



Substance Use on Campus: How Do You Think It Affects Students' Mental Health?

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Background

Poor mental health exists on a spectrum of negative psychological symptoms, physical symptoms, and mental illnesses.

In 2019, the American College Association National College Assessment found that 50.7% (ACHA, 2019) of college students aged 18 through 23 (ACHA, 2019) had felt overwhelming anxiety within the past year.

Alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana have all previously been associated with greater risk for poor mental health among college students (Jao et al., 2019).

One study found that 39.5% of adults with a major depressive episode (MDE) were more likely to have used an illicit drug compared to 17.7% of adults without a MDE (SAMHSA, 2019).

Gaps in research exist regarding college students' perception of how substance use may affect poor mental health among their peers.

Objectives

- To assess UCSD students' perceptions regarding college students' attitudes and behaviors around substance use and its effects on mental health.
- To examine what students perceive to be the influencing factors that contribute to the use of alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, and MDMA.

Methods

We conducted a cross-sectional study among 129 college students who attend UC San Diego.

Study participants were recruited via various online social media platforms and an email sent to public health students between late April to early May of 2020.

Study participants completed a 16-item online survey.

Our instrument measured student perceptions of substance use and mental health among college students.

Results

Table 1. Participant characteristics (N=129)	
Sex	
Female	102 (79%)
Male	26 (20%)
Other	1 (1%)
Age	
18-20	56 (43%)
21-23	70 (54%)
24-26	3 (3%)
Year in College	
1st year	16 (12%)
2nd year	26 (20%)
3rd year	24 (19%)
4th year	56 (43%)
5th year + more	6 (5%)
Graduate	1 (1%)
Field of Study	
Public Health	31 (24%)
STEM	46 (36%)
Social Sciences	45 (35%)
Art and Humanities	5 (4%)
Undeclared	0 (0%)
Other	2 (1%)

Figure 1. Students' perceptions of the most commonly used substances

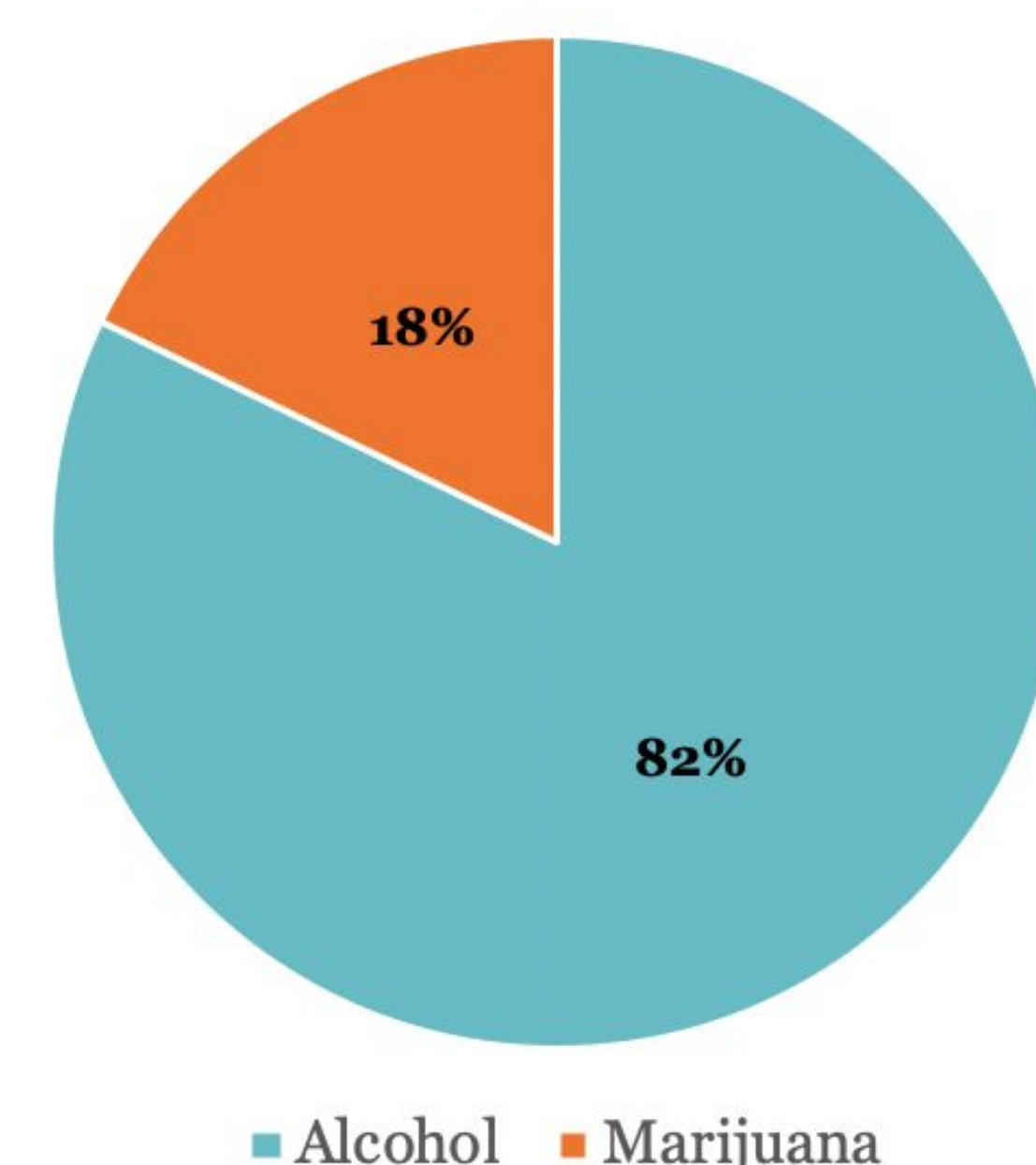


Figure 2. Students' perceptions of the effect of substances on overall mental health

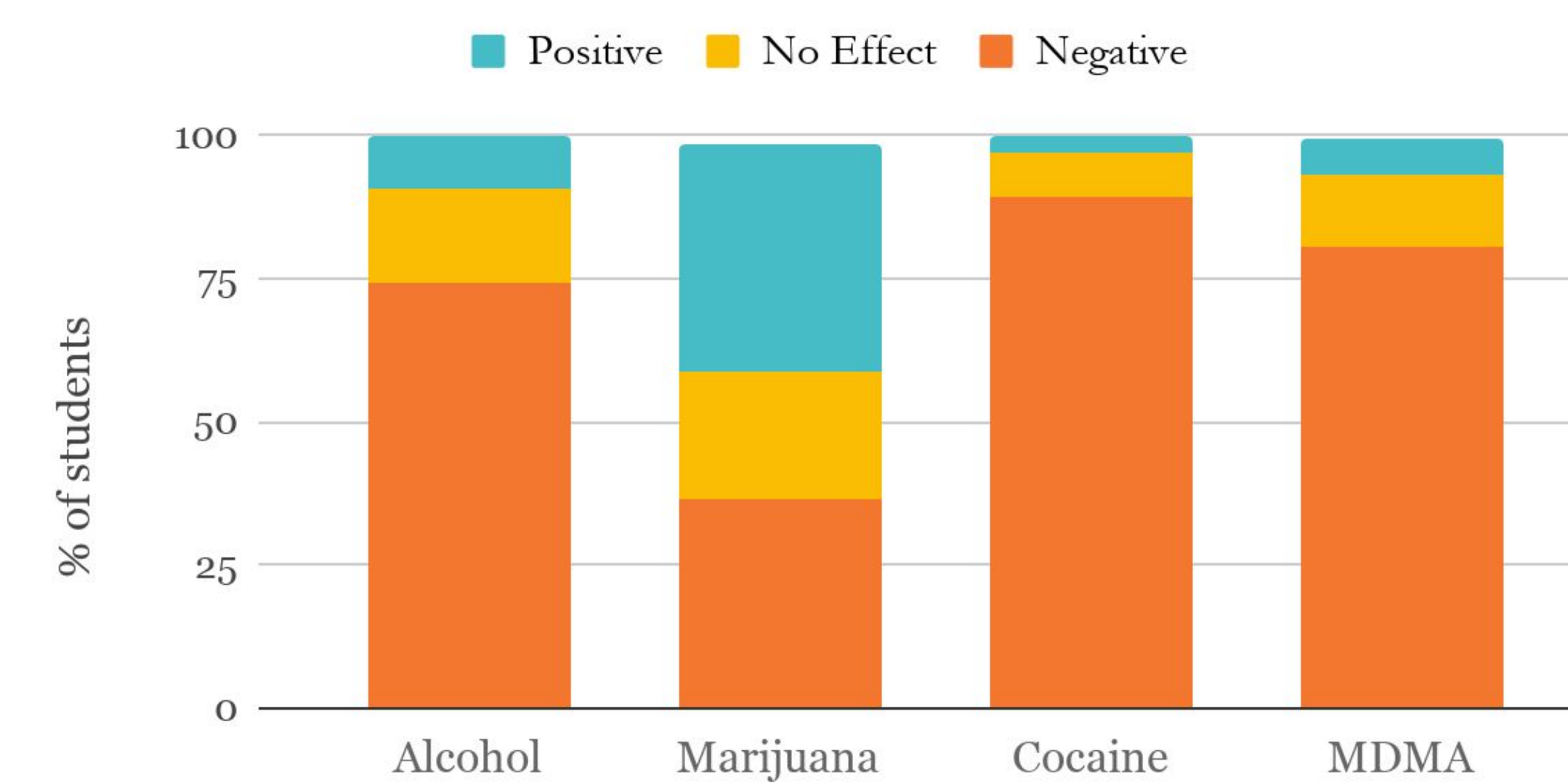


Figure 3. Percentage of students who agree that substances contribute to an increase in feeling down or sad

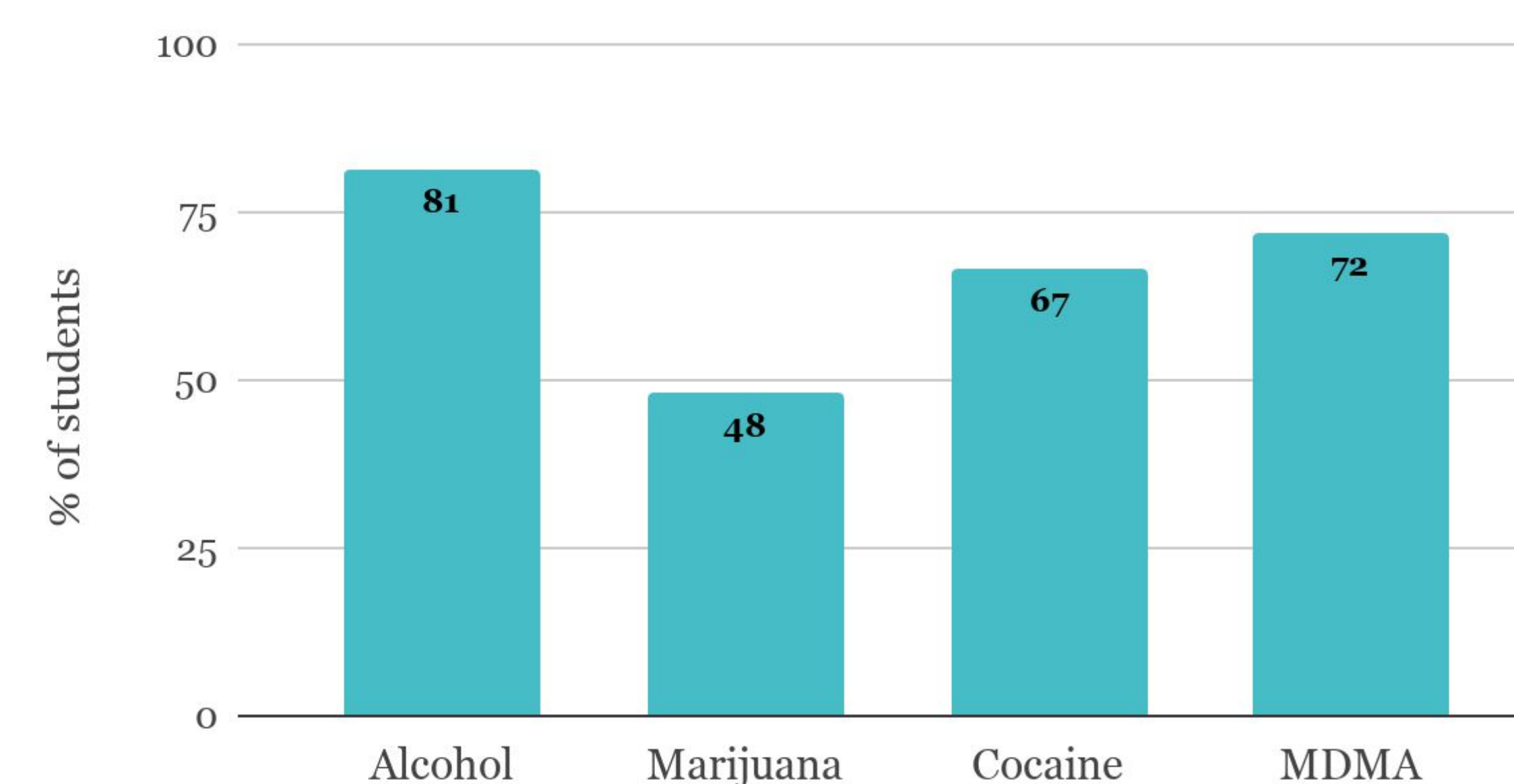
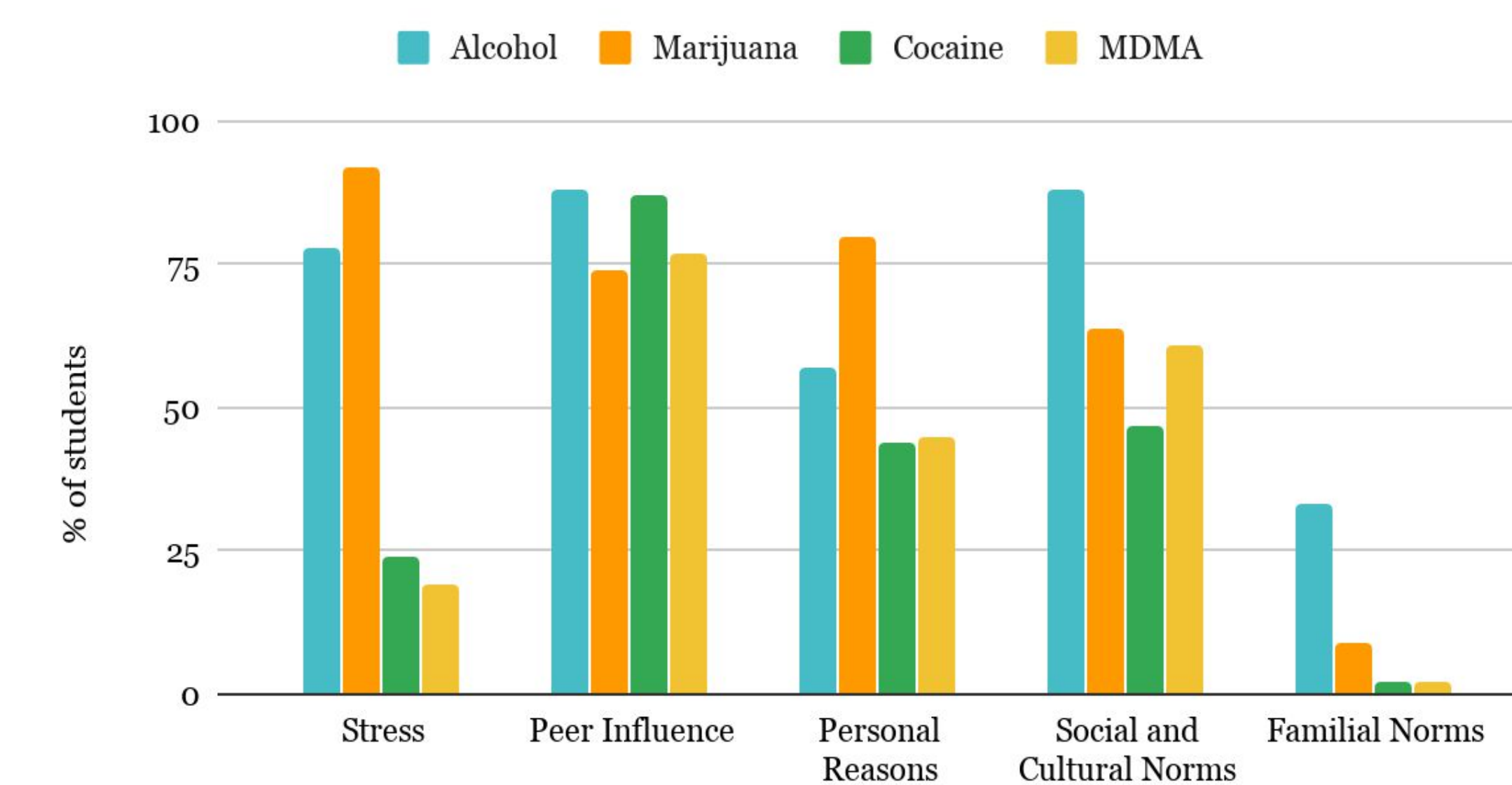


Figure 4. Students' perceptions of influencing factors that contribute to the use of substances



Alcohol use was perceived to be most susceptible to the factors of peer influence, social and cultural norms, and familial norms.

Conclusions

Alcohol, cocaine, and MDMA were perceived to have negative effects on college students' mental health.

Alcohol was perceived to be the main substance that contributes to students feeling down. Cocaine was perceived to be the main substance that contributes to poorer overall mental health.

Students had mixed perceptions about whether marijuana would produce positive or negative effects.

Peer influence was perceived to greatly influence the use of all four substances.

Future Directions

These findings support the expansion of mental health resources on college campuses to promote healthy lifestyle habits and be more inclusive of dual treatment for substance use.

Future research should explore students' perceptions of (1) marijuana and how they think it affects mental health, and (2) what initiatives will help reduce substance use among their peers.

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