



Prevalence of Drug Abuse Among Tertiary Institution Students in Umuahia

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Abstract

The frequency of drug usage among university students in Umuahia, Abia State, Nigeria, was investigated in this study. Growing worries about the rising prevalence of drug use among youth and its effects on social, health, and academic performance served as the impetus for the study. A structured questionnaire was used to survey 150 students from various institutions and academic levels. Descriptive statistics like frequency counts and percentages were used to analyse the data, and the results were displayed in tables for clarity. The results showed that drug misuse is a serious issue among students, with tramadol, cigarettes, cannabis (Indian hemp), codeine/cough syrups, and alcohol being the most frequently abused substances. Some students also reported using more potent drugs including cocaine and methamphetamine. Most students started using drugs between the ages of 15 and 19, which emphasises vulnerability and early exposure. The most frequent cause of drug use was found to be peer pressure, which was followed by academic stress, curiosity, and social factors like accessibility through friends and campus vendors. Drug misuse had far-reaching effects, such as subpar academic results, absenteeism, health problems, disciplinary proceedings, and legal troubles. Although both groups were impacted, gender analysis showed that male students were more likely than female students to take drugs. According to perception statistics, drug misuse is thought to be widespread among students, yet there is still a lack of awareness and access to counselling or preventive programs. According to the study's findings, drug misuse seriously jeopardises Umuahia students' academic, physical, and mental health. To successfully address the issue, it suggests bolstering counselling services, enforcing school drug laws, running awareness campaigns, educating peers, and working more closely with security and health organisations.

Keywords: Drug abuse, Tertiary institutions, Students, Peer pressure, Academic performance.

INTRODUCTION

Through organised study and research, universities and other postsecondary institutions play a crucial role in moulding people's intellectual capacity, conduct, and professional competence, hence promoting national development and worldwide competitiveness [1]. As a result, any behaviour that jeopardises pupils' academic achievement and mental stability is cause for serious concern. Substance abuse among college students has become a significant public health concern in recent years, with significant health, social, psychological, and economic repercussions worldwide, including in Nigeria.

About 284 million people between the ages of 15 and 64 take drugs globally, according to [2], underscoring the scope of the issue. The vulnerability of youth is shown by the fact that a significant percentage of people receiving treatment for substance use disorders in Africa are under 35. Higher education institutions are becoming more and more places where substance abuse is common. Numerous studies conducted in Nigeria have shown high rates of substance use among university students and have identified it as a serious public health issue [3].



Substance use among undergraduates has a substantial impact on mental health in addition to its effects on physical health. Substance abuse has been associated with higher rates of anxiety, depression, and other maladaptive behaviours [4]. Its negative effects on society are further compounded by the fact that it is linked to dangerous and antisocial behaviours like aggression, risky sexual behaviour, theft, and cult-related activities [5].

University students' substance usage is complex and does not happen in a vacuum. Peer pressure, the need for social connection, curiosity, academic stress, unreasonable parental expectations, financial difficulties, and attempts to manage underlying mental health disorders are among the frequently mentioned factors [6]. Furthermore, social and recreational motives are important. Pre-existing vulnerabilities and environmental factors inside tertiary institutions may interact, since prior exposure to substance use in the home environment has also been demonstrated to enhance the chance and frequency of use during university years [7].

Over time, the variety of drugs that students frequently use has grown. While more recent and locally made psychoactive mixes are being reported, classic substances like alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, cocaine, heroin, amphetamines, and prescription drugs are still widely used [8]. These include mixes of tramadol with different regionally called mixtures like "Lacatomom," "Msquared," and "Omi Gutter," which show a changing pattern of substance misuse that makes detection and management more difficult.

The prevalence of substance use is still high despite continuous treatments. According to earlier statistics by the [2], 12% of people worldwide were believed to have taken drugs in the year prior, which is a considerable increase above earlier estimates. The burden is equally concerning in Nigeria. For instance, it was stated that more than 65% of Osun State's in-school teenagers had used drugs, suggesting extensive exposure even prior to higher education. Due to their greater independence, decreased parental supervision, and exposure to a variety of social stimuli, university students are especially vulnerable. Despite a number of control efforts, substance misuse has been found to continue at Nigerian tertiary institutions. Because popular music and entertainment content may normalise or glamorise drug use, cultural and media influences may further promote substance use behaviours.

Additionally, certain patterns and factors that influence substance use are highlighted by empirical findings. According to reports, 31.1% of college students currently use alcohol, and 43.5% of them had previously consumed it. Living with a father figure seemed to be protective, although factors including male gender, older age, fewer religious activity, and better socioeconomic level were linked to an increased chance of alcohol use. Similarly, it was shown that socialisation, stress management, and academic anxiety management were the main reasons why students drank alcohol [9]. Drug misuse in Nigeria has historically developed into a complicated social problem with wide-ranging effects. In addition to its effects on personal health, it causes poor academic achievement, family strife, financial hardship, and a rise in criminal activities. Substance misuse impairs students' capacity to learn and jeopardises their physical and mental health, which frequently results in dependency and long-term decline.

There is a need for further empirical research because drug use among youth is persistent and changing, especially in higher education. With a focus on Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Abia State University (Extension), and National Open University of Nigeria Study Center, Umudike, this study attempts to evaluate the prevalence of substance use among students at Umuahia's postsecondary institutions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a descriptive cross-sectional survey design to assess the prevalence of drug abuse among tertiary institution students in Umuahia, Nigeria. The survey approach was considered appropriate for systematically collecting data on students' behaviors, perceptions, and experiences at a single point in time, thereby enabling the description of patterns and associated factors.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Umuahia, the capital city of Abia State in southeastern Nigeria. Umuahia is a semi-urban setting characterized by a heterogeneous population, comprising individuals from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. The city hosts several tertiary institutions with a predominantly youthful population.

The study was carried out in three selected institutions: Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Abia State University (Extension Centre, Umuahia), and National Open University of Nigeria Study Centre, Umuahia. These institutions were selected based on their accessibility, diverse student populations, and representation of different modes of tertiary education.

Study Population

The study population comprised all registered students in the selected institutions, spanning various faculties, academic levels, age groups, and genders. The estimated total student population across the three institutions was approximately 4,000.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A total of 150 respondents participated in the study. The sample size was proportionally allocated across the three institutions to ensure adequate representation. A simple random sampling technique was employed to select participants, ensuring that each student had an equal probability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authorities prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and data were used strictly for academic purposes.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using two primary instruments:

1. Structured Questionnaire:

The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section A captured socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, level of study, and institution. Section B focused on issues related to drug abuse, including prevalence, types of substances used, contributing factors, consequences, and students' perceptions. Both closed-ended and open-ended questions were included to allow for quantitative analysis and limited qualitative insights.

2. Interview Guide:

A semi-structured interview guide was used to obtain in-depth qualitative data from selected students and key informants, including student leaders, academic advisors, and counselors. The interviews explored themes such as personal experiences, motivations for substance use, peer influence, and institutional responses.

Data collection was conducted over a one-month period in June 2025.

Validity of Instruments

To ensure validity, the questionnaire and interview guide were reviewed by experts in sociology, psychology, and research methodology. A pilot study was conducted among 20 students outside the study sample to assess clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness. Feedback from the pilot test was used to refine ambiguous items and enhance both face and content validity.

Reliability of Instruments

The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using the test-retest method. The instrument was administered to a subset of students on two occasions separated by a two-week interval. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through the physical distribution of printed questionnaires in lecture halls, hostels, and common areas within the institutions, following approval from relevant authorities. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents.

For the qualitative component, interviews were conducted at scheduled times convenient for participants. With consent, responses were recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, tables, and charts, were used to summarize the data.

Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and key insights related to substance use among students.

Materials and Methods

Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	80	53.3
	Female	70	46.7
Age Group	15–18 years	30	20
	19–22 years	85	56.7
	23–26 years	35	23.3
Academic Level	Year 1	50	33.3
	Year 2	60	40
	Final Year	40	26.7
Institution	MichealOkpara University, Umudike	50	33.3

	National Open University, Umuahia study Cente	50	33.3
	Abia State University, Extension in Umuahia	50	33.3

The demographic data show that out of 150 respondents, 80 (53.3%) were male while 70 (46.7%) were female. This indicates a fairly balanced gender representation with a slight male majority. In terms of age, the largest group (56.7%) was aged 19–22 years, followed by 23.3% aged 23–26 years, and 20% aged 15–18 years. This reflects the typical age range of college students and confirms the relevance of this population for the study. Academic level distribution revealed that the majority (40%) were in their second year (Year 2), followed by 33.3% in their first year (Year 1), and 26.7% in their final year. We also have 50 students from ABSU, MOUAU, and Open University Umuahia study Centre. This range suggests that the responses cut across various levels of experience in college life, providing a diverse outlook on drug use and its effects.

Table 2: Primary Factors Contributing to Drug Abuse

Contributing Factor	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Peer pressure	95	63.3
Stress and academic workload	70	46.7
Lack of parental supervision	55	36.7
Easy access to drug near campus	60	40
Media influence	50	33.3

This table reveals that peer pressure is the most significant factor influencing drug use among students, with 95 respondents (63.3%) selecting it. This highlights how social networks can strongly sway students' choices, especially in peer-dominated environments like colleges. Stress and academic workload came next at 46.7%, showing that some students use drug as a coping mechanism. Other notable contributors include lack of parental supervision (36.7%), easy access to drug near campus (40%), and media influence (33.3%). The data suggest that both internal (psychological) and external (environmental and social) factors contribute significantly to students' drinking habits, indicating the need for a multi-faceted approach to intervention.

Table 3: Effect of Drug Abuse on Academic Performance and Well-being

Effect Noted	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Poor academic performance	85	56.7
Poor concentration in class	70	46.7
Frequent absenteeism	65	43.3
Health issues (e.g., liver problems)	45	30
Emotional instability/depression	40	26.7

Respondents indicated several adverse effects of drug abuse. The most reported effect was poor academic performance (56.7%), showing a clear link between drug use and reduced academic engagement or achievement. This is followed by poor concentration in class (46.7%) and frequent absenteeism (43.3%), further illustrating how drug affects students' ability to participate effectively in academic activities. Additionally, health complications (30%) such as liver issues and emotional problems (26.7%) like depression or instability were also noted. The data collectively imply that drug abuse not only affects academic life but also extends into students' physical and mental health domains, warranting concern from educators, healthcare providers, and policymakers.

Table 4: Existing Interventions

Intervention	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Counseling services on campus	30	20
Orientation programs	25	16.7
Awareness campaigns by NGOs	20	13.3
Disciplinary actions	15	10
None	60	40

An analysis of existing interventions shows that many students perceive a lack of effective action against drug abuse. Notably, 40% stated that no interventions are in place within their institution. Only 20% acknowledged the presence of counseling services, and even fewer cited orientation programs (16.7%), NGO awareness campaigns (13.3%), or disciplinary actions (10%). This indicates a gap in proactive institutional responses, suggesting that the college authorities may not be doing enough to address or publicize the resources available to help students struggling with drug use.

Table 5: Strategies to Reduce Drug Abuse

Proposed Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strengthen campus counseling units	75	50
Enforce stricter drug regulations	60	40
Engage parents/guardians in monitoring	55	36.7
Organize awareness seminars/workshops	70	46.7
Introduce religious/moral education	40	26.7

When asked about preferred strategies to curb drug abuse, 50% recommended strengthening campus counseling units, while 46.7% suggested awareness seminars and workshops. These responses show that students believe in the power of information and support systems in changing behavior. Other suggestions included stricter drug regulations (40%), parental engagement (36.7%), and moral/religious education (26.7%). The responses highlight that students recognize the importance of both preventive education and enforcement in reducing drug-related issues, favoring a collaborative effort between students, parents, institutions, and society at large.

Table 6: Awareness of Health Risks of Drug Abuse

Awareness Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Fully aware	45	30
Somewhat aware	75	50
Not aware	30	20

In terms of awareness, the data show that only 30% of students are fully aware of the health risks associated with drug abuse. A larger proportion (50%) are only somewhat aware, while 20% admit they are not aware at all. This indicates a significant knowledge gap, which could lead to risky behaviors due to ignorance or misinformation. The results suggest the need for targeted health education campaigns that explain the short- and long-term effects of drug abuse in a language that resonates with students.

Table 7: Common Drugs Consumed

Type of Drug	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Tramadol	90	60
Cannabis (Indian Hemp)	50	33.3
Codeine/cough syrups	40	26.7
Cigarettes	60	40

Tramadol is the most commonly abused drug among students, with 60% reporting its use. This is followed by cigarettes (40%), cannabis/Indian hemp (33.3%), and codeine or cough syrups (26.7%). The popularity of tramadol and cigarettes suggests that students tend to experiment with substances that are more easily accessible and often shared within peer groups. Cannabis and codeine, while less prevalent, still represent significant patterns of abuse due to their perceived effects of relaxation, escape from stress, or enhanced performance. These findings reflect the influence of peer networks, street vendors, and weak regulatory controls in making such substances available to tertiary students in Umuahia.

Table 8: Gender Distribution of Alcohol Use

Gender	Alcohol Users	Percentage (%)
Male	75	50
Female	35	23.3
None	40	26.7

The gender analysis reveals that 50% of male students reported consuming drug, compared to 23.3% of female students. Additionally, 26.7% reported abstaining from drug altogether. This gender disparity aligns with cultural and social expectations in Nigeria, where male drinking is often more socially accepted or even encouraged, while female drinking is stigmatized. However, the presence of female drug users still points to a changing trend that should not be overlooked.

Table 9: Peer Influence on Drug Use

Peer Influence Present	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly influenced by peers	85	56.7
Occasionally influenced	50	33.3
Not influenced	15	10

This table reinforces the earlier findings on peer pressure. A substantial 56.7% of respondents admitted being strongly influenced by peers to consume drug, while 33.3% were occasionally influenced, and only 10% claimed they were not influenced. This confirms the role of peer groups as a dominant force in shaping behavior among young adults, particularly in environments like college campuses where group activities and friendships are central.

Table 10: Parental Role in Drug Use

Parental Involvement	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very involved	25	16.7
Minimally involved	40	26.7
Not involved	85	56.7

When assessing parental influence, 56.7% of students indicated that their parents or guardians were not involved in monitoring or guiding their drug use. Only 16.7% reported active involvement, while 26.7% noted minimal involvement. This highlights the potential role of the family unit in both prevention and early intervention. The data suggests that many students may lack home-based guidance or restrictions that could otherwise discourage risky behavior like drug abuse.

DISCUSSION

The frequency and contributing factors of drug usage among Umuahia tertiary institution students were investigated in this study. The results show that substance abuse is a serious and pervasive problem that affects students of all ages, genders, and academic levels. The engagement of both genders suggests that drug usage is not gender-specific but rather a widespread issue among students, despite a slightly higher frequency among male students [11].

The majority of responders were between the ages of 19 and 24, a developmental stage that is frequently marked by increasing independence, experimentation, and susceptibility to risky behaviours. This result is consistent with previous research showing that late adolescence and early adulthood are crucial times for the development and maintenance of substance use behaviours [12].

Tramadol was found to be the most often misused substance, followed by cannabis and cigarettes. There were also reports of the usage of alcohol, codeine-containing cough syrups, and, to a lesser degree, cocaine and methamphetamine. The widespread use of tramadol is indicative of a developing trend in Nigeria, where the medication is frequently readily available and seen to be less dangerous than illegal narcotics. Additional evidence of polysubstance usage among students comes from the presence of many substance types [13].

Significantly, a large number of respondents stated that they started using drugs between the ages of 15 and 19, suggesting early exposure before or during admission to higher school. The significance of early preventative measures is highlighted by the widespread association between early beginning and a higher likelihood of reliance and long-term negative effects [14].

The most significant element influencing drug usage was found to be peer pressure, which is in line with research highlighting the influence of social networks on young adults' behaviour. Academic stress, curiosity, and environmental factors including substance availability in the school setting and through social interactions were other contributing factors. These results demonstrate how individual, societal, and environmental factors interact to influence substance use [15]. According to this study, drug addiction has serious repercussions, such as low academic performance, absenteeism, health issues, disciplinary actions, and legal issues. These results have wider ramifications for institutional performance and societal well-being in addition to having an impact on individual students [16, 17].

Respondents' perceptions of drug misuse showed that they were highly aware of its prevalence and detrimental effects on academic performance. Nonetheless, there was comparatively little knowledge about institutional support services including counselling and rehabilitation [18]. In addition to highlighting the need for more comprehensive interventions, such as awareness campaigns, tougher enforcement of drug rules, peer-led education, and better access to counselling services, many students expressed discontent with the institution's current efforts [19]. The results of this study support previous research showing that drug addiction among college students is a complex issue requiring all-encompassing and situation-specific solutions.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that drug misuse is common among Umuahia tertiary institution students and is caused by a mix of peer pressure, academic stress, substance availability, and personal curiosity. Given their negative impacts on students' academic performance, physical health, and psychological well-being, the widespread use of narcotics like tramadol, cannabis, and codeine-containing medications is an increasing public health concern.

This study's early initiation age emphasises how vulnerable students are during developmental transitions, especially when they enter more autonomous learning environments. The growing involvement of female students suggests a closing gender

gap that needs attention, even though male students showed a higher prevalence of substance use. Inadequate preventive education, little awareness of counselling services, and low institutional and family involvement all contribute to the continued prevalence of drug usage in these facilities. These gaps highlight the need for more coordinated and proactive actions.

A comprehensive strategy that incorporates preventive education, improved institutional policies, easily accessible counselling and rehabilitation services, and proactive cooperation with families, medical professionals, and regulatory bodies is needed to address substance abuse among students attending postsecondary institutions. Such all-encompassing approaches are crucial for reducing the effects of drug misuse and fostering healthier learning environments.

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