

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT AS FACTORS IN SUBSTANCE USE AMONG ADOLESCENT STUDENTS IN ABAKALIKI

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Abstract: The use of substance among adolescent students is widely reported, but the factors driving this are unclear. Recent reports of bullying in schools and general socioeconomic difficulties in Nigeria suggest a heightened psychological distress among students. Considering previous reports on the use of substance to assuage the experience of distress, we sought to determine whether psychological distress among adolescent students would be associated with the use of substance. We also examined social support as a viable social catalyst that would be negatively associated with substance use among adolescents. Using a cross-sectional design, this study investigated whether psychological distress and social support were associated with substance use. Participants were 375 students aged 11-19 years drawn from three government-run secondary schools in Abakaliki, Ebonyi State. Data was collected using Psychoactive Substance Use Questionnaire, Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, and Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support. Regression results revealed that psychological distress was positively associated with substance use ($\beta = .23, t = 4.61, p < .05$). Support from friends but not from family and significant others was negatively associated with substance use ($\beta = -.18, t = -2.16, p < .05$). The mean score of 5.95 (SD = 6.02) evidenced the rate of substance use among the students. These findings highlight the importance of addressing social issues that would lead to distress among students and the need for school policies that facilitate peer support in order to prevent substance use among adolescent students.

Keywords: Adolescent students, psychological distress, social support, substance use.

Introduction

Substance use among adolescents are growing in its higher rate calling for sustained attention and the need to discover its contributing factors. It is dramatically becoming endemic social behaviour among adolescents as it often hidden from public view. Considering the recent local arrest and extremely harmful effects of substances on adolescents' health and well-being, reports continue to show various rates, trends and patterns of substance use in countries and regions. For example, in the United States, alcohol was found to be the most often used substance, with 72.5% of users, followed by cigarettes 46.3% and marijuana 36.8%; In Ethiopia, the overall prevalence of any substance was 65.4%, while current substance usage among high school students was 47.9%; Alcohol remained the most commonly used drug, with long-term and

ongoing prevalence levels of 59% and 40.9%, respectively (Obadeji et al., 2020). In Nigeria, various percentages have been observed: in the Southeast, for example, the prevalence rate of any substance use among high school students was 32.9%, with alcohol being the most often used substance (29.0% users) and cocaine being the least (2.1%). In the Southwest, report on adolescents using psychoactive drugs varies from 15.0% to 69.3%, particularly when native psychoactive drugs like kola nut were included (NSDU, 2018; Manyike et al., 2016). Alcohol remained the most often used substance, followed by cigarettes (Mefoh et al., 2018). However, this pattern appears to be shifting, with tramadol now the second most used substance (Idowu et al., 2018).

Substance use is defined as the consumption, inhalation, injection, or

absorption of selected substances, potentially leading to dependence and adverse effects (Eze, 2006). Substance use among adolescents remains a pressing social concern for stakeholders due to its significant contribution to preventable morbidity and mortality during and after adolescence (World Health Organization, 2023). Consequences of substance use among adolescents if neglected can lead to many arrays of problems, ranging from poor peer relationships, bullying and victimization in schools (Orji & Eze, 2025). Substance use during adolescence can have lifelong health consequences. Research offers two key explanations for the link between substance use and psychological distress as a social response to a social condition between each other. Individuals, who are sensitive to stress, are more likely to use substance like drugs or alcohol in order to cope than people who are not experiencing high levels of tension or stress (Clifford et al., 2020). Psychological distress on the other hand is a subjective experience in the form of social condition, involving anxiety, sadness and other mental health symptoms that can result to negative self-perceptions, pessimistic views of one's social environment, and strained social relationships with others. Empirical evidence found comorbid psychological distress with marijuana dependent with a treatment seeking adults who reported that the most stated reasons for cannabis use was stress relief (Davis et al., 2022), which have supported the assumption that psychological distress would be associated with substance use.

Literature review also found association between psychological distress and substance

use. A study conducted by Livingston et al. (2024) found that psychological distress was a positive predictor of alcohol use, and that the association remained stable across survey waves, despite a decline in alcohol consumption. Anyanwu (2023) found a high prevalence of psychological distress, with 57% of adolescents scoring above the threshold on the K10. The Logistic regression analysis showed that psychological distress was significantly associated with substance use (AOR=2.06; 95% CI 1.49-2.84). Halladay et al. (2023) found that students who used substances consistently reported a higher prevalence of psychological distress, ranging from 1.2 to 2.7 times higher. Kumar et al. (2023) found that 26.9% of their participants used substances and that substance users had significantly higher mean score of anxiety ($P < 0.002$) and depression ($P < 0.002$) compared to non-users. Chang et al. (2022) probed the relationship between alcohol use, drug use, and psychological distress among postsecondary students at a large metropolitan Canadian university and found that heavy drinking and high-risk drug use were both linked to psychological distress. Tian et al. (2021) found a consistent association between alcohol use and medium to high levels of psychological distress.

The reciprocal relationships between social support with psychological distress and substance use among vulnerable adolescents remain understudied. Perceived social support is a critical factor considered in this study that may meddle the association of psychological distress with substance use among adolescents. It refers to the extent to which

adolescents believe they have access to social relationships and support (Singstad et al., 2021; Bello et al., 2022). Social support describes social and psychological assistance provided by others to an individual's environment (Zimet et al., 1988). This perception encompasses the physical and psychological comfort provided by friends, family, and other significant individuals. Studies indicate good protective effect of perceived social support with psychological distress. Acoba (2024) found that family and significant other support decreased perceived stress, increasing positive affect, and decreasing anxiety and depression. In the investigation by Maggo and Dutt (2023), the results revealed that, high perceived social support predicted positive affect, while low perceived social support predicted negative affect. Dadandi and Citak (2023) found that social support had a positive predictive effect on life satisfaction and a negative predictive effect on psychological distress. The work of Meuleman et al. (2024) found no significant concurrent, between-person, or cross-lagged associations between perceived social support and symptom distress. However, the autoregressive effects indicated that perceived social support from caregivers remained relatively stable over time, whereas symptom distress and support from significant others did not.

Using Sneed and Cohen theoretical proposition, the relationship between perceived social support and adolescents' functioning can be explained by two primary theoretical orientations: the stress-buffering model and the main effect model (Sneed & Cohen., 2014). The stress-buffering model

assumed that the positive benefits of social support aid children who are at-risk or under stress (Sneed & Cohen., 2014). On the other hand, according to the main effect model, social support may help all students, not just those under stress. The theory examined array of strains that increase the likelihood of substance use, and how the main effect and stress buffering model of perceived social support can serve as a moderator of the association of psychological distress with substance use. For instance, social support taking various forms, including affective support, instrumental support, emotional support, appraisal support, and informational support according to Rueger and Johnson (2024), can play a significant role in mediating the association of psychological distress with substance use. Thus, with its stress buffering strength, adolescents can find it easy to cope with life stressors that may lead to the use of substance.

There is no study reviewed that offer a concise moderating role of social support from family, friend, and significant others in the association of psychological distress with substance use. All the reviewed studies linked social support with psychological distress suggesting a good relationship between them. This present study aims to cover the gap by offering a comprehensive knowledge to the understanding of that role. Again, the studied population from the literature distanced the population of this study, this made their conclusion ungeneralizable to this population under study. Thus, this present study aims to systematically investigate the moderating role of social support from family, friends, and

significant others in the association of psychological distress with substance use among adolescent students in Abakaliki, Ebonyi state using a quantitative approach.

Problem of the study

Research indicates ongoing concerns about substance use among adolescents in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Studies have investigated the impact of drug abuse on the mental health of secondary school students and explored the link between substance use and criminal behavior among youth. A 2016 study described substance abuse patterns in Abakaliki, the state capital, stating usage of substance having alcohol (29%), Kolanut (24.5%), Coffee (15.6%), cigarette (14.4%), cannabis (5.2%) and cocaine (2.1%) (Anyanwu et al., 2016). These findings highlight the need for continued monitoring and intervention strategies to address this issue. The above research provided usage results offering a glimpse into the problem, suggesting a persistent need for attention to adolescent substance use in the region. The recent composite local arrest from the national drug law enforcement agency in Ebonyi state between January and March 2025, where a seizure of 55.947 kilogrammes of illicit substances and arrest of 112 suspects (85 males and 27 females aged between 16 and 76) (Ogar, 2025) also offer a recent glimpse into the problem and suggesting strong need for sustained attention to adolescents' substance use in schools.

Different social circumstances can contribute to adolescents' substance use. The effect of social factor of psychological distress

is an essential factor in determining how it contribute to substance use among adolescents. The adverse implications of psychological distress may result in the use of substance as an alternative to or as a coping mechanism to alleviate distressing condition. Some studies that found comorbid of psychological distress and substance use includes the work of Anyanwu (2023); Halladay et al. (2023); Kumar et al., (2023). Psychological distress can be more likely a consequence than a cause of using substances. This study suggests social mechanism of social support from family, friends, and significant others as a viable factor which its strong bond can meddle the adverse comorbidity between psychological distress and substance use among adolescents. There is a dearth of study on the moderating role of support from family, friends and significant others in the association between psychological distress and substance use. This study aims to look into that suggesting that perceived support from family, friends, and significant others may moderate the relationship between psychological distress and substance use emphasizing the point that adolescents with higher support from family, friends, and significant others might be less likely to experience psychological distress. The emphasis also includes that strong social support networks would foster strong supportive relationships within families, friends, and communities and may serve as a preventive measure against substance use. The contribution would inform social interventions aimed at strengthening social bonds to protect adolescents from harmful social behaviour

such as substance use, pushing this present study to ask the following research questions;

Research questions

1. Would psychological distress be significantly associated with substance use among adolescent students in Abakaliki?
2. Would social support from families, friends, significant others be significantly associated with substance use among adolescent students in Abakaliki?
3. Would social support from families, friends and significant others be significantly moderate the association of psychological distress with substance use among adolescent students in Abakaliki?

Objective of the study

This research will empirically investigate the moderating role of perceived social support on the relationship between psychological distress and substance use among adolescent students in Abakaliki. Specifically, the study aims to examine:

1. if psychological distress would significantly be associated with substance use among adolescent students in Abakaliki.
2. if social support from families, friends, and significant others would be significantly associated with substance use among adolescent students in Abakaliki.
3. if support from families, friends, significant others would significantly moderate the association of psychological distress with substance

use among adolescent students in Abakaliki.

By examining the interplay between these variables, the research would reveal potential effect of psychological distress on substance use. Additionally, it would investigate the protective effects of perceived social support on the relationship between psychological distress and substance use. Hence, this study raised the following research hypothesis:

1. Psychological distress would significantly be associated with substance use among adolescent students in Abakaliki.
2. Social support from families, friends, and significant others would be significantly associated with substance use among adolescent students in Abakaliki.
3. Support from families, friends, significant others would significantly moderate the association of psychological distress with substance use among adolescent students in Abakaliki.

Method

This study sought to investigate the role of perceived social support in the association of psychological distress with substance use. Using cross sectional design 375 adolescent students was sampled using systematic and stratified sampling techniques. The population of the study comprise government run secondary school from Abakaliki local government area in Abakaliki education zone. Data was gathered using the following instrument: the psychoactive substance use

questionnaire (PSUQ) by Eze, (2006); the multidimensional scale of perceived social support (MSPSS) by (Zimet et al., 1988); and the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale [K10]

(Kessler et al., 2002). The statistical analysis that was used was regression for the test of hypotheses.

Result

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	16.00	1.50	-.10					
2. Psy distress	18.65	8.20	.04	.09				
3. Family support	17.73	8.87	.03	-.03	-.01			
4. Friends support	11.68	6.09	-.05	-.06	-.06	.79		
5. Sig. others support	17.03	8.76	.01	-.05	.01	.91	.79	
6. Substance use	5.95	6.02	-.04	.21	.25	-.02	-.10	-.03

The correlation table above evidenced that psychological distress positively associated with substance use ($r = .09$, $p < .05$). Family support was negatively associated with psychological distress ($r = -.03$, $p < .05$) and substance use ($r = -.01$, $p < .05$). Friends support was negatively associated with psychological distress ($r = -.06$, $p < .05$) and positively associated with substance use ($r = .79$, $p < .05$).

Significant others' support was negatively associated with psychological distress ($r = -.05$, $p < .05$), but positively associated with substance use ($r = .79$, $p < .05$). The demographic variable of age was negatively associated with substance use ($r = -.10$, $p < .05$).

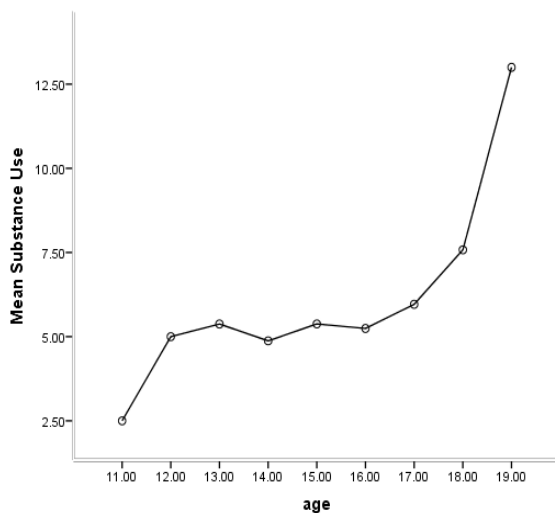
Table 2: Hierarchical multiple regression results for test of the hypotheses

Predictors	Step 1		Step 2		Step 3		Step 4		Step 5	
	B	T	B	t	B	t	β	t	β	T
Gender	-.048	-.913	.024	-.466	.035	-.693	.048	-.948	.050	-.971
Ethnic group	-.033	-.520	.043	-.688	.036	-.587	.032	-.518	.033	-.535
Religion	.089	1.391	.073	1.164	.066	1.077	.061	.991	.062	.995
Age			.199	3.879	.177	3.526	.171	3.402	.168	3.305
Psy Distress					.229	4.613	.219	4.393	.200	1.620
Family support							.115	.947	.047	-.159
Friends support							.183	2.156	.224	1.042
Sig. others support							.028	.230	.213	.677
distress * family sup									.250	.605
distress * friends sup									.054	.207
distress * others sup									.280	-.643

**** $p < .05$ **, $p < .01$ *****

Table 2 above are the hierarchical multiple regression result after controlling for gender,

ethnic group, religion and age. In the first step, religion among ethnic group, and gender was positively associated with substance use ($\beta = .09$, $t = 1.39$, $p < .05$). the model was significant $\Delta F(3,37) = .86$, $p < .05$. It accounted for 5% of variance in substance use. In second step, age was added and it was positively associated with substance use ($\beta = .20$, $t = 3.88$, $p < .05$). the model was significant, $\Delta F(1,37) = 15.05$, $p < .05$, indicating that age is a factor for substance use.



In the third step, psychological distress was added in the model. It showed positive association with substance use ($\beta = .23$, $t = 4.61$, $p < .05$). The model was significant $\Delta F(1,37) = 21.28$, $p < .05$. Psychological distress account for 16% variance in substance use. Indicating strong association to the use of substance among adolescents.

In the fourth step, family, friends and significant others' support was added to the model. Family and significant others support were positively associated with substance use ($\beta = .12$, $t = .95$, $p < .05$; $\beta = .03$, $t = .23$, $p < .05$) respectively. The model was significant $\Delta F(3,37) = 1.61$, $p < .05$. it accounted for 2%

variance in substance use. Friends support was negatively associated with substance use ($\beta = -.18$, $t = -2.16$, $p < .05$).

In the fifth step, the interaction effect for psychological distress, family, friends, and significant others' support were tested. The interaction terms for psychological distress, family and friends support were found to be positively associated with substance use ($\beta = .25$, $t = .61$, $p < .05$; $\beta = .05$, $t = .21$, $p < .05$). The model was significant, $\Delta F(3,36) = 15$, $p < .05$. The interaction terms for psychological distress, family and friends account for 11% variance in substance use. It indicated that family and friends' support moderated the association of psychological distress and substance use among adolescent students. The interaction effects for psychological distress and significant others' support were negatively associated with substance use ($\beta = -.28$, $t = -.64$, $p < .05$), indicating that significant others' support did not in any way moderate the association of psychological distress and substance use. The findings subject to the theory of main and stress buffering effect by Sneed and Cohen (2014) suggesting that, array of strains that increase the likelihood of substance use can be tackled by the main effect and stress buffering model of perceived social support which the dimensions of family and friends support have been found to moderate the association of psychological distress with substance use.

Discussion of the findings

The findings of this study have actually examined the interplay between the variables

understudy and had tested the postulated hypotheses. The first hypothesis which stated that psychological distress would significantly be associated with substance use among adolescent students in Abakaliki was confirmed ($r = .09$, $p < .05$). This finding is in consistent with that of Anyanwu (2023); Halladay et al. (2023); Kumar et al., (2023) who also found positive relationship between psychological distress and substance use. The finding proved the fact that psychological distress is a factor contributing to adolescents' substance use. The findings have also provided understanding of the factors leading to the use of substance among these group of population suggesting a need to mitigate the consequences of psychological distress.

Secondly, this study tested the second hypothesis which stated that social support from families, friends, and significant others would be significantly associated with substance use among adolescent students in Abakaliki. The finding discovered that; family support was negatively associated with substance use ($r = -.01$, $p < .05$). Friends support was positively associated with substance use ($r = .79$, $p < .05$). Significant others' support was positively associated with substance use ($r = .79$, $p < .05$). This finding provided a filling to the vague research community addressing how family, friends and significant others have contributed to substance use of adolescent students especially in the eastern part of Nigeria. It shed light that family bonds are a good protective factor that is capable to control the use of substance if strengthened.

Thirdly, the third hypothesis which stated that support from families, friends, significant

others would significantly moderate the association of psychological distress with substance use among adolescent students in Abakaliki was tested. The interaction effect showed that family and friends' support moderated the association of psychological distress and substance use among adolescent students. This is in line with the work of Acoba (2024) who found that family and significant other support decreased perceived stress. This finding has also filled the knowledge gap about the strength of family and friends' support moderating the association of psychological distress with substance use precisely. Suggesting that fostering strong family and friends' bond should be targeted in any educational programme aimed to address the issue of substance use among adolescents.

Age is one of the demographic variables found to be positively associated with substance use. Indicating that age is a factor considered to contribute to the use of substance ($\beta = .20$, $t = 3.88$, $p < .05$). The diagram below found the mean age of 15.00 years as indicating the starting point for initiation of substances.

Interestingly, religion, not gender and ethnic groups were found to be positively associated with substance use ($\beta = .09$, $t = 1.39$, $p < .05$). This is consistent with the study of Anyanwu (2016) who discovered that substance abuse was less among those who frequently participated in religious activities.

Implication of the finding

This study highlights the importance of addressing the consequences of psychological

distress among adolescent students to prevent substance use. The insight is informative to policy makers and education programmes aimed at creating healthier social environment for adolescent students. Policymakers and educators can leverage findings to improve supportive relationships within families and friends as a preventive measure as against the prevalence association of psychological distress with substance use as found in this study. This would inform social interventions aimed at promoting social bonds from family and friends support system to protect adolescents from prevailing psychological distress that leads them to harmful social behaviour like substance use. This study recognized the protective potential of family and friends among adolescent students, demonstrating that it is not only a solution to meddle bullying but also a catalyst for substance use prevention.

Limitation/Further research

This study investigated the role of social support from family, friends and significant others can serve as a moderator in the association of psychological distress and substance use using qualitative approach with a sample of 375 in three public secondary schools. Further research should extend the number of schools to accommodate more population of adolescent students.

Recommendation

1. This study found that family and friends' bonds foster protective measure in adolescents' wellbeing, it is recommended that programmes in

secondary education should encourage families and advocate for good peer relationships among adolescents to meddle in the adherence to substance use.

2. Recognizing that psychological distress is a consequence leading to substance use as found in this finding, it is recommended that education policies and programmes should inculcate in their policies a welcome development aimed to foster healthier learning environment among adolescents in schools to reduce academic stress and stressors.

Summary/conclusion

Substance use is dramatically becoming pressing social concern. Its harmful effect on adolescents' growth and career development call for sustained attention. The mean score discovered in this study indicated the extent of its usage among secondary school students. The study also discovered that psychological distress is a leading factor of substance use. The protective effect from family and friend relations was found to be capable of reducing the prevalence of psychological distress leading to substance use. The study recommends that these two dimensions of support should be encouraged. Fostering a good healthy environment for study to reduce school and academic provoking stress is also recommended for education programmes. This study has shed more understanding on the role of social support in the association of psychological distress with substance use adding to its knowledge to the research

community together with the solutions to curb out the harmful effects of substance use among adolescents.

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