

## **Experiential Narratives of Substance Use by College Students: Implication for Social Workers' Engagement in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions**

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### **Abstract**

Substance use among college students remains a global issue. This negative behavior is often associated with students' poor academic performance, health, and social problems. We endeavored to examine why students in tertiary institutions use substances and the need for social workers' intervention in schools. Data was sourced using focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. Experiences with substance use were sought from 30 undergraduate students and two social work educators at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Themes were developed from the transcripts and quotes were used to relate outstanding points from their responses. Evidence from the narratives showed that students use substances like tobacco, tramadol, cocaine, and other substances as an accepted norm adopted to overcome social, economic, and academic challenges. Peer group influence, place of residence and family structure were some factors found to influence substance use among college students. Strategies put forward by the students to overcome substance use include financial assistance, adequate accommodation with monitoring personnel and introducing extra-curriculum activities in schools. The absence of social workers' involvement in tertiary institutions was observed. We recommend the need for social workers' intervention in higher institutions and their active involvement in substance use concerns in Nigerian higher institutions.

**Keywords:** college students, intervention, social work, substance use, university

### **Introduction**

With the adoption of the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs], the members of the United Nations pledged to "leave no one behind" including persons that use substances (United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs, 2016). Substance use among college students remains a global issue. This negative behavior is often associated with the most pervasive health and social problems in the world; with increasing effects on poor academic performance, risky sexual and psychological behavior, a rise in school dropouts, and youth insurgency among other forms of social unrest (World Health Organization (WHO), 2019). Hence reducing adverse health and social consequences of substance use on students is one major goal of many

Low and Middle-Income Countries (LMIC), Nigeria inclusive (United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC), 2019). This follows from the fact that the substances used by college students have profound consequences on the nation's social and economic advancement (Jatau et al., 2021).

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2018) maintains that substance use is a maladaptive pattern adopted despite knowledge of having a persistent social, psychological or physical problem that is exacerbated by the use in situations that could be hazardous. Revealed statistics have it that an average of 5.6% adults globally used psychoactive substances in 2016, while in 2018 it increased to 14.4% among adults aged 15-64 years (UNODC, 2019; National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 2019). Yet, the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA, 2021) reported that about 40% of Nigerian youths as of 2021 are deeply involved in the use of substances. Based on these reports, our concern as social work educators emerged.

Most substance users are college students who may experience burnout, stress and course overload after an extended period, particularly in times like long holidays, pandemics and strikes. More so, their age range (15-30 years) according to studies is when experimentation, exploration, curiosity and identity search prevails (Ajayi and Somefun, 2020, Dibia et al., 2020). Majority of them may ignorantly depend on substances including tobacco, cocaine and alcohol (Oyenira et al., 2019); when they experience exhaustion, severe depression, lack of motivation with increased absenteeism, school dropout and worst, suicidal thoughts as possible consequences. For instance, some scholars have reported that substance use enables students to escape the harsh realities of their daily activities including their social, educational and emotional imbalance (Ajayi, & Somefun, 2020; Musyoka et al., 2020). Others however stated that it is only temporal (Clarence et al., 2018; Erin et al, 2017). Nevertheless, they easily procure these substances through patent medicine shops, open drug markets, friends, and fellow substance users among others (UNODC, 2019).

Several risk factors have been identified as determinants of substances used among college students, particularly in Nigeria. While Gboyega et al., (2014) posit that parenting style and family structure are major predictors, Anderberg and Dahlberg (2018) reported that gender could be a determinant of substance use. Oyenira, et al. (2019) following Dibia et al., (2020) reported that the need for energy to work for long hours, personality problems owing to socio-economic conditions and socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, independent living on and off-campus environment are major determinants. Regardless of these contentions, various scholars have found that the University system which epitomizes independence and freedom provides a veritable environment for substance use (Musyoka et al., 2020; Okoro and

Lahai, 2021). In such a situation, peer influence could play a vital role in students' substance use (Kelly et al. 2018).

This study is mainly informed by Edwin Sutherland's, 1939 differential association theory. The theory proposes that through interaction with others, individuals learn the values, attitudes, techniques, and motives for negative behavior (Gray et al., 2015). In the process, it is not the amount of exposure to substance use that is important, rather it is the ratio of behavior toward the act that determines whether an individual embraces negative behavior or not (Brookes, 2021). The influence of peer groups becomes particularly pervasive for youths not only from weak parenting and family structure but also from low economic background and the gender of the college student. For instance, owing to the traditional patriarchal system and existing indigenous cultural norms which prevail in the Igbo ethnic group where the study was conducted, it is perceived that young men are more likely to crave alcohol and use substances (Ngwu et al., 2020). This enables them to cope with the challenges associated with their daily activities including social, political, and emotional imbalance (Oyenira et al., 2019). However, this report becomes worrisome given the adverse health, social and legal consequences associated with substance use (National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), 2021). Our concern, therefore, follows that with peer group influence and the consequences of substance use on college students' academic performance; it then becomes imperative to seek ways of combating this negative social trend.

In Nigeria, various successive governments have sought ways of combating the social menace of substance consumption by youths. For instance, in 2012, the government established the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) and National Campaign against Drug Abuse (NACADA). Similarly, the Federal Ministry of Health (FMH) with the World Health Organization (WHO) joined the International Council on Alcoholism and Addiction (ICAA) to curb substance use (Boluwji et al., 2016). Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) like religious groups, youth clubs, and philanthropic organizations in collaboration with the school boards, University community and Government have organized programs to create awareness about the dangers associated with substance use (NDLEA, 2021). Despite these efforts, substance use by students in Nigeria is yet to decline; hence the need to explore social work intervention in schools.

As an agent of change and human empowerment, social workers play a direct service role with students in tertiary institutions to effect change (Miller, 2015). However, most tertiary institutions in Nigeria are yet to integrate social work professionals as an integral part of the school system (Okah et al., 2017). This has greatly affected the growth, psycho-social development and academic competence of Nigerian students. For instance, school experiences may

oftentimes be unpleasant to students; resulting in parents changing schools for their children. Given this precedent, school workers are expected to play their roles based on the peculiar relationships they find between client, action and target systems within the schools (Okafor et al., 2022). These professionals ensure an all-inclusive package for schools to accommodate academic training, psychological protection, and social care for students, their families, and school staff; hence the need to integrate social work support services.

Overall, previous studies have investigated the prevalence and challenges of substance use among students in Nigeria (Ajayi and Somefun, 2020; Gboyega et al., 2014; Okoro, and Lahai, 2021). Identified prevalence and challenges based on the report WHO (2019) revealed psychological disorders, suicidal acts, social unrest, and increasing security challenges in Nigeria; which may be attributed to substance use. Most studies that explored substance use among Nigerian college students, however, failed to place in the public domain social work professional intervention roles. Hence, the need for this study conducted by social work educators; given the dearth of social work knowledge and intervention in school settings in the country (Okafor et al., 2022). This study, therefore, aimed to explore narratives from students on the utilization of substances in schools based on the following research questions: (a) what factors predispose students to substance use, (b) what are students' suggestions on strategies to curb substance use in Nigerian tertiary institutions (c) what is the involvement of groups and social workers in curbing substance use by students.

## **Methods**

### *Study area*

The study was conducted at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, which is located in Enugu State, Nigeria. The institution has 15 faculties with an approximated population of about 36,000 undergraduate students as of 2021 academic session (University of Nigeria Academic Planning Unit, 2021).

### *Sampling procedure*

In this study, we used the phenomenological qualitative research approach in generating our data. This comprised four focus group discussions and two in-depth interviews. The phenomenological approach in qualitative research is concerned with perspectives and interpretations of people based on their lived experiences. It also seeks to gain further insights into the thinking and behavior of people (Creswell and Creswell, 2018); one of which is substance users. The respondents in this study comprised two categories; 30 student participants and two social work educators all in the same institution. The first category were students who are either substance users or friends to substance users; and were willing, available, and ready to share their lived experiences. They were selected to serve as key informants. The second category of respondents were

social work educators who can demonstrate the role of social workers in ameliorating substance use among college students. These professionals were purposively selected based on their five years teaching experience and willingness to participate in the study. The interviews were held in their offices. The respondents were made up of fifteen male and female students to ensure equal representation of selected faculties and gender. Based on the convenience of the participants we used a vacant classroom chosen by the participants.

#### *Data collection*

Data was collected using a semi-structured schedule designed by two of the researchers. This was first pretested with four students who are friends of substance users in the school of general studies of the university. We provided consent forms to participants that detailed issues of full disclosure, anonymity, confidentiality, and the right of refusal. The discussions were held in four sessions (all males and all females) comprising seven or eight participants in each group. None of the sessions lasted more than 90 minutes to prevent fatigue. The process commenced with two weeks of mobilization during the weekends in February 2021. Among the three researchers, one person moderated while others took notes and monitored the recording gadget. Care was taken to ensure the effective participation of all the participants.

#### *Data analysis*

The qualitative data analysis technique began with note-taking and careful audio-recording of all the discussions and interviews. The voice recordings were transcribed verbatim in Igbo language to retain the original thoughts of the participants. The researchers who did the transcriptions are grounded in the Igbo language, even though just a few participants expressed themselves in Igbo. In the data analysis process, the collected data were analyzed after transcription in the English language. After transcription, we compared the contents of the transcripts with the field notes to ensure coherence. The translated data was open-coded and this started immediately after the translation of the data to avoid memory loss. Data immersion was implored by repeatedly hearing the audio and re-reading the transcribed discussion and field notes for familiarization until we could identify the themes and sub-themes from their responses. These procedures are in accordance with the qualitative research approach (Lune & Berg, 2018). The themes and sub-themes were categorized based on similarities and differences from the respondents' answers.

Themes developed from this study include; factors that predispose students to substance use, students' perceived strategies to curb substance use in tertiary institutions, assessment of the involvement of organizations in curbing substance use, and social workers' role in ameliorating substance use among college students. These themes emerged from the analysis but were guided by the research questions.

## Results

### *Socio-demographic characteristics of participants*

All the participants are students and staff at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka campus; as of the 2019/2020 academic session. They were aged between 15-26 years. A good number (74%) are in their first and second year of study. The highest percentage of the participants (27%) received 11,000-20,000 naira (\$22-\$40) as monthly upkeep from parents/guardians. Slightly above half (57%) are from nuclear families and half of the study participants (50%) reside off-campus. The two social work participants who volunteered for the in-depth interview were aged 45 and 51 years respectively and specialized in medical social work. All the participants were of the Igbo ethnic group except four who were from other Nigerian tribes. They were predominantly Christians.

### **Views on factors that predispose students to substance use**

#### *Gender*

In our discussion, some participants narrated that the patriarchal family system in the Nigerian society grants certain rights and privileges to the male child. Others talked about substance use as an accepted norm in the society. They emphasized that men who reject substances are mostly associated with extremist religious groups, bound by faith, with a weak/light brain. Below are some illustrative quotes.

As the only son, I learnt using tobacco from my father. He said that it was his privilege to teach me how to be a man. This makes me intimate with him and so I do not see anything wrong with substance use (Male, Education).

Women perceive men who use substances as strong and competent while those who don't are seen as weak extremist religious individuals. With such perception you feel on top of the world to do whatever you wish and whoever you want at any convenient time and place (Male, Engineering).

However, we had some contrasting views, insisting that substance use has nothing to do with gender. The participants held the view that times have changed, and both genders exhibit positive and negative behaviors. Interestingly, even those with a contrasting response to the patriarchal family system which prevails in our society never disputed the view. A typical quote is below.

The attitude of female students on substance use in recent times calls for concern. They now compete with male students since it is an accepted norm on campus. It is said that females who drink and smoke will have fertility challenges. Notwithstanding the health implication, a good number of them indulge in this behavior (Female, Social Sciences).

### *Age and substances commonly used by students*

Most of the participants disagree with the view that the student's age is associated with substance use. According to a participant, younger students indulge in substance use more than older students. Her rationale is that older students may be completing their academic program in the institution and so may not have time to use substances. However, some participants noted that older students also indulge in using substances. Further narratives by the participants indicated that students are often involved in using substances including cocaine, tobacco, tramadol, and alcohol. They do so for the energy to keep awake and read overnight, particularly during examination periods. The quotes below are typical of the responses we got.

I will do whatever it takes to scale through my semester exams. If it involves taking some quantity of tobacco or tramadol to read and pass, then it is worth it. We must get to the next level no matter what it takes [a chores response 'Yes' was heard] (Male, Agriculture).

Using substances in time of need is no crime but when it is regular, it then becomes a crime. I do not think using some quantity of cocaine in desperate periods will lead to my using it regularly. I am able to control myself (Female, Engineering).

### *Place of residence and peer group*

Reports from some male participants indicated that students particularly younger ones pick up habits from friends and significant persons around them. This is because some of them are still new to the environment and academic system they found themselves in. These new students, from co-habitation, emulate habits from others. Though some participants agree on the influence of place of residence and peer group; others disagreed. See some illustrative quotes.

There are some students who are addicts and belong to various cartels on campus. Most cases, they interact with other students who may wish to join their popular group. These addicts influence other students with their negative attitude on substance use (Male, Arts).

I do not do drugs, but my friend does. She was dating a guy who disburses substance on campus and learnt from him how to take them. I strongly believe that if she had not met him, she may not be involved in substance use. (Male, Agriculture).

Participants who agreed that place of residence influence substance use had these to say:

... take a walk outside the institution, you will observe that student reside more in these areas. With shops where substances are sold, they live there despite the high cost of house rent and considering inadequate hostel facility in most institutions. Students take advantage of these challenges as they live independently (Male, Social Sciences).

Living off-campus enables students to perform certain activities which ordinary they will not do in their individual homes. They perceive it as

an opportunity to live free life without parents' involvement and restrictions from school authorities (Social worker, Female).

Below is a contrasting response from a participant who disagrees with the relationship between place of residence and substance use:

...for me, I am here to study, graduate in due course and leave this institution. The fact that I live independently outside the school hostel facility will not make me indulge in substance use. It is simply a matter of choice (Female, Education).

### *Family influence and pleasure*

Participants mentioned that family income, structure and background can be associated with substance use. To overcome the situation, students resort to substance use to derive pleasure. For some students, deriving pleasure is in the bit to feel hyperactive or be in a happy state of mind. The participants stressed that the substances help them avert their emotional trauma. See their responses below:

For me, going home on holiday is no fun because of our family structure and size. So long as they send money to me, there is no need going home. Here I live the life I want. Life on campus is good (Male, Agriculture).

Students consume substances to be hyperactive. Some students cannot function normally without using substances. They become very quiet, easily agitated and some cases may break down mentally. For instance, my ex-boyfriend takes tramadol whenever I pay him a visit (Female, Engineering).

After inhaling small quantity of cocaine, honestly, you will lose your sense of shame. You become energized and activated that you can easily do anything you wish. Oftentimes, I drink and smoke heavily when I feel like meeting with the opposite gender for fun. It really helps to overcome fear and guilt feelings (Male, Arts).

## **Students' perceived strategies that can be put in place to curb substance use**

### *Financial assistance*

Concerning this view, a participant noted that most parents do not provide substantial financial assistance to their wards. This leaves them frustrated and exposes them to interact and seek assistance from friends who may be substance users. A typical quote can be seen below:

As students we sustain ourselves through menial jobs and labor outside lecture hours. There are times when we will join laborers to take small substance to be energized to work more and so make more money to sustain us and our girlfriends (Male, Engineering).

While some students suggested financial support from the government, others refuted the claim that lack of financial assistance can influence substance use.

Some students reported that despite the economic situation, indulging in substance use depends on the student's willingness and choice.

#### *Adequate accommodation with monitoring personnel*

Both male and female students agreed that adequate accommodation with monitoring personnel to a large extent will reduce substance use on campuses. Regarding this opinion, a female participant from the Faculty of Arts said: “...*living together removes loneliness, boredom and the temptation to use substances as options*”. For another participant sitting next to her, she reported:

Adequate accommodation with monitoring personnel available in various hostels will reduce the extent of substance use on campuses. By so doing, substance users will easily be identified, separated and rehabilitated without others being influenced negatively, particularly the fresh students who are easy to convince (Female, Education).

#### *Introducing varieties of students' extra curriculum activities/recreations*

Participants narrated that introducing various extra curriculum activities in institutions may help reduce indulging in substance use. This will keep them engaged in different purposeful activities, and impact a change in their mental state to feel happy and courageous. They explained that recreation will relieve their feeling of depression, anger, and anxiety. Below are their responses:

An ideal mind is a devil's workshop. If there are extra curriculum activities (both religious and otherwise like learning crafts, computer studies) students will be engaged in various activities on campus, feel happy and easy off the stress and anxiety in school life; than staying with friends who may be substance users (Social worker, Male).

After lectures some days, I go and learn electronic repair. On some days, I watch and play football, chess, video or other games to keep engaged and happy. Oftentimes, I may not have time for friends, group discussions and what they do there (Male, Education).

#### *Assessment of the involvement of organizations in curbing substance use*

Views obtained from the two gender groups support the idea of inviting resource persons, groups, religious organizations and health workers that could organize programs, rallies, religious and recreational activities. This will enable students to inculcate positive behavior in their institutions. It was observed that the involvement of social workers was not mentioned by any student study participants. See some illustrative quotes below.

Owing to delay by some institutions and the Joint Admission Matriculation Body (JAMB); some of these students are enrolled into the institutions late. Hence, freshmen orientation should be organized by groups immediately after matriculation and periodically for effective participation of all new students (Female, Social Sciences).

...concentration should not only be on freshmen but for all students. Since government have no plans for our welfare, various groups can institute extra curriculum activities, talent show, competitions, skill acquisition training and more. This will help keep students fully engaged with various activities, outside normal school activities [Male, Arts].

*Roles of social workers in ameliorating substance use among college students*  
Findings from this study revealed vital roles social workers can play to ameliorate substance use among college students. There should be social workers attached to the Student Affairs Department. This is a sub-department that ensures the academic, socio-economic and psychological well-being of college students in the institution. In this regard, social workers are expected to manage the psycho-social problems of college students which could manifest as poor self-esteem, poor adjustment outside the home environment, truancy, conflict with constituted authority and other negative behavioral problems. They could provide educative programs in the hostels and classrooms before lectures commence. Working as substance abuse counselors, they strive to empower, liberate and educate the student on the risk associated with this negative behavior. They should also take custody of college students who are drug addicts, separate them from other students and help in providing resuscitation measures for them. Other roles of social workers in schools include advocacy, facilitator, and therapeutic roles. They can equally provide therapeutic roles through crisis management skills, behavior modification, and counseling skills that will help in developing therapeutic and learning programmes for students.

## **Discussions**

Despite government actions and the existing drug laws and policies; substance use remains high among Nigerian students (NDLEA, 2021). An attempt has been made in this study, to associate substance use and the implication for social workers' engagement in tertiary institutions, using students at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State. Although studies on the prevalence and predictors of substance use by students abound (Clarence et al., 2018; Erin et al, 2017); a novel finding from our study shows that factors including age and gender were not predictors. However, participants expressed concern about the increasing substance use by female college students who compete with their male counterparts. They had worries about the health implication this may have in time to come. This present study also, observed that major predictors of substance use by college students were peer group influence and place of residence.

Another finding in this study is that the participants narrated substances commonly used by college students including cocaine, tobacco, tramadol, and

alcohol. Findings show that decision to indulge in substances was to ensure improved academic performance. Other participants stressed that it is used to overcome stress, and emotions and for pleasure, and this has been reported in the literature (Ajayi and Somefun, 2020; Dibia et al. 2020; Oyenira, et al. 2019). However, most of the participants refuted the claim with the view that indulging in substance use depends on the student's willingness and choice. The fact that students' involvement in substance use is growing rapidly is a challenge that requires prompt attention from stakeholders.

Findings in this study implicate that participants perceived strategies in curbing substances used by college students include financial assistance, adequate accommodation and extra curriculum activities. It was observed that some parents fail to provide substantial financial assistance to their wards in tertiary institutions which lures them to seek assistance from friends who may be substance users. Stretching this debate, we discovered that the family responsibility to provide financial care assistance to students is diminishing and insufficient. We are then worried for those who might not have the wherewithal to receive adequate financial care support from families. We see that in a developed context, challenges of this nature could be resolved through assistance from good-spirited individuals, extended family members' support, and government-assisted programs on grants, soft loans, and scholarships (Jatua et al. 2021).

Findings show that independent living outside the university epitomizes a veritable environment, freedom, and choice to a negative attitude like substance use with peer groups. This study has uncovered the fact that peer group influence remains a strong predisposing factor for substance use among college students. The participants acknowledged that friends who use substances can influence others of the same peer group and level of study. This could be attributed to the findings of Kelly et al. (2018) which pose peer influence as a major concern of substance use among students in academic institutions. Triangulating the study findings with the theoretical framework of differential association theory of Edwin Sutherland (1939), we observed that students that use substances are often influenced through interaction with others who are regular substance users to learn motives for negative behavior. This finding could be associated with their quest for experimentation, exploration, curiosity and identity search (Oyenira et al., 2019). In this light then, most study participants were of the view that if this trend is not investigated, it may lead to drug addiction, marital and health-related problems, suicidal acts and most especially increasing level of school dropouts who may pose a threat to national security. These challenges associated with substance use have been reported in the literature (Erin et al. 2017; Shannon et al., 2019).

Indeed, school activities could be demanding and stressful (Clarence et al., 2017; Musyoka et al, 2020). Participants were optimistic in the face of daunting challenges because they feel that substances enable them to escape the harsh realities of their various daily activities experienced on campus. This is why participants suggested that extra curriculum activities should be instituted for recreational and pleasure purposes. Activities for pleasure include puzzles, quizzes, online coffee dates and games with fellow students, use of adequate music before and after lectures for set induction of students among others. This will impact change in their mental state to feel happy, confident, and courageous as good relief their feeling of depression, anger and anxiety. Therefore, we advise peer conversions on positive measures to make academic activities less difficult. This could be aired on social media (television and radio) and social workers could take the lead.

Another unique finding in this study that is not common in other studies is the role of social workers in academic institutions. Although social work practice in the school setting is relatively new in Nigeria, the profession brings unique knowledge and skills to the school system and student service (Okah et al., 2017). It is then needful to push for school social work practice at all levels of academic institutions in Nigeria (Okafor et al., 2022). Social workers can create awareness among college students on the effect of substance use, provide counseling services to substance addict students, and facilitate treatment outcomes like social rehabilitation and reintegration of patients (National Association of Social Workers (NASW), 2013). This can be done through resource linkages, psychotherapy services, advocacy, enabling appropriate health-related services, and guiding patients and their parents through making decisions with promising consequences (Miller, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

Academic excellence and human empowerment are core concerns for Sustainable Development in low and middle-income countries like Nigeria. Achieving this may require various academic institutions to instill organizational policies and laws (Okoro and Lahai, 2021). This will help in the development of interventions and strategies for early identification and rehabilitation. It then necessitates that to effect constructive change, student substance users must be identified, confronted and seek immediate rehabilitation and reintegration. Achieving this would need a systematic approach, first by understanding the nature of the concerns associated to substance use and second by collaborating with other stakeholders in enhancing youth empowerment and development (Nigeria-National Youth Policy, 2019). Although our study has shown that participants tend to be less reliant on the government for students' welfare, we advocate that the government can get involved by recognizing social workers and using them to attend to the need of students in academic institutions.

The researchers acknowledge some limitations of this study. First, the opinions of parents/guardians were not ascertained to determine their views on substance use in tertiary institutions. Second, the data was obtained from a purposively selected small number of students from a particular institution. These limitations notwithstanding, we believe that the findings of this study remains valid.

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