college students are presented with the opportunity to use stimulant medications and when they are motivated to use (Allen et al., 2017). There is not enough data regarding drug opportunity experiences that students have during college and speculated that exposure to drug opportunities before college may heighten the risk for drug use in college. There is not sufficient research on the “real-time drivers” (p. 580) of misuse of stimulants, which is impeding the development of preventive interventions (Schepis et al., 2020). Although researchers have highlighted the perceptions of college students regarding the misuse of prescription stimulants, the perspectives of the non-users were not explored (see Schepis et al., 2020). Further research is needed to explore the perspectives of diverse samples (Ross et al., 2018).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceived risks, social acceptability, opportunity experiences, and motivations of using stimulants among non-drug-using college students. Understanding the mindsets of such students helped me to position myself to focus on student’s pre-drug attempts before they occur and lead to a better understanding of their position regarding drug use and abuse on college campuses (see Ne’Eman-Haviv et al., 2019). Exploring perceptions of non-users was important to understanding what they think about the potential harm of stimulant use.

Research Questions

The following research questions (RQs) guided the research on non-using college students’ perceptions of the use of stimulants in college:

RQ 1: What are the perceived risks of stimulant use among non-using students on college campuses?

RQ 2: What are the perceptions regarding the social acceptability of stimulant use among non-using students on college campuses?

RQ 3: What opportunity experiences have non-using students come across with respect to using stimulants on college campuses?

RQ 4: What are the possible motivations of non-using students for using stimulants on college campuses?

Theoretical Framework

This research study used a phenomenology framework approach to examine the perceptions of college students regarding stimulant drug use. The philosophy of phenomenology was proposed in the early 20th century by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). The central insight of Husserl's theory involved human consciousness as the condition of all human experience (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Husserl's phenomenology also focused on the lived experiences of individuals.

In this study, a phenomenological framework was adopted to explore perceived risks, social acceptability, opportunity experiences, and motivations of using stimulants among non-drug-using college students. As a researcher, I had to engage in one-on-one interactions with the objects of research, that is, the participants (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). In a phenomenological study, the researcher explores the essence or quality of the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon under study through interviews, narratives, and observations (Connelly, 2010).

Phenomenological studies may be descriptive or interpretive in design. In the former, researchers identified and set aside any presumptions that they had with regard to the phenomenon under investigation, whereas in the latter, the presumptions are considered to be inseparable from the researcher and the study. In an interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology, the presumptions and their possible effects on the study were kept in consideration while conducting the study. For this study, a hermeneutic phenomenological framework was adopted to explore the perceptions of non-drug-using students in college. Further discussion of the phenomenological framework and its application are found in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Qualitative Study

Participants in the study were undergraduate college students from the southern Ohio area, which includes Cincinnati and Middletown. To meet the requirement for saturation, researchers have suggested anywhere between three to 30 participants for qualitative studies (Alam, 2021). For reaching saturation in this study, 10 participants in total shared their experiences and views regarding the opportunities they had of using nonprescribed stimulants. One interview was conducted per participant. The research explored the non-using student's opportunity experiences, the likelihood of stimulant use among non-using college students, the degree that stimulant use was accepted on college campuses, social acceptability, and students' perceived risks regarding stimulant use.

Definitions

The following terms are the effective operational definitions for the research.

Academic enhancement drugs: To achieve academic success, students often use drugs like stimulants that they believe will enhance their performance (Heyes & Boardley, 2019).

Motivation: Motivation signifies the processes that inspire and sustain an individual's behavior and activities (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020), in this case the choice of using stimulants.

Opportunity experiences: Opportunity experiences are an assortment of circumstances that make it convenient for an individual to participate in an event or phenomenon, which in this case, is stimulant use. An opportunity experience of stimulant use may occur based on the proximity and exposure to the event of stimulant use and the observation of the facts surrounding stimulant use (Fairman et al., 2020).

Perceptions: Perception refers to the ability to see, comprehend, become aware or understanding by utilizing the senses. It is a way of interpreting something. Affect and situation perception are interconnected in any type of situation (Gallagher, 2018).

Stimulants: Stimulants are substances that accelerate neurological activity in the body (Holt & Looby, 2018).

Social acceptability: An act of conforming or assimilating to other people's norms, behavior, or culture to be accepted. It also refers to the ability to tolerate differences in other people (Fairman et al., 2020).

Assumptions

Five basic assumptions expressed by Creswell (1998) were relevant to the study. First, the ontological assumption focused on the nature of reality; in this study, it was the reality of the perceptions of the college students. The ontological assumption was that the students were to be truthful when sharing their perceptions. Second, the epistemological assumption was concerned with how I interacted with the study. On the onset of this study, I built a rapport with the participants and interpreted the information reported by the students according to their intentions. The axiological assumption concentrated on the significance of the researcher, specifically on how I had a dialog with the participants and interpreted the data collected. I remained cognizant of the conditions concerning the collection of data and did not impose my values or influence on students throughout the interviewing process. The rhetorical assumption highlighted my personal voice when I explaining the study with the assumption that the methodology was at the forefront of the qualitative research. The methodological assumption pertained to the study's design. The methodological assumption and its consequences for the research design are thoroughly examined in Chapter 3.

Scope and Delimitations

The purpose of the qualitative study was to explore the perceived risks, social acceptability, opportunity experiences, and motivations of using stimulants among non-drug-using college students. The scope of this qualitative study included undergraduate students from colleges and universities in southern Ohio. Specifically, Cincinnati and Middletown were included in the scope of this study. This study was also limited to the perceptions of students who have not had any past experience using stimulants. The perceptions of college students who are stimulant users or non-using individuals who are not college students were not included in this study. Students studying in undergraduate courses in colleges and universities in Cincinnati and Middletown in southern Ohio were included in the study sample; non-using undergraduate students from other regions were not included.

Limitations

The following limitations were identified for this study. First, the study focused on direct approach opportunities—that is, when non-using students have been directly approached by their stimulant-using peers regarding the possible stimulant use by the former. This study did not consider instances where non-using students were in the presence of stimulant-users. The identified geographical limitations were that traveling to different schools can be impractical and time-consuming. Therefore, the findings of the study may not be broad enough to be transferable to all campuses.-Further, this study did not provide sufficient data to inform preventive programs and help prevent drug use for students at risk. Since drug use prevails on college campuses, it may be challenging to find students who have not already used drugs (Prosek et al., 2018). Since this study was not a longitudinal study, it was more difficult to track drug approach patterns that students experience. The challenges included that non-using college students did not want to discuss drug use and refuse to share their initial approach to use. Some students may have reported that they did not use drugs when they did.

Covid-19 was a barrier to conducting this study as well because there were still restrictions regarding how research can be conducted (wearing a mask, 6-ft. apart, and handwashing). Students did not want to comply with these mandates so access to college campuses was difficult due to these restrictions. The option of Zoom meetings was offered to mitigate this barrier.

Significance of the Study

This study can address the identified gap in research regarding the perceptions of non-using college students to use stimulants when presented with the opportunity. Little is known about the views of non-using college student's cognition regarding stimulant use. This void in research can be detrimental when discovering which students are at risk of using illegal prescription stimulants. The escalating drug use phenomenon on some campuses has reached epidemic proportions (CDC, 2021). The study was significant because colleges, universities, communities could benefit from the data collected. The information gathered may help society by urging governments to implement preventive programs that would inform students about the risks of using stimulants.

Contributing to the scholar community, this research can assist scholars by uncovering the specific tactics and rationalizations that students use which lead to drug use. This research has the potential to help inform researchers regarding enrollment and drop-out occurrences by understand student’s thought patterns. Their perceptions can alert administrators regarding attrition due to stimulant use. The study is considered a tool to design more effective strategies and interventive programs for those who are at risk. The potential benefit to colleges and universities is that they may have a lower drop-out rate, schools are likely to be safer, and students may be made aware of the support they need when faced with the challenges of dealing with opportunities for drug use.

Summary

This chapter introduced the topic of perceptions of non-using college students’ likelihood to use stimulants. The information included a brief background, a summary of the literature on college students and stimulant use, the gap in research that this study addressed, as well as the justification for the need for this study. The research questions that this study presented were displayed, the theoretical and conceptual framework was reviewed, and the type of study was discussed including how the design could impact the study. Furthermore, the definition and key words specific to the study were provided along with assumptions. The scope and delimitations were revealed followed by the rationale for the population selection and recognition of the conceptual framework for the study. The limitations were outlined including the location, Covid-19 and college resistance to utilize their students, potential bias, and limited transferability. The significance of the study to promote social change was also discussed. In the next chapter, the literature review conducted for this study is discussed in detail.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceived risks, social acceptability, opportunity experiences, and possible motivations of using stimulants among non-drug-using college students. Stimulant use on college campuses in the United States is escalating at a higher rate than in past years (Prosek et al., 2018). This is worrisome not only because of legal consequences of being in possession of non-prescribed stimulants but also the health risks associated with non-prescription stimulants, such as psychosis, suppression of appetite, insomnia, irritability, nausea, compulsion, and even death (Heyes & Boardley, 2019). According to the United States National Statistics (2021), 47% of the 10,146-emergency room admissions of adult patients in 2020 involved nonmedical prescription misuse. This demonstrates the critical point to which the use of non-prescribed stimulants and other drugs has reached.

Despite the negative consequences of using non-prescribed stimulants, there are several motivations for using these drugs. For college students, the pressure to perform at a higher physical and cognitive level may motivate some to try non-prescription stimulants (Schepis et al., 2020). Depending on how students perceive and understand the risks concerning stimulant use, they are either compelled to or deterred from using these drugs (Schulenberg et al., 2018). Although many researchers have explored the motivations of students who used cognitive enhancing drugs or stimulants, not enough research has examined non-using students' views, motives, or willingness for not using stimulants (Heyes & Boardley, 2019). An exploration of the perceptions of non-using students regarding the use of stimulants in college may provide critical insights as to how policies and practices can be developed to deter students from the harmful consequences of using non-prescribed stimulants on college campuses.

This chapter provides an overview of the current body of literature that is relevant to the study issue. The next section presents the search technique used to select the pertinent papers for the literature review. This is followed by a comprehensive analysis of the theoretical basis upon which this study is built. Following that, a comprehensive literature analysis is provided, structured into four distinct sub-sections: the usage of non-prescription medications among college students, the prevalence of stimulant use in college, the underlying motives for stimulant use, and a comparison between stimulant users and non-users. The evaluated papers were thoroughly examined to determine their relevance to this investigation. Through this examination, the discussion revealed a gap in the existing literature, which was filled in this study. The chapter is completed with a concise overview of the literature study.

Literature Research Strategy

The following databases were used to search for relevant literature: APA PsycINFO, Sage Journals, Google Scholar, and SocINDEX. PsycINFO was used because I wanted a more extensive search to confirm the gap in literature suggested by supporting articles. PsycINFO focuses exclusively on psychology and provided current literature, including articles, book chapters, and dissertations that informed this study. Sage Journals also provided me with peer-reviewed articles. Sage Journals was essential thus for verification and authentication of the articles obtained from PsycINFO. For the searches in these databases, I used a title search such as *what is the likelihood of college students* *to use stimulants, what is the perceptions of college student's acceptability regarding stimulant use*, and *what are the perceived risks of college students regarding stimulant use.* Google Scholar is a data source that provides a collection of scholarly literature across disciplines, including abstracts, academic publications, online repositories, publishers, and professional societies. Google Scholar does not include news or magazine articles in its database, which was helpful when searching for peer-reviewed articles. However, I did not rely entirely on this source for peer-review validation due to some unfavorable reviews concerning the verification of peer-review articles. SocINDEX is a database for sociology research. It provides an extensive authoritative bibliographic approach from sociology journals exploring many associated studies. Thus, the SocINDEX database was also used for this study.

The key search terms used in each database were *college students, stimulants, drugs, prescription drugs, nonprescription stimulants, self-efficacy, perceived harm, benefits,* and *diversion*. When encountering regions with little research, I consulted the Walden University librarian for advice on doing comprehensive searches. The librarian demonstrated how to effectively use a mix of phrases to provide successful results.

Theoretical Foundation

Following World War, I, the German philosopher Edmund Husserl introduced the notion of phenomenology as a philosophical approach to investigate and tackle the crisis of meaning and values in European culture that emerged after the war (Eagleton, 1983). Although Husserl is considered the primary philosopher of phenomenology in the 20th century (Eagleton, 1983), the foundation of phenomenology can be directed back to Kant and Hegel (Vandenberg, 1997). Husserl dismissed the concept that objects in the external environment exist independently and that information concerning the objects is reliable. He stressed that people can be certain about their point of view or how they are presented in the individual's consciousness of the world around them (Eagleton, 1983; Fouche, 1993). Husserl argued against the idea that anything beyond an individual's experience must be dismissed, and in this case the external world is diminished to subjective personal opinions and consciousness. Husserl rejected the belief that objects in the external world exist independently and that the information about objects is reliable. He argued that people can be certain about how things appear in, or present themselves to, their consciousness (Eagleton, 1983; Fouche, 1993). To arrive at certainty, anything outside immediate experience must be ignored, and in this way the external world is reduced to the contents of personal consciousness or just the facts (Husserl, 2012). Realities are thus treated as pure "phenomena" and the only absolute data from where to begin (Husserl, 2012).

Husserl's descriptive phenomenology was modified and built upon by one of his students, Heidegger, to propose the interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007), which formed the foundation of the study. Descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenology have certain key distinctions. As presented by Wojnar and Swanson (2007), the focus of descriptive phenomenology lies "on describing universal essences" (p. 175), whereas hermeneutic phenomenology lies in "understanding the phenomena in context" (p. 175). Further, descriptive phenomenologists view the study participant as a representative of the world wherein they live, while hermeneutic phenomenologists perceive the participant as “a self-interpretive being” (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007, p. 175). A hermeneutic phenomenological framework is appropriate when the researcher wishes to appreciate and include in the study the distinctions and subtle of the participants’ experiences and embrace the unique and individual perspectives on the participants’ contextualized lived experiences (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). As such, this framework was appropriate for exploring the subjective experiences and perceptions on stimulant use among non-drug-using college students.

Furthermore, hermeneutic phenomenology related to this research by examining the lived-experience descriptions of the study participants. This framework helped bring to light and reason regarding the lived experiences of these students (Hunter, 2003; Miles et al., 2013; Smythe, 2010). Heidegger’s mission was to address the “meaning of being,” which refers to the basic ontological understanding of how one interprets the world around them (Heidegger, 1995). When researchers classify things into different groups to learn more about their relationships in the universe, they are starting the ontology process (Hunter, 2003; Miles et al., 2013; Smythe, 2010). This strategy is consistent with the research since it employs philosophical ideas to guide methodological choices.

Recent studies involving the experiences of higher education students as they transition into adulthood have adopted hermeneutic phenomenological frameworks. For instance, Rawson (2018) studied German students’ experiences of personal development and learning in the context of school-related learning situations, co-constructing narratives through their interaction with the researcher. The findings of the study revealed the significance of formal as well as non-formal learning spaces among the students to enable them to develop as individuals and to become socially responsible citizens who are capable of constructively contributing to the society. In another study exploring the lived experiences of higher education students, Porteous and Machin (2018) focused on undergraduate students in the United Kingdom. Using systematic thematic analysis drawing on the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology, they identified themes of expectations, uncertainty, seeking support, survival, and moving forward as students transitioned from school to university. The undergraduate students were found to have developed the required skills to persist in their higher education studies and to cope with the demands of the higher education setting based on their varied experiences, behaviors, and influenced motivations (Porteous & Machin, 2018). These studies support the use of a hermeneutic phenomenological framework for this study, where the lived experiences of higher education students with respect to a prevalent college-related phenomenon (i.e., the use of stimulants) were explored.

With regard to research on drug use, in particular, some researchers have adopted hermeneutic phenomenological approaches to explore the perspectives and experiences of individuals in different contexts. For example, Sodelli (2021) attempted to explain the phenomenon of drug use through a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective. Sodelli (2021) was able to present a fundamental relationship that humans seem to have with drugs, which enabled them to provide recommendations of how this relationship should be considered for ensuring effective care of drug users. The use of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach for exploring the use of drugs in the contemporary world informed the current study since harm-reduction and prevention options may be elucidated.

In another study using a hermeneutic phenomenological framework, Vázquez et al. (2018) explored the lived experiences of adolescent drug users in Mexico. The researchers conducted interviews with 11 study participants, and three primary themes were identified: family roughness, experimenting in the world of drug use, and the hope of coexisting with themselves, their spirituality, their family, their loved ones, and the society. The researchers noted that the understanding of the lived experiences of the adolescent drug users reflected their need for comprehensive and sensitive human care. By using a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, Vázquez et al. were able to attain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of adolescent drug users in Mexico, which highlighted the crucial need for comprehensive and sensitive care for these youth. The use of a hermeneutic phenomenological framework for the study was expected to similarly be conducive for identifying significant themes related to the perceived risks, social acceptability, opportunity experiences, and motivations of using stimulants among non-drug-using college students.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts

The use of non-prescription drugs by college students in the United States has become a prevalent phenomenon (Prosek et al., 2018). Students entering the college environment have been shown to not have completely developed emotionally and cognitively and to be prone to risky behavior (Demirezen et al., 2019). This is perhaps one of the reasons behind the high annual use of illicit drugs on college campuses, which, in 2019, was estimated to be 47% of all college students in the United States

(Schulenberg et al., 2019). Among the illicit and non-prescription drugs used by college students, stimulants have been found to be used by many for academic and cognitive enhancement (Cook et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2018). Researchers examining college students from various institutions have found around 8% and up to around 32% of their samples reported having misused stimulants in the past year (De Bruyn et al., 2019; Mineo et al., 2018). In this context, it is critical to understand the various aspects of the misuse of non-prescription drugs, particularly stimulants, on college campuses as well as the perspectives of college students, particularly of non-users. The following literature review presents a critique of the extant research on this topic, starting with a discussion of non-prescription drug use in college, followed by a description of stimulant use in the college environment and the corresponding motivations, and ending with a discussion on users versus non-users on college campuses.

Non-Prescription Drug Use in College

Several studies have explored drug use among college students. For example, Allen et al. (2021) presented data showing trends of drug use among college students. The researchers focused on data on prescription opioids, nicotine, and alcohol, among other drugs. The researchers presented data that showed that there had been a national increase in the use of marijuana among college students. The trends presented will be useful for this study when learning about the expansion of stimulants use on college campuses, and they will also provide insights regarding future stimulant use developments on campus. Regarding drug involvement during and after college, Allen et al. (2017) explored the correlations among college students’ opportunity to use drugs, their actual use of drugs, and their use of drugs given the relevant opportunity with respect to marijuana, cocaine, hallucinogens, heroin, ecstasy, inhalants, amphetamines, methamphetamine, and the non-medical use of prescription stimulants, analgesics, and tranquilizers. Findings indicated that there were changes in opportunity to use all drugs, which was a driving force for changes in actual drug use. The changes in opportunity to use were believed to have occurred due to increased or decreased exposure and involvement in environments where these drugs could be accessed or offered. The researchers also noted that there were greater opportunities to use drugs in college compared to the post-college period (Allen et al., 2017). These findings indicated a relationship between the opportunity to use drugs and the actual use of drugs by college students, which aligns with this research which will explore the perceptions of stimulant non-users in the college environment where they are exposed to stimulant users.

Though some researchers focused on a number of drugs and their use in college, some researchers (Daniels-Witt et al., 2017; Davis et al., 2018; Harries et al., 2018) have focused on the misuse of specific medications, such as opiates. For instance, Daniels-Witt et al. (2017) explored the opiate abuse problem in American college campuses in order to determine ways to develop prevention models. They emphasized the need to involve college students to better understand the problem to develop preventive interventions. This supports the current study's purpose in learning about the cognitions of students regarding stimulants before they use, which may help develop preventive strategies and interventions.

Similar to studies on the risk factors of drug use, the reasons behind the misuse of illicit drugs by college students have been explored by some researchers (Davis et al., 2018; Palmer et al., 2012). In a study involving 262 college students who described their experiences regarding the effects of illicit drug use, 69% reported they experienced one negative event over the course of their life, and 63% reported that they experienced a negative event over the last year (Palmer et al., 2012). This may indicate that illicit drug use on college campuses is related to past negative experiences. In another study, Davis et al. (2018) provided information concerning why young people consume marijuana. The research extended motivational theory via the dualistic model of passion. Many of the reasons why students use marijuana could also be why they use stimulants. Davis et al. (2018) showed that many students used marijuana because they liked the euphoric high, they experienced, and it caused them to be more relaxed. Some students using stimulants reported that they also liked the high but felt more alert (Davis et al., 2018).

The review of literature revealed that the use of non-prescription drugs in colleges is highly relevant and prevalent (Allen et al., 2017). Researchers have explored the reasons behind the rampant use of drugs on college campuses (Davis et al., 2018) and the corresponding experiences of negative incidences (Palmer et al., 2012). A correlation between the opportunity to use drugs among college students and the actual use of drugs by these students has also been observed (Allen et al., 2017). In this regard, some researchers have focused on the use of specific drugs, such as marijuana and opioids (Daniels-Witt et al., 2017; Davis et al., 2018; Harries et al., 2018). In the next section, specific focus will be awarded to the use of stimulants in college.

Opportunity Experiences of Stimulant Use in College

The use of stimulants on college campuses have been explored by a number of researchers. In a review of studies involving the non-medical use of stimulants, Faraone et al. (2020) noted that the misuse of non-prescription stimulants among college students was a critical public health problem. In this context, Label (2018) investigated the attitudes and misinformation that students on college campuses have regarding nonmedical use of prescription stimulants. Label's (2018) research supports the data that students do not have enough information regarding stimulant use. The prevailing idea among students is that the nonmedical use of stimulants is not addictive, are low risk and is cognitive enhancing to help improve academic results. The report showed that students are not realizing issues surrounding nonmedical use of stimulants and are encouraging them to engage in unsafe practices which can be fatal. The misinformation infiltrated on college campus has caused an influx of students to misuse prescription stimulants and positions them to be more likely to use. The research provides valuable information for the research to help inform students regarding the risks and long-term effects of using nonmedical stimulants.

The popularity of stimulant misuse on college campuses has been the focus of some studies. Lam et al. (2020) assessed diversion, that is redirecting stimulants from those who had been prescribed the drug to those who use them illegally, among college students. Because the use of stimulants is becoming "the norm" on college campuses, stimulant use has increased and distribution on college campuses has soared (Lam et al., 2020). Le et al. (2018) showed that college students perceive little to no risks in using stimulants when compared to using other drugs. Because of misconceptions regarding prescribed stimulants, students are more likely to try stimulants. Le et al. (2018) showed that Caucasian males in fraternities use prescription stimulants more than the rest of the college populations. The higher use of stimulant use was due to the students perceived greater notion to advance academically. In addition to peer pressure, the fraternity's loyalty factor to become a member was a motivating component. Their commitment to the group has caused them to be more open to engaging in diversion practices, that is, students under a doctor's care giving their medication illegally to others (Le et al., 2018). Regarding stimulant diversion, Garcia et al. (2022) found that monetary gain as well as altruism were interrelated motivations. These findings are significant and align with the research by building on the knowledge of how students perceive stimulant use, the risks, diversion incidents, and the likelihood that they will use.

Students' behaviors and attitudes towards using non-prescription stimulants on college campuses have been explored in some studies (Mineo et al., 2018; Parks et al., 2017). Mineo et al. (2018) studied the prevalence of stimulant medication misuse on college campuses, with a focus on the temperance of students and the likelihood of them misusing stimulants. These students who were illegal stimulant users scored higher on the hyperthymic scale (individuals who displayed higher self-esteem, decreased need for sleep, talkativeness, high libido, and high energy). Out of the 303 students assessed, 32.3% were misusers and 6.3% had previously been diagnosed by professionals with ADHD and had been taking stimulants for a different reason and dosage than that which had been prescribed. The misuse of stimulants was associated with club membership, social drinking, and illicit drugs use. The results showed that temperament traits and behavior are indicators of students drive to use prescription stimulants for cognitive enhancement purposes (Mineo et al., 2018). In a similar study, Parks et al. (2017) examined qualitative reasoning of college student's motives and consequences linked to illegal use of prescription stimulants. They solicited sixty-one students separated in eight focus groups between April and November 2013. Students reported that simulants were used more often than other drugs because they were inexpensive, easily obtained, and no stigma was associated with the drug (Parks et al., 2017). These findings might be valuable to know when understanding how students perceive stimulant misuse.

The review of literature revealed that the opportunity experiences of using stimulants in college included students' misconceptions regarding the safety of stimulants (Le et al., 2018) as well as the inexpensive, accessible, and non-stigmatic nature of stimulants (Parks et al., 2017). Researchers have highlighted that the diversion of stimulants from prescribed to non-prescribed users has become a norm due to both altruistic and monetary incentives (Garcia et al., 2022; Lam et al., 2020). Although existing research reveals these critical insights regarding the opportunity experiences of using stimulants in college, researchers have not focused on non-users' perspectives in these matters. Specifically, the opportunity experiences, motivations, and perceived social acceptability of stimulants have not been examined for stimulant non-users. In the following section, existing works on the general motivations for and social acceptability of stimulants will be discussed.

Motivations, Social Acceptability, and Perceived Risks of Stimulant Use

The prevalence of misusing non-prescription stimulants has reached a high level. Vi et al. (2018) noted that since the mid-1990s, prescription stimulant use had increased substantially on college campuses. Nonmedical use of prescription drugs is described as the use of a prescribed stimulant without a doctor's consent or is taken in a manner of which it was not intended. Some examples of misuse are to take the prescribed medication in higher doses or in a different form (injecting crushed tablets, snorting, or liquid form). This method also involves using the medicine for purposes other than the condition/s for what it was prescribed (e.g., to get high or cognitive enhancement). Sutton (2019) discussed the statistics on the use of prescription medicine on campus by utilizing data from the 2018 College Prescription Drug Study. Sutton (2019) found that up to 10% of students reported misusing sedatives and pain medications. The trajectory of this study showed a nonmedical stimulant epidemic misuse issue on college campuses based on the data presented. If preventive measures are not considered, this trend would expand to other populations and nations.

The high prevalence of stimulant misuse on college campuses is owing to several reasons. In this regard, Horstmann et al. (2021) focused on the personality traits and situation perception of users. Horstmann et al. (2021) showed how perception, personality, affect, and situations influence behavior. The researchers explained that people respond differently in situations for several personal and social factors. Their responses, in turn, affect how they behave and the choices they make. An example concerning stimulant use along with the aspect of personality traits is seen in people who have conformed to cultural norms due to peer pressure. Although the cultural norm may go against the personal values and standards held by the students, they tend to yield to the culture. These students will be easier to be persuaded to use stimulants (Horstmann et al., 2021). The study by Horstmann et al. (2021) is a vital part of the research regarding the perceptions and likelihood that college students will use stimulants. This research is beneficial to the research because it gives insight given the situation and attitude of the students as to how they may respond to opportunities to use stimulants. For example, students who normally would not use stimulants may be more inclined to do so if they felt pressured to performing academically. In this regard, Ne'Eman-Haviv and Bonny-Noach (2019) examined the association between cognitive test anxiety (CTA) experienced by college students and the use of nonmedical and medical stimulants. The findings were that CTA levels were higher for students who used medical and nonmedical prescription stimulants (MNPS) than for students who chose not to use. Students who experienced CTA were 2.21 times more likely to use MNPS than students who had not experienced CTA. This data provides more insight regarding the perceptions of students and their reasoning for using or not using stimulants (Ne'Eman-Haviv & Bonny-Noach, 2019). These findings indicate that campus atmosphere, peer pressure, and academic concern may be some motivators of students' use of stimulants.

Researchers have also identified other motivators for students' use of stimulants on college campuses. Cook et al. (2021) explored the motives and experiences of non-prescription stimulant use among 1208 students in a southeastern university in the US. Two hundred and two students (18.9%) were found to be non-prescribed stimulant users, majority of whom reported using stimulants for academic purposes rather than recreational motivations. Non-prescribed use of stimulants was significantly related to being members of Greek societies or exhibiting binge drinking behavior (Cook et al., 2021). Further, students have reported that they believe that using a stimulant would improve academic performance and remove stress and that stimulants were safe, acceptable, and low risk (Gallagher, 2018). The findings of the studies by Cook et al. (2021) and Gallagher (2018) indicate that the prevalent use of stimulants may be for improvement of the students' performance in college.

Some researchers (Prosek et al., 2018; Schepis et al., 2020) have found that non-prescription stimulant use in college may be for enhancing the academic abilities of the students. Prosek et al. (2018) studied the pervasiveness of stimulant medication on college campuses. They surveyed 3038 undergraduate students from a Southwestern university, focusing on certain characteristics of two groups of students who misused stimulants. Out of the 430 students who misused stimulants, 74 used them on prescription, while the remaining 356 students misused stimulants without having a prescription. Both groups reported that they used because they were motivated for cognitive enhancement purposes and to improve awareness. The most common side effects they experienced were sleeplessness, racing heart, racing thoughts. All the participating students often used stimulants concurrently with marijuana and alcohol (Prosek et al., 2018). This observation was aligned with Schepis et al. (2020), who observed that students who misused stimulants also practiced risky behavior and used other substances. Similar to the findings of Prosek et al. (2018), Schepis et al. (2020)

further showed that students who misused prescription stimulants did so because they wanted to improve their grade point average. In addition to students seeking a positive affect by using, they were influenced by the reports of other students perceiving that prescribed stimulant use would help better their academic efforts. These studies showed that there is a connection between prescribed stimulant misuse and perceptions regarding academic improvement. The findings of these studies will help develop the present research study by revealing why students may or may not use stimulants.

Along with research on the motivations for using non-prescription stimulants in college, some scholars (Ross et al., 2018; Warnock et al., 2021) have explored the corresponding risks. Ross et al. (2018) explored the perceptions of college students on the benefits and risks of nonmedically using prescription stimulants. Based on the survey responses of 259 college students aged between 18 and 25 who had misused stimulants in the previous year, the researchers found that achieving higher grades and being able to meet deadlines were the most significant motivations for stimulant-use. The most critical perceived risks included expulsion from the college and limitations to future career opportunities. For the participants of this study, health-related factors, such as becoming dependent, experiencing negative health issues, and being able to skip meals, as well as social factors, such as parental disapproval, peer acceptance, and social enjoyment, were relatively less important (Ross et al., 2018). In another study with 604 college students in the US, Warnock et al. (2021) observed that students who had engaged in the use of non-prescription stimulants in the past 30 days had also been involved in risky marijuana and alcohol use behavior within those 30 days. The findings of these studies (Ross et al., 2018; Warnock et al., 2021) highlight the critical risks that students could be posing to their health as well as their future by engaging in misuse of stimulants.

The literature review revealed a number of motivations for stimulant use in college, such as enhancing academic performance, reducing stress, and improving cognitive abilities (Cook et al., 2021; Gallagher, 2018; Prosek et al., 2018; Schepis et al., 2020). With regard to the social acceptability of stimulants within college campuses, researchers have noted that stimulants are perceived to be low- or non-risk, acceptable, and safe (Gallagher, 2018). The above motivations and perceived social applicability, combined with students being under peer pressure or stress to perform well academically, were reported to lead them to use stimulants (Horstmann et al., 2021; Ne'Eman-Haviv & Bonny-Noach, 2019). Despite several college students resorting to stimulant use, many perceive corresponding risks, which primarily include college expulsion and career risks; negative health-related experiences, dependency, and social disapproval constitute relatively less important risks of stimulant use (Ross et al., 2018). Although recent studies (Cook et al., 2021; Gallagher, 2018; Horstmann et al., 2021; Ne'Eman-Haviv & Bonny-Noach, 2019; Prosek et al., 2018; Schepis et al., 2020) have presented some crucial information regarding the motivations, social acceptability, and perceived risks of stimulant use in college, adequate focus has not been awarded to the perceptions of non-users compared to stimulant users. The following section will discuss the limited information present in existing literature regarding stimulant users and non-users.

Stimulant Users and Non-Users

Some researchers (Antshel et al., 2021; Holt et al., 2018) have focused on the distinctions between users and non-users of non-prescription stimulants on college campuses. Antshel et al. (2021) noted that misusers of stimulants in college differed from non-users with respect to their performance orientations, where misusers had higher performance orientations than non-users. Holt et al. (2018) presented several other factors that differentiated prescription stimulant misusers from those at-risk of misuse. The researchers noted that non-prescription stimulant users had higher cognitive expectancies, lower guilt/dependence expectancies, and lower anxiety/arousal expectancies than at-risk non-users. Users and at-risk non-users did not present significant differences with respect to gender, academic self-efficacy, recent binge drinking behavior, or grade point average. However, users were noted to have had recent experiences of using marijuana (Holt et al., 2018). This finding is in alignment with the studies by Warnock et al. (2021) and Prosek et al. (2018), who found that stimulant use was often concurrently prevalent with marijuana use. This may indicate that those who use marijuana or are exposed to peer groups who do, are vulnerable to misusing non-prescription stimulants.

The characteristics of non-prescription stimulant users and non-users have been explored by some researchers (Hachtel & Armstrong, 2019; Holm et al., 2020). Holm et al. (2020) examined 334 college students studying in a midwestern university to determine whether their study behaviors were related to stimulant use. Users (36) as well as non-users (298) participated in the study. Based on an online survey, the researchers found that students seemed to be engaging in the use of stimulants for augmenting their studying habits. Specifically, a higher number of total study strategies and a higher number of effective study strategies were predictors of misuse of stimulants. Further, higher importance of school was also related to higher use of stimulants. The researchers recommended that further research be conducted on the external factors that may lead to the misuse of stimulants among non-users (Holm et al., 2020). In a similar study, Hachtel and Armstrong (2019) explored gender differences in the perception of the misuse of stimulants. Specifically, they studied the rates of prevalence of misuse and the corresponding perceptions on health, legal, and social risks. Questionnaire responses of 1714 undergraduate students in a southeastern university were analyzed. Stimulant misuse was higher for men than women (26.2% and 18.7%, respectively). Among all participants, both male and female users and non-users, lower health, legal, and social risks were perceived by men. Illicit users perceived lower legal, health, and social risks than non-users. Further, male non-users perceived lower legal and health risks than female non-users, but all non-users perceived similar levels of social risks. Among illicit users, males perceived lower levels of health risks than females, but all users perceived similar legal and social risks. The researchers recommended that future research should explore the motivations of non-users to engage in stimulant use as well as the influence of risk perceptions of using stimulants on the students' behaviors (Hachtel & Armstrong, 2019). These studies shed light on the attitudes and behaviors of users and non-users of non-prescription stimulants.

Understanding the factors which motivate non-users to become users of non-prescription stimulants are expected to provide valuable insights that can inform interventions for college students. In this regard, van Veen et al. (2021) noted that personal morality, social approval, self-control, and self-efficacy were significant predictors of the willingness to use non-prescription stimulants (van Veen et al., 2021). Further, Molloy (2020) found that hearing about users who seemed to have academically benefited from stimulant use resulted in non-users showing higher willingness of using these drugs than when the non-users were exposed to other non-users who had good academic performance. These study findings critically inform the present study, which will extend these results to focus on the perceptions of non-users of the perceived risks, social acceptability, opportunity experiences, and motivations of using non-prescription stimulants.

The existing literature on stimulant non-users primarily compared their characteristics with stimulant users (Antshel et al., 2021; Hachtel & Armstrong, 2019; Holt et al., 2018). Researchers have found that stimulant users tend to have higher performance orientations (Antshel et al., 2021) and higher cognitive expectancies, lower guilt/dependence expectancies, and lower anxiety/arousal expectancies compared to non-users (Holt et al., 2018). Further, non-prescription stimulant users have been noted to perceive lower legal, health, and social risks associated with stimulants compared to their non-using counterparts (Hachtel & Armstrong, 2019). The motivation of the non-users to start using has been observed to stem from their levels of personal morality, social approval, self-control, and self-efficacy (van Veen et al., 2021) and from their perceptions of academically benefitting from stimulant use (Molloy, 2020). Although existing studies have revealed these critical insights related to stimulant non-users, studies have not been conducted to solely focus on the perspectives of non-users regarding the perceived risks, social acceptability, opportunity experiences, and motivations of using non-prescription stimulants.

Summary and Conclusion

The current literature provided a representation of the general view concerning stimulant use on college campuses in the US. The persistent consensus throughout the literary reports was that the likelihood for college students to use stimulants depended on multiple factors, such as, believing stimulants are a low-risk option to use to obtain higher academic achievement, are socially acceptable by friends, family, and peers, have not much associated stigma, and have no serious repercussions for use (i.e., they are not addictive, not unhealthy, and are legal). The reviewed studies indicated that most students use prescription stimulants for cognitive enhancement and not for recreational purposes. Students felt the pressure to perform academically, and this pressure took priority over the potential health problems of using stimulants, such as addiction and side effects like increased heart rate, accelerated blood pressure, racing thoughts, and headaches. These health concerns are often overlooked by the users' peers as the latter also relate with academic pressure. Additionally, stimulants are perceived to be convenient for use, easy to conceal, and readily available.

According to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (2020), 10% of all college students in the US use prescription stimulants and this percentage is increasing each year. This issue can be addressed by creating and implementing preventive programs, tried and tested coping methods, and drug abuse programs that make students aware of the reality of using any kind of drugs and help them maintain a healthy, drug-free lifestyle. The findings of this study were expected to help take a step in that direction. As such, the specific research method used in this study was elaborated in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceived risks, social acceptability, opportunity experiences, and motivations of using stimulants among non-drug-using college students. In this chapter, the research method is elaborated on. A detailed description of the research design of the study and the rationale for the selected design is presented, followed by a discussion of my role in the study and the study's methodology. The methodology section includes information regarding the sample population, data instruments, procedures for participant recruitment and participation, and data collection and analysis. The ethical concerns of the study and the measures in place to ensure the study's trustworthiness are then discussed. An overall summary of the information assessed is provided at the conclusion of the chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

The central phenomenon under investigation in this study was the perspective of non-drug-using college students regarding the perceived risks, social acceptability, opportunity experiences, and motivations of stimulant use on college campuses. The following RQs guided the research on non-using college students' perceptions of the use of stimulants in college:

- RQ 1: What are the perceived risks of stimulant use among non-using students on college campuses?
- RQ 2: What are the perceptions regarding the social acceptability of stimulant use among non-using students on college campuses?
- RQ 3: What opportunity experiences have non-using students come across

with respect to using stimulants on college campuses?

- RQ 4: What are the possible motivations of non-using students for using stimulants on college campuses?

The perceptions of non-using students was the focus of this study in order to understand the potential factors that may contribute to them using non-prescribed stimulants in the future. This focus was taken for the possible development of interventions and practices that help address these factors of non-using students' diversion to stimulants.

I followed the guidelines of Creswell (2007) regarding qualitative research. Qualitative research is a collection of approaches that assesses data in the structure of natural language, or words (Creswell, 2007). It is the process of making known the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2007). This design allows researchers to examine the meanings and interpret the experiences, subject to the descriptions of the experiences presented by the participants. A qualitative approach for this study helped explore the subjective opinions of non-using students regarding stimulant use on college campuses. This shed light on the perspectives and experiences of this group of students in the context of an environment which is witnessing increasing stimulant use.

An iterative method of assumptions means that I evaluated data by recognizing patterns associated with the instances of an occurrence (Creswell, 2007). Seeing a consistent event helped me explain trends and developing patterns. Qualitative instruments and data collections were derived from fewer sources (like participants) than other research design methods but involved substantial, detailed, and extensive contextualized reports from each resource. The participants of this study provided rich and detailed descriptions regarding their thoughts and views on stimulant use in college and how it relates to them.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the qualitative researcher was to lead the research study. I had a thorough understanding of the processes of the research and how it should be managed (Maxwell, 2005). I involved myself in every stage of the exploration by ensuring that the articles used were peer reviewed, current, and significant to the study (Maxwell, 2005). I analyzed the articles to identify common themes and trends, which helped validate the presented data. The information gathered helped substantiate the relevance of the study.

I also chose participants who were well-suited for the study and aligned with the research. In the study, the students were informed about the study and its purpose. They had ample time to answer and complete the questions and the option to stop the interviewing process at any time. The participants knew how the results would be utilized. A consent form was part of the interviewing process. The study adhered to the APA ethical principles and codes requirements when following the interviewing practices. I conducted the study in an environment that was safe, quiet, healthy, and temperature comfortable. The location was easy to access and convenient for students when answering the questions. I provided the necessary instruments to conduct the interviews, record the interviews, interpret, and assess the data, and present the results. The factors that could have affected the outcome of the interview were the restrictions in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the unavailability of a facility on campus where the interviews could be conducted, and the university policies according to which persons not associated with the school could not engage with students.

Methodology

The target population for this study was undergraduate students from colleges in Cincinnati and Middletown in southern Ohio. The eligibility criteria for participants were full-time students of the institution who have had no past experience of using stimulants in college. Convenience sampling was used for recruiting the participants, which involves identification of study participants based on their accessibility, availability, and alignment with the study's eligibility criteria (Etikan et al., 2016). For this study, I identified participants from colleges in Cincinnati and Middletown who have had no past experiences of using stimulants in college. The participants' claim of not having used stimulants in the past was taken at face-value. If their reports of not having used stimulants was found to be untrue post their participation, their voluntary participation in this study focusing on non-users was analyzed as one of the study themes.

Instrumentation

The instrument of data collection for this study was a researcher-developed structured interview. The interview guide was developed considering the problem to be addressed, the purpose of the study, the theoretical foundation of the study, and the developed research questions. The interview protocol contained a total of seven open-ended questions. Questions 1-3 of the interview informed research questions 1 and 2, and questions 3-7 informed research questions 3 and 4. The interview guide questions may be modified, or additional questions may be asked to the participants during the interview based on their responses. The interviews were expected to last for 30-45 minutes depending on how elaborately participants responded to the questions of the interview guide. The following table depicted the research questions and corresponding interview questions of this study.

Table 1

Research Questions and Interview Questions

Research Question	Interview Questions
RQ 1: What are the perceived risks of stimulant use among non-using students on college campuses?	1. What are your thoughts regarding drug and stimulant use on campus? Probing Question: What do you think are the risks of using stimulants? How acceptable do you think it is using them?
RQ 2: What are the perceptions regarding the social acceptability of stimulant use among non-using students on college campuses?	2. Have you witnessed someone on campus being approached to use drugs? What were your thoughts concerning the experience? Probing Question: What were your reactions to the incident? What did you do during the incident? What did you do after the incident? 3. How would you describe your own experiences of being approached for using stimulants in campus? Probing Question: How did you react to it? What were your thoughts?
RQ 3: What opportunity experiences have non-using students come across with respect to using stimulants on college campuses?	4. If you have never been approached to use drugs, how would you think you would feel if someone asked you to use stimulants? 5. What are your thoughts on sharing one's prescribed medication with someone else?
RQ 4: What are the possible motivations of non-using students for using stimulants on college campuses?	6. What do you think about using stimulants to advance academically? Would you consider it? 7. How have your experiences with regards to other people or yourself being approached for using stimulants impacted your decision to use or refuse stimulants?

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

For participant recruitment, the following procedure was followed. First, I obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). I identified one university system in Southern Ohio as the research site, with campuses in both Cincinnati and Middletown. An email was sent to the institutional review board (IRB) office of this university system for obtaining site permission. The email included the details of the study and its potential benefits for students as well as the eligibility criteria for participants. The eligibility criteria were: Full-time students of the institution who have had no past experience of using stimulants in college.

I then proceeded to obtain site permission from the participating university system in Southern Ohio. After receiving approval from Walden University's IRB, I reached out to the IRB office of the target university system. I composed and submitted a formal request that outlined my study's purpose, methodology, and the potential benefits for their students. This step was essential for me to ensure I complied with the host institution's research policies and to secure official authorization to conduct my study on their campuses. I waited for their response, prepared to address any questions or concerns they might have had about my research project.

Once IRB approvals from the identified institution as well as my institution was obtained, I sent the institutions' IRB offices a notice through email. The notice contained a brief description of the study, highlighted the benefits of the study, and specified the eligibility criteria. The institutions' IRB offices were requested to share the notice with their students. The notice also included my email address at the end, and interested participants were required to reach out by sending an email directly to me.

A minimum of 10-12 participants were recruited through this process. I focused my recruitment efforts entirely on this single university system, leveraging its multiple campuses to reach the required number of participants. In qualitative studies, the objective is to gather rich information from the participants, irrespective of the number of participants, which may vary from as few as three to as many as 30 (Dworkin, 2012;

Magilvy & Thomas, 2009). As such, 10-12 participants were expected to help reach data saturation, that is, the point where no further relevant information can be obtained by increasing the participant number (Dworkin, 2012). I initially recruited 10-12 participants. Upon analyzing the data, I determined that data saturation had not been reached. Therefore, I recruited an additional 3 participants, bringing the total to 15, at which point I achieved data saturation. The same recruitment procedure as above was implemented for identifying additional participants.

The interested individuals who reached out to me were informed of the details of their interview (that is, interview date and time) through email. On the day of the interview, I started by introducing themselves and providing a brief introduction of the study's purpose. The participants were informed of their voluntary participation, the measures in place for ensuring their confidentiality, and their rights to withdraw from the study at any point. The interview guide was then followed to conduct the interview, which was audio recorded. At the end of the interview, the participants were acknowledged for their time and effort in participating in the study.

Data Analysis Plan

After the interviews were conducted, the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim using the online transcription tool, Konch.ai. The interview transcripts were then thematically analyzed using the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed the following steps for thematic analysis: Familiarizing oneself with the data, developing initial codes from the data, generating themes from the initial codes, reviewing the generated themes, defining the reviewed themes, and developing the final thematic analysis report.

For this study, the following steps were adopted based on the method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step of familiarizing oneself with the data involved reading the transcribed interviews at least three times. The first reading was done while listening to the audio recording in the background, and the second and third readings were done to focus only on the interview transcripts. In the second step, an initial set of codes were developed. Codes were words or phrases that were assigned to unique ideas or perspectives related to the study's research questions.

In the third step, similar codes were grouped together to form themes. To develop the themes, the codes that convey similar ideas or perspectives were collated into sub-themes. Related sub-themes were then collated to form unique and individual themes. Once the first set of themes was formed, the fourth step of reviewing them was conducted. The themes were reviewed to ensure that the information within the themes were coherent, and at the same time, they have clear and identifiable distinctions between them.

After the themes were reviewed and finalized, the fifth step of naming was conducted. The themes were named based on the idea they convey and were related to the purpose of the study. Finally, in the sixth step, the thematic analysis report was formulated. In the report, extracts from the interview transcripts that gave rise to the final codes and themes were included. These extracts were related to the themes and the themes, in turn, were related to the research questions of the study. Finally, the themes and the addressed research questions were used to highlight how the purpose of the study was achieved.

Pilot Study

I conducted a pilot study first, to test my research design, including setting up a study schedule, to test the interview questions I had designed, and to detect problems with data collection and analysis during the pilot. For the pilot, I conducted interviews with 3 participants who met the same eligibility criteria as in the main study, and recruited them through the same convenience sampling method described earlier.

This pilot study was conducted in a manner consistent with the procedure of the main study, but with fewer participants. Each individual participated in a structured interview that lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, using the same structured interviewing technique that was applied in the main study. Every interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. After the transcription was done, the adaptation of the six-step thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) method was used as described in the data analysis section.

Findings from the pilot study informed whether the interview questions were adequate, whether the instructions to the participants were clear, and whether the interview flowed. The feedback from pilot study participants, and the initial findings of the pilot study data, also informed some minor adjustments to the interview guide to clarify wording and ensure that the questions elicit the kinds of responses necessary to address the research questions. Overall, the pilot study helped to confirm that the qualitative methods of data collection and analysis are appropriate to address the questions underlying the qualitative research.

Issues of Trustworthiness

The following measures were taken to support the trustworthiness of the study in terms of its credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability. Credibility signifies internal validity of the study and refers to how trustworthy or believable the study's findings are to the participants (Petty et al., 2012). To support credibility, I conducted member checking by allowing the participants to review their interview transcripts. I aimed to establish a good rapport and develop a trusting connection with the participants during the interviews for prolonged engagement with them, further supporting credibility. To enhance the credibility of this study, I conducted a debriefing session with three peers. These peers were fellow doctoral candidates in my program at Walden University. The debriefing session involved a thorough review of my research process, findings, and interpretations. This peer debriefing acted as a type of external audit, enabling lateral feedback and ensuring that my conclusions were not unduly influenced by my own perspectives (Kornbluh, 2015). During this session, which lasted approximately two hours, the peers critically examined my methodology, data analysis, and conclusions, offering valuable insights and challenging my interpretations where necessary.

The neutrality of the study was manifested by its confirmability, which is the extent to which the study's findings can be trusted as being informed by the study participants rather than my interpretation or bias (Petty et al., 2012). The confirmability of this study was supported by maintaining a reflexive journal throughout the data collection and analysis process, where I noted down in detail all the steps involved. A reflexive journal contained a reflective account of the activities conducted during the research process. Maintaining a reflexive journal enabled me to reveal their own subjectivity and the corresponding influence on the study (Bradbury-Jones, 2007). The member checking process will also support the study’s confirmability. Dependability or reliability signifies how well the study can be understood and repeated by fellow researchers (Petty et al., 2012), and the reflexive journal helped in supporting dependability of this study. Finally, the external validity or transferability, which refers to the degree to which the study’s findings could be applied to a different group of relevant participants or a varied and related context (Petty et al., 2012), was supported through the reflexive journal. I examined the contents of the journal to analyze how the obtained results could be transferred to other related contexts.

I took all possible measures to ensure that the ethical considerations related to human participants were assured in this study. Prior to site authorization, I obtained the required permissions from the university’s IRB. The recruited participants were provided with an informed consent form, as required by the IRB, wherein they were made aware of their voluntary participation and the right to withdraw from the study at any point. The identities of the participants were only known to me and were always kept confidential; no mention of their identities was made at any instance of the dissertation. Pseudonyms were used in the dissertation for referring to the participants as well as the site of the study. The interview recordings and transcripts were stored in my password protected laptop and backed up in an external hard disk, which also had password protection. All study data, including recordings and transcripts, will be deleted five years after publication of the dissertation.

Summary

In this chapter, the research method of the study was elaborated on. First, the rationale for choosing a qualitative design was presented, followed by a discussion on my role in this study. The target population of the study was then established as full-time students from colleges in Cincinnati and Middletown in Southern Ohio, United States who have had no past experiences of using stimulants in college. The development process of the interview guide for this study and the recruitment procedure for a minimum of 10 participants were then described. Finally, the measures in place for supporting credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability of the results and the ethical considerations of the study were discussed. The results obtained from the interviews were presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter presents the findings from the qualitative investigation into the perceptions, experiences, and motivations of undergraduate students who are non-users of stimulants at a single university system in southern Ohio, with campuses in Cincinnati and Middletown. In the previous chapters, the overall objective of this research was set out to reveal the complex landscape of stimulant use within the academic sphere and, more precisely, among students who do not use stimulants. The theoretical foundations, methodological strategy, and conclusions from the empirical data converge in this chapter.

The purpose of this study was to describe the perceived risks, social acceptability, opportunity experiences and motives of stimulant use among non-using students on college campuses. The need arose from the fact that the incidents of stimulant administration among those high-risk students need to be better understood. This is important to enhance the understanding of stimulant use among high-risk students, thereby contributing to the broader discussion on substance use in academic institutions.

The research questions guided this investigation and were purposefully constructed to address diverse issues connected to the non-user's views on stimulants. The questions covered the perceived risks and social acceptability, opportunities experienced and motivations, which is an extensive framework for analysis. This was done by providing avenues for the participants to give accounts of their lived reality to lay the foundation for rich interpretations and enlightened interventions. Reflecting the objectives outlined in this study, the research focused around four critical questions:

1. What are the perceived risks of stimulant use among non-using students on college campuses?
2. How is the social acceptability of stimulant use perceived among non-using students on college campuses?
3. Which opportunity experiences related to stimulant use have been encountered by non-using students on college campuses?
4. What motivations might non-using students have for considering the use of stimulants on college campuses?

This chapter presents the results derived from the qualitative investigation into non-using college students' perceptions of nonprescription or prescription stimulant use. The organization of this chapter is designed to facilitate a clear understanding of the findings and their implications within the context of existing literature and the study's objectives.

Pilot Study

The execution of a pilot study represented an important step in my research journey, particularly within the complicated exploration of stimulant use perceptions among non-using college students. The essence of conducting a pilot study is underscored by its critical role in enhancing the robustness, validity, and generalizability of the main study's findings (Bell et al., 2018). A pilot study serves as a preliminary step where researchers can test various aspects of their main study in a smaller scale setting. This allows for the identification of potential issues in the research design, methodology, and implementation before committing significant resources to a full-scale study (Bell et al., 2018). The pilot phase was initiated as an exploratory endeavor aimed at refining the research instruments and methodologies directly tied to the scientific objectives of our investigation.

In the pilot study for my research, I conducted semistructured interviews, mirroring the approach planned for the main study. These interviews focused on topics such as perceived risks of stimulant use, social acceptability, opportunity experiences, and motivations behind considering such substances on college campuses. This approach was crucial in uncovering the complexities inherent in students' perceptions of stimulant use.

The pilot study involved 10 volunteers who matched the demographic and academic profiles of full-time undergraduate students from the targeted university system in Southern Ohio, with campuses in Cincinnati and Middletown. Volunteers were recruited through convenience sampling, a method consistently used throughout the study. Feedback from participants during these preliminary interviews highlighted specific areas where the interview questions could be misinterpreted or lacked depth, leading to significant refinements. For instance, questions initially designed to probe the social acceptability of stimulant use were found to elicit superficial responses, prompting a revision to include more direct inquiries about participants' personal experiences and the influence of peer networks. Additionally, discussions on motivations behind stimulant consideration revealed a need for questions that could differentiate between academic pressure and recreational curiosity.

As a result of the pilot study, the interview guide was adjusted to foster deeper, more insightful responses by incorporating prompts that encouraged participants to reflect on and share more about the context and reasoning behind their attitudes toward stimulants. These refinements were then applied to the semistructured interview format used in the main study. The use of semistructured interviews throughout both the pilot and main study ensured consistency in the data collection process while allowing for the flexibility to explore emerging themes and individual perspectives. This approach was applied to all 12 participants in the main study, as well as the 10 volunteers in the pilot phase.

Notably, the pilot phase highlighted areas of ambiguity within certain interview questions, prompting a revision process to better align these inquiries with the study's objectives. For example, the pilot phase revealed that some interview questions were too broad, leading to generic responses that did not provide the depth or specificity needed for our study's objectives. For instance, a question initially framed as "What are your thoughts on stimulant use among students?" was found to elicit superficial answers that skirted around personal perceptions and experiences. Feedback from pilot participants indicated confusion over whether the question aimed at legal prescriptions, illicit use, or both.

Furthermore, in the pilot study, it was discovered that the initial coding scheme applied to thematic analysis was overly rigid, which restricted the richness of insights that could be collected from the participants' narratives. For example, one initial code, "study habits," was meant to capture any mention of academic behaviors, but this broad category failed to distinguish between the various study methods discussed by participants. Upon reviewing pilot interview transcripts, it became clear that students were differentiating between collaborative group study sessions and individual study sessions—each with distinct implications for potential stimulant use. Consequently, the coding scheme was refined to differentiate between "individual study habits" and "group study dynamics," allowing for analysis that could better inform the main study's focus on stimulant use in relation to academic practices.

Setting

The research unfolded in the diverse and dynamic academic environments of Cincinnati and Middletown, southern Ohio. The unique cultural, educational, and socioeconomic background played a pivotal role in shaping college students' perceptions towards stimulant use. The region's distinct demographic and sociocultural landscape significantly influenced the study's findings, as individual histories, experiences, and the broader university setting contributed to a better understanding of non-using students' attitudes toward stimulants. Acknowledging both the personal and organizational conditions affecting participants, the study examined how changes in university administration, policy shifts, and the cultural norms of southern Ohio impacted students' experiences and attitudes toward stimulant use. Through this focused exploration within a specific setting, the study offered valuable insights into the complex factors shaping stimulant use perceptions, providing a foundation for broader discussions on substance use in academic contexts.

Demographics

The geographic setting of this study involves full-time undergraduate students in colleges in Cincinnati and Middletown, southern Ohio. The elaborate description of the participant demographics presented here is evaluated not as a mere requirement but as scrutiny to make clear the features of the non-using student cohort. Participants' ages span the critical period of the emergence of adulthood, that is, 18 to 24 years. This demographic information is essential as it corresponds with the developmental stage where individuals make life-changing decisions, enter higher learning institutions, and form their identities (Schulenberg et al., 2019). By focusing on this specific age group, the study aimed to capture the perspectives of young adults who were navigating the challenges of college life while also developing their personal and professional identities. This age range allowed for the inclusion of students at various stages of their college careers, from freshmen to seniors, providing a comprehensive view of how perceptions and experiences related to stimulant non-use might evolve throughout the undergraduate years. The study, focusing on this age group, highlights the distinctiveness of students who do not use non-prescription/prescription stimulants during this crucial developmental period.Social backgrounds are another vital dimension of the participant's demographics. The participants' economic setting indicates the possible differences, privileges, or challenges they could have (Schulenberg et al., 2019). Through considering socioeconomic factors, the research encompasses the intersectionality of student experiences, which is that academic achievement, social interactions, and coping mechanisms depend highly on students' economic backgrounds.

Academic endeavors also refine the demographic canvas. The participants' divergence in majors, academic interests, and career goals makes the research study challenging. For instance, the motivations and the reasons against using stimulants can be different for STEM majors and liberal arts students (Miller, 1994). This acknowledgement of the diversity of the respondents enables the research to reveal how academic trajectories intersect with stimulant-use perceptions, helping to build a more detailed analysis of the findings. See Table 2 for a summary of participants' demographics.

Table 2

Participant Demographics and Characteristics

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Academic Year	Major
P01	Male	23	Senior	Psychology
P02	Female	19	Sophomore	Biology
P03	Male	22	Junior	English Literature
P04	Female	25	Senior	Public Health
P05	Male	20	Sophomore	Chemical Engineering
P06	Female	21	Junior	Sociology
P07	Male	24	Senior	Business Administration
P08	Female	23	Senior	Neuroscience
P09	Male	18	First Year	Philosophy
P10	Male	21	Sophomore	Nursing
P11	Female	20	Senior	Biology
P12	Female	24	Senior	Public Health

The data collection for this study was carried out at two colleges located in Cincinnati and Middletown, southern Ohio, where the participants were full-time undergraduate students. Each participant engaged in one structured interview via the online platform Zoom, a deviation from the initial face-to-face methodology in Chapter 3 due to the COVID-19 pandemic's constraints. The interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes each, striking a balance between comprehensive exploration and participant comfort.

To ensure accuracy and facilitate analysis, each session was audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim using the transcription service Konch.ai. Despite the shift to a virtual format, the data collection remained consistent across participants without significant deviations from the planned approach. The study did not encounter any unusual circumstances that impacted the data collection process; the transition to online interviews was well-received by participants and did not detract from the quality or depth of the conversations. This adjustment to the data collection method, along with the thorough documentation of the process, underlines the adaptability and resilience of the research design in maintaining the integrity of the study (Horstmann et al., 2021). The extensive exploration of participant demographics expands the study to the reality of the non-user student population.

Data Collection

The foundational element of our investigation, data collection, was meticulously orchestrated to illuminate the intricate perspectives of non-using college students regarding stimulant use. This endeavor unfolded within the academic environs of Cincinnati and Middletown, Southern Ohio, where a carefully selected cohort of 12 participants shared their narratives. This selection, governed by the qualitative tenet that emphasizes depth of insight over numerical breadth, was pivotal in capturing the viewpoints of individuals who have abstained from stimulant use.

Structured interviews, comprising seven open-ended questions aligned with our research objectives, served as the primary instrument for data collection. These questions were meticulously designed to probe into themes such as perceived risks, social acceptability, opportunity experiences, and motivations behind stimulant use or non-use. The interviews, set against the backdrop of the participants' daily academic settings, facilitated a genuine discourse on the subject matter, thereby ensuring that the data collected were deeply rooted in the participants' real-world experiences.

The frequency and duration of data collection were tailored to the dynamics of qualitative inquiry, with each interview spanning approximately 30 to 45 minutes. This flexibility allowed for an adaptive approach to each session, ensuring that participants had ample opportunity to express their thoughts comprehensively. Audio recordings of these interviews served as the primary method of data capture, preserving the authenticity of participants' expressions, and emotions. This fidelity to participants' voices was paramount, with the subsequent verbatim transcription using the online tool Konch.ai marking a critical step in transitioning from oral narratives to analyzable textual data.

The data collection process was characterized by its adaptability, accommodating probing questions and spontaneous discussions that emerged naturally during the interviews. This responsive approach enriched the data collection process, allowing for the exploration of unforeseen topics and insights. Serendipitous moments of disclosure and emotional depth encountered during the interviews added a layer of complexity to the collected data, underscoring the dynamic nature of qualitative research.

Table 3

Data Collection Overview

Aspect	Details
Participants	12 non-using college students
Location	Colleges in Cincinnati and Middletown, Southern Ohio (On-line Zoom)
Duration	30 to 45 minutes per interview
Frequency	One time
Recording Method	Audio recordings
Transcription Tool	Konch.ai

The data collection phase of our study was a meticulously planned and executed process that prioritized depth, authenticity, and adaptability. The structured interviews conducted within the collegiate settings of Southern Ohio provided a rich tapestry of narratives that form the basis of our thematic analysis. The following sections will explore the analytical journey, unraveling the themes and insights from the collected data.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this qualitative study was conducted personally by me, without the use of analytical software. After transcribing the interviews using Konch.ai, I immersed myself in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts to capture the full range of participants' perspectives on stimulant use. This intensive engagement with the text allowed me to manually generate initial codes by noting patterns, sentiments, and concepts expressed by the participants.

These initial codes served as the foundation for my analysis, which I then manually organized into broader categories reflecting their relational aspects and thematic linkages. This process was iterative, with categories refined through constant comparison and reflection. The final step in my analysis involved distilling these categories into overarching themes that encapsulate the shared experiences and perceptions of the non-using students I interviewed. This thematic framework was developed through my direct and detailed analysis, ensuring a nuanced interpretation of the data grounded in the participants' own words and contexts.

Table 4

Summary of Themes and Codes from Participant Interviews

Theme	Code	Participant Quotes
Perceived Risks of Stimulant Use	Addiction Risk	"Well, uh, addiction, death... it impacts your, um, mental health."
	Mental Health Impact	"I'm pretty sure, like, doesn't do good things to your brain."
	Gateway to Harder Drugs	"People start off with, like, the light stuff... then, you know, three years later, heroin and meth."
Social Unacceptability	Personal Disapproval	"I don't think it's very acceptable."
	Societal Norms	"A lot of people have more tolerance for certain things than I do."
Exposure to Drug Use	Normalization	"Yes, multiple times actually. All the time."
	Peer Influence	"It was one of those another day in the neighborhood kind of things."
Resistance to Peer Influence	Autonomy	"I'd be more annoyed than anything. I don't need any stimulants."
	Annoyance	"I don't think I look like a person who would be interested in stimulants."
Rejection of Academic Performance Enhancement	Integrity	"All I need to do is like, you know, work harder... I have too much pride..."
	Dismissal of Need	"I don't think, uh, altering your brain chemistry is the solution to, uh, getting better grades..."
Prescription Medication Sharing	Ethical Concerns	"I don't think it's a good idea to be sharing your prescriptions..."
	Health Risks	"Everyone's physiology is completely different."

Discrepant Cases

Discrepant cases in this study primarily emerged from participants who, while generally opposing stimulant use, showed empathy towards peers who resorted to such measures. These individuals did not fully align with the predominant themes of strict opposition and ethical condemnation. Instead, they offered a perspective, suggesting that under extreme academic pressure, the decision to use stimulants, while not ideal, could be understood as a last resort. For example, one participant remarked, *"I can see why someone might feel pushed towards it during finals... though I wouldn't do it myself.*" This comment indicates a divergence from the main themes, reflecting a compassionate understanding of the pressures faced by fellow students.

These discrepant cases were integral to the analysis as they provided depth to the understanding of stimulant use perceptions among non-users. They highlight the complexity of the issue, where a confluence of stress, academic demands, and personal ethics influences students' decisions. Acknowledging these discrepancies underscores the diversity of opinions and experiences within the student body, offering insights into the nature of stimulant use on college campuses (Kennedy, 2018).

In conclusion, the thematic analysis revealed a strong consensus among participants regarding the perceived risks, social unacceptability, and ethical considerations associated with nonmedical stimulant use. The identified themes reflect a broader cultural and moral framework within which these students navigate their academic and social lives. By incorporating both the predominant views and discrepant cases, this analysis offered a comprehensive understanding of non-using college students' perspectives on stimulant use. This highlights the importance of addressing the individual and environmental factors contributing to this complex issue.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, establishing trustworthiness is crucial to validate the findings (Petty, Thomson, & Stew, 2012). This study adhered to strategies for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to ensure the research's integrity and applicability.

Credibility

To ensure the credibility of this study, I adopted a detailed engagement approach, which involved comprehensive interaction with research participants and the implementation of member checking procedures. I conducted interviews over extended periods, typically lasting 45 to 60 minutes each, which allowed for a depth of understanding that surface-level inquiries could not have achieved. This prolonged engagement enabled me to build rapport with participants, encouraging them to share more detailed and honest responses about their perceptions and experiences regarding stimulant non-use in college. After each interview, I employed member checking by providing participants with a summary of their responses and my initial interpretations. This gave them the opportunity to confirm, clarify, or expand upon their statements, ensuring that my understanding accurately reflected their intended meanings. This process not only enhanced the accuracy of the data but also deepened the participants' involvement in the research process, further strengthening the credibility of the findings. This in-depth engagement facilitated an exploration of the participants' experiences and perceptions concerning nonmedical stimulant use, ensuring that the findings were a true reflection of their perspectives (Dworkin, 2012). Following the initial data analysis, summaries of the findings were returned to the participants, inviting them to verify the accuracy and resonance of the interpretations with their experiences. This member checking process not only validated the credibility of the findings but also enriched my understanding, enabling refinements and adjustments that ensured the interpretations accurately reflected the participants' narratives.

To further support the credibility of the study, peer debriefing sessions were conducted with three independent scholars. These scholars were selected based on their expertise in qualitative research methods and familiarity with substance use studies in academic settings. The group consisted of two associate professors and one postdoctoral researcher from different universities, none of whom were affiliated with the study site. Their backgrounds spanned psychology, public health, and sociology, providing a multidisciplinary perspective on the research. The scholars reviewed the research process, results, and interpretations, providing an external audit to the research process. This allowed for critical vetting of the research methodology, ensuring that the research outcomes were not merely confined to my way of seeing the world (Kornbluh, 2015). Each scholar independently reviewed the materials and then participated in a group discussion session lasting approximately two hours. The inclusion of these checks and balances resulted in a research design committed to attaining a high degree of credibility. As a result, the findings presented are deserving of faith and trust as representations of the lived experiences and meanings ascribed to them by participants who do not use stimulants.

Transferability

The principle of transferability was addressed by providing a comprehensive description of the study's context, including the setting, participants, and the methods employed for data collection and analysis. Such detailed documentation enables other researchers and practitioners to understand the specific conditions under which the study was conducted, facilitating the assessment of the findings' applicability to other contexts (Johnson, Adkins, & Chauvin, 2020). The selection of a diverse participant pool, representing a range of experiences and perspectives regarding stimulant use, enhances the potential for the findings to be relevant to similar contexts beyond the immediate study setting. This approach underscores the study's effort to contribute not only to the specific knowledge base regarding stimulant use among college students but also to broader discussions on substance use in academic environments.

Furthermore, the thorough documentation of methodological decisions and the rationale behind these choices served to provide a blueprint for future research. By articulating the steps taken to ensure the integrity and applicability of the study, this research contributes to a growing body of knowledge that can inform both policy and practice in the realm of substance use and academic performance. The detailed account of the study's methodology and context thus plays a crucial role in facilitating the transferability of its findings, offering valuable insights that can be adapted and applied in varied educational settings (Johnson, Adkins, & Chauvin, 2020).

Dependability

Dependability in this study was assured through meticulous research process documentation, creating an audit trail that detailed every aspect of the study from inception to conclusion (Johnson, Adkins, & Chauvin, 2020). This comprehensive record-keeping included notes on the development of the research question, changes in the study design, data collection and analysis processes, and the reasoning behind methodological decisions. Such an approach not only demonstrated the consistency and reliability of the research process over time but also provided a transparent account of the study's evolution, enabling future researchers to replicate or build upon the work. The audit trail acted as a cornerstone of the study's dependability, offering a clear and detailed pathway through the research process that underscored the stability and consistency of the findings.

To complement this, the study also employed triangulation methods, integrating various data sources, analytical techniques, and theoretical perspectives to cross-validate the findings. This triangulation process enhanced the dependability of the research outcomes by confirming that the emerging themes and conclusions were not artifacts of the data collection method or analytical approach but were consistent across different dimensions of the study. By employing these rigorous methodological strategies, the study ensures that its findings are dependable, offering a reliable foundation for future research and practical interventions (Johnson, Adkins, & Chauvin, 2020).

Confirmability

Confirmability within the study was achieved through the maintenance of a reflexive journal throughout the research process, coupled with stringent member checking protocols. The reflexive journal served as a critical tool for documenting my reflections on the study, including biases, assumptions, and methodological decisions. This practice ensured that the findings were grounded in the data collected rather than my subjective interpretations or preconceptions (Kornbluh, 2015). By openly acknowledging and reflecting upon potential biases, the study strengthens its confirmability, providing an objective basis for the research findings.

In addition to the reflexive journal, the member checking process allowed participants to review and comment on the findings, ensuring that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives. This collaborative validation process enhanced the study's confirmability by anchoring the findings in participants' realities and enriched the research process, fostering a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Through these meticulous approaches to maintaining confirmability, the study demonstrates a commitment to objectivity and rigor, ensuring that the conclusions drawn are a trustworthy and accurate representation of the research participants' experiences with stimulant use.

Results

This section presented the findings from an in-depth qualitative investigation into the perceptions, experiences, and motivations of undergraduate non-stimulant-using students regarding stimulant use within a collegiate context. The study was driven by four primary research questions, exploring perceived risks, social acceptability, opportunity experiences, and motivations related to stimulant use among college students.

Research Question 1: Perceived Risks

Theme 1: Health Concerns and Addiction

Participants unanimously cited health risks and the potential for addiction as significant concerns. Participant One, [P01], a key informant, expressed, "Well, uh, addiction, death... it impacts your, um, mental health," highlighting the severity of perceived risks. Another participant noted, "I'm pretty sure, like, doesn't do good things to your brain."

Research Question 2: Social Acceptability

Theme 2: Societal Disapproval and Personal Values

The majority of participants felt stimulant use was socially unacceptable, citing personal and observed societal norms. Another participant [P03] stated that "I don't think it's very acceptable." In regard to societal norms, one participant expressed, "A lot of people have more tolerance for certain things than I do."

Research Question 3: Opportunity Experiences

Theme 3: Encounters and Resistance

Encounters with drug offers were common, yet resistance to peer pressure was a strong theme. "Yes, multiple times actually. All the time," participant [P05] noted, emphasizing the frequency of such encounters but also his resistance. In reference to resistance to peer influence, one participant expressed, "I'd be more annoyed than anything. I don't need any stimulants."

Research Question 4: Motivations Against Use

Theme 4: Academic Integrity and Health Preservation

Participants cited a commitment to academic integrity and preserving health as key factors deterring stimulant use. "All I need to do is like, you know, work harder," [P01] articulated, underscoring a reliance on personal effort over stimulant use. Another participant responded, "I don't think, uh, altering your brain chemistry is the solution to, uh, getting better grades," which led to the code "dismissal of need" and the subsequent theme of health preservation.

Discrepant Cases

While the majority of participants expressed strong opposition to stimulant use, a small subset presented discrepant views, suggesting understanding of the pressures leading to stimulant use. P06 stated, “Sometimes, the pressure feels unbearable, and I can see why some might turn to stimulants.” These cases were carefully analyzed to ensure a comprehensive view of the topic, enriching the study’s findings by highlighting the complexity of student attitudes toward stimulants.

Summary

In this chapter, I examined the perceptions of non-using college students towards the use of stimulants on campus, exploring the perspectives that define their stance on this pressing issue. Through an in-depth analysis of interview data, several key themes emerged, offering a comprehensive answer to the research questions posited at the outset of this study.

Firstly, the perceived risks of stimulant use were highlighted as a major concern among participants. They articulated fears of addiction, mental health deterioration, and the potential for stimulants to act as gateways to more dangerous substance abuse. These risks were not seen in isolation but as part of a broader awareness of the negative consequences that stimulant use could entail for their academic integrity and personal well-being.

Secondly, the social unacceptability of stimulant use was a recurrent theme. Participants expressed a strong disapproval of nonmedical drug use, which was influenced by personal values and observed norms within their college environments.

This disapproval was rooted in a commitment to personal integrity and a belief in achieving academic success through hard work and dedication, rather than through the perceived shortcut of stimulant use. The exposure to drug use on campus and the encounters with drug offers revealed a normalization of these experiences among the student body. However, participants showed a strong resistance to peer influence, emphasizing their autonomy and the importance of making informed decisions that align with their values and the potential long-term consequences of drug use.

Resistance to the justification of academic performance enhancement through stimulant use was another significant theme. Participants rejected the notion that stimulants could be a legitimate means to improve academic outcomes, viewing such practices as unethical and unworthy of true academic achievement. The interviews also touched on the topic of prescription medication sharing, with participants voicing ethical concerns and highlighting the health risks associated with such practices. This underscores the complexity of the issue, where the lines between assistance and harm, support and dependency, become blurred.

As I transition to Chapter 5, these findings lay the groundwork for discussing the implications of stimulant use among college students. The insights gained from this study contribute to our understanding of the issue and suggest pathways for future research, intervention, and policy development. I will explore the practical applications of these findings, consider recommendations for college administrators, educators, and students themselves, and propose areas for further investigation. The journey from understanding to action requires careful consideration of the ethical, social, and personal dimensions revealed through this research, aiming to foster a safer and more supportive academic environment for all students.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

In Chapter 5 of this exploration into the perceptions and experiences of non-using college students toward stimulant use on campus, I revisit the purpose that guided this qualitative study and summarize the key findings that have emerged from the data. The study was initiated to understand the perspectives of college students who have not engaged in the use of stimulants within a college environment known for its increasing prevalence of stimulant use. The primary aim was to delve into the perceived risks, social acceptability, and potential motivations behind stimulant use, alongside the experiences of students when confronted with opportunities to use these substances. This investigation was driven by a need to shed light on the under-explored viewpoint of non-users, a group whose voices are critical in understanding the broader context of stimulant use in academic settings. Through a detailed analysis of interviews conducted with participants from colleges in Cincinnati and Middletown, Southern Ohio, this study sought to capture the complex interplay of individual values, societal norms, and the academic pressures that influence students' attitudes towards stimulants (McCabe et al., 2005).

Key findings from this study highlighted several themes: the significant perceived risks associated with stimulant use, including addiction and negative health impacts; the social unacceptability of using stimulants, rooted in personal values and societal norms; the commonality of encounters with drug use and offers on campus; strong resistance to peer influence and drug offers; and a rejection of the notion that stimulants are necessary or acceptable for academic enhancement. Participants expressed a clear preference for integrity, hard work, and personal health over the perceived benefits of stimulant use, indicating a deep-seated resistance to the normalization of these substances within college life. These findings not only contribute to an understanding of stimulant use from the perspective of non-users but also provide a foundation for developing targeted interventions and policies aimed at reducing the misuse of stimulants in college settings. In this chapter, the insights gained from this study will be instrumental in guiding discussions on effective strategies to support student well-being and academic integrity in the face of the growing challenge of stimulant misuse.

Interpretation of the Findings

This study sought to explore the perceptions of non-using college students towards the use of stimulants on campus, focusing on their perceived risks, social acceptability, encounters with drug use, and the implications of such use for academic performance. The research was prompted by the increasing prevalence of stimulant use among college students and the need to understand the perspectives of those who choose not to use these substances (Allen et al., 2017). Through qualitative interviews with participants from colleges in Cincinnati and Middletown, southern Ohio, the investigation uncovered the views that inform students’ attitudes towards stimulant use within their academic and social environments.

Key findings from the study highlighted a strong consensus among non-using students regarding the perceived risks associated with stimulant use, including addiction, mental health concerns, and the potential for these substances to serve as gateways to more severe forms of drug abuse (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Participants also expressed clear disapproval of stimulant use, framing it as socially unacceptable and contrary to their personal values and academic integrity. Encounters with drug offers were commonly reported, yet participants demonstrated a resistance to peer pressure, emphasizing their autonomy and commitment to achieving academic success through merit rather than through pharmacological means.

The findings of this study both confirm and extend existing knowledge in the discipline, aligning with previous research on the risks and ethical considerations associated with nonmedical stimulant use among college students. For instance, the expressed concerns over addiction and mental health echo the findings of Allen et al. (2017) and Arria et al. (2017), who reported similar apprehensions among college populations. Furthermore, the strong stance against the academic use of stimulants for performance enhancement corroborates the work of McCabe et al. (2005), which highlighted ethical concerns and the perceived unfairness of stimulant use in academic settings. However, this study also extends the discourse by offering a deeper insight into the personal and social dynamics that underpin students' resistance to stimulant use. The emphasis on personal integrity and the rejection of stimulants as a means to academic success reflect a commitment to authentic learning and achievement, underscoring a values-based approach to navigating the academic pressures of college life (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Analyzing these findings within social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), I can interpret the strong resistance to stimulant use as a manifestation of high self-efficacy and moral agency among non-using students. These students believe in their ability to succeed academically without resorting to pharmacological aids and adhere to a personal moral code that guides their decision-making processes. This interpretation suggests that interventions aimed at reducing stimulant use among college students could benefit from reinforcing students' self-efficacy and ethical reasoning skills, thereby empowering them to make choices that align with their long-term well-being and academic goals.

It is important to note that these interpretations do not exceed the scope of the data collected. The findings are specific to the experiences and perceptions of non-using college students in the context of southern Ohio. While they offer valuable insights, they may not be generalizable to all college populations. The study's qualitative nature allows for a rich, detailed exploration of these issues but also necessitates caution in extending these interpretations beyond the immediate context of the research (McCabe et al., 2005). This understanding of non-using students' perspectives provides a valuable contribution to the field, offering directions for future research and practical interventions designed to support students in making informed decisions about stimulant use.

Limitations of the Study

The execution of this qualitative study on the perceptions of non-using college students towards stimulant use on campus presented several limitations that impact the trustworthiness and generalizability of its findings. These limitations necessitate a thoughtful consideration of the study's scope and the applicability of its conclusions.

Firstly, while appropriate for qualitative depth and detail, the study's sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. The participants were drawn from a specific geographic area—colleges in Cincinnati and Middletown, Southern Ohio—and their experiences and perspectives may not reflect those of college students in different regions or cultural contexts (De Bruyn et al., 2019). This geographical limitation suggests caution when applying the study's insights beyond the immediate setting.

Secondly, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for bias. Participants may have been inclined to present themselves in a favorable light, possibly underreporting their encounters with stimulant offers or overemphasizing their resistance to peer pressure. While efforts were made to establish a rapport and encourage honesty, the intrinsic nature of self-reporting necessitates a recognition of this potential bias. Additionally, the study did not account for the diversity of college student experiences beyond the binary of stimulant users and non-users. Factors such as students' mental health status, academic pressure levels, and social environments may influence their perceptions and decisions regarding stimulant use. The focus on non-using students provides valuable insights but also omits the experiences of students who may be ambivalent or situational in their approach to stimulant use.

The timing of the study also presents a limitation. Conducted during a period of significant social and educational disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings may be influenced by unique stressors and changes in academic and social life that are not representative of typical college experiences (Clarke & Braun, 2017). This temporal context may affect the applicability of the study's conclusions to other periods.

Lastly, while efforts were made to ensure the study's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability through various methodological strategies, the subjective nature of qualitative research and the specific choices made in data collection and analysis mean that other researchers might interpret the data differently (McCabe et al., 2005). The study's findings are thus a product of a particular methodological approach and should be considered within the context of its limitations.

Acknowledging these limitations is crucial for accurately interpreting the study's contributions to the field and guiding future research. It opens avenues for further exploration, including studies with broader geographic scopes, diverse student populations, and methodologies that can complement and expand upon the findings presented here.

Recommendations for Further Research

Building on the insights garnered from this study on the perceptions of non-using college students towards stimulant use on campuses in Southern Ohio and mindful of its strengths and limitations, several recommendations for future research emerge. These recommendations aim to broaden understanding, fill existing gaps, and address the dynamics of stimulant use in academic settings.

Expand Geographic Scope

Future studies should consider expanding the geographic scope beyond Southern Ohio to include diverse college environments. Research across different regions, including urban and rural campuses, community colleges, and universities in various countries, could offer comparative insights into how location and cultural context influence student perceptions and behaviors regarding stimulant use.

Longitudinal Studies

Implementing longitudinal research designs could provide valuable insights into how perceptions and behaviors related to stimulant use evolve over the course of a student's academic career. This approach would allow for the examination of changes in attitudes, the impact of academic pressures over time, and the long-term effects of educational interventions.

Incorporate Diverse Participant Profiles

Further research should aim to include a broader spectrum of student experiences, including those of stimulant users, former users, and those with ambivalent attitudes towards use. Including participants with varying academic performances, mental health statuses, and social backgrounds could yield a richer understanding of the factors influencing stimulant use and resistance.

Mixed-Methods Approaches

Employing mixed-methods research designs could enrich qualitative findings with quantitative data, offering a more comprehensive view of stimulant use on college campuses. Surveys could quantify the prevalence and patterns of use, while in-depth interviews and focus groups could explore the motivations, perceptions, and social dynamics behind the numbers.

Investigate the Role of Online Learning

Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational practices and social interactions, future studies should explore how the shift to online learning has affected stimulant use among college students (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Research could examine whether virtual environments have altered accessibility, social pressures, or perceived need for stimulants.

Evaluate Intervention Efficacy

There is a need for research that assesses the effectiveness of current educational and policy interventions aimed at reducing non-medical stimulant use among college students (McCabe et al., 2005). Studies could evaluate which strategies are most effective in changing perceptions, reducing usage rates, and supporting students' mental health and academic success.

Examine the Impact of Social Media

Research into the role of social media in shaping attitudes towards and disseminating information about stimulant use could offer insights into modern drivers of use and potential digital intervention strategies.

These recommendations are designed to build upon the findings of the current study while staying within its scope. By addressing these areas, future research can contribute to developing a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing stimulant use among college students. This, in turn, can inform the development of targeted, culturally sensitive, and student-centered interventions and policies aimed at reducing the misuse of stimulants in academic settings.

Implications

The exploration of non-using college students' perceptions towards stimulant use carries profound implications for fostering positive social change across various strata of society (Clarke & Braun, 2017). By delving into the understandings and attitudes these students hold, the study illuminates pathways for individual, familial, organizational, and societal interventions to mitigate the misuse of stimulants within academic environments.

Individual and Family Level

The study highlights the critical role of awareness and educational initiatives in equipping students and their families with the knowledge to navigate the challenges associated with stimulant misuse. There is a pressing need for programs that inform about the potential health risks and empower students to make choices that prioritize their well-being (De Bruyn et al., 2019). Moreover, the findings point to the importance of bolstering familial and individual support systems. By enhancing access to resources for stress management, academic support, and mental health services, families and educational institutions can create a supportive ecosystem that encourages students to seek healthier coping mechanisms for academic pressures.

Organizational Level

At the organizational level, the study's outcomes underscore the necessity for colleges and universities to formulate and enforce policies that directly confront the issue of nonmedical stimulant use. Such policies should be complemented by preventive education programs and the provision of comprehensive mental health and counseling services that are easily accessible to students. Furthermore, establishing peer support programs can leverage the influence of social norms and peer dynamics in promoting a drug-free campus culture, encouraging students to engage in healthy behaviors.

Societal/Policy Level

The societal and policy implications of the study call for a concerted effort to address prescription stimulant misuse through legislative and educational means. This includes advocating for more stringent prescription regulations and launching public health campaigns aimed at raising awareness about the perils of nonmedical stimulant use. Additionally, fostering community engagement in discussions about the academic and social pressures facing today's college students can lead to a more supportive societal framework for tackling stimulant misuse.

Methodological, Theoretical, and Empirical Implications

Methodologically, this study enriches the qualitative research landscape by offering insights into the complex web of factors that shape students' attitudes towards stimulant use. Theoretically, it contributes to the discourse on social norms and health behavior by applying these frameworks to the stimulant use context, thus broadening the scope of existing theories (De Bruyn et al., 2019). Empirically, the study enhances the foundation upon which targeted intervention strategies can be developed, calling for further research to explore additional dimensions of drug use in educational settings.

Recommendations for Practice

For educational institutions, there is a clear directive to create and implement educational initiatives that address the root causes of stimulant misuse and propose viable alternatives for managing academic demands. Healthcare providers are encouraged to increase their vigilance in screening for signs of stimulant misuse among college students, offering guidance and support for healthy academic practices. Policymakers, on their part, should push for the development of supportive policies that bolster mental health services, educational programs, and further research aimed at preventing stimulant misuse (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Through these approaches, the potential for engendering positive social change is immense. It calls for a unified effort from individuals, families, educational bodies, and the broader community to cultivate an environment where students' health, well-being, and informed decision-making are placed at the forefront of the academic experience. This concerted action is the cornerstone for reducing the prevalence of nonmedical stimulant use and its associated adverse outcomes, paving the way for a healthier and more informed student population.

Conclusion

The essence of this study converges on a critical examination of non-using college students' perceptions towards stimulant use, shedding light on the dimensions of risk, social acceptability, and the broader implications of these substances on academic integrity and personal well-being (De Bruyn et al., 2019). Through the voices of the participants, I unearth a compelling narrative that underscores collective disapproval and concern towards the nonmedical use of stimulants within academic settings. These insights not only provide a deeper understanding of the societal norms and individual values that guide student behaviors but also highlight a pervasive resistance against the pressures of academic enhancement through stimulant misuse.

At its core, this study serves as a clarion call for a collective reevaluation of our approaches to academic excellence, mental health, and substance use among the college demographic. It emphasizes the urgency of implementing comprehensive, evidence-based educational and policy interventions that address the root causes of stimulant misuse while promoting a culture of health, integrity, and resilience (Clarke & Braun, 2017). By focusing on the development of supportive environments that encourage healthy coping mechanisms, academic institutions can play a pivotal role in safeguarding the future of our students against the backdrop of increasing stimulant misuse.

In conclusion, this study is not just a reflection on the state of stimulant use on college campuses but a testament to the strength of individual and collective resolve to uphold principles of health and academic integrity. It underscores the need for a sustained dialogue among students, educators, policymakers, and healthcare providers to foster environments that support the holistic development of students. As I move forward, let us carry with us the message that the path to academic success and personal well-being does not lie in the misuse of stimulants but in the strength of our commitment to fostering environments that nurture the mind, body, and spirit of our academic communities.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. What are your thoughts regarding drug and stimulant use on campus?

   Probing Question: What do you think are the risks of using stimulants? How acceptable do you think it is using them?

2. Have you witnessed someone on campus being approached to use drugs? What were your thoughts concerning the experience?

   Probing Question: What were your reactions to the incident? What did you do during the incident? What did you do after the incident?

3. How would you describe your own experiences of being approached for using stimulants in campus?

   Probing Question: How did you react to it? What were your thoughts?

4. If you have never been approached to use drugs, how would you think you would feel if someone asked you to use stimulants?

5. What are your thoughts on sharing one's prescribed medication with someone else?

6. What do you think about using stimulants to advance academically? Would you consider it?

7. How have your experiences with regards to other people or yourself being approached for using stimulants impacted your decision to use or refuse stimulants?