

# An evaluation of substance usage by Faculty of Medical Sciences students during the COVID – 19 Pandemic

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## Introduction

The stress from social isolation and other COVID-19 related safety measures have left individuals who misuse/abuse drugs particularly vulnerable. The medical student population, facing stress, anxiety and increased fear of the pandemic, is among those vulnerable groups. With knowledge of the consequences of excessive and prolonged substance use, like health issues, suicidal ideations and unsafe sexual activity, this research project sought to investigate the influence of the pandemic on the already high prevalence of substance use among medical students to allow for appropriate intervention.

## Objective

The aim of this project was to determine the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the prevalence of substance usage among FMS students of UWI STA, with the following objectives:

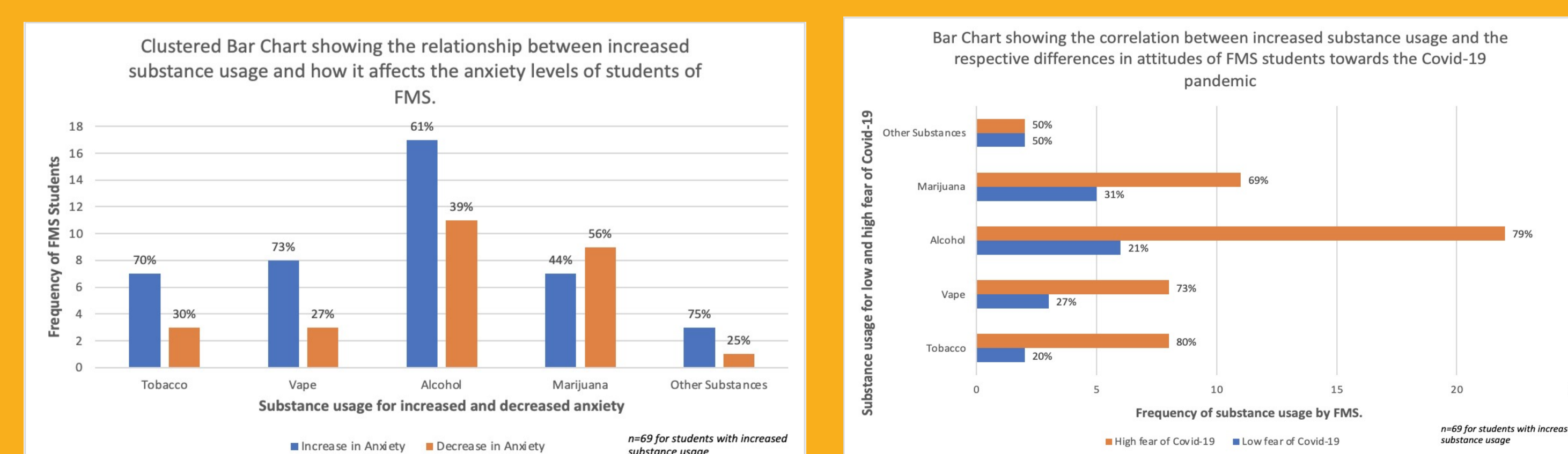
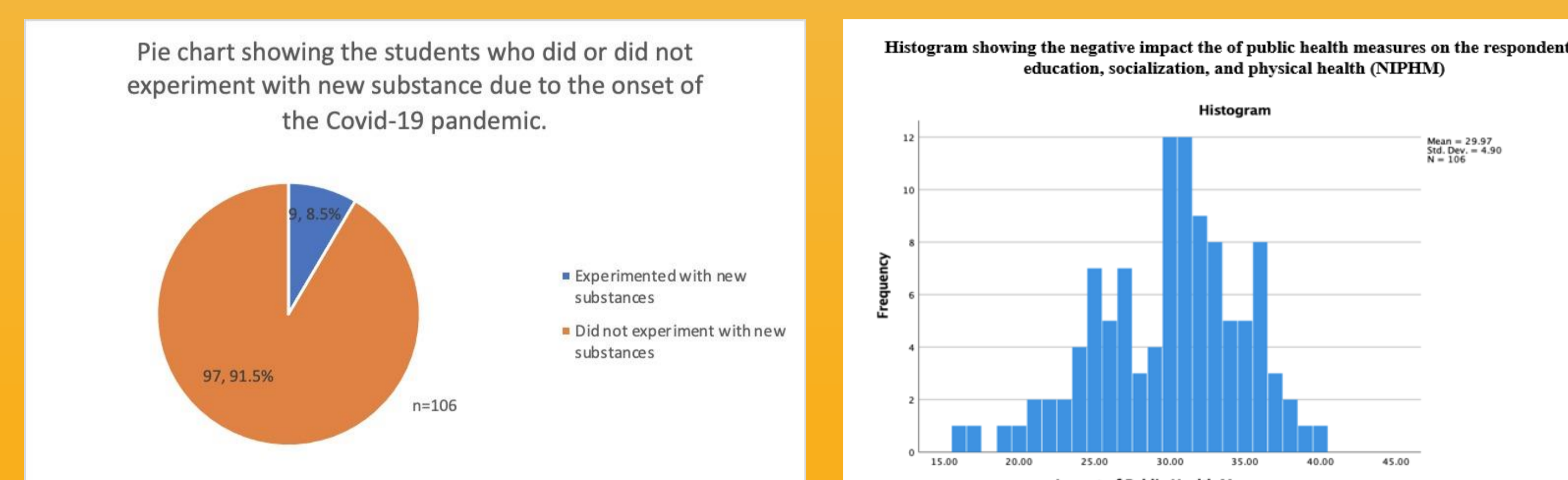
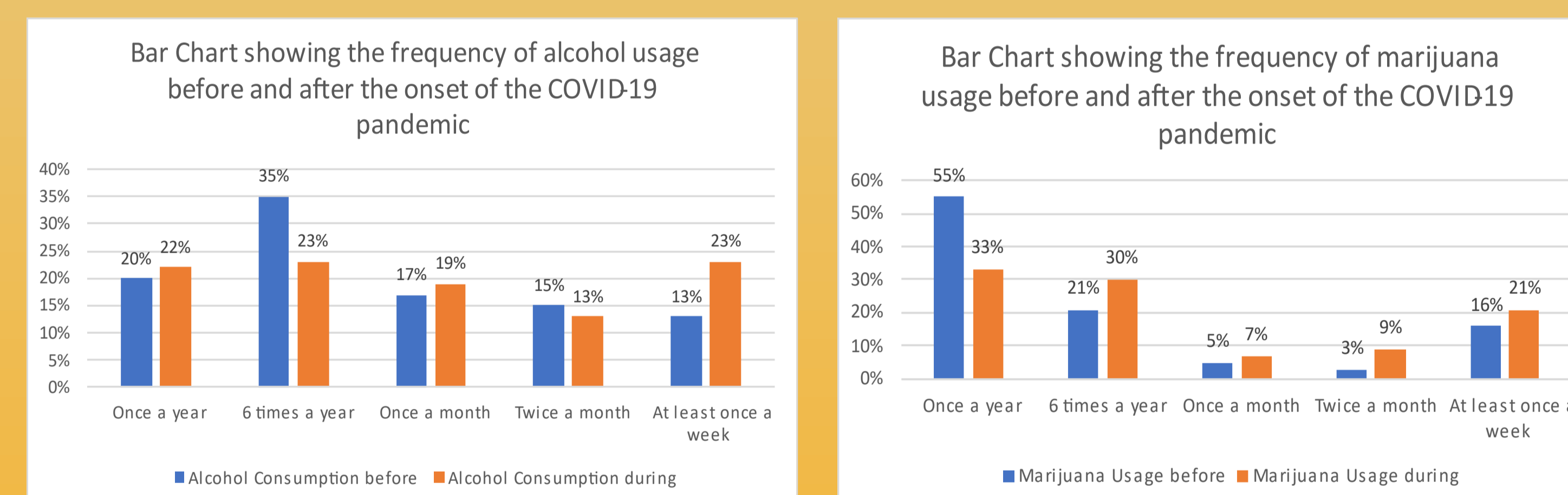
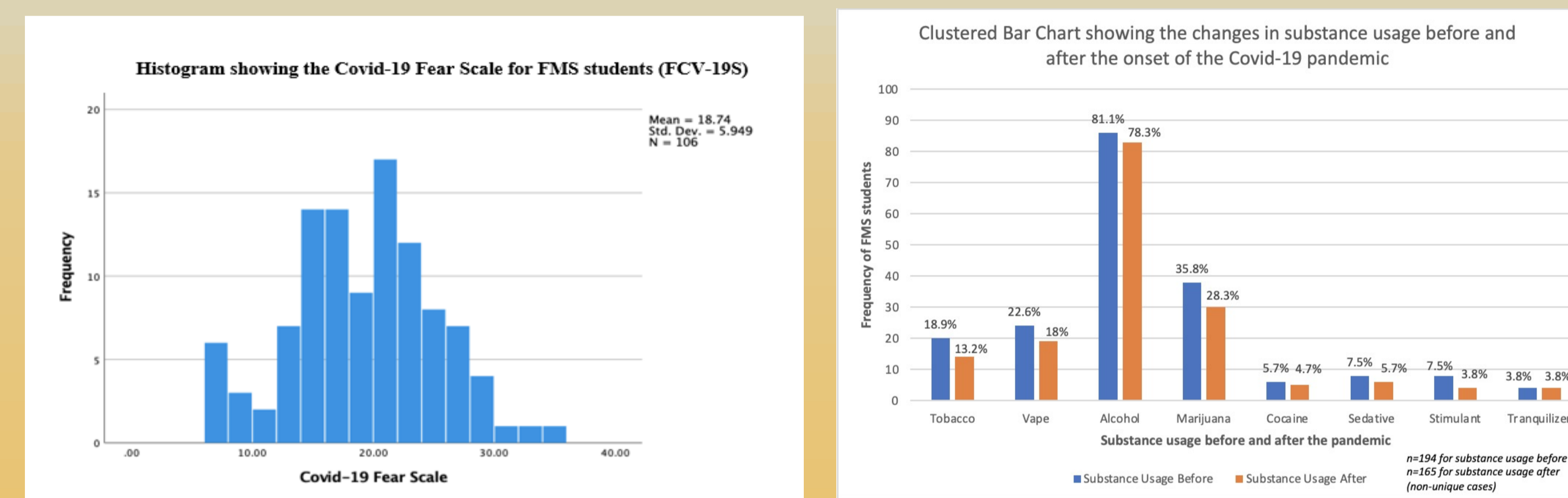
1. To compare the prevalence of substance usage by FMS students before and during the pandemic.
2. To determine the frequency and types of substance used by FMS students before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. To determine the factors related to the COVID-19 pandemic that influence substance usage among FMS students during the pandemic period.

## Methodology

A cross sectional study with descriptive analysis was carried out to determine whether or not any changes in drug usage among FMS students occurred after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was achieved by comparing frequencies, patterns and reasons for drug usage. The study population included students from FMS currently in years 2-5 and required a sample population of 336 FMS students.

Data was collected via an online questionnaire which allowed collection of both quantitative and qualitative data through use of closed-ended and open-ended questions. The FCV-19S and DeNovo NIPHM scale were adapted to assess impact of the pandemic and associated public health measures on students. SPSS version 27 was used to obtain frequency analyses and tests of association. The data was then presented by use of graphs and charts.

## Results



## Discussion

- Before the onset of the pandemic, alcohol (81.1%) and marijuana (35.8%) were the most used substances by medical students of UWI STA due to its availability.
- As a result of the COVID-19 counteractive measures and its associated negative emotions, it was hypothesized that more students would have used substances with the onset of the pandemic. In this study, however, a slight decrease in prevalence was observed but there was an increase in the frequency of use. A small percentage of students experimented with new substances.
- Alcohol and marijuana were once again the most prevalent substances used during the pandemic with a decrease to 78.3% and 28.3% respectively owing to the stringent restrictions implemented to combat surges in COVID-19 cases.
- There was an increased frequency of alcohol consumption by 10% and marijuana by 5%.
- 73% and 70% of respondents who reported an increase in their nicotine usage by vape and cigarette respectively also reported higher levels of anxiety.
- 50.9% were highly affected by the Public Health measures which suggests that these mitigation methods have negatively impacted their education, socialization and overall health.
- High fear of COVID-19 was expected to cause an increase in substance usage, particularly alcohol and marijuana (79% and 69% respectively) while 30% of students described their increased substance usage as a stress-coping mechanism.

## Conclusion

Despite an increase in the frequency of substance usage, there was an overall reduction in the prevalence with marijuana and alcohol being the most commonly used. Substance abuse increased due to factors such as a worsened mental health as well as an increase in the fear of covid-19. Majority of students reported that they used such substances as means of relaxation or to cope with stress involving academics or home life

## References

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