

Awareness, Knowledge and Attitude to Substance Abuse among Students in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

Chiejine Gibson Ifechukwude ¹; Duluora Nneka Chidimma¹; Isenalumhe Ade Salami²; Afekhobe Jedidiah B. S.²; Akubue Nnaemeka Emmanuel³; Ogbiti Mark Imhonikhe²; Nwamaka Chidera Bob-Ume⁴; Umeugoji Chinenye Pamela¹; Joseph Oghenewogaga Owheruo⁶; Chigbo Chisom God'swill⁵; and Okereke Uzoma Chidi Charles¹

¹Department of Community Medicine, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Teaching Hospital, Nnewi, Nigeria.

²Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Irrua Specialist Teaching Hospital, Nigeria. ³Department of Paediatrics, University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital, Nigeria. ⁴All Saints University School of Medicine, St Vincent & The Grenadines. ⁵School of Public Health, University of Port-Harcourt Rivers State, Nigeria. ⁶Delta State University of Science and Technology, Delta State, Nigeria.

Corresponding author: dr gib2002@gmail.com

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Abstract

Substance abuse is a significant public health challenge across the globe, with its prevalence particularly alarming in developing nations, including Nigeria. This study aimed to assess the awareness, knowledge and attitude of substance abuse among students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among 365 students in two tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The IBM SPSS software was used for analysis in the study. The overall awareness level was 90.1%, and for male and female students it was 92.6% and 88.9% respectively. 88.8% of the students had good knowledge of substance abuse. The knowledge level was higher among the female students (90.1%) than the male students (86.1%). The positive attitude to substance abuse was 79.2%, it was slightly higher among the male students (79.5%) than the female students (79.0%). The overall prevalence of substance abuse was 10.1%. The prevalence was higher among the male students (21.3%) than the female students (4.5%). Good knowledge of these substances and their negative effects should be able to positively influence the behaviour of the youths. Understanding students' levels of awareness and knowledge about the risks and consequences of substance misuse is essential for developing effective educational programs and interventions.

Keywords: Attitude, Knowledge, Students, Substance Abuse, Tertiary Institutions, Nigeria.

Introduction

Substance abuse remains a significant public health challenge across the globe, with its prevalence particularly alarming in developing nations, including Nigeria. In recent years, the increasing trends of drug and substance misuse among adolescents and young adults have raised concerns among health professionals (Nath et al., 2022; Runcan, 2020). Tertiary institutions are crucial environments where young adults navigate their identities and coping mechanisms, often in the face of various psychosocial stresses (Akunna & Lucyann,

2023; Shehu & Rao, 2024). The formative years spent in these educational settings can significantly influence individual behaviours and choices, making it imperative to understand the awareness, knowledge, and attitudes of students toward substance abuse (Babalola et al., 2014; Oluremi Olayinka Solomon et al., 2024). According to the World Drug Report 2021, about 275 million individuals have had at least one exposure to illicit drugs in the preceding year globally, while more than 36 million individuals suffered from substance use disorders (Babalola et al., 2014). Substance use is a major contemporary health issue affecting large parts of the developing countries, including Nigeria (Oluremi Olayinka Solomon et al., 2024).

Substance use is the harmful use of psychoactive substances and illicit drugs (includes alcohol, cannabis, amphetamine and other illicit drugs) in a manner that is legally and medically unacceptable to the individual and/or society (Oluremi Olayinka Solomon et al., 2024). Adolescent and young adult remains a vulnerable target to increasing substance use and abuse, with increasing number of youths globally. In Sub-Saharan Africa, early onset of substance use is associated with higher risks of developing dependence, other health and non-health issues during adult life, with younger individuals being disproportionately affected by substance use compared with older adults (Ajayi & Somefun, 2020; Sequeda et al., 2024).

Drug abuse is a complex and multifaceted global health concern with profound implications for individuals, families, communities, and societies at large (Akunna & Lucyann, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

The Global Prevalence of Drug abuse knows no borders, affecting people across the world regardless of age, gender, race, or socioeconomic status.

As of 2024, 5.4% of the global population which is about 430 million people were affected by substance abuse. This figure is projected to rise to 6% by 2025, with young adults particularly at risk due to post-pandemic stress and economic pressures (UNODC World Drug Report, 2024; Rehab Seekers, 2024). A 2025 review found that substance use among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa has reached 41.6%, with Central Africa reporting the highest rate at 55.5% (Marsiglia et al., 2024). Alcohol and cannabis are the most commonly used substances, with Southern Africa showing rates as high as 44.6% for any substance use (Marsiglia et al., 2024).

Nigeria's drug use prevalence is alarmingly high, 14.4% of people aged 15–64 (about 14.3 million Nigerians) used drugs in the past year which is nearly three times the global average (Dele et al., 2025).

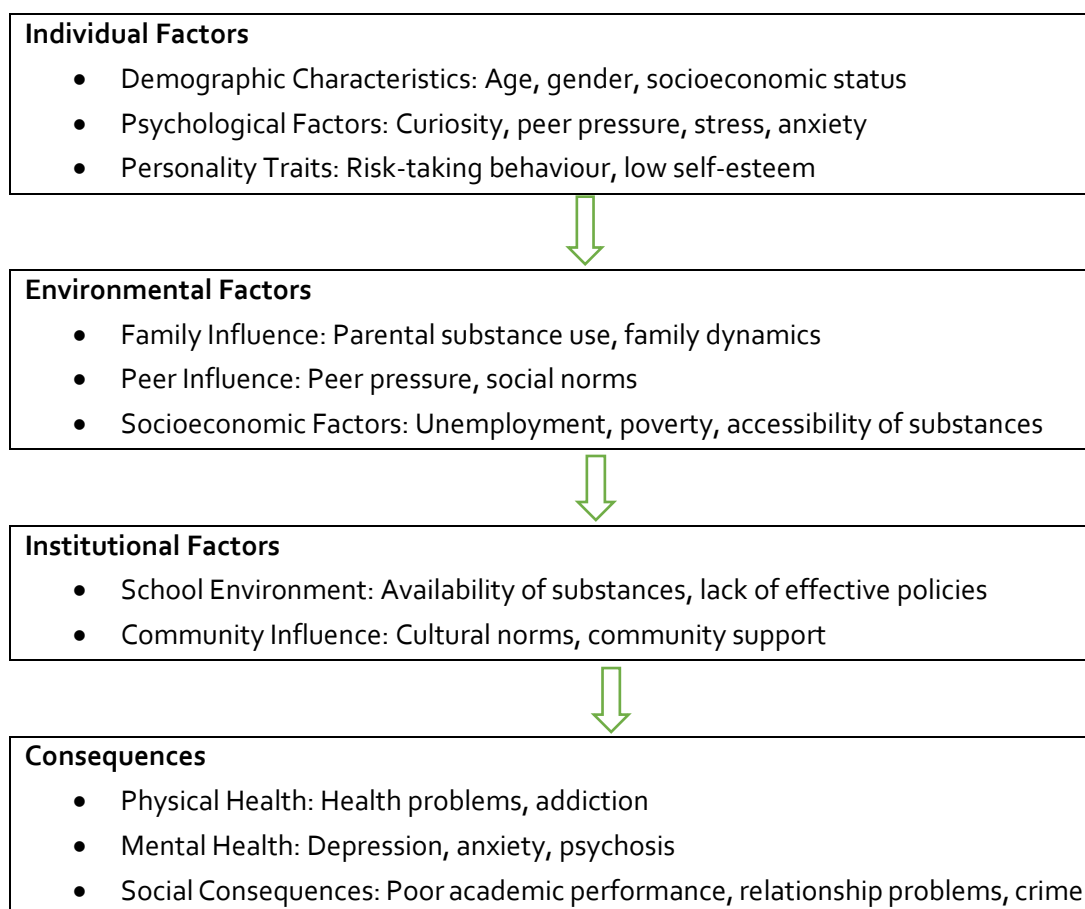
Cannabis is the most abused drug, followed by tramadol and other opioids. The southern zones (South-East, South-West, South-South) report the highest usage, ranging from 13.8% to 22.4% (Dele et al., 2025; National Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

Substance use is associated with an increased risk of infectious diseases (e.g., HIV, hepatitis), cardiovascular problems, respiratory issues, and various forms of cancer (Akunna & Lucyann, 2023). Mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, and psychosis are

associated with substance abuse (Shehu & Rao, 2024). The social and economic repercussions of drug abuse are enormous. Families are torn apart, communities are destabilized, and societies bear the burden of increased healthcare costs, lost productivity, and crime. The criminal justice system is also strained as it contends with drug-related offenses (Akunna & Lucyann, 2023; Nath et al., 2022). The drivers of drug abuse are multifaceted and interconnected. Socioeconomic factors, including poverty and lack of educational opportunities, peer pressure, cultural norms, and the availability of drugs further exacerbate the problem are the contributors. Genetic predispositions and mental health issues can also play a role (Ajayi & Somefun, 2020; Akunna & Lucyann, 2023). In Nigeria, where socio-cultural norms, economic factors, and high rates of unemployment converge to create unique risks for substance abuse, it is essential to explore how university and polytechnic students perceive and understand the complexities of drug use (Babalola et al., 2014).

Conceptual Framework

This framework highlights the complex interplay of factors contributing to substance abuse among youth and tertiary institution students in Nigeria. Understanding these factors is crucial for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies.



Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2021).

Methodology

Two tertiary institutions were randomly selected for the study- Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Anambra state and Delta state University, Delta state. Delta state University, Delta state was selected randomly from among the government universities in the South-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Anambra state was selected randomly from the southeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Descriptive cross-sectional study design was employed to assess the awareness, knowledge and attitudes to substance abuse. The study population was male and female students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, and school of Nursing, Nnamdi Azikiwe university Teaching hospital, Anambra state; and Delta state University, Delta state. Delta state University, Delta state. Sample size for the study was 365 which was determined using the Cochran's Formula for descriptive study, $N = Z^2 pq/d^2$.

Inclusion Criteria

All students in the selected tertiary institutions.

Exclusion Criteria

Students who were not fit to take part in the research because of ill-health, or who refused to give consent or assent to partake in the study.

Sampling technique

The multi-stage sampling method was used which involve the following stages:

Stage 1: Stratification of states in Nigeria into 6 geopolitical zones and random selection of two geopolitical zones which were South-east and South-south geopolitical zones

Stage 2: Random selection of one state each from South-east and South-south geopolitical zones. Anambra state and Delta state was selected.

Stage 3: Random selection of two tertiary institution from Anambra state and one government tertiary institution from Delta state. Nnamdi Azikiwe University and school of Nursing (Nnamdi Azikiwe University teaching hospital); and Delta state University were selected.

Stage 4: Random selection of faculties and departments for the study. There was random selection of departments in the faculty of Arts, Sciences and school of Medicine in the Nnamdi Azikiwe University. Random selection of departments in the faculty of Arts and Sciences in Delta state University. And random selection of class level in the School of Nursing at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University Teaching Hospital.

Stage 5: Involves the proportionate random selection of respondents at the class levels for the selected departments for the study.

The study was carried out using a semi-structured self-administered questionnaire, which was adapted from The World Health Organization (WHO) student drug use questionnaire for data collection. It was originally developed by the WHO in collaboration with the United Nations Fund for Drug Abuse Control for use in different socio-cultural settings (Babalola et

al., 2014; World Health Organization, 1980). The questionnaire was also reviewed and edited for reliability and validity by professional who are specialist in the field. The questionnaire was pretested in a different institution (Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Awka, Anambra state) to ensure clarity of the questions in the questionnaire, time taken to complete each questionnaire and to identify possible errors in the questionnaire which should be addressed before the main data collection.

Data Analysis

The questionnaire was sorted, coded and checked for errors and completeness. All data collected were analysed using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0 now called Statistical Product and Service Solutions. The outcome variables included the awareness level, knowledge level of substance use, and the pattern of substance use.

Ethical Consideration

Research approval was sought from Ethics and Research Committee of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Anambra state and Delta state University, Delta state. A written informed consent was obtained from each of the respondents.

Results

In this study, a total of 365 respondents was interviewed with 100 percent response rate.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Variable	Frequency (Total= 365)	Percentage
Age in years		
16-19	128	35.1
20-24	173	47.4
25-29	52	14.2
30-34	12	3.3
Mean age: 21.40		
SD: 3.36		
Range: 16-30		
Sex		
Male	122	33.4
Female	243	66.6
Tribe		
Edo	11	3.0
Hausa/Fulani	3	0.8
Ibo	299	81.9
Isoko	19	5.2
Urhobo	28	7.7
Yoruba	5	1.4

Religion		
African tradition	3	0.8
Atheist	1	0.3
Christianity	360	98.6
Islam	1	0.3
Department		
Account	26	7.1
Applied Micro Brewery	16	4.4
Civil Law	61	16.7
English	18	4.9
Environmental Management	47	12.9
Fishery and Aquatic	8	2.2
Food Science and Technology	74	20.3
General Nursing	22	6.0
Medicine and Surgery	86	23.6
Statistics	7	1.9
Class Level		
100L	26	7.1
200L	113	31.0
300L	61	16.7
400L	84	23.0
500L	33	9.0
600L	48	13.2
Number of Sibling		
0-2	78	21.4
3-5	232	63.6
6-8	46	12.6
9-11	9	2.5
Birth Position		
1-2	199	54.5
3-5	147	40.3
6-8	15	4.1
9-11	4	1.1
Father education Status		
No formal Education	10	2.7
Primary	44	12.1
Secondary	116	31.8
Tertiary	195	53.4
Mother education Status		
No formal Education	8	2.2
Primary	21	5.8
Secondary	119	32.6
Tertiary	217	59.5
Father's occupation		

Employed	117	32.1
Self-employed	230	63.0
Unemployed	18	4.9
Mother's occupation		
Employed	131	35.9
Self-employed	209	57.3
Unemployed	25	6.8
Grew up under who		
Both Parents	310	84.9
Father only	5	1.4
Mother only	35	9.6
Relations	15	4.1
Monthly pocket money		
Nil	122	33.4
<50000	156	42.7
50-80,000	56	15.3
> 80000	31	8.5
Religious participation		
Weekly	294	80.5
Monthly	23	6.3
Rarely	48	13.2

Table 1 showed the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents. Out the 365 respondents, the females constitute 66.6% (243) and the males were 33.4% (122) of the study participants. The mean age of the respondents was 21.4 ± 3.36 years and the range was 16 to 30 years. Most of the respondents were between 20-24 years (47.2%).

Most of the respondents (54.5%) where the either the first or second child in the family. Of the respondents, 84.9% of the students grew under both parents. Majority of the students (42.7%) get less than #50,000 monthly pocket money. Most of the students' parents had tertiary education, 53.4% and 59.5% for the fathers and mothers respectively. Most of the respondents' fathers and mothers were self-employed, (63.0%) and (57.3%) respectively.

Table 2: Age and Awareness of substance abuse

Age group	Awareness	All respondents		Male		Female	
		Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
<20 years							
	No	14	10.9	5	11.9	9	10.5
	Yes	114	89.1	37	88.1	77	89.5
	Total	128	100.0	42	100.0	86	100.0
20-24							
	No	20	11.6	3	6.1	17	13.7
	Yes	153	88.4	46	93.9	107	86.3
	Total	173	100.0	49	100	124	100
25-29							
	No	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
	Yes	52	100.0	25	100.0	27	100.0
	Total	52	100.0	25	100.0	27	100.0
30-34							
	No	2	16.7	1	16.7	1	16.7
	Yes	10	83.3	5	83.3	5	83.3
	Total	12	100.0	6	100.0	6	100.0

Table 2 shows age distribution and awareness of substance use. A 100% awareness of substance use and abuse was shown by students who were in the 25-29 age group. This is followed by 89.1% awareness by students who were below 20 years. In the study, 92.6 % of the male respondents are aware of substance use and abuse which is more than 88.9 % of the female aware of substance use and abuse. The most common sources of information were social media (50.8%) and mass media (28.2%) respectively

Table 3: Knowledge Score

Knowledge Grade	General knowledge		Male		Female	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Good	324	88.8	105	86.1	219	90.1
Fair	36	9.9	14	11.5	22	9.1
Poor	5	1.4	3	2.5	2	0.8
Total	365	100.0	122	100.0	243	100.0

Table 3 shows the knowledge score of the respondents and that of the male and female gender about substance use and abuse. It was shown that 88.8% of the respondents had good knowledge, 9.9% had fair knowledge and 1.4% had poor knowledge. the study showed that the female respondents had good knowledge (90.1%) more than the male respondents (86.1%) though it was not statistically significant (P-value 0.329). Poor

knowledge of substance abuse was higher among male respondents (2.5%) than the female respondents (0.8%)

Table 4: Attitude of Respondents

Attitude Grade	General Attitude		Male		Female	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	289	79.2	97	79.5	192	79.0
Fair	61	16.7	18	14.8	43	17.7
Poor	15	4.1	7	5.7	8	3.3
Total	365	100.0	122	100.0	243	100.0

Table 4 shows that 79.2% of the respondents had positive attitude. The percentages of the male and female respondents who had positive attitude were very close (79.5% and 79.0% respectively). The percentages for poor attitudes were similar for both gender (5.7% and 3.3% for male and female respondents respectively).

In this study, the overall prevalence of substance abuse was 10.1%. The prevalence of substance abuse among the male is 21.3% while among the female respondents, the prevalence of substance abuse was 4.5%. this difference in the prevalence of substance abuse between the male and female respondents was statistically significant (P-value: 0.001).

Discussion

The rate of substance use and abuse is on the increase and the female gender is not excluded. In the study, the awareness, knowledge and attitude to substance abuse among tertiary institution students in two Nigerian universities were assessed.

In this study, the percentage of the male gender was 33.4% which is similar to the study by Chioma et.al in Anambra state in 2022 which was 33% (Chioma et al., 2022). The male proportion of our study was lower compare to studies by Anetor et.al in Lagos state, Ajayi et.al. in two Nigerian universities and Babalola et.al in Ogun State of Nigeria (Ajayi & Somefun, 2020; Anetor & Oyekan-Thomas, 2018; Babalola et al., 2014)

The mean age of the respondents in our study was 21.4 ± 3.36 years and similar to that in the study by Olusoji et.al. in Ado Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria (Oluremi Olayinka Solomon et al., 2024); but higher than the mean age of respondents (16.4 ± 1.4 years) in the study by Chioma et.al in Anambra state (Chioma et al., 2022); and lower than that found by Babalola et.al in Ogun state (Babalola et al., 2014). The reason why the mean age of the participants was higher is because the study was done among year 5 and final medical students only who are older adolescents. Most of the respondents were between 20-24 years (47.2%) in our study which is higher than found in the studies by Chioma et.al. and Anetor & Oyekan-Thomas (Anetor & Oyekan-Thomas, 2018; Chioma et al., 2022). The difference is that the study by Cioma et. al was among secondary school students. in our study most of the

participants are Igbos (81.9%) because most of the participants from the University in the East part of Nigeria were Ibos. Anetor and Oyekan-Thomas (2018) study have almost equal proportions of Ibo and Yoruba (Anetor & Oyekan-Thomas, 2018). The Yoruba dominated the study by Olusoji et. al. (2024) because the it was in a tertiary institution in the western part of Nigeria (Oluremi Olayinka Solomon et al., 2024). Christians dominated our study just as it was in the studies by Babalola et.al. and Olusoji et.al. (Babalola et al., 2014; Oluremi Olayinka Solomon et al., 2024). Contrary to our study, the Muslims were more than the Christians in the study by Anetor and Oyekan-Thomas (Anetor & Oyekan-Thomas, 2018) Majority of the students' parents had tertiary education which was similar to the study by Olusoji et. al. in Ekiti tertiary institution (Oluremi Olayinka Solomon et al., 2024).

Our study showed a 100% awareness level of substance use and abuse was by students who were in the 25-29 age group. This is followed by 89.1% awareness by students who were below 20 years. One possible reason is that the older age group have been in the tertiary institution and away from parental control longer than the younger age group.

In the study, 92.6 % of the male respondents are aware of substance use and abuse which is more than 88.9 % of the female aware of substance use and abuse. The most common sources of information were social media (50.8%) and mass media (28.2%) respectively. In Olusoji *et al.* (2024). study majority of respondents were aware of substance use (96.5%), the most popular sources of information were the school (33.2%), and mass media (26.3%) which contrast with the source of information in our study (Oluremi Olayinka Solomon et al., 2024). This difference might be attributed to the geopolitical zone.

The percentage of respondents with good knowledge about substance abuse in our study was 88.8% and the percentage of female respondents with good knowledge (90.1%) was higher than the male respondents (86.1%) though it was not statistically significant (P-value 0.329).

The percentage of respondents with good knowledge in our study was higher than that obtained from the study by Anetor and Oyekan-Thomas (Anetor & Oyekan-Thomas, 2018). The possible reason could be that the participants in the study by Anetor and Oyekan-Thomas were not students. The percentage of participants with good knowledge was also very low (47.2%) in the study by Olusoji et. al (2024) at Federal Polytechnic, Ado Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria (Oluremi Olayinka Solomon et al., 2024).

In this study, the overall prevalence of current substance abuse was 10.1%. The prevalence of substance abuse among the male is 21.3% while among the female respondents, the prevalence of substance abuse was 4.5%. this difference in the prevalence of substance abuse between the male and female respondents was statistically significant (P-value: 0.001). Compare to other studies, it is lower to the study by Chioma et. al. (Chioma et al., 2022) and study by Ajayi & Somefun, 2020(Ajayi & Somefun, 2020)

Babalola et.al (2014) study reported a lifetime prevalence of any drug use as 65%, about 70% of male and 56% of female respondents disclosed a lifetime use of any substance, while 66% of males and 48.3% of females reported current drug use. This prevalence is far higher than obtained in our study probably because the respondents in Babalola et.al. study

older youths compare to our study and been in final year in the medical school could be another possible reason. However, differences in methodology, socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents studied and the different numbers of drugs and substances included in the various studies probably also contributed to the observed differences in prevalence rates.

Conclusion

This study estimated the awareness, knowledge and prevalence of substance use and abuse among Nigerian university students. Our results showed that despite the high awareness and good knowledge about substance abuse, abuse of substance remains higher. This indicates that there are driving forces encouraging substance abuse that the tertiary institution students are contending with. Given the study findings and harmful consequences of illicit drug use, there is a need for interventions to address drug use on Nigerian tertiary institutions. The family should be considered as an important unit to sensitize young people on the harmful effects of drug use. There is a need to address drug use on Nigerian campuses by educating students about its adverse impacts and training on coping mechanisms.

Limitation

The data was based on self-reported information given by the respondent which might have introduced bias. It was a cross-sectional study; exposure and outcome were examined at the same time so causal relationship cannot be established. The study was limited to only two geopolitical zones in Nigeria. The study was purely descriptive, it did not address associations and inferential statistics.

Future Directions

Substance abuse is great public menace especially among the adolescents and youth in the tertiary institutions. With understanding that the development of any society lies also the vigour and strength of the young generation, it is important for extensive and comprehensive study involving all geopolitical zones in the country, including in-depth analysis for associations and inferential findings be carried that will inform better direction in policy making. Collaboration involving all stakeholders is recommended for funding and research which may give more robust findings.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest among the authors in this study.

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