

Portrayal of Substance-Use by Social Media Celebrities and its Influence on Substance Abuse among Students of Enugu State University of Science and Technology

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Abstract

Drug abuse over the years has become a social and health dilemma in Nigeria and across the world. There is rising concern about the link between social media and celebrity's social media posts and the incidence of substance misuse and addiction among young people. Specifically, the study ascertained the usage of drugs among Nigerian youths and the influence of social media on drug misuse. A sample of 384 out of 18,702, undergraduate students at the Enugu State University of Science and Technology participated in the study. The cross-sectional survey research design was adopted to collect quantitative data using the questionnaire structured by the researchers. Three research experts validated the instrument and thereafter, was pre-tested on a sample of 20 respondents. Microsoft Excel was used for data analysis using the Relative Importance Index (RII) formula where values closer to one (1) are considered of higher importance. The findings of the study indicate that alcohol was ranked first (RII = 0.40) as the most used substance. The daily use (RII = 0.66) of substances among the respondents shows a high rate of substance abuse. Though the students were mostly introduced to substance use by their peers (RII = 0.54), however, a good number of the respondents stated they got validation for continued substance use through celebrities on social media (RII = 0.50). Based on the findings, the study recommended the need to organize regular seminars, workshops and conferences targeted at addressing substance abuse in higher institutions as its prevalence among the youth is quite high.

Keywords: Substance, Abuse, Social, Media, Nigerian, Influence

Introduction

The problem of substance abuse, especially among youths, is a silent epidemic and a major public health problem globally. A total of 270 million people (about 5.5% of the world's

population) are estimated to be using psychoactive substances globally in 2021 (World Drug Report, 2021). Apart from cannabis, there is a growing abuse of synthetic drugs that were once strange to the Nigerian environment

which include but are not limited to amphetamine, cocaine, heroin, glue, methamphetamine, paint thinner, cement, animal excreta, spirit, cough syrup made with codeine and so on. Within the last decade, the involvement of Nigerian youths in drug abuse has taken a wide and frightening dimension (Eze, 2023).

Adolescent substance abuse is a major public health concern in Nigeria, having far-reaching effects on both individuals and society. The susceptibility of Nigerian youth to substance abuse is influenced by numerous factors including socio-economic factors like poverty, unemployment, and limited access to education (Akpan et al., 2024). Substance abuse not only compromises individual health and well-being but also undermines the productivity and stability of communities, hindering the country's overall socio-economic progress (World Health Organisation, 2018). Studies conducted in 2021 by the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) revealed that adolescents and youths of both sexes and between the ages of 13 – 35 years constitute the high-risk group for drug abuse in society (Eze, 2023). Also, the Rapid Situation Assessment of Drug problem in Nigeria conducted by NDLEA in collaboration with the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crimes (UNODC) revealed that the vulnerable groups for drug abuse include students, the unemployed, artisans (craftsmen), commercial sex workers, long-distance drivers, and street children (Eze, 2023). The National Survey Data (NSD, 2020) raised the

alarm that 50% of youths between the ages of 18 and 35 years consumed alcohol weekly, and 25.5% drank alcohol daily. Also, alcohol addiction is associated with several risk factors and harms such as delinquent behaviour, economic deprivation, criminal behaviour, impulsive-thoughts, anti-social behaviour, vocational failure and social conflict (Hawkins, 2019).

Young people, including university students, use social media for various purposes such as sharing academic information and creating social networks. However, social media can also be linked to negative health outcomes, such as poor mental health, addictive behaviour and norms regarding alcohol, tobacco and other drugs (Gikas & Grants, 2013; Henzel & Hakansson, 2021; Ilakkuvan et al., 2019). As of 2022, Nigeria had nearly 84 million internet users. This figure is projected to grow to 117 million internet users in 2027. Moreover, internet penetration amounted to over 38 per cent of the population in 2022 and is set to reach 48 per cent in 2027 (Statistia, 2022). Social media use amongst teens is nearly universal today. About 92% of adolescent user's report checking social networking sites more than once a day. Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat are the top social media platforms for young adults (Hilliard, 2025). About 21.75 million Nigerians are active users of Facebook accounts as of January 2023, and the empirical analyses of the contents and messages posted on Facebook have found that alcohol-related contents on social networks where youths interact convey positive attitudes towards alcohol

addiction (Henriksen, 2021; Hennessy & Tanner-Smith, 2018). A study conducted by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University found that teenagers who regularly use popular social media outlets were more likely to drink, use drugs, and buy tobacco than adolescents who either did not use social media or used it less frequently (Hilliard, 2025). Similarly, Ng Fat et al. (2021) discovered that a positive relationship existed between social media usage and alcohol addiction among youths and young adults. A recent study shows that 75% of teenagers seeing photos on social networking sites of other young people smoking weed or drinking alcohol encourages them to experiment in the same way (Hilliard, 2025). Abdulmalik and Fadahunsi (2020) added that several studies have underscored the alarming rates of substance abuse among youths across the country, necessitating a deeper understanding of the multifaceted factors contributing to this phenomenon.

Substance use is rampant and often glorified by celebrities and others on social media. There have been reports of social media being used as a strategy for connecting sellers to buyers (Yang et al., 2016). Celebrities promote drug and alcohol use on social media sites, which young people see and are often encouraged by. Celebrity advertising makes smoking and drinking seem like fun, cool activities, which can subtly pressure teens to experiment with the same products. Many digital advertisements use celebrities, music industry personnel, and attractive young models to promote their

products, all of which are effective marketing strategies among children and teenagers. Research has revealed that advertising may be responsible for up to 30% of adolescent tobacco and alcohol use (Hilliard, 2025).

Several studies have been conducted to underscore the awareness, usage and prevalence of substance abuse among the youth while evaluating the relationship between social media and substance abuse among the youths. Such studies include that of Muhia (2021) on the impact of peer influence on substance abuse among students in day secondary schools using a descriptive research design in Thika Sub-County, Kenya. It was discovered that (86.4%) of respondents agree that alcohol is commonly abused by youths in the community. In addition, (84.4%) of the respondents agree that peer influence contributes to drug abuse among the students. Idowu et al. (2023) conducted a substance abuse among secondary students in Ogbomoso, Oyo State, using a cross-sectional study design. They found a high prevalence of alcohol and substance abuse despite the respondents' good knowledge and negative attitudes towards substance use. Furthermore, friends (82.4) were the people who introduced the respondents to drugs. Akpan et al. (2024) used a cross-sectional descriptive survey design to obtain a quantitative description of the prevalence and factors contributing to drug and alcohol use among young in South-South Nigeria. The finding reveals that 93.1% identified negative peer influence as a factor that influences drug and alcohol abuse. Atusingwize et al. (2022) conducted a cross-sectional study

among 996 undergraduate students at Makerere University, Uganda and found that alcohol use was stronger with social media usage (OR=6.46, CI: 4.04-10.30). Olanrewaju et al. (2022) conducted a cross-sectional study aimed at assessing the prevalence and awareness of drug and substance abuse among undergraduates in four southwestern universities in Nigeria. The study identified alcohol as the most commonly abused substance by 61.5% of respondents.

Abuka and Adesina (2024) using a mixed-methods approach, provided a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between social media use and substance abuse among the youth. The study found that 65% of the respondents use alcohol. Additionally, a significant correlation between social media usage and substance abuse (0.52) was found by Eze et al. (2024) on social media usage and drug abuse among youths in Port Harcourt. They used a survey research method using a questionnaire to elicit the response of the 400 respondents sampled. The study discovered that social media platforms (Facebook-40.8%, WhatsApp-40.3%, Instagram-40.7%, X-46.7%, and TikTok-41.9%) promote drug use among youths in Port Harcourt. Russell et al. (2021) captured the 100 most popular videos including, the #alcohol hashtag on the popular social networking site TikTok. The finding reveals that a vast majority (98%) of videos expressed pro-alcohol sentiment. Many of the videos (72%) included liquor. Consuming multiple drinks quickly was depicted in more than half of the videos (61%). Riordan et al. 2019; Noel. 2020 and Russell et al. (2021) concluded that alcohol-related

social media posts tend to portray drinking positively, often glamorizing and normalizing heavy drinking behaviours (e.g., intoxication, blacking out), while rarely depicting any alcohol-related negative consequences.

Despite ongoing campaigns on substance abuse across the globe, drug and alcohol abuse has been on the increase, leading to alcohol and drug addictions among the youths. The studies conducted on these topics within Africa were from countries such as Uganda, Kenya, and Nigeria. The research in Nigeria focused mostly on the southwest and south-south regions. Geographically, a similar study in the Southeast geopolitical zone is required, and conceptually, there is a need to look beyond usage, prevalence, and awareness to evaluate celebrities' social media portrayals of substance use to determine their influence on substance addiction among teenagers. Hence, this study examined the portrayal of substance use by social media celebrities and its influence on substance abuse among students of Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT).

Objectives of the Study

Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Examine the use of substances among the students of Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT).
2. Evaluate the influence of social media celebrities' portrayal of substance use on the substance use habits of ESUT students.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on social learning and cultivation theories. Social learning theory, proposed by Albert Bandura (1977) suggests that people learn behaviours through observation, imitation, and modelling. When young people see celebrities who they consider role models, glamorizing substance use, they may perceive it as acceptable or even desirable. Similarly, the cultivation theory propounded by George Gerbner (1969), posits that prolonged exposure to media content shapes individuals' perceptions of reality. If celebrities and social media users are consistently shown using substances without consequences, young audiences may develop a skewed understanding of drug use.

Methodology

Design of the study: The study adopted the cross-sectional survey research design. Cross-sectional surveys analyze data from a population at one moment in time (Wang & Cheng, 2020).

Population of the study: The population of the study comprised 18,702 undergraduate students (ESUT Academic Planning Unit, 2021).

Sample for the study: The sample size of 384 was statistically determined using the formula provided by Aroaye (2004). According to Aroaye (2004), this formula can be used where the population size is greater than 10,000.

Formula:
$$N = \frac{Z^2 P_2}{d^2}$$

Where:

N = desired sampled size (where the population is greater than 10,000)

Z = the standard deviation, usually set at 1.96, since a significant level of 95% is used.

P = the proportion in the target population estimated to have particular characteristics under study. Fifty percent (0.50) was used since there was no known estimate.

D = degree of accuracy desired

Sampling Technique: The purposive sampling technique was used to select the Agbani Campus of the Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT). The Agbani campus was selected for the study because it is the main campus of the university, housing 12 out of the 13 faculties.

Media discussions about the rising cases of drug use among youths in the Enugu metropolis have often spotlighted students of the Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT), prompting the Nigeria Police Force, Enugu State Command, to charge ESUT students to shun cultism and social vices such as drug use (Joseph, 2024), thereby making it imperative to explore this particular university.

Instrument for data collection: The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire. It contains 12 items, 4 items in the demographic section, which gathered background information about the respondents and 8 in the psychographic section, which focused on substance use and the influence of celebrities' portrayal of substance use among students of ESUT. The psychographic section comprised eight multiple-choice questions designed to elicit the responses of the respondents. The response format varied based on each question but

primarily used a five-point multiple-choice questions scale. The questions had a rating scale of 1 to 10, depending on the number of available options per question.

Validity of the Instrument and Test of Reliability:

The instrument was validated by three research experts, two from the Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka and one from the Measurement and Evaluation Unit, Science Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. They assessed the items for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives. Based on their feedback, necessary modifications were made to improve content validity. Thereafter, the instrument was pre-tested on a sample of 20 respondents. The data collected from this pilot test was subjected to reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient method. The result yielded a coefficient of 0.803, indicating that the instrument is 80% reliable and suitable for the main study.

Data Collection Procedure: Three hundred and forty-eight copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the students at the Agbani campus. The distribution and collection of each batch of copies of the questionnaire was done within a 24-hour time frame. However, the distribution and collection of the entire copies of the questionnaire took four days. All (100%) of the copies of the questionnaire were collected. The process was completed with the help of three research assistants.

Data and Statistical Analysis: The quantitative data obtained from the distributed questionnaire was analysed

and presented using the Relative Importance Index (RII). The Relative Importance Index (RII) was employed to determine and rank the most significant factors based on respondents' perceptions. The RII values range from 0 to 1, with values closer to 1 indicating higher perceived importance. Using Microsoft Excel, RII was utilized to identify and rank the most critical issues related to first usage, frequency of usage, celebrity's portrayal of substance, and types of campaigns celebrities promulgate as perceived by participants. Additionally, the study, for a substance intake to be considered an abuse it has to be used frequently (daily). Only 271 out of the 384 respondents who acknowledged substance use were included in the final analysis. The 113 non-substance users were removed from the analysis because their responses would not add to the study's primary objectives.

Results

The findings of the study are presented below:

Analyses of the Demographic Information

Demographic findings show that most students were male (63%) and the rest were women (37%). They were mostly within the age range of 15-20 years, the others were between the ages of 21-25 years (35%), 26-30 years (6%), and 31-35 years (19%). A greater majority of the students were 200 level (38%), the others were in 100 level (33%), 300 level (20%) and 400 level (9%).

Use of substances among the respondents

The table below shows that alcohol (RII = 0.38) was the first substance the students used. Similarly, alcohol (RII = 0.40) is the substance that the students

use more at present. Many of the students used their preferred substance daily (RII = 0.66). Most of the students (RII = 0.54), were introduced to substance use by their peers.

Table 1: Analyses of the use of substances among the students of ESUT

First substance used	f	RII score	RII Ranking
Alcohol	102	0.38	1
Cigarettes/Shisha	84	0.31	2
Marijuana (Cannabis)	47	0.17	3
Codeine	38	0.14	4
Tramadol	-	-	-
Cocaine	-	-	-
Crystal Leth (<i>Mkpurummiri</i>)	-	-	-
Substances being used at present			
Alcohol	108	0.40	1
Cigarettes/Shisha	54	0.20	2
Marijuana (Cannabis)	40	0.15	3
Codeine	40	0.15	3
Tramadol	29	0.10	5
Cocaine	-	-	-
Crystal Leth (<i>Mkpurummiri</i>)	-	-	-
Frequency of substance use			
Very frequently (Daily)	179	0.66	1
Regularly (1-5 times a week)	92	0.34	2
Occasionally (1-3 times a month)	-	-	-
Rarely (Less than once a month)	-	-	-
Who introduced you to substance use			
Peers	146	0.54	1
Social media	80	0.29	2
Relatives	34	0.13	3
Parents	11	0.04	4

Influence of social media celebrities' portrayal of substance use on the substance use habits of the respondents

The table below shows that celebrity drug portrayals on social media had a high negative influence (RII = 0.56) on students' habits of substance use. It was

also discovered that repeated exposure to celebrities using drugs on social media had a high negative influence (RII = 0.75) on the likelihood of the students experimenting with substances. Additionally, the type of campaign celebrities promulgate about

substance abuse through their lifestyle and social media content was strong campaigns that negatively promote substance use (RII = 0.96) among the students. When asked about their

strongest source of validation for substance use, the students said that celebrity lifestyle/social media content (RII = 0.50) was the strongest source of validation for substance use.

Table 2: Influence of social media celebrities' portrayal of substance use on substance use habits among the respondents

Extent of celebrity influence on substance use	f	RII score	RII Ranking
High negative influence	151	0.56	1
Low negative influence	73	0.27	2
High positive influence	-	-	-
Low positive influence	47	0.17	3
Influence of repeated exposure to celebrities using drugs on the likelihood of experimenting with substances			
Strong negative influence	201	0.75	1
Low negative influence	68	0.25	2
Strong positive influence	-	-	-
Low positive influence	-	-	-
Types of celebrity campaigns about substance abuse in social media contents			
Strong negative campaign	260	0.96	1
Low negative campaign	11	0.04	2
Strong positive campaign	-	-	-
Low positive campaign	-	-	-
Strongest source of validation for substance use			
Celebrity lifestyle/Social media content	136	0.50	1
Movies/TV Shows/Music Videos	86	0.32	2
Peers/family	-	-	-
Personal experiment	49	0.18	3

Discussion of findings

The study examined the portrayal of substance use by social media celebrities and its influence on substance abuse among university students. The findings of the study were discussed based on the objectives of the study as follows:

The findings indicate that alcohol was the first substance the students used and the one they currently use most frequently. A greater proportion of the students consumed alcohol daily, suggesting abuse. According to

WHO (2024), no form of alcohol consumption is risk-free, making it even more dangerous when abused. Drinking alcohol is associated with risks of developing liver diseases, heart diseases, and various types of cancer. Early and frequent alcohol use can harm brain development, increase the likelihood of addiction, depression, and anxiety, diminish academic performance, and make individuals more vulnerable to unsafe sex and violence. The following findings align with those of other studies, such as that

of Muhia (2021), who found that 86.4% of respondents agree that alcohol is the most abused substance among youths in the community. Idowu et al. (2023) also found a high prevalence of alcohol and substance abuse despite the respondents' good knowledge and negative attitudes towards substance use. Olanrewaju et al. (2022) identified alcohol as the most abused substance by 61.5% of respondents. Abuka and Adesina (2024) found that 65% of respondents use alcohol.

Additional findings from this study showed that most students were introduced to substance use by their peers. The high frequency of substance-use among students, combined with the fact that many were introduced to it by their peers, presents a significant cause for concern. This suggests that peer groups can play crucial roles in the lifestyles of young people. The study by Obosi et al. (2022) revealed that friends predominantly (82.4%) introduced their respondents to drugs, and 84.4% of them agreed that peer influence contributes to drug abuse among students. Obosi et al. (2022) further noted that peer pressure and substance use can negatively affect young people's mental health. Additionally, Akpan et al. (2024) revealed that 93.1% of their study participants identified negative peer influence as a factor that affects drug and alcohol abuse.

The findings indicate that celebrity portrayals of substance use on social media have a significant negative influence on students' substance use habits. It was also discovered that repeated exposure to celebrities using drugs on social media greatly increases the likelihood of students

experimenting with substances. Additionally, the type of campaign celebrities promote regarding substance abuse through their lifestyle and social media content has a substantial negative impact on students. When asked about their strongest source of validation for substance use, the students reported that celebrity lifestyle/social media content was the most significant source of validation for substance use.

In their study, Atusingwize et al. (2022) similarly found that alcohol use was relatively high among university students, and alcohol use was stronger with social media usage (OR=6.46, CI: 4.04-10.30). Abuka and Adesina (2024) found a significant correlation between social media usage and substance abuse (0.52). Eze et al. (2024) also found that social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, X, and TikTok promote drug use among youths in Port Harcourt. Russell et al. (2021), in their study, revealed that most (98%) videos expressed pro-alcohol sentiments of which 72% included liquor. Consuming multiple drinks quickly was depicted in more than half (61%) of the videos.

These findings advance the social learning theory which posits that people learn behaviours through observation, imitation, and modelling. When young people observe celebrities who they regard as role models, glamorizing substance use, they may perceive it as acceptable or even desirable (Bandura, 1977). Similarly, the cultivation theory holds that continuous exposure to media content shapes people's perceptions of reality. If celebrities are consistently depicted

using substances without consequences, young followers may develop a distorted view of drug use (Gerbner, 1969).

Conclusion

The survey revealed a high rate of substance use among the university students sampled, with the majority reporting the use of psychoactive substances, most notably alcohol. The frequency of use is particularly concerning, as a significant proportion of the respondents admitted to daily consumption. Notably, peer influence emerged as the primary source of introduction to substance use. However, social media celebrities also play a considerable role by glamorizing, normalizing and validating substance use through their lifestyle portrayals and online content, thereby reinforcing harmful behaviours.

Recommendations

1. There is a need for the departments and faculties in universities across the country to organise regular seminars, workshops and conferences targeted at addressing substance abuse in higher institutions as its prevalence among the youth is quite high.
2. Social media platforms should tighten their content moderation standards to prevent exposure to substance-promoting content while amplifying anti-drug messages.
3. Celebrities should utilize their social media platforms to advocate against substance addiction rather than glamorize it, as they are idolized by young people and have a huge influence on their perception.

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