

# Acceptability of Peer Networking Strategy in Combating Substance Abuse Among Undergraduates in Universities in Anambra State

Uju Cecilia Onuchukwu<sup>1</sup>, Obini Ijeoma Onuchukwu<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

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## ABSTRACT

Substance abuse among the youths has been on the increase despite efforts of government and other concerned institutions to combat it. The university system in Nigeria is not exempt from this cankerworm. These citadels of learning, as it is, grapple with the challenge of indiscriminate substance use among undergraduates. It is against the backdrop of the prevalence of substance abuse among undergraduates and the consequent failures of so many strategies to combat abuse that this study investigated the acceptability of peer networking as an alternative public relations strategy for combating substance abuse among undergraduates of universities in Anambra State. The study was conducted in the light of the Theoretical Framework of Acceptability (TFA) propounded by Sekhon *et al* (2017). Using a descriptive survey design, the study surveyed a sample of 200 undergraduates from universities in Anambra State to ascertain their perspective on the acceptability of the proposed peer networking strategy in combating substance abuse. A questionnaire titled 'Peer Networking for Combating Substance Abuse Questionnaire (PNCSAQ)' was developed and used to obtain data from the undergraduates. The PNCSAQ was validated and the reliability coefficient index of 0.86 was obtained. Data collected for the study were analysed with descriptive statistics. Findings indicated that undergraduates despite their diverse demographic characteristics accepted peer networking as a good strategy for combating substance abuse in the universities. Based on the findings, it was recommended among other things, that PR managers should employ the peer networking strategy in combating substance abuse among undergraduates in the universities.

## INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse among the youths has continued to occupy the attention of well-meaning members of the society. The concern shared by most people results from the medical, economic and social implications of substance or drug abuse. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2006) defines drug abuse as a state of periodic or chronic intoxication, detrimental to the individual and to the society, produced by the repeated consumption of a drug (natural or synthetic). From this definition, the WHO incorporates the consequences of such abuse. Somani and Meghani (2016) state that substance abuse includes the frequent use of illegal drugs or the misuse of legal drugs. In other words, substance abuse is not restricted to banned drugs, but includes overuse of legal ones. Substances prone to abuse include hashish, charas, bhang, opium, alcohol, tobacco, shisha, marijuana, cocaine, cough syrup, cigarettes, inhalants, cannabis and other psychotropic drugs. In Nigeria, substances such as tramadol, aspirin, also have enjoyed some acceptance among young people raising serious concern about the future of these youths as well as other medical and socio-economic consequences.

Substance abuse however, is a global problem. It is reported that 5.6% of the global population aged 15–64 years used drugs at least once in 2016 (United Nations, 2018). Substance abuse among young people is reported to be higher than that among older people for most drugs (Nawi *et al*, 2021), but, young people are

more prone to addiction (Luikinga, Kim & Perry, 2018). The critical age of initiation of drug use begins during the adolescent period, and the maximum usage of drugs occurs among young people aged 18–25 years old (United Nations, 2018). During this period, they have a strong inclination toward experimentation, curiosity, susceptibility to peer pressure, rebellion against authority, and poor self-worth, which makes such individuals vulnerable to drug abuse (Degenhardt, Stockings, Patton, Hall & Lynskey, 2016). During this period moreover, the basic development process generally involves changing relations between the individual and the multiple levels of the context within which the young person is accustomed.

The prevalence of substance abuse among youths is high in Nigeria as indicated by several studies. Mamman, Othman and Lian (2014) found that North-west of Nigeria recorded the highest number (37.5 per cent) of abusers; South-west 17.3 per cent; the South-east 13.5 per cent; North-central 11.7 per cent, and the North-east zone has 8.5 per cent of the drug abusers in the country. The study also found that most abused substances among the population are cannabis (10.8 per cent), psychotropic drugs such as benzodiazepines and amphetamine-type stimulants (10.6 per cent), followed by heroin with 1.6 per cent, and cocaine 1.4 per cent respectively. Males' populations are higher 94.2 per cent among the substance users than females, at 5.8 per cent. In another survey conducted by the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA, 2018) in Northern Nigeria, Kano and Jigawa ranked as the States with the highest number of young people who engaged in substance abuse. Over 3 million bottles of codeine syrup were consumed daily in these States. NDLEA further stressed that it had arrested and detained over 2,205 persons in 2015 on crimes related to drugs and substance abuse in the North.

Substance abuse is influenced by a number of factors such as peer influence, family instability, environment and family socio-economic status. Peer pressure and exposure to drug-related marketing activities are predisposing factors for young people to initiate substance use (Somani & Meghani, 2016). Close association with substance abusers may draw non-users to substance abuse. Young people get entangled with substances when they associate with friends who abuse substances. The adage, 'show me your friend and I will tell you who you are' readily comes to mind. And 'two cannot walk unless they agree' is a biblical maxim that has stood a test of time. Moreover, family unit is a very important institution for effective rearing of the child. Where this institution fails to discharge its responsibility probably as a result of family discord or instability and the resultant breakdown, the child becomes the victim. Aubele (2012) observed in a study that in Nigeria a male child from a broken home is likely to engage in substance abuse. The researcher further observed that in Nigeria, most marijuana abusers are young people, some are students who suffer from relative deprivation from their family; they lack affectionate love from their parents; and they are not properly monitored at home. Furthermore, the environment in which a child is reared can exert enormous influence on the child's lifestyle. Environment is anything immediately surrounding an object and exerting a direct influence on it (Enamhe & Maxwell-Borjor, 2021). A person's environment consists of the sum total of the stimulation which he receives from his conception until his death (Ekpeyong, 2012). Some habitats like slums, ghettos and isolated areas are known to be a breeding ground for substance abuse. Inhabitants of these shanties live on the verge of the society untouched by development and soon constitute a 'special' sub-group within the larger society with propensity for lawlessness. More and more young people worldwide are growing up in an environment increasingly tolerant of various forms of substance use, both medical and non-medical (World Youth Report, 2003).

Substance abuse among the Nigerian youths has come with dire consequences. There exist a series of health issues associated with substance abuse. The health issues may be related to physical or mental, both of which are of great concern to government and policymakers. Excessive intake of drugs leads to dependence (Doherty & Gaughran 2014). Substance dependence entails an irresistible desire to use substance to satisfy the desire and this can only happen due to the reoccurring intake of the substance. Drug addicts who inject hard drugs through their blood have a high risk of HIV and AIDS infection, cancer of the lungs, throat, stomach, Liver cirrhosis, Hepatitis B and C. This also can affect the reproductive health of the users such as

problems of impotence, low sperm count, tuberculosis, diabetes mellitus, as well as injuries obtained from road traffic accidents (Ekpenyong, 2012).

Apart from the health concerns, substance abuse has some social consequences. A study conducted among students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria revealed that persistence substance abuse may lead to students' dropout from schools (Yusuf *et al.*, 2013). It may also render students susceptible to riots in universities thereby distorting the academic calendar and the inability of the schools to cover the required syllabus. Crime committed by youth is linked closely to substance abuse. When the users get intoxicated, their behaviours or course of action would come under the influence of the substance. Youth appear to be the major actors igniting and instigating the occurrence of this social unrest in Nigeria. Political violence which is a major threat to the peaceful coexistence of Nigerians is influenced by substance abuse. According to Siro (2014), majority of the political hooligans usually are under the influence of drug. Substance abuse also fosters other anti-social behaviours such as theft, burglary, rape cases, sodomy, lesbianism, commercial sex business and pickpocketing (Mohammad & Yusof, 2014). Ethno-religious conflict and political violence occur due to the influence of drugs. It is therefore important that youths are kept away from drugs. Substance abuse affects not only the substance abusers, but the non-users in some ways. Air pollution emanating from smoky drugs can harm both the user and the non-user alike (Enamhe & Maxwell-Borjor, 2021). Non-users also fall victim to user's criminality, violence and other anti-social behaviours. In other words, substance abuse should be a concern to everybody as silence may mean tacit approval to untold havoc on the society which abuse can cause.

It is as a result of the consequences of incessant abuse of substances among undergraduates in Nigerian universities that some public relation strategies (PRS) have been deployed to curb excessive use of substances especially among young people. According to Chukwu (2015), public relation strategy refers to the forms or techniques adopted by public relation practitioners in handling their services. The task of building good public relations can only be achieved with the use of appropriate strategies which include publicity, advertising, meetings, and communication campaign and so on. In fact, part of public relations is protecting the individual or organization's brand. A brand is an exclusive and desirable idea embodied in products, places, services, people, and experiences (Toastmaster International, 2016). Every organization desires to sustain good brand. Substance abuse, however, is likely to have adverse effect on brand. Government and other concerned institutions develop and implement effective public relations campaigns aimed at reducing the prevalence of certain unacceptable behaviours. The 1964, Surgeon General's report on the harmful effects of tobacco use opened the way for a plethora of communication campaigns all over the world that communicate the message that people cease from using tobacco products, via anti – smoking television advertisements (public service announcements) supported by printed advertisements in magazines, the daily press and posters in busy city streets (Raftopoulou, 2007).

Public relations strategy performs three functions: inform, persuade and train. The audience need to be informed about these behaviours and their consequences; the audience will consequently be persuaded to cease or avoid those behaviours and finally, the audience will be trained in skills necessary to change or translate intention into action. Although there have been reports of the efficacy of some public relations strategies (Beaudoin, 2012; Goldman & Glantz, 2018), it appears that these strategies have not made the desirable impact on the reduction of substance abuse in the universities. The continual rise in abuse among young people seems to suggest that public these strategies have failed to make the desirable impacts on young people. Based on this concern, it is important to seek alternative strategy such as peer networking in addressing the prevalence of substance abuse.

Peer networking is a deliberately planned strategy that seeks to influence the behaviour of young people through their peers. According to Backer and Kern (2010), peer networks help people with common goals to exchange information, solve problems, and build unified leadership for change. Peers might be local

residents, hospital medical directors, students, or all of these. Often they live or work together in a particular community which is the focus for change. In peer networking, courses of action and process leading to outcome are preplanned by the public relation specialist, while actions are carried out by young people themselves. Backer and Kern give three conditions for a successful peer networking: Trust, Time and Truth (3Ts). Peer networks are successful when they create a trusting environment, in which people feel safe saying what they think and having an honest discussion. It is successful when the peer network has the time to develop, find its own way of working, and to “mature” as a community organization. Furthermore, networks are successful when they operate “transparently,” and gather good information about how well they are working and how they could improve.

Peer-mediated interventions like peer networking have emerged as an effective avenue for promoting peer interactions and improving academic and social outcomes for students (Hochman, Carter, Bottema-Beutel, Harvey, & Gustafson, 2015). It is likely that peer network may bring about attitudinal change in people especially those susceptible to substance abuse if the strategy is effectively carried out. Community change is hard, and to succeed people have to work together and support each other. Peer networking helps because it creates a shared space, like a town square, where people can feel comfortable talking with each other, debating possible solutions to problems, and getting information that helps them with the work of change. Both online and in-person methods can be part of a good peer network (Backer & kern, 2010), and it usually has somebody to help coordinate everything. It saves time, builds good relationships, and gives a regular schedule for people to work together with others who “look like them.”

Although this strategy appears attractive, it may be costly to embark on a ‘journey’ which ‘destination’ is neither known nor imagined. Affective is a domain with most difficult task because all the components thrives in the abstract. Hence, a programme to bring attitudinal change without first determining whether this can work with the people it is intended may constitute a wild goose chase. It is in this vein, that this writer conceived the need to find out the acceptability of peer networking in combating substance abuse. Acceptability has become a key consideration in the design, evaluation and implementation of any intervention programme. In fact, successful implementation of any programme depends on the acceptability of the intervention to both intervention deliverers and those for which it is intended. Although, like many constructs, acceptability has defied a universal definition, the seminal work of (Sekhon, Cartwright & Francis, 2017, p.4) has produced a seeming working definition of the concept which is suitable to the present study. Accordingly, acceptability is defined as “a multi-faceted construct that reflects the extent to which people delivering or receiving a(n)... intervention consider it to be appropriate, based on anticipated or experienced cognitive and emotional responses to the intervention”. In other words, acceptability of intervention will come from either of the two ends: the giver and the receiver (the PR and students). Hence, this study determined the acceptability of peer networking in combating substance abuse from the views of university undergraduates in Anambra state.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF ACCEPTABILITY**

This study adopted the Theoretical Framework of Acceptability (TFA) developed by Sekhon *et al* (2017). The framework states that acceptability is not simply an attribute of an intervention but is rather a subjective evaluation made by individuals who experience (or expect to experience) or deliver (or expect to deliver) an intervention. The distinction between prospective and retrospective acceptability is a key feature of the TFA. The theory posits that, prior to experiencing an intervention both parties (people being targeted and professional) can form judgments about whether they expect the intervention to be acceptable or unacceptable. These judgments may be based on the information provided about the intervention, or other factors. Assessment of anticipated acceptability prior to participation can highlight which aspects of the intervention could be modified to increase acceptability, and thus participation. Researchers need to be clear about the purpose of acceptability assessments at different time points (i.e. pre-, during or post-intervention)



and the stated purpose should be aligned to the temporal perspective adopted (i.e. prospective or retrospective acceptability). For example, when evaluating acceptability during the intervention delivery period (i.e. concurrent assessment) researchers have the option of assessing the experienced acceptability up to this point in time or assessing the anticipated acceptability in the future. Different temporal perspectives change the purpose of the acceptability assessment and may change the evaluation, e.g. when assessed during the intervention delivery period an intervention that is initially difficult to adjust to may have low experienced acceptability but high anticipated acceptability. Similarly post-intervention assessments of acceptability may focus on experienced acceptability based on participants' experience of the intervention from initiation through to completion, or on anticipated acceptability based on participants' views of what it would be like to continue with the intervention on an on-going basis (e.g. as part of routine care).

Although the TFA is postulated in the context of health care provision, it is very suitable for the present study. It provided a rationale for determining acceptability prior to an intervention programme like peer networking. In other words, ascertaining the acceptability of peer networking from undergraduates themselves will be the best approach to determine the probable usability and utility of peer networking as a PR strategy to combat substance abuse in the universities.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Substance abuse among the youths most especially in tertiary institutions in Nigeria generally and Anambra State in particular is increasing with alarming dimension. If left unchecked, substance abuse can pose enormous danger to both the abusers and non-abusers alike. Although several attempts have been made by various regulatory agencies to eradicate substance abuse, these efforts have not translated to the decrease of the use of substances by undergraduates thus necessitating an alternative strategy to tackle the cankerworm. The peer networking strategy may have been tried in some settings to bring about attitudinal change among communities, whether this can be acceptable in the combat against substance abuse in the university environment was the problem this study was poised to solve.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of the study was to determine the perspective of undergraduates of tertiary institutions in Anambra State on the acceptability of peer networking in combating substance abuse. Specifically, the study:

1. Determined the demographic distribution of participants in the study;
2. Ascertained the acceptability of peer networking in combating substance abuse;

### **Research Question**

The study answered the following questions:

1. What is the demographic distribution of participants in the study?
2. How acceptable is peer networking in combating substance abuse?

## **METHODS**

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. The target population was undergraduates of universities in Anambra State. A sample of 200 respondents was randomly selected from Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam and Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The sample consisted of 111 female and 89 male undergraduates. The selection of sample involved probability and non-probability techniques such as stratified, purposive, convenience and simple random sampling techniques. The instrument for data collection was a researcher-made questionnaire titled 'Peer Networking for Combating Substance Abuse

Questionnaire (PNCSAQ). The PNCSAQ is arranged in three sections; each section addresses each of the research question posed in the study. It has a three-point weighted options, namely Very Acceptable (VA), Acceptable (A) and Not Acceptable (NA) with numerical values of 3, 2 and 1 respectively. A criterion mean cut-off of 2.00 indicates acceptability. However, real limit of numbers were employed in data interpretation to wit: 2.50-3.00 (VA), 2.00-2.49 (A), and 1.00-1.99 (NA). The validity of the instrument was done, and reliability coefficient index was 0.86. Respondents were administered questionnaire through face-to-face. In addition to PNCSAQ, respondents were provided a leaflet on peer networking containing detailed principles of peer networking as well as how it can be employed among university communities. Data collected were analysed with descriptive statistics, namely the mean and standard deviation.

## RESULTS

The results obtained in the study are presented here in tables.

**Table 1: Demographic distribution of study participant**

Variables	N	Mean	%
Participants	200		100
Female	111		55.5
Male	89		44.5
Age			
16-20	69	19	34.5
21-25	61	22.57	30.5
26-30	70	24.2	35
Academic Level			
100	52		26
200	42		21
300	51		25.5
400	55		27.5
Substance Use			
Never	93		46.5
At times	73		36.5
Always	34		17

Table 1 shows the demographic distribution of the study sample. Out of the 200 undergraduates sampled, 111 (55.5) are female while 89 (45.5) are male. The age ranges of the undergraduates are as follows: 69 are between 16 and 20 years with a mean age of 19.0; 61 are in the age range of 21 to 25 with a mean age of 22.7; while 70 are between the ages of 26 to 30 with a mean age of 24.20. Participants also are fairly distributed across levels with 52 (26.0%) in 100 level, 42 (21.0%) in 200 level, 51 (25.5%) in 300 level, and 55 (27.5%) in 400 level. Among the participants, 93 (46.5%) have never used substances, 73 (36.5%) have used substances at times, and 34 (17.0%) always used substances.

**Table 2: Acceptability of peer networking in combating substance abuse**

S/N	X	SD	Decision
1	2.61	0.76	Very Acceptable
2	2.04	0.67	Acceptable

3	1.88	0.54	Not Acceptable
4	2.65	0.33	Very Acceptable
5	2.88	0.29	Very Acceptable
6	2.66	0.65	Very Acceptable
7	2.89	0.32	Very Acceptable
8	2.92	0.11	Very Acceptable
9	2.93	0.29	Very Acceptable
10	2.88	0.41	Very Acceptable
<b>GM</b>	<b>2.63</b>	<b>0.48</b>	<b>Very Acceptable</b>

\*GM= Grand Mean

Table 2 shows the mean ratings of participants on acceptability of peer networking in combating substance abuse. Out of the 10 listed items on peer networking inventory, all but one (items 2 & 3) received mean ratings within the range of 2.50 to 3.00 which means 'very acceptable'. Item 2 received a mean rating of 2.04 which is within the mean range of 'acceptable', while the item 3 was rated 1.88 which is within the range of 'not acceptable'. The grand mean of 2.63 however, indicates that peer networking is very acceptable as strategy for combating substance abuse among undergraduates. The standard deviation indicates the relative homogeneity of undergraduates' opinion on the acceptability of peer networking.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study sought to establish the acceptability of peer networking strategy in combating substance abuse among undergraduates in the universities in Anambra State. The demographic composition of participants were distributed evenly to allow for diversity of opinion. The participants composed of undergraduates of different gender, age groups and levels. They also comprised undergraduates who had never used substances, those who use substances sparingly and others who take substances on regular basis.

The findings also indicate that undergraduates were favourably disposed to the application of peer networking in combating substance abuse. They accepted all but one item within the peer networking inventory presented for determination. The finding is consistent with extant literature on the efficacy of peer networking in bringing about attitudinal change. For instance, Hochman *et al* (2015) observed that peer-mediated interventions have emerged as an effective avenue for promoting peer interactions and improving social outcomes for students. Similarly, Backer and Kern (2010) stated that peer networks help people with common goals to exchange information, solve problems, and build unified leadership for change. Peer network established for the sole purpose of combating substance abuse among undergraduates therefore can provide an effective alternative that the society needs.

## CONCLUSION

The search for an effective strategy to combat substance abuse has remained in the front burner of public discourse. Public relation practitioners use public communication generally as tool for public engagement. Peer networking could be an effective technique within the ambit of public communication to bring about attitudinal change in young people in the universities especially as it regards substance abuse. The acceptability of the peer networking by undergraduates of diverse demography has provided hope that this strategy could be employed effectively in the fight against substance abuse.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the findings and conclusion of the study, the following are recommended:

1. Public relation managers in the universities should employ the peer networking techniques in their public communication strategy in waging war against substance abuse among undergraduates;
2. Students may be encouraged to key into this strategy through provision of incentives like data for online participation and other inducements for active participation;
3. University management should in the alternative provide free access to the internet to enable students participate without being scared by the challenge of data cost.

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