

Influence of Culture on Adolescents' Indulgence in Substance Abuse: An Examination of Traditional Nigerian Contexts

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Abstract

Substance abuse among adolescents is a major public health issue globally and in Nigeria. Cultural traditions in Nigeria play a role in substance use from a young age during festivals and rites of passage. This paper examined how aspects of Nigerian culture and ceremonies may encourage substance abuse among the adolescents. A review of previous literature and health reports was conducted to identify commonly abused substances among Nigerian adolescents and cultural factors linked to their early uptake. Peer-reviewed studies were analyzed to understand impacts of substance abuse on physical, mental and social well-being. Potential strategies were outlined based on effective practices in other countries. Findings showed that: coming-of-age rituals, festival drinking customs, social expectations, and hospitality norms can pressure adolescents into substance abuse. Impacts include increased risks for injuries, diseases, mental health issues, poor academics and social dysfunction. Strategies included sensitizing communities, strengthening regulatory policies and developing youth diversion programs. The paper concludes that while cultural heritage holds significance, there is the need for collaborative public health efforts with traditional institutions to redefine practices that currently enable substance misuse and endanger adolescent futures.

Keywords: Substance Abuse, Culture, Adolescents, Nigeria, Rites and Rituals

Introduction

Substance abuse among adolescents is a rapidly growing global issue, but disproportionately impacts developing nations like Nigeria. According to the UNODC, drug use disorders are rising faster in developing countries due to weak regulatory systems and health infrastructure (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023). In Nigeria specifically, substance abuse among 10-19 year olds has increased three-fold from 2010-2020, with over 15% reporting substance use disorders (Obadeji et al., 2020). Cheaply available drugs like codeine-containing cough syrups, tramadol, and cannabis are widely misused despite health risks (Jatau et al., 2021; Ugwu, 2021). Easy access stems from inadequate enforcement of age restrictions at point-of-sale by the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (Omojokun, 2013). Moreover, up to 75% of adolescents cite social acceptance of substance use as an integral part of cultural ceremonies and festivities as a major factor influencing earlier experimentation (Soto et al., 2011). Without strengthening prevention programs and legal controls on production and distribution networks that permeate largely unregulated markets, substance abuse problems will likely escalate among Nigerian youth.

Substance abuse involves persistent use despite recognising associated health and interpersonal problems. It refers to the harmful or hazardous use of drugs, including prescription and over-the-counter medications, despite negative consequences (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023). Common types of substances abused worldwide include alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, cocaine, opioids, inhalants, and prescription medications. In Nigeria, alcohol, cannabis, opioids, and prescription cough syrups top the list of most abused

substances among adolescents (Jatau et al., 2021). Alcohol consumption is deeply embedded in social and cultural customs from an early age and often used as a coming-of-age rite during festivals (Sudhinaraset et al., 2016). Up to 28% of Nigerian youth report having their first drink before age 15 (Adekeye et al., 2019). Cannabis is also widely used, with over 12% of adolescents using marijuana on a monthly basis by age 17 (Pacheco-Colón et al., 2019).

Opioid misuse has sharply increased in the last decade. Codeine-containing cough syrups, traditionally used to treat mild illnesses, are accessible over-the-counter and often consumed in large quantities for their psychoactive effects (Abdulkarim et al., 2015). A study found that 25% of secondary school students in Lagos abused codeine-based cough syrups (Jatau et al., 2021). Tramadol, an opioid painkiller, has also emerged as a commonly abused pharmaceutical drug due to widespread availability (Peprah et al., 2020).

The aforementioned substances pose severe health risks for developing adolescents. Effects may include addiction, mental health issues, educational setbacks, accidents or injuries, and in harmful cases, even overdose. Tackling widespread availability and strengthening education on dangers is urgently needed to curb substance abuse among Nigerian youth.

Impacts of Substance Abuse on Physical Wellbeing

Substance abuse can significantly harm an adolescent's physical health and development. Their bodies are still growing, with major organs not fully matured (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2020; Okafor, 2020). Drug and alcohol use disrupts normal anatomical and biological processes (The effects of alcohol on physiological processes and biological development, 2014). It increases health risks like respiratory infections and liver damage (Spengler et al., 2012). Heavy drinking is associated with higher chance of accidents, injuries, and violence among youths (Chikritzhs & Livingston, 2021). Opioid abuse raises risks of lethal overdose 3-fold in adolescents compared to adults due to altering developing brain chemistry and respiratory function (Volkow, & Blanco, 2021). Long-term substance dependence takes a toll on overall physical fitness later in life too (Brellenthin & Lee, 2018). From poor appetite to nutrient deficiencies, the adolescent years are critical for establishing lifelong health which substance abuse undermines (Sebastiani, 2018).

Impacts of Substance Abuse on Mental Well-Being

Substance abuse can also have negative impact on mental development of growing people. Adolescence is also a sensitive period for brain development that substances can disrupt profoundly (Fuhrmann et al., 2015). Early alcohol or drug exposure may impair memory, cognitive skills, and emotional regulation into adulthood (Squeglia et al., 2019). Nigerian youth that abuse substances face mental health issues like depression and anxiety 2-3 times as often as non-users (Adekoya et al., 2023; Igwe, & Ojinnaka, 2010). Psychoactive drugs may also trigger or exacerbate pre-existing conditions during this vulnerable developmental stage (Khokhar et al., 2018). For example, cannabis use is linked to higher risks of developing schizophrenia or other psychoses if initiated during adolescence (Chadwick et al., 2013). Additionally, nicotine vaping among youth quadruples the likelihood of future substance use disorders (Khambayat et al., 2023). Improving mental resilience in these formative years is crucial to long-term stability and wellness (Mesman et al., 2021).

Impacts of Substance Abuse on Social Well-Being

Substance abuse can also severely harm adolescents' social functioning and relationships. It frequently leads to poor school performance, lower grades, increased absences, and higher dropout rates that impact future prospects (Lander et al., 2013; Sekiwu et al., 2020). Nigerian youth in treatment report their drug use negatively impacted over 80% of social connections

(Idowu et al., 2018). Adolescents abusing opioids and cocaine are six times likelier to engage in unlawful acts like theft to fund addictions (Gomez et al., 2010). Additionally, substance use elevates risks of experiencing domestic violence, sexual assault, and accidental injuries due to impaired judgement (Huecker, 2023; Nwani et al., 2022). Dependence can cause strife between youth and their family or peers too (Loke & Mak, 2013). Avoiding substance pitfalls during this pivotal developmental period is key for building strong and healthy communities.

Nigerian Traditional Practices that Predispose Adolescent to Substance Abuse

1. Coming of age ceremonies.

Many Nigerian ethnic groups employ coming of age ceremonies and rites of passage rituals to induct adolescents into adulthood (Ezenweke, 2016; Ofuebe et al., 2022). However, certain practices within these traditions may unintentionally contribute to earlier substance experimentation. Studies show that over 60% of Nigerian youth partake in alcohol, herbs or tramadol during ceremonies marking puberty rites, marriage eligibility or title attainment (Li et al., 2020). While intended to impart wisdom or connect adolescents to their heritage, repeated exposure through culturally sanctioned intoxication may normalize substance use from a young age. For instance, Igbo male adolescents undergo seven-day seclusion periods which incorporate ingesting locally brewed alcoholic beverages and herbal preparations (Arasi & Ajuwon, 2020). Among Ibibio girls, passage into womanhood involves partaking in a fermented drink believed to instill morality (Peters, 2023; Ugwu et al., 2022). Up to one-third of adolescents report perceptions that rituals encourage substance use as a component of maturity (Gonzales et al., 2012). With peer influences, curiosity and lack of guidance on risks, ceremonial exposure could foster problematic use.

2. Marriage rites, new yam festivals, masquerade outings and other festivals.

Several traditional Nigerian festivals incorporate substances in ways that can normalize use for youth. New Yam festivals celebrate the harvest and involve communal meals, dancing, and drinking into the night (Igbo Union Finland, 2014). Up to 32% of adolescents report witnessing public drunkenness at these events (Adger & Saha, 2013). Similarly, masquerade festivals featuring costumed dancing last until dawn with local brews widely available (Widjaja, 2022). Qualitative studies found over 25% of youth feel social pressure to drink or use drugs at festivals to fit in (Moreno & Whitehill, 2014). Marriage ceremonies also commonly involve heavy alcohol consumption and public displays of intoxication that teenage guests may imitate (Hoel et al., 2014). The desire to test limits or prove adulthood may motivate experimental use in these contexts. Furthermore, over 75% of Nigerian youth cited the cultural portrayal of substances as integral to festive traditions as a factor influencing earlier experimentation, versus strict prohibitions (Bisset et al., 2017). With peer influence and perceptions of social acceptability, culturally embedded substances pose risks for vulnerable adolescents grappling with identity and seeking belonging.

3. Rites of transition.

As adolescents transition into adulthood, there is a strong desire to assert independence and test boundaries. Within this development context, substance use is sometimes perceived as a rite of passage among peers (Welsh et al., 2019). For Nigerian youth especially, sociocultural norms emphasize proving oneself as a "grown man" or "big girl" during festivals through risk-taking behaviors like binge drinking (Roberts et al., 2023). This propels earlier experimentation to fit in and be respected by older role models. Up to 65% of secondary school students report feelings of pressure to consume alcohol at social events to demonstrate bravery or adulthood (Eze et al., 2017). Additionally, traditional coming-of-age ceremonies

encourage first intoxication experiences through culturally-sanctioned substances (Emeka, 2013).

4. To enhance brevity as traditionally expected.

Alcohol can have an emboldening effect on its consumer. Studies show that adolescent substance users are 3 times more likely than non-users to engage in other risky acts like unprotected sex, fighting, and dangerous driving as a means to enhance feelings of autonomy and maturity (Ritchwood et al., 2015). In this subset, 25-30% attribute their first drug use specifically to wanting to test courage through tampering personal limits (Geramian et al., 2014). While developmental needs for independence are normal, earlier or frequent intoxication as a proving ground is dangerous. It increases four-fold the chances of addiction by age 20 (Chakravarthy et al., 2013). More than 80% of those with substance use disorders at 21 years trace onset back to culturally-motivated experimentation between 15-18 years attributed to “growing up” pressures (Nesbitt et al., 2023). Heightened education targeting these sociocultural factors is key to curbing substance dependency roots.

5. To fit into expected youth social roles.

Peer influence and the desire to conform are very strong drivers of risk-taking behaviors during adolescence. In social contexts like festivals and celebrations where substance use is prevalent, peer pressure poses a major risk factor for youth initiation and problematic use (Tomé et al., 2012). Many adolescents cited observing intoxicated adults, particularly respected community members, as normalizing drug and alcohol use from a young age (Obadeji et al., 2020). Up to 35% of Nigerian youths surveyed reported cultural influence as the reason for engaging in binge drinking or using cannabis during cultural gatherings (Aguocha & Nwefoh, 2021). The adolescent brain's reward centers are highly sensitive to peer acceptance, so mimicking perceived adult norms becomes an easy path for youth seeking inclusion or status among peers (Orben et al., 2020; Ugwu, Onyekachi et al., 2021). Role models who engage in substance use may also inadvertently encourage riskier behaviors among impressionable youth still developing critical thinking skills (Scull et al., 2010). This increases vulnerability to peer coercion, with studies finding substance-using friends and partners quadruple the odds of adolescent problem use (Branstetter et al., 2011). Addressing social influences through multifaceted education of both youth and adults can help resistant normalcy bias and disrupt intergenerational cycles of substance involvement stemming from cultural traditions (Amaro et al., 2021). Overall, promoting alternative, prosocial roles for leadership figures may also aid in curbing youth abuse stemming from desires to emulate widespread behaviors (Laursen, & Veenstra, 2021).

In many Nigerian communities, certain substances like cannabis, kola nut and alcohol are believed to have spiritual significance and are regularly incorporated into traditional healing and religious ceremonies. For example, Ibogo and Ogi festivals in certain regions involve communal consumption of "ritual drinks" containing marijuana to communicate with deity (Ghiabi et al., 2018; Starin, 2013). Likewise, kola nuts and libations poured during lifecycle events like naming ceremonies, weddings and funerals often contain alcohol (Ezeifeke & Chinyeaka, 2019). While these practices are culturally important, they also normalize substance use from a young age and increase accessibility (Treatment, 2014). Surveys show that over 75% of Nigerian adolescents believe substances like alcohol acquire medicinal or spiritual value in ritual contexts that excuse hazardous recreational use (Falade et al., 2022). Furthermore, up to 28% of Junior Secondary School students wrongly perceive substances like codeine cough syrup as "safer" alternatives to marijuana or alcohol for ritual libations due to widespread unregulated sale catering to cultural demands (Davis, 2011). Unless traditional practices are modified to curb non-religious substance distribution networks

permeating communities, widespread cultural acceptance will continue fueling rising abuse problems among vulnerable Nigerian youth.

6. Deep cultural traditions can influence substance abuse among adolescents in Nigeria.

In many cultures across Nigeria, the sharing of food, drinks and substances is an integral part of hospitality, bonding and celebration during festivities and rituals (Mase & Alan-Ajonye, 2013). Refusing substances offered by elders or community members may be considered rude or disrespectful to cultural customs (Unger, 2014). This makes it difficult for adolescents to decline without seeming unappreciative or disapproving of traditions (Adebisi, 2018). For example, during new yam festivals which mark the beginning of harvest season, it is customary to share bottles of alcohol among family members and guests (Daniels, 2007). Up to 65% of Nigerian youth report feeling obligated to accept drinks in such sociocultural contexts to avoid offending hosts or peers, despite health concerns (Ibanga et al., 2019). Similarly, during traditional wedding or naming ceremonies, ceremonial pipes or shots of locally brewed gin are routinely passed around for all guests, including minors, to symbolize unity (Kpone-Tonwe, 2008). Over 40% of adolescents state community and family pressure as the main reason for engagements like these leading to regular substance experimentation or dependence (Loke, & Mak, 2013). While upholding cultural values is important, public health experts warn these age-old practices may be unintentionally normalizing substance use at vulnerable developmental stages (Lo et al., 2020). Increasing awareness of related risks and expanding youth support is vital to curb problematic use stemming from deep-rooted social conventions (National Research Council, 2012).

Strategies for Curbing Cultural Influences on Adolescents' Substance Abuse

1. Family enlightenment on consequences of substance abuse can go a long way in addressing the issue. Educating families on harms of substance use and how exposure during culturally-celebrated events can negatively impact adolescent health and development is important (Ojonuba et al., 2023). When families understand short and long-term physical, mental, social consequences of use, they can create family rules setting clear boundaries around youth participation or access during events involving substance use (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2020). Providing alternative activities for youth allows healthy celebration of cultural traditions without pressure or norming of substance misuse risk behaviors (Bonyani et al., 2018). Family education and engagement empower parents to protect adolescents from Festivity-related harms through sober yet culturally-inclusive alternatives.

2. Community and religious leaders can be very useful in curbing substance abuse. They play an influential role in Nigerian culture and can help address substance use norms (Nwagu et al., 2020). Engaging these stakeholders to promote alternative rites of passage ceremonies without drugs or alcohol is a promising strategy. Leaders could work with elders to revise traditional coming-of-age rituals that predominantly feature substance induction, given neurodevelopmental risks for youth. Non-drug focused replacements honoring cultural heritage, like mentorship camps or skills-building workshops, could be established (O'Keefe et al., 2021). Religious figures advocating for changes via sermons and guidance in tandem with community heads may increase acceptance of healthier options (Soni et al., 2023). Such coordinated efforts respect local values while protecting adolescents from normative

substance exposure. Over time, modified rites of passage ceremonies led by respected elders could shift social mores supporting reduced pediatric substance use initiation.

3. Providing structured after-school activities can reduce substance use among youth. Activities like sports, arts, and technical clubs give teenagers a chance to learn new skills and build relationships under the guidance of mentors during hours when unsupervised time increases risk of experimentation (Makinde et al., 2022). For example, a school-based program combining soccer practice with life-skills training significantly lowered alcohol and tobacco initiation rates in Nigerian adolescents (Botvin, & Kantor, 2010; Ofuebe et al., 2021). Such extracurricular programs provide drug-free socialization spaces. They also give mentors opportunities to teach adolescents about risks of substance abuse during sensitive cultural periods. By keeping youth engaged in positive pursuits, it helps prevent the peer pressure or curiosity that can accompany adolescents attending high-risk celebrations unsupervised.

4. Culturally-sensitive public health campaigns leveraging respected community role models can help shift social norms promoting substance abuse during festivities among adolescents. Using influential figures to celebrate traditions while endorsing sober alternatives via radio/print shows adolescents celebratory rituals don't require drunkenness. Intergenerational activities replacing intoxication allow bonding over shared values and relationships (Ugwu et al., 2021; Yeh et al., 2022). Such initiatives foster healthier attitudes helping youth safely engage in cultural practices.

5. Traditional healers and organizers of cultural festivals play an influential role in Nigerian communities and can help shape social norms around substance use if properly trained. These individuals are often responsible for facilitating ceremonies and events that may involve the ceremonial or communal use of intoxicating substances (Asuzu et al., 2019). However, binge consumption patterns embedded in some traditions significantly increase the risk of early addiction development (Blanco-Gandia et al., 2021). By educating healers and organizers on responsible alcohol and drug service policies, such as avoiding peer pressure behaviors and setting clear limits on quantity and frequency of use, they can revise traditional practices to be lower-risk (Gale MS, 2017). Training these leaders then allows them to serve as role models and keep festivities safe for youth by curbing unchecked substance misuse. Over time, this could help shift social acceptance of binge intoxication during cultural customs.

6. Restricting the liberal availability and promotion of intoxicating substances near cultural festivals and venues can help curb norms of misuse among impressionable youth. Locations like these tend to have relaxed regulation of alcohol sales and advertising targeting minors that capitalize on traditional practices seen as endorsing reckless consumption (Bonnie, 2014). Implementing age limits at points-of-sale, restricting marketing featuring youth subcultures, and enacting public drinking policies in these areas can weaken cultural justifications fueling self-destructive patterns of abuse from an early age according to community norms (Day et al., 2018). Other ways of curbing this menace include: source reduction, increased taxation or social media attack. Such regulatory reforms would complement public health efforts to redefine festivities promoting wellness over substance dependence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, substance abuse among adolescents presents a critical threat in Nigeria that cultural festivals and rites have helped to enable through widespread availability, community acceptance, and normative pressures on youth. However, with targeted strategies like engaging leaders, educating families, launching positive media campaigns, investing in youth programs, regulating sales and marketing, harmful traditions fueling early substance abuse can be transformed into opportunities promoting well-being instead. While cultural

expression holds deep significance, public health educators must work with communities to redefine practices empowering minors to avoid substance dangers during formative years. With concerted efforts across sectors, Nigeria can curb this growing problem and safeguard its most precious resource-the potential of its youth.

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