



THE 21ST EDITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
EUROPEAN INTEGRATION
REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

Are we Shifting from Criminalization to Normalization of Cocaine Use in Albania...?! A Psychosocial Perspective on Social Status, Quality of Life, and Policy Responses

Sonila Bitri¹, Eliona Kulluri Bimbashi², Tea Bitri³

Abstract: Objectives: This study examines the psychosocial shift in perceptions of cocaine use in Albania, exploring its transition from criminalization to normalization. It investigates how this shift impacts social status, identity, and quality of life, with a focus on its psychosocial consequences. **Prior Work:** While global research on drug use normalization and harm reduction exists, few studies focus on Albania's unique sociocultural context. This paper builds on psychosocial and addiction frameworks, examining how drug use, social status, and stigma intersect in Albania. **Approach:** A mixed-method approach combining qualitative interviews, case studies, and quantitative surveys was used across urban and rural Albania. This methodology explores how cocaine use affects social identity, stigmatization, and public health outcomes. **Results:** Findings show a societal divide: younger generations view cocaine as a status symbol, while older generations criminalize it. This divide leads to psychological stress for users, increasing shame, social isolation, and diminishing quality of life. **Implications:** The study highlights the need for policies addressing both the normalization of cocaine use and the stigma surrounding addiction to improve public health and well-being. **Value:** This paper offers new insights into the psychosocial impact of cocaine use in Albania, enriching global harm reduction and addiction treatment discussions.

Keywords: Cocaine shift; Social stigma; Psycho-social impact; Social work

JEL Classification: I31, I38, Z13, D63

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Albania has undergone profound social, economic, and cultural changes. From the streets of Tirana to smaller towns, I have witnessed how globalization, migration, and the digital revolution are reshaping lifestyles and perceptions among our youth. These changes are not only affecting daily life, but also the ways in which young Albanians perceive and engage with psychoactive substances, particularly cocaine.

¹ Ph.D. candidate, Lecturer, Western Balkans University, Tirana, Albania, Address: Autostrada Tirane-Durres Km7, Tirane 1001, Albania, Corresponding author: sonila_bitri@yahoo.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6405-2120>.

² Associate Professor, Ph.D., Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Tirana, Albania, Address: Gjergj Fishta Blvd., Tirana, Albania, E-mail: elionakulluri@gmail.com.

³ Student, Charite University of Medicine, Berlin, Germany, Address: Charitéplatz 1, 10117 Berlin, Germany, E-mail: teabitri8@gmail.com.



Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.
Open access publication under the terms and conditions of the
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial (CC BY NC) license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

Traditionally, cocaine and other illicit substances were framed as symbols of criminality, moral failure, or social deviance. People using drugs were often stigmatized, treated as outsiders, or feared. Punitive approaches dominated public discourse, and addiction was seen as a moral failure, rather than a multifaceted health issue. However, a new reality is emerging in recent years, particularly among urban and socially active youth.

In the nightlife of Tirana and other urban centers, cocaine is increasingly linked to prestige, social confidence, and professional performance. Social media, global trends, and music culture, all play a role in shaping this image. Unlike heroin or injectable drugs, cocaine is often considered a “functional” drug, compatible with work, study, and social life, which may reduce the perceived risk of use.

Yet, this growing normalization coexists with persistent stigma toward those struggling with addiction. Individuals may enjoy temporary social acceptance while privately suffering from psychological distress, anxiety, or shame. From my medical perspective, these contradictions have real consequences for mental health, identity, and quality of life.

2. Related Work

The concept of drug normalization emerged from sociological research examining changing attitudes toward recreational drug use among young people, particularly in Western urban societies. In their work, Parker, Aldridge, and Measham argued that certain psychoactive substances gradually become integrated into mainstream youth culture, where experimentation is increasingly perceived as socially acceptable, rather than deviant (Aldridge et al., 2013). Normalization does not necessarily imply universal approval of drug use, but rather a reduced perception of risk and greater cultural accommodation within specific social groups.

Over the last two decades, cocaine has undergone a significant symbolic transformation internationally. Historically associated with criminality, social marginalization, and severe addiction, cocaine has increasingly become connected to nightlife culture, luxury, social status, and professional performance (Duff, 2005). Studies from several European countries demonstrate that cocaine is frequently perceived as a “recreational” or “functional” stimulant, particularly among socially active young adults, students, and professionals.

This transformation is closely linked to globalization and consumer culture. Modern societies increasingly emphasize performance, visibility, productivity, appearance, and social image. Within this context, psychoactive substances such as cocaine may become symbolically connected to confidence, ambition, sociability, and success. Pennay and Measham note that normalization is not simply about drug availability, but also about cultural meaning and identity construction (Pennay & Measham, 2016).

The role of media and digital culture is particularly important in contemporary discussions regarding cocaine normalization. Social media platforms, music videos, influencer culture, nightlife promotion, and celebrity representation frequently portray stimulant use within glamorous or socially desirable contexts. Repeated exposure to these representations may gradually reduce perceived danger associated with cocaine use, especially among adolescents and young adults.

Several studies have shown that risk perception strongly influences experimentation. When young people perceive cocaine as socially manageable or less dangerous than other drugs, occasional use may become increasingly normalized within peer groups (European Union Drugs Agency, 2025). In many urban societies, cocaine is no longer viewed exclusively as a “street drug,” but rather as a substance linked to social events, private parties, nightlife, and high-status environments.

At the same time, the literature emphasizes that normalization does not eliminate harm. Functional or recreational cocaine users often experience anxiety, impulsivity, sleep disturbances, emotional instability, and depressive symptoms despite maintaining social or occupational functioning (Volkow & Boyle, 2018). This phenomenon is especially concerning because socially functional users may remain hidden from healthcare systems and avoid seeking support.

The psychosocial dimensions of cocaine use have also become increasingly important in addiction research. Contemporary theories highlight the role of emotional vulnerability, peer influence, identity formation, trauma, and social belonging in shaping substance use behaviors (Levine, 2009). Cocaine use may function not only as a source of pleasure, but also as a coping mechanism for insecurity, loneliness, emotional exhaustion, stress, or low self-esteem.

Howard Becker's labeling theory remains highly relevant in understanding addiction stigma (Chung, 2017). According to this perspective, social reactions and labels strongly influence how individuals view themselves and how they are treated by society. Individuals identified as "drug users" or "addicts" may experience shame, rejection, discrimination, and exclusion.

Corrigan and colleagues argue that addiction stigma significantly reduces treatment-seeking behavior and worsens mental health outcomes (Corrigan et al., 2017). In highly stigmatizing societies, individuals frequently conceal substance use in order to protect social reputation and family image. This issue is particularly relevant in Albania, where collectivistic cultural values continue to shape attitudes regarding morality, family honor, and social acceptance.

The relationship between cocaine use and quality of life has also been widely explored in international literature. Although stimulant use may initially increase energy, confidence, and sociability, prolonged use is associated with worsening emotional well-being, interpersonal conflict, occupational instability, financial stress, and psychological distress (Illner, 1998; Milliken et al., 2025; Laudet, 2011). Users frequently report emotional emptiness, irritability, insomnia, panic symptoms, and social isolation.

Research further suggests that socially functional users often experience a fragmented identity, balancing a public image of success with hidden emotional suffering. This discrepancy between appearance and internal distress may contribute to chronic anxiety, secrecy, and delayed intervention.

In the Balkan region, research regarding cocaine use remains relatively limited compared to Western Europe. Most available studies focus on trafficking routes, organized crime, prevalence rates, or legal responses rather than psychosocial dimensions of use. However, reports from the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) indicate increasing cocaine availability across the Western Balkans over recent years (European Union Drugs Agency, 2025).

Albania occupies a particularly important position within these regional dynamics due to its geographic location and role within trafficking routes connecting South America, the Balkans, and Western Europe. Increased availability may influence both accessibility and social perception, especially among younger generations exposed to nightlife culture and international trends.

Post-transitional societies such as Albania may be especially vulnerable to cocaine normalization because of rapid cultural transformation, migration, economic inequality, urbanization, and identity-related pressures. Young people growing up within these changing environments may experience uncertainty regarding employment, social mobility, belonging, and future expectations. Substance use may therefore become intertwined with aspirations for success, confidence, and social adaptation.

The literature additionally highlights the importance of mental health in understanding stimulant use. Anxiety disorders, depressive symptoms, trauma exposure, emotional dysregulation, and chronic stress frequently coexist with cocaine use patterns. Some individuals report using cocaine to temporarily enhance mood, increase confidence, or reduce emotional discomfort, even though long-term use often worsens psychological functioning.

Gender differences also appear within stimulant-related behaviors. Men more frequently associate cocaine with risk-taking, power, competitiveness, and nightlife status, while women may describe emotional pressure, social belonging, relational insecurity, or coping motivations. Such findings suggest that prevention and psychosocial interventions should adopt gender-sensitive approaches.

Finally, contemporary addiction literature increasingly supports biopsychosocial and public health-oriented approaches over exclusively punitive models. Harm reduction frameworks emphasize prevention, psychological support, early intervention, and social reintegration rather than solely punishment and criminalization (Denis-Lalonde et al., 2019).

Several international organizations, including the World Health Organization and the European Union Drugs Agency, stress the importance of integrated addiction care combining mental health services, psychosocial interventions, public education, and community support systems. These approaches may be particularly relevant for Albania as societal attitudes toward cocaine continue to evolve.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative psychosocial approach based on the analysis of experiences shared by patients who presented for consultation at the Addiction Service of American Hospital 2 in Tirana, Albania, between January 2025 and January 2026. Data was collected through clinical discussions and psychosocial evaluations focusing on themes such as cocaine normalization, stigma, emotional distress, peer influence, and quality of life.

Elements of snowball sampling were also incorporated by analyzing experiences and observations related to peers and close social contacts, as reported by the patients themselves. This allowed for a broader understanding of social attitudes and behavioral patterns surrounding cocaine use among young adults in Albania.

All information was analyzed confidentially and in accordance with ethical standards related to patient privacy and psychological safety.

4. Results

4.1. Cocaine as a Symbol of Social Status

Younger participants frequently associated cocaine with prestige, economic success, confidence, social integration, and nightlife culture. In many cases, cocaine was considered “normalized” in professional and social settings, similar to how alcohol is socially accepted in many contexts.

4.2. Generational Divide

Older participants viewed cocaine as immoral and criminal, reflecting traditional attitudes. Younger individuals, however, often minimized risks, particularly for occasional recreational use, highlighting the influence of globalization and international cultural trends.

4.3. Psychological Consequences

Despite social normalization, many users reported anxiety, emotional emptiness, shame, sleep disturbances, mood instability, and fear of judgment. Several maintained a socially successful exterior while privately struggling with mental health challenges.

4.4. Stigma and Secrecy

Dependency remains heavily stigmatized. Users feared family rejection, professional consequences, social exclusion, and being labeled as addicts. This stigma contributed to delayed help-seeking and emotional isolation.

4.5. Quality of Life

Although initial use may enhance sociability and confidence, prolonged use negatively impacts interpersonal relationships, occupational functioning, financial stability, emotional well-being, and family dynamics. The gap between public image and private suffering, significantly reduces overall quality of life.

5. Value of the Study and Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that Albania is currently experiencing a complex and gradual transition regarding cocaine use, particularly among younger generations and socially active urban populations. While cocaine continues to be officially framed as an illicit and dangerous substance, its symbolic meaning within some social environments appears to be changing. In many nightlife settings, among certain professional circles, and within highly image-oriented youth cultures, cocaine is increasingly associated with confidence, prestige, social influence, and modernity.

This transformation mirrors broader international trends documented in sociological and public health research. In many Western societies, cocaine has progressively shifted from being viewed exclusively as a “hard drug” linked to marginalization toward becoming integrated into recreational and socially functional environments (Duff, 2008; Pennay & Measham, 2016). Albania appears to be following a similar trajectory, although within a unique post-transitional social context shaped by migration, economic instability, globalization, and rapid digitalization.

One of the most important findings emerging from this study is the contradiction between normalization and stigma. “Everybody uses cocaine doctor”-are the words the patients describe the Albanian reality... While recreational cocaine use may be tolerated, hidden, or even admired within some environments, addiction itself remains deeply condemned. This creates what many participants described as a “double life.” Users may feel socially accepted when using cocaine recreationally, yet simultaneously fear becoming publicly associated with addiction.

This contradiction has major psychosocial implications. Individuals often attempt to preserve a socially successful image while privately experiencing emotional distress, shame, sleep disturbances, anxiety, irritability, and identity insecurity. Several participants described constantly managing appearances in order to avoid judgment from family, employers, or society. In Albania, where family reputation and social image remain highly valued, this pressure can become psychologically exhausting.

The findings also suggest that cocaine use among some young Albanians is connected not only to pleasure-seeking, but also to emotional coping and social adaptation. Participants frequently described cocaine as increasing confidence, reducing insecurity, facilitating communication, and helping individuals feel more socially accepted. Such motivations are particularly important in highly competitive urban environments where young adults face increasing pressure regarding appearance, professional achievement, financial success, and social status.

The influence of globalization and digital media should not be underestimated. Young Albanians today are constantly exposed to international content through social media platforms, music culture, influencer lifestyles, and online entertainment. Cocaine is often indirectly presented within these spaces as glamorous, luxurious, or socially desirable. This repeated exposure gradually alters public perception and may contribute to reduced risk awareness.

Music trends deserve particular attention in the Albanian context. Participants repeatedly referred to international and regional music in which cocaine is casually referenced as part of nightlife culture, wealth, and power. Such representations contribute to symbolic normalization, particularly among adolescents and young adults who increasingly consume digital content as part of identity formation.

Another important issue emerging from the findings is the rise of what may be described as “functional cocaine use.” Unlike traditional stereotypes of addiction associated with visible social deterioration, many cocaine users today maintain employment, academic achievement, social relationships, and outward functionality. This creates the illusion that cocaine use is harmless or manageable. However, beneath this appearance, many users reported emotional instability, sleep problems, impulsivity, and deteriorating mental health.

Healthcare professionals express increasing concern regarding hidden stimulant use among socially functional individuals. Many patients seek help for anxiety, insomnia, panic symptoms, emotional exhaustion, or depressive episodes without initially disclosing cocaine use due to shame or fear of stigma. This complicates diagnosis and delays appropriate intervention.

The study also highlights significant gender dimensions. Male participants often associated cocaine with confidence, masculinity, dominance, competitiveness, and nightlife performance. Female participants more frequently described cocaine use in relation to emotional pressure, relational insecurity, and coping with stress. These findings suggest that psychosocial prevention strategies should incorporate gender-sensitive approaches.

The Albanian context itself plays a central role in understanding these evolving patterns. Albania remains a society in rapid transition, balancing traditional collectivistic values with increasing exposure to Western individualism and consumer culture. Young people are growing up in environments where social image, financial success, and online visibility are increasingly emphasized. Cocaine may therefore become symbolically connected to achievement, status, and belonging.

At the same time, many Albanian young adults experience uncertainty regarding employment opportunities, migration, economic stability, and future expectations. Psychosocial stress, emotional

insecurity, and identity fragmentation may increase vulnerability to experimentation and occasional stimulant use. Cocaine may temporarily function as an emotional escape or a tool for social adaptation.

Importantly, the findings demonstrate that criminalization alone cannot adequately address these realities. Excessively punitive approaches may reinforce secrecy, stigma, and delayed treatment-seeking. Individuals who fear judgment or legal consequences are less likely to access psychological support or addiction services.

However, complete normalization also carries serious risks. Reducing perceived harm, may increase experimentation among adolescents and socially vulnerable populations. Public health approaches must therefore balance prevention, education, psychosocial support, and harm reduction without minimizing the dangers associated with stimulant use.

Finally, this study reinforces the importance of understanding cocaine use through a biopsychosocial lens. Cocaine use is not simply a pharmacological behavior. It is deeply connected to identity, emotional regulation, peer influence, socioeconomic conditions, media exposure, mental health, and social aspiration. Effective interventions must therefore move beyond simplistic moral narratives and address the broader psychosocial realities shaping substance use in Albania.

6. Policy Implications and Solution Approach

The changing landscape of cocaine use in Albania requires multidimensional, evidence-based, and culturally sensitive policy responses. Traditional punitive strategies alone, are insufficient to address the psychosocial realities emerging among younger generations. Prevention and intervention efforts must increasingly recognize the interaction between mental health, identity, social pressure, stigma, and substance use.

6.1. Strengthening Prevention Programs

Prevention strategies in Albania should move beyond fear-based campaigns focused exclusively on criminality. While legal awareness remains important, prevention programs should also address the emotional, psychological, and social factors contributing to experimentation.

Educational initiatives should begin early within schools and universities and include:

- Emotional regulation skills
- Mental health literacy
- Media literacy
- Peer pressure awareness
- Self-esteem development
- Stress management strategies
- Healthy coping mechanisms

Young people should be encouraged to critically analyze the glamorization of cocaine within social media, music culture, and digital entertainment. Prevention programs should additionally involve parents, teachers, psychologists, and community organizations in order to strengthen protective social environments.

6.2. Expanding Mental Health and Harm Reduction Services

One of the most urgent needs identified by this study is the expansion of accessible psychosocial and mental health services for adolescents and young adults.

Many participants described emotional distress, anxiety, insomnia, insecurity, and shame associated with cocaine use, yet avoided seeking help due to stigma. Mental health and addiction services should therefore become more accessible, confidential, youth-friendly, and nonjudgmental.

Harm reduction approaches should include:

- Early psychological intervention
- Counseling services
- Community mental health programs
- Crisis support services
- Psychotherapy access
- Integrated addiction treatment
- Family counseling

Healthcare systems should increasingly recognize stimulant use disorders as complex biopsychosocial conditions requiring multidisciplinary care.

6.3. Reducing Addiction Stigma

Stigma remains one of the greatest barriers preventing individuals from accessing treatment in Albania. Public discourse often frames addiction as weakness, irresponsibility, or moral failure, increasing shame and secrecy.

National anti-stigma campaigns are urgently needed in order to:

- Promote understanding of addiction as a health condition
- Reduce fear surrounding treatment-seeking
- Encourage open discussion regarding mental health
- Improve social reintegration opportunities
- Challenge stereotypes surrounding substance users

Media campaigns should involve healthcare professionals, psychologists, educators, public figures, and individuals with lived experience in order to humanize addiction and promote empathy.

6.4. Training Healthcare and Educational Professionals

Healthcare professionals in Albania require specialized training regarding stimulant-related disorders, trauma-informed care, motivational interviewing, and psychosocial intervention strategies.

General practitioners, psychiatrists, psychologists, emergency physicians, school counselors, and social workers should receive additional education regarding:

- Early identification of stimulant use

- Hidden functional addiction
- Mental health comorbidities
- Adolescent psychosocial vulnerability
- Nonjudgmental communication
- Crisis management

Educational institutions should also strengthen school psychology services and improve collaboration between healthcare and educational sectors.

6.5. Improving Research and Monitoring Systems

Research regarding cocaine use in Albania remains limited. More evidence-based studies are necessary in order to understand:

- Prevalence trends
- Youth perceptions and behaviors
- Media influence
- Psychosocial motivations for use
- Mental health consequences
- Gender-related differences
- Treatment outcomes
- Regional disparities

Longitudinal research would help policymakers better understand how changing cultural attitudes influence future patterns of cocaine use.

6.6. Community-Based and Family Interventions

Because Albanian society remains strongly family-oriented, prevention and intervention strategies should incorporate family-based approaches.

Parents often lack accurate information regarding modern stimulant use patterns, nightlife culture, social media influence, and emotional vulnerability among adolescents. Educational workshops and community programs may improve communication between parents and young people while strengthening emotional support systems.

Community centers, youth organizations, and universities should additionally provide safe environments where young people can discuss emotional pressure, identity struggles, mental health, and substance-related risks without fear of judgment.

6.7. Policy Balance Between Criminalization and Public Health

Finally, Albania faces the challenge of balancing law enforcement with public health responses.

Completely punitive approaches may reinforce secrecy and social exclusion, while excessive normalization may reduce perceived risk and increase experimentation. Policies should therefore aim to:

- Maintain legal protection against trafficking and organized crime
- Promote treatment instead of punishment for vulnerable users
- Expand psychosocial support services
- Improve rehabilitation opportunities
- Encourage early intervention
- Strengthen public mental health infrastructure

Balanced strategies recognizing both the risks of cocaine use and the psychosocial realities driving experimentation are more likely to produce long-term public health benefits.

7. Conclusion

Cocaine use in Albania reflects a complex interplay of normalization and criminalization, social aspiration, and identity formation. While some youth experience temporary social benefits, prolonged use often results in significant psychological and social harm. A human-centered, psychosocially informed approach, integrating prevention, harm reduction, mental health care, and anti-stigma interventions is essential for addressing evolving patterns of cocaine use.

Acknowledgement

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to all individuals who struggle and fight every day with substance use disorder. Their strength, resilience, and humanity inspired this work, and is dedicated to them.

References

- Aldridge, J., Measham, F., & Parker, H. (2013). *Illegal Leisure*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315812441>
- Chung, D. (2017). The Big Five Social System Traits as the Source of Personality Traits, MBTI, Social Styles, Personality Disorders, and Cultures. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(9), 269–295. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2017.59019>
- Corrigan, P., Schomerus, G., Shuman, V., Kraus, D., Perlick, D., Harnish, A., Kulesza, M., Kane-Willis, K., Qin, S., & Smelson, D. (2017). Developing a research agenda for understanding the stigma of addictions Part I: Lessons from the Mental Health Stigma Literature. *The American Journal on Addictions*, 26(1), 59–66. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajad.12458>
- Denis-Lalonde, D., Lind, C., & Estefan, A. (2019). Beyond the Buzzword: A Concept Analysis of Harm Reduction. *Research and Theory for Nursing Practice*, 33(4), 310–323. <https://doi.org/10.1891/1541-6577.33.4.310>
- Duff, C. (2005). Party drugs and party people: Examining the ‘normalization’ of recreational drug use in Melbourne, Australia. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 16(3), 161–170. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2005.02.001>
- Duff, C. (2008). The pleasure in context. *International Journal of Drug Policy, Pleasure and Drugs*, 19(5), 384–392. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2007.07.003>
- European Union Drugs Agency. (2025). *European drug report 2025*. Publications Office. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2810/3504283>

- Illner, M. (1998). The Changing Quality of Life in a Post-Communist Country: The Case of Czech Republic. *Social Indicators Research*, 43(1), 141–170. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1006822726111>
- Laudet, A. B. (2011). The Case for Considering Quality of Life in Addiction Research and Clinical Practice. *Addiction Science & Clinical Practice*, 6(1), 44.
- Levine, H. G. (2009). Review of “The Globalisation of Addiction: A Study in Poverty of the Spirit” by Bruce K. Alexander. *Harm Reduction Journal*, 6, 12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1477-7517-6-12>
- Milliken, A. L., Collamore, K. O., & Ryan-Pettes, S. R. (2025). Quality of life measures in treatment for active substance misuse: A scoping review. *Quality of Life Research*, 34(12), 3407–3424. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11136-025-04072-0>
- Pennay, A. E., & Measham, F. C. (2016). The normalisation thesis – 20 years later. *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*, 23(3), 187–189. <https://doi.org/10.3109/09687637.2016.1173649>
- Volkow, N. D., & Boyle, M. (2018). Neuroscience of Addiction: Relevance to Prevention and Treatment. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 175(8), 729–740. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2018.17101174>