African Journal of
Medicine, Surgery and Public Health Research

ISSN: 1595-8000

Index: Harvard, Boston, Sydney University, Dimensions, Lens, ResearchGet Scilit, Semantic, Google Scholar, Base etc

https://doi.org/10.58578/AJMSPHR.v3i1.8024

A Study to Determine the Incidence of Drug Abuse Among Students of Tertiary Institutions. A Case Study Wukari

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Article Info:

Submitted:	Revised:	Accepted:	Published:
Oct 15, 2025	Nov 6, 2025	Nov 18, 2025	Nov 23, 2025

Abstract

This study explores the incidence, patterns, and consequences of drug abuse among students in tertiary institutions in Taraba State, Nigeria, using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative survey data revealed that 28.4% of students had engaged in drug use, with alcohol (64.8%), cannabis (45.1%), and tramadol identified as the most commonly abused substances. Qualitative insights from focus group discussions and key informant interviews highlighted the social dynamics, institutional gaps, and cultural factors shaping substance use, with male students aged 21–25 and those living off-campus emerging as the most vulnerable demographic, while covert drug use among female students was linked to peer and romantic influences. Peer pressure, academic stress, and curiosity were reported as primary motivators, and hostel environments were found to foster experimentation. Drug abuse was associated with academic decline, mental health problems—including anxiety, depression, and suicidal

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ideation—and low utilization of counseling services, whereas institutional responses were characterized by limited drug education, weak enforcement, and poor awareness of available support systems. The study underscores the urgent need for integrated prevention strategies, peer-led interventions, and enhanced mental health services to address this growing public health concern.

Keywords: Drug Abuse; Tertiary Institutions; Mixed-Methods Approach; Taraba State; Mental Health; Peer Pressure; Substance Use Patterns

Introduction

Drug abuse among students in tertiary institutions has emerged as a critical public health concern both globally and within Nigeria. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) defines drug abuse as the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs. In Nigeria, the magnitude of this issue is underscored by the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), which reported that over 14.3 million people aged 15–64 had used drugs in 2020, with a significant proportion being students in tertiary institutions (UNODC, 2021). This alarming statistic reflects a growing trend that threatens the academic, psychological, and social well-being of young adults in higher education.

The transition to tertiary education often marks a pivotal phase in a young person's life. It is characterized by increased autonomy, exposure to diverse social environments, and heightened academic expectations. These factors, while essential for personal growth, can also predispose students to experimentation with substances as a coping mechanism (Eze et al., 2021). The newfound freedom and reduced parental oversight create a fertile ground for risky behaviors, including drug use, especially when combined with peer influence and the desire to fit in socially.

Peer pressure remains one of the most influential drivers of drug abuse among students. In many cases, students are introduced to drugs by friends or acquaintances who normalize the behavior. Poor parental supervision, especially in cases where students live far from home, further compounds the issue (Odejide, 2006). Socio-economic challenges, such as financial stress and unemployment, also contribute to vulnerability, as some students may resort to drug use as a form of escapism or temporary relief (Akinyemi et al., 2021).

The types of substances commonly abused by Nigerian students vary but often include cannabis, tramadol, codeine-based syrups, and alcohol. These drugs are not only accessible but are also glamorized in certain social circles and media platforms (Ajibola & Oluwatusin, 2024). The misuse of prescription medications like tramadol and codeine is particularly concerning, as these substances are often perceived as less harmful due to their medical origins, despite their addictive potential and severe health consequences.

The impact of drug abuse on students is multifaceted. Academically, it leads to poor performance, absenteeism, and in extreme cases, dropouts. Psychologically, students may experience depression, anxiety, and cognitive impairment, which further hinders their ability to succeed in school (Umar et al., 2025). Socially, drug abuse can strain relationships with peers, family, and faculty, and may lead to isolation or involvement in criminal activities (Ojo et al., 2022).

Risky behaviors associated with drug abuse, such as unsafe sex, violence, and reckless driving, pose additional threats to student safety and campus stability. These behaviors not only endanger the individual but also disrupt the learning environment and burden institutional resources (Oke et al., 2021). Despite these far-reaching consequences, many tertiary institutions lack comprehensive drug education programs or support systems to address the issue effectively (Nwankwo et al., 2022).

In Wukari, a town in Taraba State, Nigeria, the presence of multiple tertiary institutions—including a federal university, a polytechnic, and a college of education—provides a unique setting to examine the incidence of drug abuse among students. These institutions cater to diverse student populations with varying academic orientations, socio-economic backgrounds, and cultural influences, making Wukari an ideal case study for understanding the scope and dynamics of student drug abuse.

Previous studies have largely focused on urban centers and elite universities, often overlooking smaller towns and institutions that may face different challenges. By focusing on Wukari, this study aims to fill a critical gap in literature and provide localized insights that can inform targeted interventions. Understanding the specific factors driving drug abuse in this context is essential for developing effective prevention and support strategies.

The study also seeks to explore students' awareness of the risks associated with drug use, their attitudes toward substance abuse, and the availability of institutional support. By combining quantitative data on incidence rates with qualitative insights from

student experiences, the research aims to present a holistic view of the problem. Ultimately, the findings will contribute to the broader discourse on youth health and education policy in Nigeria.

In conclusion, drug abuse among students in tertiary institutions is a complex and urgent issue that demands attention from educators, policymakers, and health professionals. This study, centered on Wukari, offers a timely and context-specific investigation into the prevalence of and drivers of substance abuse among students. Its outcomes are expected to guide future interventions and promote healthier, more supportive academic environments.

Cannabis (Marijuana)

Cannabis is the most widely abused illicit drug in Nigeria, with approximately 10.6% of the population reporting lifetime use (UNODC, 2021). It is often smoked for its psychoactive effects, which include euphoria, altered perception, and relaxation. However, chronic use has been linked to mental health disorders such as schizophrenia, especially among young users (Oweibia et al., 2025). Despite its illegality, cannabis cultivation is widespread across Nigerian states like Edo, Ondo, and Ogun (MSN Africa, 2025). The NDLEA maintains a firm stance against local consumption, citing public health risks and social consequences.

Tramadol

Tramadol, a synthetic opioid prescribed for pain relief, has become a major drug of abuse in Nigeria. Its misuse is prevalent among youth seeking euphoric highs and increased stamina, especially in manual labor and sexual performance contexts (Premium Times Nigeria, 2020). Nigeria accounts for 90% of global tramadol seizures in recent years, highlighting its central role in the African tramadol crisis (UNODC, 2021). Long-term abuse can lead to dependence, seizures, and respiratory depression (Oweibia et al., 2025).

Codeine-Based Syrups

Codeine-containing cough syrups are commonly abused for their sedative and euphoric effects. Youths often mix them with soft drinks, creating a cocktail known as "purple drank" (NAFDAC, 2013). Addiction develops rapidly, leading to physical dependence and withdrawal symptoms. The National Agency for Food and Drug

Administration and Control (NAFDAC) has issued alerts and tightened regulations to curb the widespread misuse (Oweibia et al., 2025).

Alcohol

Alcohol is legal but widely abused in Nigeria, especially among adolescents and young adults. Nigeria has one of the highest rates of alcohol use in sub-Saharan Africa, with alcohol-related deaths accounting for over 29% of fatalities, including 50% of road traffic accidents (Agwogie, 2022). Despite its social acceptance, excessive consumption leads to liver disease, mental health issues, and risky behaviors (SSPH+, 2021).

Cocaine

Cocaine abuse is more prevalent in urban centers and among affluent youth. It is often snorted or injected for its stimulant effects, such as increased energy and confidence (Oweibia et al., 2025). However, it poses severe risks including cardiovascular complications, addiction, and psychosis. The NDLEA continues to intercept cocaine shipments, but its availability remains a concern (UNODC, 2021).

Heroin

Heroin, though less common than other drugs, is present in Nigeria's drug landscape. It is typically injected or smoked and leads to rapid dependence. Users experience intense euphoria followed by sedation, but long-term use results in tolerance, withdrawal, and increased risk of infectious diseases like HIV (SSPH+, 2021; Oweibia et al., 2025).

Methamphetamine (Crystal Meth / Mkpurummiri)

Methamphetamine use has surged, particularly in southeastern Nigeria. Known locally as "Mkpurummiri," it is smoked or injected and produces intense euphoria, hyperactivity, and aggression (BMC Public Health, 2024). Prolonged use leads to severe psychological issues including paranoia, hallucinations, and violent behavior. Nigeria has become a significant meth producer, with clandestine labs dismantled by NDLEA (UNODC, 2021).

Rohypnol and Diazepam

Rohypnol and diazepam are prescription sedatives misused for their calming and sleep-inducing effects. Rohypnol is notorious as a "date-rape" drug due to its ability to incapacitate victims (Public Health Nigeria, 2022). These drugs are often crushed and

snorted or mixed with other substances, leading to dangerous interactions and dependency (Oweibia et al., 2025).

Synthetic Drugs (e.g., Black Mamba)

Synthetic cannabinoids like Black Mamba mimic marijuana but are far more potent and unpredictable. Users report hallucinations, convulsions, and zombie-like states (Pulse Nigeria, 2017). These drugs are often made from dried herbs sprayed with chemicals, making them difficult to regulate. Public health experts warn of their growing popularity and devastating effects (Oweibia et al., 2025).

This study aims to determine the incidence of drug abuse among students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, identify the most abused substances, and explore the socio-demographic factors influencing drug use. The findings will inform policy interventions and campus-based prevention strategies.

Background

Tertiary institutions are environments where students experience newfound independence, exposure to diverse peer groups, and academic stress—factors that may contribute to experimentation with drugs (Eze et al., 2021; Olayinka et al., 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines drug abuse as the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs, which can lead to dependence and adverse health outcomes (WHO, 2022).

In Nigeria, the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) has reported a surge in youth involvement with substances such as cannabis, tramadol, codeine-based syrups, and methamphetamine (NDLEA, 2022). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found that approximately 14.3 million Nigerians aged 15–64 had used drugs in 2020, with a significant proportion being students in tertiary institutions (UNODC, 2021). Recent studies estimate that between 28% and 35% of students in Nigerian universities and polytechnics have engaged in some form of drug use (Ajibola & Oluwatusin, 2024; Kolade et al., 2024).

The most abused substances among students include cannabis, alcohol, tramadol, and codeine (Adebayo & Yusuf, 2021; Olatunde et al., 2022). These substances are often easily accessible and are sometimes misused under the guise of academic enhancement or recreational relief. Factors such as peer influence, poor parental supervision, socio-

economic challenges, and exposure to urban drug markets have been identified as key drivers of student drug abuse (Odejide, 2006; Akinyemi et al., 2021; Yusuf et al., 2020).

The consequences of drug abuse among students are profound. Academically, drug use has been linked to poor performance, absenteeism, and increased dropout rates (Umar et al., 2025; Egbule et al., 2021). Psychologically, students who abuse drugs are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Ojo et al., 2022; Akinwale et al., 2020). Socially, drug abuse contributes to risky behaviors such as unsafe sexual practices, violence, and criminal activity (Oke et al., 2021; Nwankwo et al., 2022).

Despite these risks, many Nigerian tertiary institutions lack comprehensive drug education programs, mental health support services, and effective prevention strategies (NDLEA, 2022; WHO, 2020). Addressing this gap is critical to safeguarding the well-being and academic success of students.

Objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to investigate the incidence and impact of drug abuse among students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Determine the incidence rate of drug abuse among students in tertiary institutions. This involves quantifying the proportion of students who have engaged in the use of illicit or psychoactive substances, either experimentally or habitually, within a defined academic period.

2. Identify the most abused substances among the student population. The study will catalog the types of drugs frequently used, including but not limited to cannabis, tramadol, codeine-based syrups, alcohol, and other emerging synthetic drugs.

3. Explore socio-demographic correlates of drug use. This objective examines how factors such as age, gender, academic level, living arrangements, parental background, and socio-economic status influence the likelihood of drug abuse.

4. Assess the impact of drug abuse on academic performance and mental health. The study will evaluate how substance use affects students' academic outcomes (e.g., GPA, attendance, retention) and psychological well-being (e.g., anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation).

5. Recommend institutional and policy-level interventions to mitigate drug abuse. Based on the findings, the study will propose evidence-based strategies for tertiary institutions, government agencies, and stakeholders to implement preventive and rehabilitative measures.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional descriptive design integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to assess the prevalence, patterns, and determinants of drug abuse among students in tertiary institutions. The cross-sectional nature allowed data collection at a single point in time, while the mixed-methods approach enabled triangulation of findings for enhanced validity and depth of understanding (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Quantitative data was collected through structured questionnaires to generate statistical insights into drug use behaviors, while qualitative data were obtained via focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) to explore contextual and experiential dimensions of substance abuse.

Study Area

The study was carried out in Taraba State, Nigeria, across three distinct tertiary institutions to ensure a diverse academic representation: a federal university known for its expansive, research-driven environment; a polytechnic specializing in technical and vocational education; and a college of education dedicated to teacher training and pedagogical development. This multi-institutional approach provided a comprehensive perspective on the research topic, capturing insights from varied educational contexts.

These institutions were purposively selected to reflect diversity in academic orientation, student demographics, and institutional culture. Abuja, being the Federal Capital Territory, presents a unique blend of urban exposure, socio-economic diversity, and access to illicit substances, making it a relevant setting for this investigation (NDLEA, 2022).

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised undergraduate students aged 16 to 30 years enrolled in the selected institutions during the 2024/2025 academic session. This age range was chosen based on the NDLEA's classification of youth vulnerability to substance abuse (UNODC, 2021).

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation across faculties, departments, gender, and academic levels. The sampling process involved:

Dividing the student population into strata based on faculty and level.

Randomly selecting participants from each stratum using student enrollment lists.

Ensuring gender balance and inclusion of students from both on-campus and off-campus residences.

A total of 500 students were selected, with sample size determined using Cochran's formula for prevalence studies, assuming a 30% estimated prevalence rate, 95% confidence level, and 5% margin of error (Cochran, 1977).

Data Collection Instruments

Three instruments were used for data collection:

1. **Structured Questionnaire**

Sections included socio-demographic data, drug use history, frequency and type of substances used, academic performance indicators, and mental health screening (using validated scales such as PHQ-9 and GAD-7).

Pre-tested on 30 students from a non-participating institution to ensure reliability and clarity.

Sample Structured Questionnaire: Drug Abuse Among Tertiary Students

Section A: Socio-Demographic Information

1. Age: _____
2. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other
3. Marital Status: ☐ Single ☐ Married ☐ Other

4. Institution: _____

5. Faculty/Department: _____

6. Level of Study: ☐ 100 ☐ 200 ☐ 300 ☐ 400 ☐ 500

7. Residence: ☐ On-campus ☐ Off-campus

8. Religion: ☐ Christianity ☐ Islam ☐ Other

9. Parental Occupation: _____

10. Monthly Allowance: ₦_____

Section B: Substance Use History

11. Have you ever used any psychoactive substance (e.g., cannabis, tramadol, codeine, alcohol)?

☐ Yes ☐ No

12. If yes, at what age did you first use a substance? _____

13. Which of the following substances have you used? (Check all that apply)

☐ Cannabis

☐ Tramadol

☐ Codeine-based cough syrup

☐ Alcohol

☐ Cigarettes

☐ Methamphetamine

☐ Others (please specify): _____

14. How frequently do you use these substances?

☐ Daily ☐ Weekly ☐ Monthly ☐ Occasionally ☐ No longer use

15. What motivated your substance use? (Check all that apply)

☐ Peer pressure

☐ Academic stress

☐ Curiosity

☐ Family issues

☐ Recreational

☐ Other: _____

Section C: Academic Impact

16. Has your academic performance been affected by substance use?

☐ Yes ☐ No

17. If yes, how?

☐ Poor grades

☐ Missed classes

☐ Failed courses

☐ Dropped out temporarily

☐ Other: _____

18. Current GPA (if known): _____

Section D: Mental Health Indicators

19. Do you often feel anxious or depressed?

☐ Yes ☐ No

20. Have you ever experienced suicidal thoughts?

☐ Yes ☐ No

21. Do you feel your substance use is linked to your emotional state?

☐ Yes ☐ No

22. Have you ever sought help for mental health or substance use?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, from whom?

☐ Counselor ☐ Friend ☐ Religious leader ☐ Health professional ☐ Other: _____

Section E: Institutional Support

23. Are you aware of any drug education or counseling services in your institution?

☐ Yes ☐ No

24. Have you ever participated in any drug awareness program?

☐ Yes ☐ No

25. What kind of support would you like your institution to provide?

☐ Counseling services

☐ Peer support groups

☐ Awareness campaigns

☐ Stricter regulations

☐ Other: _____

2. **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)**

- Conducted with student union leaders, peer educators, and hostel representatives.
- Explored perceptions, motivations, and social dynamics surrounding drug use.

3. **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)**

- Held with school counselors, health officers, and NDLEA officials.
- Provided expert insights into institutional responses and policy gaps.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committees of the participating institutions. All participants provided written informed consent after being briefed on the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and voluntary participation. Anonymity was maintained by assigning unique codes to each respondent, and data were stored securely in password-protected files.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 25:

- Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) summarized demographic and drug use variables.

- Inferential statistics (Chi-square tests, logistic regression) examined associations between drug use and socio-demographic factors.

Qualitative data from FGDs and KIIs were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic content analysis. Emerging themes were coded and interpreted to complement quantitative findings and provide contextual depth.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category/Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	280	56.0
	Female	220	44.0
Age Group	16–20 years	150	30.0
	21–25 years	270	54.0
	26–30 years	80	16.0
Residence	On-campus	190	38.0
	Off campus	310	62.0

Table 2: Drug Use Patterns and Academic Impact

Variable	Category/Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Ever Used Drugs	Yes	142	28.4
	No	358	71.6
Common Substances Used	Cannabis	64	45.1 (of users)
	Tramadol	43	30.3
	Codeine-based syrup	26	18.3
	Alcohol	92	64.8
	Cigarettes	35	24.6
Frequency of Use	Daily	21	14.8
	Weekly	38	26.8
	Monthly	29	20.4
	Occasionally	54	38.0
Motivation for Use	Peer pressure	78	54.9
	Academic stress	39	27.5
	Curiosity	51	35.9
	Family issues	22	15.5
	Recreational	33	23.2

Variable	Category/Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Academic Impact	Poor grades	67	47.2
	Missed classes	58	40.8
	Failed courses	34	23.9
	Dropped out temporarily	12	8.5

Table 3: Mental Health and Institutional Support

Variable	Category/Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Mental Health Indicators	Anxiety/Depression	88	62.0
	Suicidal thoughts	19	13.4
	Emotional link to drug use	76	53.5
Help-Seeking Behavior	Sought help	41	28.9
	Did not seek help	101	71.1
Awareness of Institutional Support	Aware of drug education/counseling services	112	22.4
	Not aware	388	77.6
Preferred Support Options	Counseling services	215	43.0
	Peer support groups	134	26.8
	Awareness campaigns	178	35.6
	Stricter regulations	96	19.2

Qualitative Results

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with a total of 15 participants drawn from three tertiary institutions. The group comprised 5 student union leaders, 4 peer educators, and 6 hostel representatives. These individuals were selected based on their active roles in student welfare, peer engagement, and residential life, providing diverse perspectives on the social dynamics and motivations surrounding drug use among students.

Table 4: Emerging Themes and Insights: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Theme	Key Findings
Peer Influence	Most participants agreed that peer pressure is a major driver of drug initiation. Students often start using substances to fit in or gain social acceptance.
Stress and Academic Pressure	Many students resort to stimulants (e.g., tramadol, caffeine mixtures) during exams to stay awake or manage anxiety.

Theme	Key Findings
Curiosity and Experimentation	Hostel representatives noted that students experiment with drugs out of boredom or curiosity, especially in unsupervised environments.
Accessibility of Substances	Drugs are reportedly easy to obtain near campuses, especially from local vendors and unregulated pharmacies.
Gender Dynamics	Female students are less likely to use drugs openly but may engage in hidden use, often influenced by romantic partners.
Lack of Awareness	Peer educators highlighted that many students are unaware of the long-term consequences of drug abuse.
Suggested Interventions	Participants recommended peer-led campaigns, anonymous counseling services, and stricter hostel monitoring.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with a total of seven informants selected for their professional expertise and institutional roles. The participants included three school counselors, two campus health officers, and two officials from the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA). These individuals provided critical insights into the institutional responses to student drug abuse, highlighting existing support structures, enforcement challenges, and policy gaps within tertiary institutions.

Table 5: Emerging Themes and Insights: Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Theme	Key Findings
Institutional Gaps	Counselors reported a lack of structured drug education programs and limited mental health resources.
Policy Enforcement Challenges	NDLEA officials noted that enforcement near campuses is difficult due to informal drug networks and lack of cooperation from some institutions.
Health Impacts	Health officers observed an increase in cases of anxiety, depression, and substance-induced psychosis among students.
Stigma and Help-Seeking	Many students avoid seeking help due to fear of stigmatization or disciplinary action.
Need for Collaboration	Informants emphasized the importance of collaboration between institutions, NDLEA, and community leaders.
Recommendations	Suggested interventions included mandatory orientation sessions on drug risks, confidential reporting systems, and integration of drug education into curricula.

These qualitative findings complement quantitative data by providing deeper insight into the social dynamics, institutional challenges, and potential solutions surrounding drug abuse in tertiary institutions.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the incidence, patterns, and consequences of drug abuse among students in tertiary institutions in Taraba State, Nigeria. The findings revealed that 28.4% of surveyed students had engaged in drug use, with alcohol, cannabis, and tramadol being the most abused substances. These results are consistent with national data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2021), which reported that approximately 30% of Nigerian youth aged 15–64 had used drugs, with cannabis and opioids being the most prevalent.

The use of a mixed-methods approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the issue. Quantitative data provided prevalence rates and demographic correlations, while qualitative insights from focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) illuminated the social dynamics, institutional gaps, and policy challenges surrounding student drug abuse.

The high prevalence of alcohol (64.8%) and cannabis (45.1%) use among students aligns with previous studies conducted in Nigerian tertiary institutions (Adebayo & Yusuf, 2021; Olatunde et al., 2022). Tramadol and codeine-based cough syrups were also frequently reported, reflecting the growing trend of prescription drug misuse among youth (Adebisi et al., 2021). The accessibility of these substances—often through unregulated vendors near campuses—was a recurring theme in FGDs, corroborating findings by Akinyemi et al. (2021) on urban drug market exposure.

Socio-Demographic Correlates: The study found that male students and those aged 21–25 were significantly more likely to engage in drug use. This demographic pattern is consistent with earlier research by Eze et al. (2021) and Odejide (2006), which identified young adult males as the most vulnerable group. Students living off campus reported higher rates of drug use, likely due to reduced parental supervision and increased exposure to peer networks and urban influences (Yusuf et al., 2020).

Interestingly, FGDs revealed that female students may engage in drug use covertly, often influenced by romantic partners or social circles. This hidden pattern of use among females has been documented in other studies, suggesting that gender-based stigma may lead to underreporting (Oke et al., 2021).

Motivations and Social Dynamics**:** Peer pressure emerged as the most cited motivator for drug initiation, followed by academic stress and curiosity. These findings echo those of

Olayinka et al. (2020), who found that students often resort to stimulants during exam periods to enhance concentration or cope with anxiety. FGDs emphasized the role of hostel environments in fostering experimentation, especially in unsupervised settings.

The social normalization of drug use within certain student groups was also highlighted. Peer educators noted that some students perceive drug use as a rite of passage or a symbol of maturity. This cultural framing of substance use has been observed in other African contexts and poses a challenge to prevention efforts (Odejide, 2006).

Academic and Mental Health Consequences: Drug abuse was strongly associated with academic decline. Students who used drugs reported poor grades, missed classes, and failed courses. These outcomes are consistent with the findings of Umar et al. (2025), who demonstrated a negative correlation between substance use and academic performance. The cognitive impairments and motivational deficits linked to drug use are likely to contribute to these academic challenges.

Mental health indicators were equally alarming. Among drug users, 62% reported symptoms of anxiety or depression, and 13.4% had experienced suicidal thoughts. These figures align with studies by Ojo et al. (2022) and Akinwale et al. (2020), which found high rates of psychological distress among student drug users. KIIs with health professionals confirmed an increase in substance-induced psychosis and emotional instability on campuses.

Despite these risks, only 28.9% of users had sought help, and 71.1% had never accessed counseling or mental health services. This reluctance to seek support may be driven by stigma, fear of disciplinary action, or lack of awareness—barriers that have been widely documented in Nigerian tertiary institutions (Nwankwo et al., 2022).

KIIs revealed significant institutional gaps in drug education, mental health support, and enforcement. Counselors reported limited resources and absence of structured intervention programs. NDLEA officials highlighted challenges in monitoring drug distribution near campuses due to informal networks and lack of institutional cooperation.

These findings underscore the need for multi-stakeholder collaboration. WHO (2020) recommends integrating drug prevention into school curricula, establishing confidential support systems, and training educators to identify at-risk students. Peer-led

initiatives, as suggested in FGDs, may also be effective in shifting campus culture and reducing stigma.

Furthermore, the low awareness (22.4%) of available counseling services suggests a communication gap between institutions and students. Addressing this requires proactive outreach, digital engagement, and inclusion of mental health resources in student orientation programs.

Compared to similar studies in sub-Saharan Africa, the incidence rate in this study is moderately high but not exceptional. For instance, Odejide (2006) reported rates ranging from 20% to 40% across African universities. However, the increasing use of synthetic opioids like tramadol and codeine in Nigeria marks a shift from traditional substances to more dangerous pharmaceuticals (Adebisi et al., 2021).

The qualitative depth of this study adds value by capturing the lived experiences of students and institutional actors. While previous studies have focused primarily on prevalence, this research provides a holistic view of the motivations, consequences, and systemic challenges of drug abuse in tertiary education.

CONCLUSION

Drug abuse among students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria represents a multifaceted public health crisis with far-reaching implications for individual well-being, academic achievement, and national development. The findings from existing literature and national reports underscore the alarming prevalence of psychoactive substance use among youth, with cannabis, tramadol, codeine-based syrups, alcohol, methamphetamine, and other prescription and synthetic drugs being the most abused. These substances are often consumed in response to academic stress, peer pressure, socio-economic hardship, and inadequate parental supervision, exacerbated by the absence of robust institutional support systems.

The consequences of drug abuse are profound, ranging from poor academic performance and mental health disorders to risky behaviors such as violence and unsafe sexual practices. The normalization of substance uses in some social circles and the easy accessibility of drugs—both legal and illicit—further compound the problem. Despite

efforts by agencies like NDLEA and NAFDAC, enforcement alone has proven insufficient without complementary strategies in education, counseling, and community engagement.

This study highlights the urgent need for a comprehensive, multi-sectoral response that includes preventive education, early intervention, and rehabilitation services within tertiary institutions. Universities and colleges must prioritize student mental health and substance abuse prevention through curriculum integration, peer-led outreach, and confidential counseling services. Furthermore, policy makers should strengthen regulatory frameworks and invest in youth-centered public health campaigns to address the root causes of drug abuse.

Ultimately, tackling drug abuse among Nigerian students requires a collective commitment from educators, health professionals, families, and government agencies. Only through sustained and coordinated efforts can we safeguard the future of Nigeria's youth and foster a healthier, more resilient academic environment.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no competing interests related to the content or publication of this manuscript.

Authors' Declaration

The authors certify that the research presented is entirely original and has not been published elsewhere. They assume full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work, including any claims or implications arising from its content.

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