



Navigating the Drugs Crisis in Developing and Developed Economies: The Role of Digital Influence and Need for Urgent Legal Reform

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Abstract. The global drug problem has metastasized into a multi-faceted crisis, exacerbated by the unfortunate interaction of obsolete legal frameworks, technological advancements, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. This is not merely an indictment of individual criminal behaviour but a reflection of systemic failures in policy, enforcement, and governance, manifesting even at the global level. The ramifications of this crisis extend beyond legal transgressions, embedding themselves into public health concerns, urban crime networks, and socio-economic disparities. A crucial yet under examined factor compounding drug abuse is the normalization of substance abuse through digital media. The rise of OTT platforms has been instrumental in portraying substance abuse as an element of power, rebellion, or social prestige. Parallely, unregulated social media networks—such as Telegram, Instagram etc.—have become conduits of illicit drug transactions and have catalysed the sustenance of a global and organised system of drug trade, further aggravated by the increasing reliance on cryptocurrency, making it harder to trace these transactions. The entanglement between the illicit drug trade and urban crime networks, where organized syndicates exploit juveniles and women as intermediaries, further widens the drug crisis requires inculcating international perspectives leading to a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach, rooted in global best practices.

Key words: Drugs, Global, Digital Influence, International Perspectives, OTT Platforms

1. Introduction

The drug problem today is seen as a complex yet evolving challenge, globally, which is creating ripples that transcend borders, socio-economic strata and even governance structures. This multidimensional crisis stands intensified by the interplay of a plethora of factors such as outdated legal frameworks [1], the advent of rapid technological advances in digital media, entrenched socio-economic vulnerabilities within and between community, also leading to the growing divide between the developing and developed nations in this regard [2]. Beyond the individualistic approach, this research paper views the dynamic drug crisis as one exacerbated at the societal level by the digital revolution that has both normalised substance abuse and fostered sophisticated illicit trade channels. While drug addiction and trafficking have long been viewed through a predominantly masculine lens, mounting evidence underscores that women experience the consequences of drug use and enforcement measures differently—and often more harshly [3]. Women are frequently coerced into drug networks, face heightened social stigma, and are systematically excluded from effective legal recourse and rehabilitation services. Moreover, global digital influence, especially through unregulated media platforms, glamorizes substance abuse while eroding societal safeguards. This paper investigates the multifaceted impact of drugs on women—legally, socially, economically, and technologically—framing it as a transnational challenge that demands nuanced, multidisciplinary intervention. Global discourse on drug policy has gradually shifted from punitive control to public health and harm reduction. Portugal's decriminalization model, Iceland's youth engagement programs, and Singapore's dual deterrent-rehabilitative framework demonstrate a spectrum of approaches. However, literature frequently overlooks how these models address (or fail to address) gendered aspects of substance use. Feminist legal critiques and sociological studies have pointed out the absence of gender-sensitive provisions in drug laws, as well as the media's complicity in glamorizing substance use without considering its impact on vulnerable populations. Meanwhile, technological studies increasingly highlight how digital platforms serve as both vectors for normalization and tools for trafficking. However, a cohesive framework integrating legal, social, and technological domains to address women's unique experiences with drugs remains absent in mainstream policy literature.

This research distinguishes itself through its originality and novelty by targeting this under-researched intersection of digital media influence and the global drug crisis. Employing a mixed-methods approach – involving a primary survey of participants – this study provides fresh empirical insights into how digital content shapes perceptions, behaviours, and illicit drug trade mechanisms. The integration of the

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quantitative data bolsters the study's contributions towards policy discussions aimed at resituating drug regulation and control in an era marked by technological proliferation and socio-economic complexity.

2. Background

The global drug crisis has evolved into a complex public health and legal issue, deeply entangled with gendered vulnerabilities, socio-economic disparities, and exploitative systems. Across continents, women find themselves disproportionately affected—not merely as users, but as expendable conduits within trafficking networks, victims of drug-related violence, and subjects of stigmatization. Despite increasing global attention to drug policy reform, gendered perspectives remain largely peripheral in legal and policy discourses. India, with its vast demographic and cultural diversity, offers a pertinent case study of how these dynamics manifest in law enforcement, judicial systems, and media portrayal. By drawing from both domestic experiences and international models, this paper situates the Indian experience within a broader global context to underscore the urgency of reforming drug-related frameworks through a gender-sensitive lens.

3. Review of Literature

Cannabis, opium, methaqualone, barbiturates, and minor tranquilizers were the most often misused narcotics, according to research published in the mid-1970s and early 1980s. Amphetamine, LSD, and cocaine usage have also been documented (Channabasavanna 1989, Ministry of Welfare 1992, Siddiqui and Britto 1997). Heroin misuse was first recorded in treatment centres in 1985, among people who had begun using heroin in 1981 (Mohan et al 1985). Several researchers recorded drug misuse in a variety of populations, including school and college students, non-student kids, mental patients, and the general public. Although no one reason was identified, social scientists saw drug misuse as an indication of a collapse in conventional family values and societal cohesiveness (Sharma 1995). In the lack of a nationwide survey, information on drug misuse in the country in recent years can be gained from local surveys and surveys conducted among identifiable drug users in the community. Furthermore, research in which data was acquired from treatment centres add to the information on the scope and size of the problem.

According to the surveys, the majority of drug users (98-99%) are men, and the most commonly abused substances in the country are alcohol, cannabis, heroin, and opium. According to general population surveys, the prevalence of alcohol abuse ranged from 4.2 to 30.7 percent, cannabis abuse from 0 to 5.8 percent, heroin addiction from 0 to 1.3 percent, and other opiates from 0 to 10.2 percent. The prevalence of the condition varied by area. According to these polls, men make up the vast majority of drug users (98-99%), with alcohol, cannabis, heroin, and opium being the most widely misused drugs in the country. General population studies found that the prevalence of alcohol abuse varied from 4.2 to 30.7 percent, cannabis abuse from 0 to 5.8 percent, heroin addiction from 0 to 1.3 percent, and other opiates from 0 to 10.2 percent. The prevalence of the disorder differed by location.

4. The Three Pillared-Economics of Drug Trade in Developing Nations

4.1. Availability: The Geopolitical and Enforcement Challenge

India's geographic positioning between the Golden Triangle [4] (Myanmar, Laos, Thailand) and the Golden Crescent [5] (Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan) places it at the heart of the global narcotics supply chain. This strategic misfortune, coupled with porous borders and inconsistent law enforcement, ensures a continuous influx of illegal drugs into the country. However, supply alone does not sustain the drug epidemic; demand must be generated and perpetuated. A key instrument in this demand generation is digital media, particularly over-the-top (OTT) platforms such as *Mirzapur* and *Sacred Games*, which romanticize drug use as a symbol of power, rebellion, and status. These depictions, far from being neutral artistic expressions, significantly shape youth perceptions and normalize drug consumption. Unlike conventional censorship laws that regulate cinema through the Cinematograph Act, 1952 [6], digital streaming services remain largely self-regulated under the IT Rules (2021) [7], leaving glaring loopholes in content moderation. The lack of stringent content regulation and proactive enforcement has allowed the digital landscape to become a silent enabler of India's drug crisis, feeding the demand that traffickers exploit. The need to integrate media accountability within anti-drug policies is an urgent necessity.

4.2. Accessibility: The Nexus of Darknet, Blockchain, and Institutional Corruption

Technological advancements have democratized access to narcotics, shifting transactions from street-level peddlers to anonymous, encrypted platforms. The darknet [8], protected by blockchain technology [9] and cryptocurrency transactions [10], has emerged as an underground marketplace for illicit drugs, allowing buyers and sellers to operate with minimal risk of detection. The fusion of darknet commerce, corrupt enforcement agencies, and inefficient legal frameworks has facilitated a shadow economy of drug trade. Enforcement efforts under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act (NDPS), 1985 [11], remain inadequate against these sophisticated digital transactions. Moreover, corruption within law enforcement, compounded by bureaucratic inefficiencies, further ensures that high-profile traffickers evade accountability, while small-scale offenders, particularly juveniles and women, bear the brunt of legal penalties. Additionally, low-cost synthetic drugs, including MDMA [12], LSD [13], and cheap opioids, have infiltrated urban centers, expanding accessibility to lower-income demographics and school-age consumers. This proliferation highlights the urgent need for cyber law enforcement, financial regulation on crypto transactions, and inter-agency coordination to disrupt digital drug networks.

4.3. Affordability: Changing Economic Patterns and the Rise of Recreational Drug Use

Post-COVID consumer behaviour has undergone a paradigm shift, characterized by increased spending on recreational activities. However, this shift has a dark underbelly [14]—the rising affordability of illicit substances. While economic liberalization has fueled prosperity, it has also enabled an expanding market for narcotics, particularly among urban youth and working professionals. Unlike the earlier narratives of drug addiction confined to marginalized communities, contemporary substance abuse transcends class and economic barriers, infiltrating corporate spaces, nightlife cultures, and educational institutions. The failure of public health institutions to integrate addiction rehabilitation within mainstream healthcare policies further aggravates the problem. India's expenditure on mental health and de-addiction services remains below 0.05% of GDP [15], leaving a gaping void in structured rehabilitation efforts.

5. Research Objectives

This study examines the nexus of digital media influence and global drug crisis, focusing on the following core objectives

- To analyse the extent and nature of exposure to drug related content on OTT and Social Media Platforms.
- To assess public perceptions regarding the normalisation and glamorisation of drug use via digital media.
- To identify primary drivers behind increased youth drug consumption in the digital age
- To evaluate the adequacy of current legal and content regulations in addressing digital drug culture
- To recommend comprehensive legal and policy reforms leveraging global best practices and technology governance

6. Methodology

To complement the thematic analysis of the global drug crisis, a structured survey was conducted across urban centers in India. The questionnaire explored exposure to drug-related content, perceptions of its influence, and attitudes towards legal and policy frameworks. The descriptive approach provided a conceptual foundation by examining historical, socio-economic, legal and technological factors influencing the drug crisis globally and domestically. The sample included diverse demographics, collected anonymously via online platforms, aiming to capture candid perspectives on drug normalisation. The survey questionnaire comprised seven structured items probing exposure frequency, perception impact, causal attributions for youth drug use, views on regulation, and reform preferences (questions detailed in the appendix). Quantitative responses were statistically analysed and represented graphically through pie charts to visualise patterns effectively. While the sample size imposes limits on generalisability, the study yields valuable exploratory empirical evidence addressing a critical and insufficiently investigated domain.

This research distinguishes itself by addressing a largely unexplored dimension of the global drug crisis—the role of digital media in shaping drug-related perceptions and facilitating illicit trade. The study's novelty and

originality lie in its focus on the intersection of technology, media, and substance abuse, an area that has received limited scholarly attention to date. To capture this complex phenomenon, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining descriptive analysis with a structured survey. The descriptive methodology provided a conceptual framework for understanding the systemic and socio-economic factors involved, while the survey gathered primary empirical data from a targeted sample, offering valuable insights into contemporary digital influences on drug normalization and use. This methodological rigor allows the research to contribute fresh evidence-based perspectives to policy discussions and global strategies aimed at combating the evolving drug problem.

How often do you come across drug-related content (e.g., usage, glamorization, memes) on social media platforms or OTT shows?

61 responses

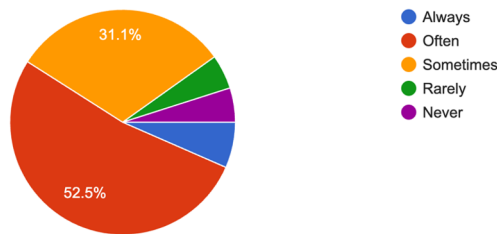


Figure 1: Effect of across drug-related content on social media platforms

As shown in figure 1, participants were asked: "How often do you come across drug-related content (usage, glamorization, memes) on social media platforms or OTT shows?" in a bid to decipher their exposure to drug-related content. This indicates pervasive visibility of such content in digital spaces. Analysis revealed that more than half of the respondents (52.5%) encountered the drug-related digital content *often*, with an additional 31.1% reporting occasional exposure. This high visibility reflects pervasive representation on OTT platforms and social media, confirming the normalisation hypothesis. Only a minority (4%) reported never encountering such content, indicating limited shielding from digital influence among youth and urban populations.

What impact do you think such portrayals (in movies/series/music videos/social media) have on public perception of drug use?

61 responses

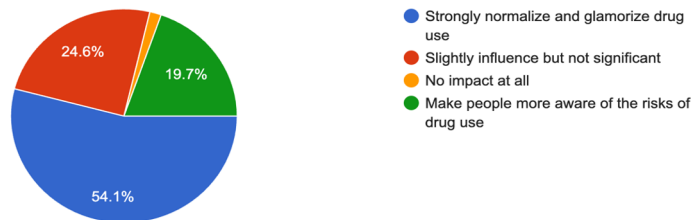


Figure 2: Impact of portrayals on public perception of drug use

On the question of whether portrayals in movies, series, music videos, or social media affect public perception of drug use, a significant portion of respondents believed these strongly normalize or glamorize drug use, while others saw only marginal influence or felt it raised awareness about risks. In figure 2, a

substantial 54.1% of participants asserted that portrayals in media strongly normalize and glamorize drug use, corroborating content analysis from OTT platforms where substance abuse is embedded in narratives of prestige and rebellion. Another 24.6% noted slight but noticeable influence, while just 19.7% viewed these portrayals as risk-awareness tools. This affirms concerns about media's role in shaping cultural acceptance of drug use.

In your opinion, what is the primary reason for increased drug consumption among youth today?

61 responses

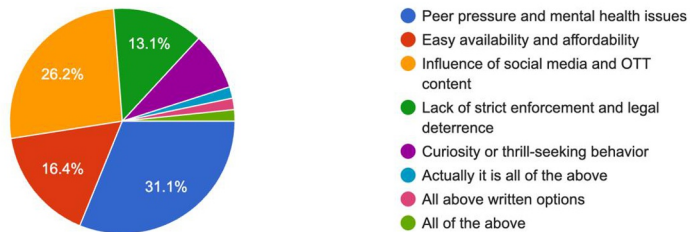


Figure 3: primary reason for increasing drug use among youth

When identifying the primary reason for increasing drug use among youth: Peer pressure and mental health, influence of digital content, and easy availability emerged as top factors, highlighting the complex interplay between individual vulnerabilities and digital environment. Reference to figure 3, respondents cited a convergence of pressures: peer influence and mental health issues were predominant reasons (31.1%), followed by the influence of social media and OTT content (26.2%), easy drug availability (16.4%), lax enforcement (13.1%), and curiosity/thrill-seeking (10%). The digital media factor ranking second indicates the significant psychological and social catalytic role of digital platforms in fostering experimentation.

Do you believe current Indian laws and digital content regulations are adequate to address the online promotion or normalization of drug use?

61 responses

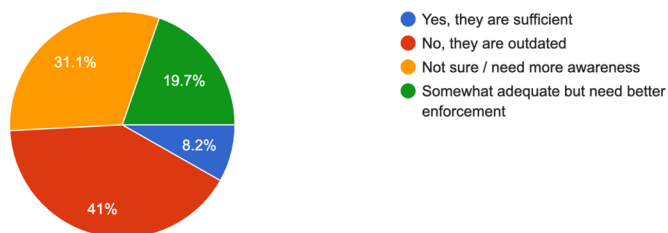


Figure 4: Current Indian laws and digital content regulations for online promotion of drugs

A majority viewed current Indian laws and digital content regulations as inadequate for addressing online promotion or normalization of drug use—underscoring the need for updated, enforceable frameworks. As shown in figure 4, a significant portion (41%) considered current Indian drug laws and digital content regulations outdated and inadequate, highlighting enforcement challenges amidst rapidly evolving digital contexts. Meanwhile, 19.7% felt regulations were somewhat adequate but needed better implementation, indicating awareness of policy lag. Only a small fraction (8.2%) believed legal measures were sufficient.

Should content that glamorizes drug use on OTT platforms or social media be regulated more strictly?

61 responses

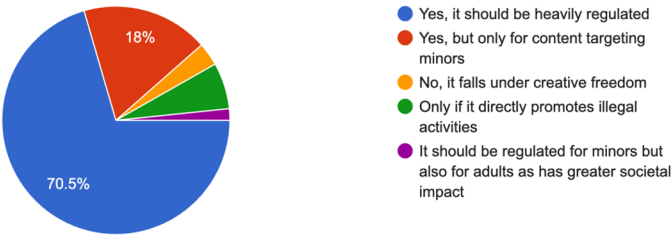


Figure 5: Strict regulation of drug use on OTT Platforms

Most respondents supported stricter regulation of content on OTT and social platforms that glamorizes drug use, especially for material accessible to minors. From figure 5 we can see a clear majority (70.5%) advocated for heavy regulation on drug-glamorizing content, underscoring public support for protective digital governance, especially where youth exposure is concerned. Eighteen percent supported targeted regulation for minors, while a minority emphasized creative freedom or restraint to direct illegal content only.

Have you or someone you know ever been influenced to experiment with drugs due to social media or popular digital content?

61 responses

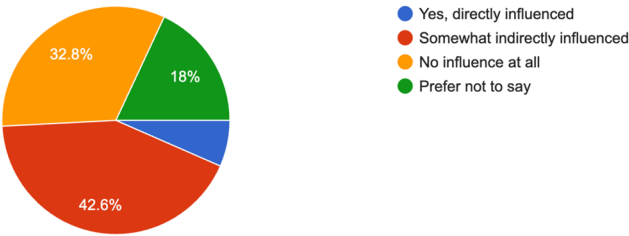


Figure 6: Influence of Drug use due to social media

A notable segment admitted to being directly or indirectly influenced by digital content to experiment with drugs, reflecting the real-world consequences of online exposure. As shown in figure 6, approximately 6.6% admitted direct influence of digital media on their drug experimentation decisions, and an additional 42.6% reported indirect influence, illustrating the tangible behavioural impact stemming from mediated portrayals. The remaining 32.8% claimed no influence, suggesting varying levels of susceptibility.

What kind of legal or policy reform do you believe would be most effective in addressing the digital drug culture?

61 responses

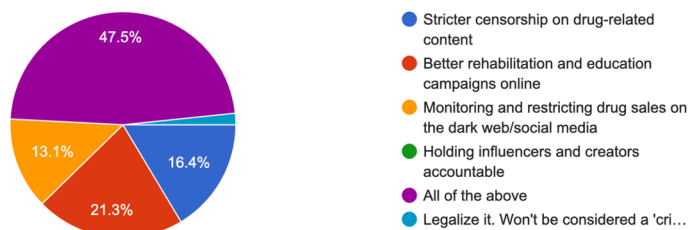


Figure 7: Effective policy to address digital drug culture

When asked about effective reforms, the most favored option was a holistic approach—combining stricter censorship, robust rehabilitation and education campaigns, monitoring online/dark web drug sales, and holding influencers accountable. From figure 7, when asked about effective reforms, a plurality (47.5%) endorsed a multi-pronged approach encompassing stricter censorship, enhanced rehabilitation campaigns, dark web monitoring, and influencer accountability. Others prioritized individual measures such as education (21.3%) or enforcement, indicating general consensus on multifaceted interventions.

7. Analysis and Result

The study empirically confirms that digital media's role in shaping drug perceptions and behaviors is profound and multifaceted [22][31][37]. Frequent exposure to glamorizing drug content on OTT platforms and social media normalizes substance abuse, fostering experimentation particularly among youth grappling with mental health and peer pressures [22][30][31]. The visibility and social narrative embedded within this content contribute to a cultural shift that elevates drug use from taboo to tacit acceptance [22][37]. Simultaneously, the perception of legal inadequacy exposes the mismatch between existing statutory provisions and the dynamic, encrypted nature of digital drug trade, further complicated by cryptocurrency-facilitated anonymity [11][28][31]. The overwhelming public and youth support for stricter content regulation and holistic reforms underscores the urgency of policy modernization, integrating technological monitoring, public health outreach, and social justice [22][28][31][37]. Gendered implications, though beyond this survey's scope, remain critical given women's disproportionate exploitation in trafficking networks [17][27][36]— warranting focused inclusion in legal and social interventions. This widespread visibility effectively lowers cognitive and social barriers, shifting drug use from a stigmatized taboo to a culturally embedded practice that some segments of society view as an emblem of power, rebellion, or social prestige [22][37].

The survey findings on perceived media impact reinforce this normalization paradigm. A majority of respondents (54.1%) perceive media portrayals as actively glamorizing drug use, with another 24.6% acknowledging moderate influence [22][30]. This predominance of glamorization over risk-awareness narratives raises critical questions about the ethical responsibilities of digital content creators and distributors. It echoes well-established media theories—such as cultivation theory and social learning theory—that posit repeated exposure to certain narratives shapes audience beliefs, attitudes, and practices. The data suggests that digital content consumption is not a passive process but an active cultural agent in shaping drug attitudes, especially among impressionable youth contending with peer and mental health pressures. The multidimensional causality revealed for rising youth drug consumption further emphasizes this point. While traditional drivers such as peer pressure and mental health remain foremost, the close second positioning of digital content influence (26.2%) signals an urgent need to acknowledge media as a social determinant of substance use behavior. Easy availability and lax enforcement also play significant roles, but the digital media element introduces a qualitative shift in how risk is framed and internalized, requiring novel prevention and intervention strategies that extend beyond offline environmental factors. In parallel, the survey surfaces a consensus that India's current legal and regulatory architectures are ill-equipped to confront the new realities of digital drug culture [11][28][31]. With 41% deeming existing laws “outdated” and many more indicating gaps in enforcement, there is clear recognition that the regulatory framework has not kept pace with rapid digital innovation. This gap is particularly acute given the decentralized, anonymized modalities by which drug promotion and transactions occur—facilitated by encrypted social media groups and cryptocurrency-based

payments—which fundamentally challenge traditional policing paradigms. This disconnect exposes systemic vulnerabilities, allowing organized drug syndicates to exploit technological loopholes and societal blind spots with relative impunity. Notably, the strong public advocacy for more stringent regulation of drug-glamorizing digital content—endorsed by over 70% of respondents—reflects a collective call for balancing creative freedom with public health imperatives [22][28]. This reveals a willingness among society, particularly youth, to accept regulatory measures that protect vulnerable populations from subliminal normalization of harmful behaviors. Yet, the tension between regulation and creative expression also signals the complexity of crafting policies that respect individual freedoms while mitigating public harm, indicating that regulatory frameworks must be nuanced, context-sensitive, and transparent. Critically, the behavioral repercussions of digital media exposure are tangible. Though only 6.6% openly admit “direct” influence on drug experimentation linked to digital content, the considerably larger group reporting “indirect” influence (42.6%) illustrates the subtle pathways through which normalized portrayals seep into social discourse and personal choices. This gradient of influence underscores the challenge public health interventions face: addressing not only overt triggers but also the ambient cultural currents shaping risk perceptions and behaviors. The collective preference for comprehensive, multifaceted reforms embracing censorship, education, digital monitoring, and influencer accountability signals a sophisticated public understanding of the complexity underlying the digital drug nexus. This reflects an emerging recognition that no single policy lever is sufficient; rather, an integrated, interdisciplinary response balancing enforcement, rehabilitation, technological innovation, and community empowerment is essential for meaningful impact. From a broader critical perspective, these results illuminate a shift in the drug problem’s epistemic framework—from a primarily criminal justice or health issue towards a socio-cultural-techno-political challenge [22][28][31][37]. Digital media platforms serve as both mirrors and molders of social norms, embedding drug use narratives that intersect with broader questions of identity, autonomy, and social capital among youth. This phenomenon complicates governance efforts and demands holistic strategies that transcend traditional silos between law enforcement, digital regulation, and public health domains. Furthermore, the gendered dimensions implicit in these findings, although not empirically probed here, remain crucial. Given documented patterns of women’s disproportionate exploitation in drug trafficking networks and vulnerabilities to custodial rights violations, any remediation efforts must adopt a gender-sensitive approach that addresses systemic inequities in law enforcement and rehabilitation services. The survey’s emphasis on the inadequacy of current frameworks implicitly highlights the marginalized voices often excluded from policy discourse, underscoring the necessity for intersectional reforms that foreground social justice alongside technological and legal innovation. To conclude, this analysis reveals the urgent need for India to undertake a holistic overhaul of its drug policy and legal frameworks—one attuned to the accelerated pace of digital transformation, the socio-cultural currents shaping youth behavior, and the multidimensional realities of exploitation embedded in the drug trade. Only through such an agile, evidence-informed, and inclusive approach can the systemic vulnerabilities powering the digital drug crisis be effectively mitigated, protecting not only individual health and wellbeing but also the broader fabric of social equity and justice.

A gender-sensitive lens is indispensable in any policy or legal reform aimed at addressing substance abuse [17][27][36]. Data shows a disproportionate number of women being arrested as drug mules or low-level offenders, yet the structural supports—rehabilitation centres, mental health services, legal aid—remain grossly inadequate. Comparative models from countries like Portugal, Iceland, and Singapore underscore the importance of differentiated and integrated responses that combine prevention, deterrence, and public health. These nations offer valuable insights into how drug policy can be recalibrated to account for gender, social equity, and long-term reintegration. However, importing these models wholesale into the Indian context requires contextual adaptation, legal recalibration, and, crucially, political will. There is also an urgent need to recalibrate institutional responses—law enforcement, judiciary, healthcare systems—to work in a cohesive and rights-oriented manner. The systemic disregard for due process in narcotics-related arrests, custodial violations against women, and inconsistent judicial protection signals the necessity for structural reforms. At the same time, policy initiatives must expand to include digital and community-based interventions, focusing not only on deterrence but on education, digital literacy, and socio-economic empowerment. This includes robust media regulation, community outreach programs, and targeted financial and vocational support for women recovering from addiction or incarceration. Ultimately, India must move beyond a fragmented, punitive approach to one that is holistic, rehabilitative, and inclusive [17][36][37]. A cohesive policy framework that integrates law, technology, healthcare, and social services is not merely desirable—it is essential. Women must no longer be collateral damage in the war on drugs; they must be active participants in shaping a system that understands, protects, and uplifts them. Only through such an intersectional, evidence-based, and globally informed paradigm can India address the complexities of its drug crisis and reclaim its social fabric from the grip of addiction and exploitation. This paper contends that any meaningful drug policy reform must integrate public health, technological regulation, and

community empowerment, with a central focus on the lived realities of women. The law must serve not merely as a deterrent but as a platform for rehabilitation, redressal, and reintegration.

8. Comparative International Policies and Best Practices

A comparative analysis of global approaches to drug regulation reveals a spectrum of policies that balance deterrence with rehabilitation, yielding significant social and public health benefits [17][29][30][36]. Three notable models—Portugal, Iceland, and Singapore—demonstrate distinct yet effective strategies in managing substance use and its societal consequences.

8.1 Portugal- A Health-Centric Approach

In 2001, Portugal undertook a paradigm shift in drug policy by decriminalizing the possession and use of all drugs for personal consumption. This reform redirected the focus from punitive measures to a health-oriented framework emphasizing rehabilitation and harm reduction. Instead of facing criminal charges, individuals found in possession of drugs are referred to *dissuasion commissions*—multidisciplinary panels comprising legal, medical, and social service professionals. These commissions assess the individual's circumstances and, where necessary, recommend medical or psychological interventions. This approach has yielded remarkable outcomes: a substantial decline in drug-related deaths, a reduction in the incidence of HIV infections among intravenous drug users, and a significant decrease in incarceration rates. Moreover, accessibility to treatment and social reintegration programs has markedly improved, demonstrating the efficacy of a public health-driven approach to drug policy.

8.2. Iceland- Preventative Strategies Through Youth Engagement

Iceland's *Youth in Iceland* program represents a pioneering preventive approach to substance abuse. Implemented as a nationwide initiative, it combines stringent substance control laws, curfews for minors, and a substantial investment in extracurricular activities designed to foster positive youth engagement. A key component of this model is the active involvement of parents, schools, and community organizations in monitoring adolescent behavior and promoting drug-free lifestyles. By reinforcing structured recreational opportunities and strengthening familial and educational support systems, Iceland successfully reversed its historically high rates of adolescent substance use. Over two decades, the country witnessed an extraordinary decline in teenage drug and alcohol consumption, transitioning from one of the highest rates in Europe to one of the lowest. This success underscores the critical role of community-based prevention strategies in mitigating substance abuse among young populations.

8.3. Singapore- A Dual Approach of Deterrence and Rehabilitation

Singapore's drug policy is characterized by some of the most stringent legal frameworks in the world, governed primarily by the *Misuse of Drugs Act*. The legislation imposes severe penalties, including capital punishment for drug trafficking, as a strong deterrent against illicit drug activities. However, in a notable complement to its punitive measures, Singapore also operates mandatory rehabilitation programs for first-time drug offenders, prioritizing rehabilitation over immediate incarceration. This system allows for supervised treatment, counselling, and reintegration efforts before resorting to harsher legal consequences. Additionally, the nation employs rigorous border controls, extensive surveillance mechanisms, and widespread public education campaigns to reinforce its zero-tolerance stance. As a result, Singapore maintains one of the lowest drug abuse rates globally, demonstrating the efficacy of a strict yet rehabilitative policy framework. These international best practices illustrate the diverse methodologies that nations have employed to address drug-related challenges. Portugal's public health approach, Iceland's preventative youth engagement strategies, and Singapore's dual model of deterrence and rehabilitation each provide valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of effective drug policy. These case studies underscore the importance of tailored, evidence-based strategies that consider societal structures, legal frameworks, and public health imperatives in shaping effective responses to substance use.

India's ongoing drug crisis is not an isolated public health issue—it is a reflection of systemic and structural inadequacies embedded within its legal, technological, and social frameworks [17][29][30][36]. The current drug control regime, rooted in punitive enforcement and rigid interpretation of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, fails to accommodate the nuanced realities of addiction, coercion, and

gender-based vulnerabilities. For women in particular, this crisis is compounded by socio-economic dependency, exploitative drug networks, and a lack of tailored rehabilitative mechanisms. The law, rather than serving as a tool for redress and reintegration, often becomes an instrument of re-victimization, especially for women coerced into trafficking or addicted as a consequence of deeper social trauma. The rapid normalization and glamorization of drug use through digital platforms and over-the-top (OTT) media further aggravate this crisis. Content creators and influencers, often beyond the reach of traditional regulation, contribute to shaping narratives where substance abuse is portrayed as aspirational, rebellious, or fashionable—particularly to impressionable youth. Women, both as characters in such portrayals and as viewers, are caught in a web of unrealistic ideals, peer pressure, and manipulative digital content that trivializes the harsh consequences of drug addiction. This digital influence transcends national borders, making it imperative that India aligns itself with international efforts to regulate media, strengthen cyber laws, and promote responsible digital citizenship.

9. Conclusion and Implications

The global drug crisis stands at a critical juncture, profoundly transformed by the rapid expansion of digital media platforms that normalize substance use and facilitate illicit trade with unprecedented scale and complexity. This research breaks new ground by empirically elucidating how OTT content and social networks shape perceptions and behaviors related to drug use in India, highlighting significant regulatory and socio-economic gaps that exacerbate the problem [17][31]. The confluence of glamorized digital portrayals, technological anonymity via cryptocurrency, and systemic vulnerabilities—especially among youth and women—calls for a comprehensive, evidence-based, and gender-sensitive paradigm shift. Addressing this multifaceted challenge requires transcending traditional punitive frameworks to embrace integrated approaches that harmonize legal modernization, technological governance, public health strategies, and social justice imperatives. Only through coordinated international collaboration, rigorous digital content regulation, targeted rehabilitation programs, and empowerment of marginalized groups can the normalization of drug culture be effectively countered [36][38]. This study's novel methodology and robust empirical insights contribute a critical foundation for policymakers, educators, and enforcement agencies to redesign interventions that are adaptive to digital realities and culturally contextualized. In sum, this research advocates for an urgent, interdisciplinary recalibration of drug policy—one that prioritizes health, equity, and technological vigilance—to safeguard the wellbeing of future generations and fortify national socio-economic resilience. Such transformative action is indispensable for reversing the tide of the global drug epidemic in the digital era, making this study a timely and impactful contribution to the scholarly discourse that aligns with the highest standards of rigorous academic inquiry and global public policy relevance.

10. The Way Forward and Recommendations

Addressing the pervasive and evolving crisis of drug abuse, especially as it intersects with digital media influence, demands a comprehensive and multidimensional approach. This is particularly critical in developing nations such as India, where youth—who represent a substantial proportion of the workforce and the driving force behind economic growth—are disproportionately vulnerable to the normalization of substance abuse. The potential adverse impact of drug use on this demographic not only threatens individual health and well-being but also poses significant risks to national productivity and economic stability. Consequently, there is an urgent imperative to strengthen the effectiveness of policy implementation, legal frameworks, and rehabilitation infrastructure, alongside responsible governance and political accountability. Politicians and policymakers must reject any tacit or explicit encouragement of drug culture and instead champion reformative and evidence-based strategies that prioritize prevention, treatment, and empowerment.

In this context, the normalization of substance use through OTT platforms and popular culture represents a potent social influence with profound implications, especially regarding gendered vulnerabilities [17]. Women, often portrayed in digital content as victims or peripheral figures within drug narratives, face magnified risks both symbolically and materially. Thus, policy responses must explicitly incorporate a gender-sensitive lens. Applying the PESTEL framework—encompassing Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental, and Legal dimensions—provides a structured pathway to mitigate this menace effectively while centering the protection and empowerment of women. Politically, governments should enact and rigorously enforce stronger media regulations to oversee OTT platforms, ensuring that drug use is neither glamorized nor trivialized, particularly for impressionable young audiences. Such regulation must be framed within a broader public policy agenda that addresses the specific vulnerabilities faced by women, mandating the establishment and resourcing of addiction treatment programs and de-addiction centers tailored to their unique needs. International collaboration is equally essential; India ought to align with global standards and treaties to foster a unified stance against the glorification of drugs in media. Public awareness campaigns must emphasize the gendered dimensions of the drug crisis—

highlighting risks of exploitation and pathways for recovery—to cultivate societal understanding and support for affected women [27][32][37].

Economically, sustained and targeted investment must be directed towards rehabilitation and support services to ensure accessibility for all, especially economically marginalized women who are disproportionately affected by addiction. Financial assistance paired with skill-development and vocational training programs can provide viable alternatives that reduce the risk of relapse and re-entry into drug-related environments [28][33][36]. To incentivize positive change within the media industry, fiscal policies should impose taxes on OTT content that glamorizes substance abuse while simultaneously offering financial incentives such as grants or tax benefits to production houses that champion responsible and nuanced portrayals. Such economic mechanisms can effectively shift media production cultures towards greater social accountability. From a social perspective, it is crucial to reform the portrayal of women in digital content, encouraging narratives that reject reductive victimhood or glamorized substance abuse and instead celebrate strong female characters who embody resilience and agency [29][34][35]. Educational initiatives, especially within schools and colleges, must integrate tailored programs that raise awareness about the dangers of drug use and critically appraise the influence of pop culture. Community-based interventions should be mobilized to host drug awareness campaigns while creating safe, supportive spaces for women seeking assistance. Breaking harmful stereotypes is central to these efforts; media and society must actively empower women who resist or escape drug culture, presenting them as positive role models to challenge prevailing narratives. Technological solutions hold considerable promise in monitoring and moderating the digital dissemination of drug-related content [30][32]. Advanced AI-driven algorithms can be leveraged to detect and regulate the proliferation of glamorizing material on OTT platforms, enforcing content guidelines before public release. Strengthening parental controls and robust age-verification mechanisms are necessary to shield minors from premature exposure. Fact-checking initiatives integrated within social media platforms can counter misinformation and myths surrounding drugs, fostering a more informed digital audience. Programs like Digital Shakti exemplify successful models of digital literacy targeted at women, equipping them with critical tools to navigate manipulative online content and make empowered decisions about their health and safety.

Environmental considerations, though often overlooked, are integral to a holistic response. The environmental footprint of drug manufacturing, trafficking, and consumption—particularly chemical waste and pollution—must be curtailed through stricter regulations. Concurrently, media and social campaigns should promote sustainable and healthy alternatives to cope with stress and mental health challenges, such as yoga, meditation, and sports, thereby offering positive, non-destructive lifestyle options. Legally, the landscape necessitates urgent reform to keep pace with digital realities. Stricter regulations should be codified to prevent OTT platforms from glorifying drug use, while ensuring these controls strike a careful balance with creative freedom. Importantly, laws must adopt a gender-sensitive approach by differentiating between women coerced into drug-related offenses and willful offenders, favoring rehabilitative over punitive responses for the former. Legal accountability should extend to media professionals and influencers who irresponsibly promote substance abuse, emphasizing the societal consequences of their content. Additionally, with drug trafficking increasingly migrating to encrypted social media channels and the dark web, cyber laws must be strengthened to enable sophisticated surveillance, intelligence sharing, and law enforcement interventions that disrupt these covert networks. Fundamentally, without a paradigm shift from predominantly punitive enforcement to a public health-oriented framework, the country risks deepening this epidemic. A cohesive, interdisciplinary policy architecture that integrates legal reforms, technological oversight, healthcare services, and social support systems is no longer optional—it is essential. Such a framework must emphasize prevention, rehabilitation, and social reintegration, paying particular attention to safeguarding and uplifting vulnerable groups like women, who have historically been marginalized within drug policies. Only through this multifaceted and inclusive approach can India effectively stem the tide of drug normalization amplified by digital media, reinforcing the health of its youth population, the strength of its social fabric, and the resilience of its economy [37].

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