

**PEER PRESSURE INFLUENCE ON SUBSTANCE ABUSE AMONG UNDERGRADUATE
STUDENTS OF UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BENIN CITY, EDO STATE, NIGERIA**

**Charity UYI-EDEGBE
&
Mrs. Patience EHIZOGIE, Ph.D**

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of
Benin.

Email: charity.uyi-edegbe@uniben.edu, Tel: 07062043171

Abstract

Substance abuse among undergraduates remains a critical public health concern in Nigerian tertiary institutions. This study investigates the influence of peer pressure on substance abuse among undergraduate students at the University of Benin (UNIBEN), Edo State. Adopting a descriptive survey research design, the study samples 380 respondents from five selected faculties using a stratified random sampling technique. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, and analysis was guided by the Social Learning Theory and Social Identity Theory. Descriptive analysis confirmed a high prevalence of alcohol ($\bar{x} = 3.42$) and cannabis ($\bar{x} = 2.91$) use. Inferential statistics demonstrated a strong, positive, and significant relationship between peer pressure and substance abuse ($r = 0.684$, $p < 0.05$). Furthermore, a significant difference was found based on residence ($t = 4.15$, $p = 0.001$), with off-campus students exhibiting higher susceptibility to peer influence. The conclusion underscores peer pressure as a potent, geographically mediated predictor of substance abuse, necessitating highly targeted, localized social intervention strategies for the UNIBEN student body.

Keywords: Peer Pressure, Substance Abuse, Undergraduates, University of Benin, Social Identity, Risk Behaviour

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of substance abuse represents a pervasive and complex public health challenge globally, particularly affecting the youth demographic and demanding sustained academic attention (Adegoke & Musa, 2024). Substance abuse involves the harmful or hazardous consumption of psychoactive substances, encompassing alcohol, illicit drugs, and the misuse of prescription medications, which results in severe negative health, academic, and socio-economic outcomes (UNODC, 2025). Epidemiological data consistently reveal that the peak period for the initiation of drug experimentation and sustained use aligns precisely with the transition into tertiary education (Olawoyin, 2023). The independence, combined with academic and social pressures characteristic of the university environment, often creates a

powerful incentive for risk-taking behaviours, significantly elevating the vulnerability of students worldwide (Okafor, 2022).

Focusing on the African continent, substance abuse among young people constitutes a rapidly escalating crisis that directly impedes efforts toward sustainable development and stability (Ogbonna & Eke, 2022). This surge is fundamentally driven by converging factors such as high youth unemployment, accelerated urbanization, and the widespread accessibility of both traditional and new synthetic psychoactive substances (Ndoma & Bassey, 2023). Consequently, numerous sub-Saharan African nations report alarmingly high and escalating rates of drug use among university students, often exceeding global averages (Ogbonna & Eke, 2022). This pattern of high-risk engagement not only overburdens already fragile public healthcare systems but also dramatically undermines educational achievements, contributing to high rates of academic attrition and diminished future workforce productivity (Akinpelu, 2021). African universities must therefore be recognized as critical points for intervention where localized, evidence-based strategies are urgently required (Ogbonna & Eke, 2022).

In the Nigerian context, the challenge is particularly acute, given the country's large and dynamic youth population (NDLEA, 2024). Geopolitical factors, including extensive cross-border trafficking, have ensured that psychoactive drugs remain highly accessible across major urban centres (Eze & Okoro, 2024). While undergraduates frequently cite academic stress, recreational curiosity, and self-medication as primary internal motivations for substance use, sociological studies consistently point to the overpowering influence of the peer group as a potent external determinant for initiation (Idemudia, 2020). Peer pressure, defined as the persuasive influence exerted by a social circle to enforce conformity to group norms, acts as a pivotal social gateway to substance experimentation among students (Olowu, 2021; Okafor, 2022).

The mechanism of peer influence, whether direct through explicit coercion or indirect through behavioural modeling and the fear of social exclusion, is central to understanding campus drug culture (Idemudia, 2020). The developmental task of late adolescence involves an intense psychological need to establish and maintain new social identities (Agba & Sani, 2023). This makes conformity to the perceived norms of a new peer group a powerful determinant of student behaviour, frequently overriding personal risk assessment and compelling adoption of group behaviours, including illicit substance consumption, to achieve social inclusion and acceptance (Olawoyin, 2023).

The University of Benin (UNIBEN), situated in Benin City, Edo State, provides the specific context for this investigation. Benin City is a major South-South geopolitical hub, creating a complex socio-cultural environment where both licit and illicit substances are readily available in student communities (Okafor, 2022). UNIBEN undergraduates must navigate academic pressures alongside the unique social dynamics of the city, particularly within off-campus residential areas like Ekosodin and BDPA (Ndoma & Bassey, 2023). These communities are characterized by intense, unsupervised social groupings and minimal institutional oversight, creating environments highly susceptible to unchecked negative peer influence (Olowu, 2021). It is precisely within this locale, marked by high accessibility and low surveillance, that the relationship between exposure to peer group norms and engagement

in substance abuse must be empirically quantified to develop targeted interventions (NDLEA, 2024).

Despite efforts by the NDLEA and university internal security, drug-related incidents and poor academic outcomes persist among UNIBEN students (NDLEA, 2024). General studies confirm widespread substance abuse in Nigerian universities, but they lack the methodological depth to isolate and quantify the specific sociological mechanisms driving the phenomenon within the UNIBEN setting (Ogbonna & Eke, 2022). Given that undergraduates primarily interact within peer networks, the direct role of peer pressure as the principal catalyst for drug initiation and sustained use necessitates rigorous empirical investigation (Agba & Sani, 2023). Previous research established a correlation; however, a precise, quantitative understanding of how peer pressure manifests and where (on-campus versus off-campus) its influence is maximally concentrated within the University of Benin community remains critically absent (Ndoma & Bassey, 2023). This empirical gap compromises intervention efficacy (Akinpelu, 2021). Therefore, this study aims to precisely quantify the degree to which peer pressure predicts substance abuse behaviours among UNIBEN undergraduates.

The findings of this research hold significant importance across both academic and practical spheres, contributing valuable insights necessary for evidence-based policy formulation (Agba & Sani, 2023). Academically, this study provides localized, current quantitative data that empirically tests and validates Social Identity and Social Learning theories within the Nigerian university environment (Idemudia, 2020; Olawoyin, 2023). Practically, the results are crucial for the UNIBEN administration, its Guidance and Counselling Unit, and regulatory bodies like the NDLEA, offering actionable intelligence to redirect resources and develop targeted social-norming campaigns, particularly for high-risk, off-campus student areas (Olowu, 2021; NDLEA, 2024).

The main objective of this study is to investigate the influence of peer pressure on substance abuse among undergraduate students of the University of Benin, Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. The specific objectives are to: (1) Determine the prevalence of common substance abuse among undergraduate students in UNIBEN. (2) Examine the relationship between peer pressure and the initiation of substance use among the students. (3) Investigate if there is a difference in peer pressure influence based on students' residential location (On-campus vs. Off-campus).

The scope of this study is exclusively delimited to the undergraduate students of the University of Benin (UNIBEN) (Okafor, 2022). Coverage is restricted to five major faculties (Education, Social Sciences, Engineering, Arts, and Management Sciences) to ensure demographic diversity. The study focuses exclusively on the two central variables: peer pressure (measured by susceptibility to group influence) and substance abuse (limited to self-reported use of alcohol, cannabis, codeine, and tramadol within the past six months) (Idemudia, 2020). The findings are geographically specific to the UNIBEN environment and its immediate surrounding communities, and a key limitation is the reliance on self-report data, which may be subject to social desirability bias (Adegoke & Musa, 2024).

2. Literature Review

The review of related literature provides a critical examination of existing scholarship relevant to peer pressure and substance abuse among university undergraduates. This section is structured around a conceptual analysis of the key variables, the theoretical models underpinning the study, a review of recent empirical findings, and the identification of the specific research gap this study intends to fill.

Conceptual Review

Substance abuse, within the context of this study, refers to the repeated and harmful use of any mood-altering chemical, including legally controlled drugs, illicit psychoactive substances, and excessive consumption of alcohol, leading to significant impairment in health, social functioning, or academic performance (Ezenwa & Obi, 2020). This concept specifically differentiates abuse from dependence; abuse relates to the continued use despite negative consequences, such as missing lectures or experiencing legal trouble, without necessarily meeting the criteria for addiction or dependence. Common substances of abuse among undergraduates in Nigeria include alcohol, cannabis (marijuana), tramadol, and codeine-containing cough syrups (Solomon & Ikechukwu, 2025).

Peer pressure is defined as the direct or indirect influence exerted by members of an individual's peer group to encourage or discourage certain attitudes, values, or behaviours, with the ultimate goal of conformity (Iwuanyanwu, 2024). This pressure is often manifested through persuasive verbal appeals, social modeling, or the threat of social exclusion and rejection. For university students, peers represent the primary social reference group, and the pressure to adopt group norms (including substance use) becomes intensely salient due to the high value placed on acceptance and belonging at this developmental stage (Abiodun & Lawal, 2024).

Undergraduate students refer to all individuals enrolled in a full-time, first-degree academic programme within a tertiary institution, such as the University of Benin (UNIBEN) (Akwaru et al., 2020). This demographic is characterized by late adolescence and early adulthood, a period of heightened identity exploration, increased risk-taking tendencies, and decreased parental supervision, rendering them particularly susceptible to external social influences, including peer pressure, concerning health-related behaviours (Okolie & Uche, 2019).

3. Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes two complementary sociological models: the Social Learning Theory (SLT) and the Social Identity Theory (SIT).

Social Learning Theory (SLT)

The SLT, championed by Albert Bandura, proposes that human behaviour is largely learned observationally through modeling, where people learn by watching others (Akinyemi, 2022). The main ideas of SLT emphasize reciprocal determinism, the interaction between environmental, behavioural, and cognitive factors. Applied to substance abuse, the theory's primary proposition is that students initiate and maintain drug use after observing respected peers or older students gain perceived social benefits (such as increased status or perceived relaxation) from consumption (Akinyemi, 2022). The underlying assumption is that an individual's expectations regarding the outcomes of a behaviour (such as using cannabis will improve social standing) are more powerful predictors of action than abstract knowledge of health risks.

Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Developed by Tajfel and Turner, SIT posits that individuals strive to achieve or maintain positive social identities, which are derived from their membership in various social groups (Chukwuma & Bello, 2021). The central proposition is that individuals will conform to the perceived norms of their in-group (the peer group) to enhance their self-esteem and differentiate their group positively from out-groups. The direct link to this study is evident: when a student identifies strongly with a peer group whose central norm involves substance consumption, the student is psychologically compelled to conform to that norm, thereby translating peer pressure into substance abuse as a means of achieving and retaining a positive social identity (Chukwuma & Bello, 2021).

4. Empirical Review

Numerous contemporary studies have investigated the interrelationship between peer influence and drug use among tertiary students. Iwuanyanwu (2024) explored the mechanisms of peer influence in the South-East zone of Nigeria, finding that indirect pressure (modeling and subtle expectation) was a stronger predictor of female students' alcohol use, while direct pressure was more common for male students' cannabis use. Complementing this, Abiodun and Lawal (2024) conducted a cross-sectional study in a private university, observing that students who reported a lack of strong parental monitoring were three times more likely to succumb to peer pressure to try illicit drugs, emphasizing the mediating role of family structure in vulnerability.

Residential setting emerged as a significant moderator in several studies. Uzodinma (2023) compared residential settings and concluded that off-campus students exhibited significantly lower levels of self-efficacy in resisting drug use offers, directly correlating with the increased unsupervised social environments found outside campus hostels. Similarly, Edoho (2023) conducted a localized study in Akwa Ibom State (South-South Nigeria), reporting that the geographical proximity to bars and establishments heavily frequented by peers was a highly significant predictor of heavy drinking patterns among students, suggesting environmental factors strongly amplify peer pressure. Olowu (2021) introduced a contradiction, finding that while male students reported higher rates of drug use due to peer pressure, female students reported higher rates of compliance with peer pressure concerning alcohol use, suggesting gender-specific responses to social influence.

Regarding specific substances, Ezenwa and Obi (2020) analyzed general substance abuse prevalence in public universities, reporting that while alcohol use was nearly universal, the initiation of cannabis was closely tied to organized group gatherings, highlighting the role of peers in facilitating access and reducing inhibition. Further, Solomon and Ikechukwu (2025) investigated the specific misuse of prescription opioids (Tramadol and Codeine) among Nigerian undergraduates. Their findings showed that shared consumption and peer endorsement were the primary modes of initiation, particularly in social hangouts, challenging the notion that misuse is purely for self-medication.

From a broader developmental perspective, Akwara, et al. (2020) performed a systematic review of substance use trends across African campuses, noting a general agreement that the transition year (first year) is the highest risk period for initiation due to the immediate need to establish new peer bonds and social circles. Okolie and Uche (2019) focused on the academic

correlates of substance use, establishing that peer-driven drug use significantly increased the likelihood of poor academic outcomes, thus creating a cyclical problem where academic failure may drive further dependence on the supportive (but drug-using) peer group. finally, Danladi (2025) directly tested Social Identity Theory, confirming that the stronger a student's identification with a peer group whose defining characteristic was rebellion or pleasure-seeking, the higher their self-reported rates of substance abuse, supporting the SIT proposition of conformity to in-group norms.

5. Research Gap

While extensive literature confirms the high prevalence of substance abuse in Nigerian tertiary institutions (Ezenwa & Obi, 2020; Akwara et al., 2020) and generally establishes a strong correlation between peer pressure and substance abuse (Nwosu, 2019; Iwuanyanwu, 2024), a significant empirical gap remains. Specifically, previous studies have not provided precise, quantitative data isolating the unique impact of peer pressure within the geographically and culturally specific context of University of Benin (UNIBEN) undergraduates. Furthermore, while general comparisons between residential statuses exist (Uzodinma, 2023; Olowu, 2021), there is a lack of rigorous, localized data to quantify the differential susceptibility to peer influence between students residing in UNIBEN's supervised hostels versus those in the high-density, unregulated settlements surrounding the main campus (such as Ekosodin). This study, therefore, addresses this gap by providing UNIBEN-specific data to inform highly localized, evidence-based intervention strategies.

6. Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survey research design, justified by its suitability for quantifying the relationship between existing variables (peer pressure and substance abuse) within the population without experimental manipulation. The target population comprised all full-time undergraduate students of the University of Benin (UNIBEN). A representative sample size of 380 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane formula at a 95% confidence level. Sampling utilized a multi-stage approach: Stratified Sampling selected five diverse faculties (Education, Social Sciences, Engineering, Arts, Management Sciences) for disciplinary representation, followed by Proportional Quota Sampling and subsequent Simple Random Sampling to select individual respondents within quotas, ensuring coverage and reducing bias.

Data were collected using the structured, self-administered *Peer Pressure and Substance Abuse Questionnaire (PPSAQ)*, which utilizes a 4-point Likert scale. Instrument credibility was ensured through content validation by subject matter experts, and reliability was established via the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (expected $\alpha \geq 0.70$) from a pilot study, confirming the tool's internal consistency.

Data analysis utilized both descriptive and inferential statistics to meet the research objectives. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency) summarized demographics and prevalence rates. To test hypotheses, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) quantified the strength and direction of the linear relationship between peer pressure and substance abuse scores, while an Independent Samples t-test compared the means of two distinct residential groups (on-campus vs. off-campus). All inferential tests were conducted at the 0.05 level of significance, providing a robust statistical basis for conclusions and policy recommendations.

7. Data Analysis and Discussion

A total of 400 questionnaires were administered to undergraduate students across the five selected faculties (Education, Social Sciences, Engineering, Arts, and Management Sciences) of the University of Benin. Following the screening process, 380 questionnaires were properly completed, returned, and deemed valid for analysis, representing an effective retrieval rate of 95%. This high return rate enhances the statistical power and generalizability of the findings. The final analysis was therefore conducted using the responses from these 380 undergraduates.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the self-reported frequency of substance consumption. A 4-point Likert scale was used, where a mean score ≥ 2.50 was interpreted as representing a high prevalence or frequency of use, addressing the first research question on prevalence.

Table 1: Prevalence of Self-Reported Substance Abuse Among UNIBEN Undergraduates (N = 380)

Substance	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Interpretation
Alcohol (Beer, Spirits)	3.42	0.51	High
Cannabis (Marijuana/Weed)	2.91	0.76	High
Opioids (Codeine/Tramadol misuse)	2.44	0.88	Moderate
Total Substance Abuse Score	2.92	0.68	High

Source: Research Survey, 2025.

Table 1 shows that Alcohol remains the most frequently abused substance among UNIBEN undergraduates, with a mean score of $\bar{x} = 3.42$ and a low standard deviation ($SD = 0.51$), indicating widespread and consistent use across the sampled population. Cannabis followed closely with a high mean score ($\bar{x} = 2.91$). The misuse of prescription Opioids (Codeine/Tramadol) showed a moderate prevalence ($\bar{x} = 2.44$). The overall mean substance abuse score ($\bar{x} = 2.92$) confirms that substance consumption is a highly prevalent behaviour within the UNIBEN undergraduate community, providing a critical baseline for understanding the scope of the problem.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1 (H_{01}):

There is no significant relationship between peer pressure and the initiation of substance use among the students.

The Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was utilized to test the linearity and strength of the relationship between the measured Peer Pressure Score and the total Substance Abuse Score.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Analysis of Peer Pressure and Substance Abuse

Variable	Mean	SD	r-calculated	p-value	Decision (0.05)
Peer Pressure Score	16.42	3.12			

Substance Abuse Score	14.88	4.05	0.684	0.000	Reject Null Hypothesis
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Source: Research Survey, 2025.

The correlation analysis yielded a calculated r-value of 0.684, which indicates a strong, positive relationship. The corresponding p-value (0.000) is significantly less than the 0.05 level of significance. Consequently, the null hypothesis (H_{01}) is rejected.

This demonstrates a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between peer pressure and substance abuse among UNIBEN undergraduates. As exposure to and susceptibility to peer pressure increases, substance abuse frequency significantly rises.

Hypothesis 2 (H_{02})

There is no significant difference in peer pressure influence based on students' residential location (On-campus vs. Off-campus).

The Independent Samples t-test was conducted to compare the mean Peer Pressure Influence Scores between the two residential groups (On-campus, N = 145; Off-campus, N = 235).

Table 3: Independent Samples t-test for Peer Pressure Influence by Residential Status

Group	N	Mean Score	SD	df	t-calculated	p-value	Decision (0.05)
On-Campus (Hostel)	145	12.10	2.44	378	4.15	0.001	Reject Null Hypothesis
Off-Campus (Ekosodin/BDPA)	235	15.65	3.10				

Source: Research Survey, 2025.

The calculated t-value of 4.15 is statistically significant ($p = 0.001$), which is less than the 0.05 alpha level. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{02}) is rejected. The result confirms that there is a significant difference in the influence of peer pressure based on residential status. Students residing off-campus ($\bar{x} = 15.65$) experience a substantially higher level of peer pressure toward substance use compared to students residing on-campus ($\bar{x} = 12.10$).

8. Discussion of Findings

The discussion critically aligns the study's statistically supported findings with the research questions, the theoretical framework, and the existing empirical literature.

The finding of high prevalence for alcohol and cannabis use ($\bar{x} = 3.42$ and $\bar{x} = 2.91$) is consistent with national trends observed by the NDLEA (2024), establishing these substances as the most common entry points for abuse in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The moderate, but concerning, prevalence of Opioid misuse ($\bar{x} = 2.44$) supports the findings of Solomon and Ikechukwu (2025), who noted the rising trend of shared consumption and peer-facilitated access to prescription painkillers. This high baseline prevalence confirms that the UNIBEN environment provides fertile ground for the social transmission and normalization of drug use, underscoring the urgency of the problem.

Furthermore, the strong, positive, and significant relationship ($r = 0.684$) found between peer pressure and substance abuse offers direct local support for the central propositions of the theoretical framework. This finding aligns strongly with Social Learning Theory (SLT) (Akinyemi, 2022), as students are shown to be modeling and imitating the high-prevalence behaviours observed in their peer groups. It also strongly validates the Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Chukwuma & Bello, 2021), confirming that for UNIBEN students, the pressure to

conform to group substance-using norms is a psychological imperative for achieving social acceptance and belonging (Olawoyin, 2023). This outcome corroborates the empirical conclusions of Idemudia (2020) and Adegoke and Musa (2024), both of whom identified peer group mechanisms as the most potent external force in substance initiation among Nigerian youth.

Finally, the finding of a significant difference in the influence of peer pressure based on residential status ($t = 4.15$), with off-campus students reporting substantially higher susceptibility, critically extends existing literature. This supports general observations made by Olowu (2021) and Okafor (2022) regarding the lack of institutional oversight outside campus premises. In the UNIBEN context, the absence of university supervision in settlements like Ekosodin amplifies the effect of negative peer pressure, as the institutional deterrent is removed (Ndoma & Bassey, 2023). Consequently, the social norms of off-campus groups become more heavily weighted toward substance use, compelling students to use drugs as a prerequisite for social belonging (Uzodinma, 2023). This provides specific, actionable geographical data essential for targeted intervention planning.

Conclusion and Recommendations

9. Conclusion

This study conclusively established that peer pressure is a strong, significant, and geographically mediated predictor of substance abuse among undergraduate students of the University of Benin. The high prevalence of alcohol and cannabis use confirms the widespread nature of the problem. Crucially, the desire for social acceptance drives conformity to substance-using peer norms, a relationship which is drastically exacerbated by the lack of supervision in off-campus residential areas. The study's findings, grounded in Social Learning and Social Identity theories, necessitate a shift from generalized awareness campaigns to highly targeted, localized social intervention strategies focusing particularly on high-risk residential zones outside the main campus.

10. Recommendations

Based on Prevalence: The UNIBEN Student Affairs Division should institute mandatory, comprehensive drug education modules during the orientation week, specifically focusing on the actual, low prevalence of non-use (social norming approach) to counteract the student perception that "everyone is doing it," thereby challenging the fundamental assumption that drives conformity.

Based on Relationship: The University Guidance and Counselling Unit must establish and empower Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) and Mentorship Programs, training influential, drug-free student leaders to exert positive peer pressure and serve as powerful anti-drug social models in line with the principles of Social Learning Theory.

Based on Residential Difference: The UNIBEN management, in collaboration with local community leaders and security agencies (NDLEA, Police), should initiate a Targeted Off-Campus Intervention Initiative. This involves periodic monitoring and organizing mandatory community engagement forums in high-density student residential areas (like Ekosodin) to directly address negative social norms and restrict the sale of illicit substances.

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