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# Psychosocial correlates of substance use among unemployed persons in Ibadan, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Background: The study explored the prevalence of substance use among unemployed persons in Ibadan, and the roles of some psychological and socio-demographic variables. Method: A standardized questionnaire was used to collect relevant data from 200 unemployed persons. Respondents' were 109 males and 91 females, with a mean age of 29.07 and a standard deviation of 5.46. Mean years of graduation (when a respondent had graduated without a job) was 5.38 years with a standard deviation of 3.53. Results: Lifetime and current use of psychoactive substances were 69% and 44% respectively, indicating that this particular population (the unemployed) might be at an elevated risk for substance abuse. The most currently used psychoactive substances were alcohol (36%), followed by stimulants (29%), Tobacco (28%), and sedatives (12.5%), while for lifetime use the following were the most common: alcohol (44.5%), stimulant (35%), tobacco (32%) and cannabis (21%). Results showed that age ( $r = -.23$ ;  $p < .05$ ), sex ( $r = -.39$ ;  $p < .01$ ), Marital status ( $r = -.22$ ;  $p < .05$ ), Number of years of formal education ( $r = -.27$ ;  $p < .05$ ), number of years spent after graduation ( $r = .33$ ;  $p < .01$ ), personality ( $r = -.47$ ;  $p < .01$ ), perceived social support ( $r = -.41$ ;  $p < .01$ ), and distress tolerance ( $r = -.47$ ;  $p < .01$ ) were significantly related to substance use. Conclusion/Recommendation: Unemployed persons should be considered for social schemes and social security benefits. Also, unemployed persons should be targeted for psychological services such as counseling and specially designed psycho-educational programmes aimed at engendering core self-evaluation traits (high self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, emotional stability and internal locus of control), distress tolerance, and social support.

**Keywords:** Substance Use, Psychosocial Factors, Unemployment, Nigeria

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## 1. Introduction

Work serves many beneficial functions in the lives of individuals, including to earn some sort of wage or rewards in such a way that people can sustain themselves and dependents in order to fulfill certain primary needs; to determine (to a large extent) where and how people live, the community and organizations in which they participate, and many other social aspects of their lives; to attain certain social status; to have a source of identity, feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. This is because people have feelings of mastery and self-fulfillment when they successfully engage in work activities. To underlie the important roles that work plays in human lives and the huge deleterious impact that lack of employment portends, the empirical literature is replete with associations between unemployment (when a person who is actively searching

for employment is unable to find work) and a host of multidimensional negative outcomes, including drug use, criminal behavior, low self-esteem, physical and psychological morbidity.

Significant relationships between unemployment and an increased prevalence of use of heroin, cocaine, crack, marijuana, hallucinogens, alcohol and nonmedical use of sedatives, tranquilizers, and analgesics have been demonstrated (1). Research evidence has also indicated that the unemployed have the highest rates of use of most drugs (2). Similarly, a reciprocal relationship between unemployment and alcohol consumption was reported by (3), in their study among unemployed youths. Even among persons in treatment for drug abuse, unemployment has been associated with poor treatment outcome (4). The potentials for substance use among the unemployed are, therefore, very high.

Psychologists have demonstrated that certain personality factors help people to cope more effectively with stress and make them less vulnerable to self-injurious behaviors, such as substance use (5). Some of the personality factors that have been implicated in this regard include perceived personal control (5, 6), Hardiness (6), emotional stability or neuroticism (7), self-esteem (8) and locus of control (9). An emerging body of literature suggests that a higher – order self-evaluative personality trait called core self-evaluations (10), composed of some of psychology's most studied traits – neuroticism, self-esteem, locus of control and generalized self-efficacy – represents ability or skills across many domains. For example, people with high core self-evaluations have been shown to demonstrate more effectiveness in overcoming obstacles by using better problem-solving strategies (11), higher stress tolerance (9), and ability to cope better with frustration and unpredictable situations (11). Individuals with high core self-evaluations, therefore, might be expected to adopt more beneficial coping strategies when faced with challenges (such as unemployment) rather than resorting to substance use.

While theoretical models implicate stress in substance use and relapse (12, 13, 14), and empirical evidence supports this relationship (15), there currently exists no empirical evidence that levels of stress are directly related to substance use. However, distress tolerance - the ability to withstand intense negative affect without resorting to anger, dissociation, impulsive and (or) self-injurious behaviors (16), has been linked directly to substance abuse. While low levels of distress tolerance are theorized to increase emotional dysregulation in borderline personality disorder, it could be argued that alcohol use serves the same function in some individuals. Specifically, when faced with distress, some individuals would rather use psychoactive substance as a coping mechanism to decrease stress and negative affect than facing up to the challenging situation. As such, it can be hypothesized that substance abusers as a group have lower levels of distress tolerance than the general population because of their dependence on psychoactive substances to manipulate affective states. Several researchers have identified a relationship between one's ability to tolerate emotional and/or physical distress and substance use (14,17, 18) and other addictive behaviours (4). These researchers argued that individuals with low persistence (distress tolerance) in the face of distress are particularly attracted to the immediate reinforcement of substances.

In an attempt to apply theory to understanding why persistence in the face of negative affect and distress predicts abstinence duration in addictive disorders, (17, 19) proposed that the relationship between distress tolerance and treatment completion can be explained through the concept of learned industriousness theory (20), which states that the amount of effort an individual displays is dependent on the degree of aversiveness associated with the effort evoked on the specific task, and this level of aversiveness is a function of prior learning history.

Specifically, a history of reinforcement for low effort will likely lead to high effort being aversive, and a history of reinforcement for high effort would lead to experiencing high effort as rewarding. Thus, the reinforcement for high effort should generalize across behaviors, leading to a greater probability of high effort in the future, and vice versa.

Another variable which has received empirical attention is level of social support, with researchers suggesting that a higher level of social support may be associated with abstinence from substance use (21, 22). For instance, levels of psychological distress and depression were found to be higher for patients with low social support while levels of substance abuse were also higher in this group (21).

While the influence of some demographic variables, such as sex, age, and educational qualification on substance use, especially drinking patterns among other populations have been previously explored (23, 24, 25, 26), other potential variables such as religious influence, educational qualification, recency of graduation, and years of unemployment have received scanty empirical attention. Religious involvement may serve to reign in individuals who, ordinarily, might have engaged in socially-disapproved behaviors such as alcohol use. Substance use among unemployed persons that are deeply religious, therefore, may not be as widespread and excessive as among those not affiliated to any religion. Likewise, education is supposed to exert a liberating effect on individuals. Persons with higher the educational qualifications are, thus, expected to be more knowledgeable about the various risks inherent in substance use and avoid same. Furthermore, the period of time an individual has been without a job should be related to tendency to engage in substance use, given that frustration might set in for the unemployed person as the months (and for many, the years) roll by.

That high rates of unemployment, such as Nigeria's, carry a huge potential for negative consequences cannot be overemphasized. This much has been attested to by studies (27, 28, 29, 30, 31) in which significant associations were found between unemployment and notable social vices, such as armed robbery, destitution, prostitution, political violence, kidnapping, human trafficking, among others. While these studies have addressed the unemployment and its consequences from the social, political and economic perspectives, there is a dearth of empirical studies on the psychological aspects of unemployment. There is the need, therefore, to investigate substance use and its predictors among this highly vulnerable population in Nigeria with a view to filling the existing gap in knowledge, and to sensitize policy makers, researchers and other stakeholders to the need for more concerted effort aimed at mitigating the problem.

The National Bureau of Statistics has put the figure of unemployed Nigerians at 23.9 per cent in 2011, up from 21.1 per cent in 2010 and 19.7 per cent in 2009 (32). According to the reports, the total number of unemployed

Nigerians rose from more than 12 million in 2010 to more than 14 million in 2011, with unemployment rates as high as 42.6% in some states. Given these high unemployment rates and the potentials for the adoption of counterproductive coping strategies (especially the resort to substance use) with huge social, psychological, physical and economic consequences, there is need to investigate the extent to which unemployed persons use psychoactive substances and relevant variables that are associated with this tendency.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Two hundred purposively selected unemployed graduates from Ibadan metropolis participated in this cross-sectional survey. Inclusion criteria included: being aged 18 and above; having no job at the time of the interview (people who had jobs but were seeking better employment were excluded) but willing to work, and actively searching for one; and having a reasonable level of formal education, the least being the West African School Certificate (WASC) / Senior Secondary School Certificate (SSSC). Of the 200 participants, 109 (54.5%) were males while 91 (45.5%) were females. Participants' age range was 20 to 49 years, while mean age was 29.07 with a standard deviation of 5.46. In terms of educational qualification, 2 (1.0%) had SSCE/WASC; 45 (22.5%) of respondents were OND/NCE holders, 110 (55.0%) were B. Sc / HND holders, while 43 (21.5%) possessed postgraduate qualifications. Years of graduation ranged from 1 year to 20 years, with a mean of 5.38 and a standard deviation of 3.53. While 124 (62.0%) of the respondents were single, 76 (38.0%) were married.

### 2.2. Measures

A structured questionnaire was used to collect relevant data in this study. *Background variables* measured included age, year of leaving school, total number of years spent in formal education, sex, educational status, marital status, and religious affiliation.

The *Interpersonal Support Evaluation List* (33) was used to assess perceived social support. This 40-item measure was used to assess participants' perception of functional support. Questions are answered on a 4-point scale with regard to 4 types of social support: tangible (i.e., perceived availability of material aide); appraisal (i.e., perceived availability of someone to confide in); self-esteem (i.e., positive comparison when comparing oneself with others); and belonging (i.e., perceived availability of people one can do things with). The ISEL has strong psychometric properties with Cronbach coefficients ranging from .73 to .81 for tangible support, .70 to .82 for appraisal, .62 to .73 for self-esteem, and .73 to .78 for belonging (4, 33, 34). A coefficient alpha of .74 was obtained for the entire scale in the present study.

The 12-item *Core Self-evaluations Scale* (CSES) was

used to assess core self-evaluations. Developed by (35) as a direct and relatively brief measure of the core self-evaluations traits (high self-esteem, high generalized self-efficacy, emotional stability and internal locus of control), the instrument is scored along a five-point Likert scale with options ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree", and with higher scores denoting high core self-evaluations and vice-versa. Six items on the scale are reverse scored (items 2, 4, 6, 8, 10 and 12). Robust psychometric properties have been reported for the scale (35, 36, 37) including an average reliability of .84, test-retest reliability of .81; item-total correlations ranging from .48 to .55 as well as high and positively correlated inter-item matrices (when the negatively worded items had been reverse scored). In the present study; a coefficient alpha of .79 was obtained.

The *Stress Reaction Subscale of the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire* (38) was used to assess distress tolerance. The MPQ is a self-report measure that represents 11 primary personality dimensions and three higher order traits: Positive Emotionality, Negative Emotionality, and Constraint. The stress reaction subscale of the MPQ has strong psychometric properties including high internal consistency, test-retest, construct validity and concurrent validity (4, 38). A coefficient alpha of .84 was obtained for the scale in the present study.

*Substance use* was assessed in this study with modified *Montgomery Substance Abuse Questionnaire*. The questionnaire has two parts. In the first part, a list of substances are provided (including alcohol, nicotine, anabolic steroids, inhalants, sedatives, stimulants, dissociative anesthetics, opioids, etc.) and respondents were asked to indicate any of the substances that they had ever used, had used in the last 30 days or were using currently. The second part consists of 12 items assessing respondents' substance abuse in the last 12 months, by ticking either "Yes" or "No" for each item (scored 1 and 0 respectively). Respondents' composite scores are used to determine the presence and degrees of substance use /abuse. A Cronbach alpha of .78 was obtained for the instrument in the present study.

### 2.3. Procedure

The survey was carried out in Ibadan, a large metropolitan city in the south-western part of Nigeria. Questionnaires were administered at several government parastatals and agencies (when applicants were responding to perceived or actual job vacancies) within the Oyo State Government Secretariat and Federal Secretariat in Ibadan. After explaining the goals of the study to the authorities of the agencies and parastatals involved, permission to conduct the study was granted. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained by participants' signing of the informed consent form attached to the questionnaire. Since all participants were literate, there was no problem with completion of the questionnaire. Participants were instructed not to indicate their names anywhere on the

survey materials. No financial incentive was given to participants. The researchers and two trained Assistants personally administered 300 questionnaires over a period of six weeks, out of which 200 questionnaires were retrieved with usable data. This represented 66.7% return rate.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Prevalence of Psychoactive Substance (Drug) Use/Abuse

About 44% of all respondents reported current use while 69% reported lifetime use of one or more psychoactive substances. Prevalence rates of use of all categories of drugs by respondents are presented in Table 1. Life time prevalence rate was highest for alcohol (44.50%), followed by stimulants (35%), tobacco (32%), cannabis (21%), sedatives (20.50%) and heroin (17.50%). The least were inhalants and anabolic steroids with (2%). The previous 30 days and current use prevalence rates followed similar patterns but the rates were lower than the life time use.

Table 1. Prevalence rates of drug use among respondents (N=200)

Drug	Lifetime Use		Previous 30 days use		Current use	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Alcohol	89	44.50	74	37.00	72	36.00
Stimulants	70	35.00	62	31.00	58	29.00
Tobacco	62	32.00	58	29.00	56	28.00
Cannabis	42	21.00	28	14.00	22	11.00
Sedatives	41	20.50	32	16.00	25	12.50
Heroin	35	17.50	28	14.00	25	12.50
Cocaine	23	11.50	15	7.50	14	7.00
Opium	17	8.50	14	7.00	9	4.50
Hallucinogens	05	2.50	3	1.50	3	1.50
Inhalants	04	2.00	4	2.00	4	2.00
Anabolic Steroids	04	2.00	-	-	-	-
Others	15	7.50	8	4.00	5	2.50

#### 3.2. Associations between Psychosocial Variables and Substance Use

The relationships among the variables of study were examined. Results showed that age ( $r = -.23$ ;  $p < .05$ ), sex ( $r = -.39$ ;  $p < .01$ ), Marital status ( $r = -.22$ ;  $p < .05$ ), Number of years of formal education ( $r = -.27$ ;  $p < .05$ ), number of years spent after graduation ( $r = .33$ ;  $p < .01$ ), personality ( $r = -.47$ ;  $p < .01$ ), perceived social support ( $r = -.41$ ;  $p < .01$ ), and

distress tolerance ( $r = -.47$ ;  $p < .01$ ) were significantly related to substance use. In other words, younger persons, males, singles, persons who had spent less number of years in formal education, those who had left school for a relatively longer number of years, persons with low core self-evaluations, low social support and low distress tolerance were more likely to use psychoactive substance. These and other relationships are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Intercorrelations, means and standard deviations among study variables

Variable	Age	Sex	MS	FE	GRA	CSEs	PSS	DT	SU	M	SD
Age	-									29.07	5.46
Sex	-.39**	-								-	-
MS	.23*	.26*	-							-	-
FE	.43**	-.07	.09	-						14.59	4.30
GRA	.29*	.11	.13	-.13	-					5.38	3.53
CSEs	.11	.09	.08	.23*	.13	-				31.92	6.87
PSS	.23*	.36**	.26*	.38**	.16	.38**	-			93.85	12.18
DT	.24*	.10	.32**	.31**	-.09	.41**	.43**	-		89.10	11.63
SU	-.23*	-.39**	-.22*	-.27*	.33**	-.47**	-.41**	-.47**	-	7.53	3.03

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

Abbrev: Years of formal education = FE; Number years of graduation = GRA; Marital Status = MS; Personality (core self-evaluations) = CSEs; Perceived Social Support = PSS; Distress Tolerance = DT; Substance Use = SU

Coding of dichotomous variables: Sex (Males = 1, females = 2); Marital status (Single = 1, Married = 2).

### 4. Discussion

The present study investigated the association of some psychosocial factors with substance use among unemployed persons in Ibadan, Nigeria. Lifetime and current use of psychoactive substances were 69% and 44% respectively, indicating that this particular population (the

unemployed) might be at an elevated risk for substance abuse. In our sample, the most currently used psychoactive substances were alcohol (36%), followed by stimulants (29%), Tobacco (28%), and sedatives (12.5%), while for lifetime use the following were the most common: alcohol (44.5%), stimulant (35%), tobacco (32%) and cannabis (21%). Although we did not find empirical evidence on

prevalence of substance use among unemployed persons in Nigeria, the finding is consistent with previous studies indicating alcohol to be the most currently abused substance in Nigeria. The implication of these findings is that unemployment might be an important risk factor for substance use. While not ruling out other plausible explanations for substance use among unemployed persons, therefore, it is safe to opine that many unemployed persons take to psychoactive substances as a way of finding solace from the many psychological, social and economic consequences of unemployment.

We also found significant associations between several psychological and socio-demographic variables - personality, perceived social support, distress tolerance, age, sex, marital status, number of years of formal education, number of years spent after graduation - and substance use. Low core self-evaluations were significantly associated with more substance use. This finding is consistent with the notion that high core self-evaluations individuals demonstrate more effectiveness in overcoming obstacles by using better problem-solving strategies (11), higher stress tolerance (9), and ability to cope better with frustration and unpredictable situations (11). In a country like Nigeria where there is no social security or welfare programme for the unemployed, unemployment constitutes a huge threat not only to an individual's economic and social well-being, but also to the person's psychological well-being as well. In such a situation, an individual without a robust, well-rounded personality, therefore, might find himself (herself) at the mercy of his (her) circumstance, and subsequently resort to the use of psychoactive substances to obtain the succour that the society has failed to provide. Thus, like in many other physical, psychological and social issues, personality could play a very crucial role.

Distress tolerance was also found to be significantly associated with substance use, with individuals low on distress tolerance more likely to use psychoactive substances, relative to those with high distress tolerance. This finding is consistent with several previous findings that have identified a relationship between one's ability to tolerate emotional and/or physical distress and substance use (4, 14, 17, 18). This appears to corroborate Daughters (4) assertion that it is those individuals who are able to persist despite increased levels of negative affect that are most likely to either abstain from substance abuse or complete treatment for substance abuse. Thus, ability to persevere or tolerate aversive stimuli (such as unemployment) could represent a buffering variable in substance use. More work is still needed, however, to elaborate on this line of research as most empirical findings were based on treatment programs for substance abuse.

We also found significant association between perceived social support and substance use among unemployed persons, with high social support individuals less likely to use substances. Apart from the empirical demonstrated support for the beneficial roles of social support across many negative circumstances (4, 21), the finding of the

present study is also intuitively plausible. Under stressful circumstances, availability of social support has been shown to be very helpful and has indeed been documented as a highly effective intervention for stress. The perceived availability of social support has also been found to be crucial in the effective coping under aversive conditions to the extent that the individual feels that socio-emotional resources are available from significant others. This is particularly important for unemployed individuals who must also sustain themselves on the basic things of life (just like the gainfully employed persons). Additionally, the availability of social support (or its perception) might serve to de-stigmatize the unemployed in social settings, thus reducing the time and opportunities available to the individual to entertain negative thoughts and engage in self-injurious behaviors (such as substance abuse).

Age was found to be associated with substance use, with relatively younger persons more likely to be involved. This appears consistent with emerging trends in substance abuse literature indicating that younger persons, more than was previously the case, are now abusing psychoactive substances to very dangerous extents (23, 39). Male unemployed persons were found to be more likely than females to use psychoactive substances. In keeping with previous evidence (23, 39, 40) that men tend to turn to psychoactive substances (especially alcohol), relative to women, when faced with major challenges. This is not uncommon, especially in a country like Nigeria where many men believe that one could go to a "beer parlour" to have some drinks and forget about his troubles. Number of years of formal education was found to be significantly but negatively related to substance use. Although we couldn't find empirical evidence to substantiate this line of thinking, it is plausible to opine that more years of formal education carry the potential of educating an individual about the deleterious effects of substance abuse, thereby dissuading the individuals with more formal education. The positive association between the length of years after leaving school (years of unemployment) and substance abuse could be the result of increasing frustrations of joblessness with the passage of time. Social expectations for marriage, child-bearing, and sustaining other family members create serious pressure on a graduate with the passage of time. This may push the unemployed person into engaging in detrimental coping strategies such as substance abuse.

Based on the results of this study and the discussion, we conclude that current and lifetime substance use was generally high among unemployed persons and if, left unaddressed, portends double jeopardy for this group of people. To the extent that several psychological and socio-demographic variables examined in the present study (although not totally exhaustive) are strongly related to substance use, then, intervention should be possible. We recommend, therefore, that unemployed persons should be considered for social schemes such as being given monthly stipends and other social security benefits. Also, unemployed persons should be considered for

psychological services such as counseling and specially designed psycho-educational programs aimed at engendering core self-evaluation traits (high self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, emotional stability and internal locus of control), distress tolerance, and social support. Young, male school leavers and unemployed persons should be especially targeted for such intervention programs.

The study has certain limitations, such as the cross-sectional nature of the study which would make it impossible to draw causal inference. An experimental study in which variables were actively manipulated and extraneous variables controlled would have provided a more compelling test of the hypotheses. Other psychological and social variables not investigated in this study might play crucial roles in explaining substance use in this vulnerable population. This study, thus, did not provide a complete picture of the situation. However, these limitations did not in any way vitiate the important findings of the study and its vital contributions to empirical knowledge on the subject matter.

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