Peer Influence and Adolescent Substance Use: A Qualitative Study Among Senior High School Students in Accra

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Abstracts

Adolescent drug use represents a significant public health concern. Peer relationships substantially influence drug use initiation and maintenance. This research investigates the connection between peer dynamics and substance use among secondary school students in Accra, with particular attention to substance types, vulnerability factors, and students' management strategies. The research design followed qualitative phenomenological principles, gathering data through in-depth interviews with twenty students (8 males and 12 females) between fourteen and nineteen years old from a pair of senior secondary institutions. Participant selection followed purposive and snowball sampling methods. Thematic analysis identified patterns in substance use behaviours, peer influence, and coping mechanisms. Findings revealed widespread drug use among students. Cannabis-infused confectioneries (weed toffees), energy drinks, alcohol (Panache), and tramadol emerged as commonly abused substances. Peer pressure constitutes a significant factor, with students using drugs to gain acceptance within social groups. Some of the participants endeavour to withstand negative influences by seeking guidance from counsellors or deliberately avoiding classmates known for substance use; nevertheless, many find such resistance challenging within the complex social hierarchies that characterise secondary education environments. The evidence from this study points toward an urgent need for educational interventions that simultaneously target personal decision-making and the wider social ecosystem surrounding adolescents. Academic institutions should develop student-led awareness initiatives, enhance psychological support frameworks, and institute more rigorous substance regulations. Broader community participation proves indispensable in curtailing youth substance misuse and mitigating its enduring impacts on development and well-being.

Keywords: Peer Influence, Substance Abuse, Adolescents, Ghana, Prevention Strategies

Introduction

Substance abuse constitutes a significant societal challenge within Ghana's secondary education system. This study defines drug abuse as the excessive consumption of psychoactive substances beyond therapeutic requirements, resulting in adverse health and social consequences. Peer pressure—the perceived or actual social influence encouraging specific behaviours—emerges as a fundamental catalyst for both initial and continued substance misuse among adolescent students. Viner and Taylor (2007) attribute increased drug abuse in Ghana to rapid social transformation and deterioration of traditional communal structures that previously enforced stricter behavioural constraints. The theoretical foundation for this investigation incorporates Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, which explicates behavioural acquisition through observational processes and reinforcement mechanisms, alongside Peer Influence Theory, collectively illuminating how adolescent social dynamics shape substance use patterns among Ghanaian secondary students.

Statement of the Problem

Adolescent substance use often persists into adulthood, raising concerns about dependency and long-term consequences (Viner & Taylor, 2007). Studies indicate that peer networks significantly shape drug behaviours, as substance use is often embedded in social interactions (Morrison, 2004; Kawaguchi, 2004). Beyond individual consequences, drug abuse affects academic performance and financial stability, placing a strain on institutional resources (Otieno & Ofulla, 2009). Previous studies have examined adolescent drug use in general; however, there remains a lack of understanding regarding the specific influence of peer pressure on substance use among secondary school students in Accra. Addressing this gap is essential for formulating targeted interventions to reduce peer-influenced substance abuse in Ghanaian schools.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the patterns of drug use among senior high students influenced by their peers, including the types of substances involved and the frequency of use.
2. To explore strategies that senior high students adopt to resist peer pressure and avoid involvement in drug abuse.

Research questions

1. What are the new trends and patterns of drug abuse among senior high school students?
2. Are there significant strategies adopted by students to resist negative peer influence and drug abuse?

Literature Review

Health and Social Impacts of Drug Abuse

Drug abuse has severe health and social consequences, contributing to accidents, organ damage, and increased cancer risks. Adolescents who misuse substances often struggle academically and face psychological distress, risky behaviour, and criminal involvement (Steinberg, 2005).

Global Context and Prevalence

Substance abuse is a global issue, significantly contributing to morbidity and mortality (UNODC, 2008). Studies link higher drug use rates to school dropout, emphasising the protective role of structured educational environments (Sizi & Menkiti, 2014).

Peer Influence Mechanisms

Peer influence is a major driver of adolescent substance use. Youth with drug-using peers face higher risks of experimentation, often driven by social acceptance and avoidance of exclusion (Bahr, Hoffmann, & Yang, 2005; Nasim et al., 2011).

Ghanaian Context

In Ghana, adolescents initiate substance use between the ages of 14 and 19, with alcohol, cannabis, and cigarettes being the most prevalent (Nkyi, 2014). Rising drug-related mental health cases have positioned Ghana among Africa's top illicit drug consumers (Appiah et al., 2018).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological design to explore adolescents' lived experiences with peer pressure and substance use in Ghanaian secondary schools.

Population and Sampling

The study focused on senior high students in Korle Klottey Municipality, Accra. Two schools—Kinbu Secondary Technical and Presbyterian Secondary, Osu—were purposively selected due to their demographic diversity and reported substance use cases. The sample consisted of 20 students (8 males, 12 females) aged 14–19, evenly distributed across first- to third-year levels.

Sampling Techniques

A two-stage sampling approach was used. Purposive sampling identified students based on school attendance, substance use history, and willingness to participate, while snowball sampling helped recruit additional participants through peer networks (Naderifar et al., 2017).

Data Collection Procedures

In line with the thematic approach of Patton (2015), institutional permission was secured, and school counsellors organised participant recruitment and confidentiality. Semi-structured interviews (45–60 minutes) were held in private, exploring patterns of substance use, peer influences, and methods of coping. Interviews were audio-recorded (with permission), transcribed verbatim, and supplemented by field notes documenting non-verbal interactions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols (Patton, 2015) were adhered to, ensuring informed consent, participant anonymity, and voluntary withdrawal rights. School counsellors were available for psychological support.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=20)

Characteristic	Category	Number	Percentage
Sex	Male	8	40%
	Female	12	60%
Age	14-16 years	10	50%
	17-19 years	10	50%
Education Level	Form 1	7	35%
	Form 2	6	30%
	Form 3	7	35%
School	Kinbu Secondary	10	50%
	Presbyterian Secondary	10	50%

Source: Fieldwork (2024)

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to examine interview transcripts. The process involved multiple readings, independent coding by two researchers, and iterative theme development. Final themes were refined through inter-coder discussions, achieving an 85% agreement rate.

Table 2: Peer Relationships and Their Influence on Substance Use

Key Aspect	Quantitative Data	Qualitative Illustrations	Interpretation
Peer closeness	80% (*n* = 16) of participants reported very close peer relationships.	"Outings, sittings, partying, spending long hours in school, and engaging in similar interests like football."	Close-knit peer networks fostered environments where substance use was normalized.
Social activities	–	Shared activities often involved unsupervised gatherings or leisure time, creating opportunities for substance use.	Social bonding rituals directly correlated with contexts where substances were used.

Note. Data source: Participant interviews (Fieldwork, 2024). Percentages reflect responses from the total sample (N = 20).

As shown in Table 2, peer dynamics strongly influenced substance use, with 80% (n = 16) of participants citing social activities as key avenues for drug experimentation. Informal gatherings often served as initiation points, as illustrated by a female participant: *"I went for a hangout with my friends, and some were using drugs, so I decided to try it."* **(P3, 15 years, Female, Accra).**

Table 3: Variations in Peer Influence on Substance Use by Gender and Age

Category	Subgroup	Sample Size	Key Motivation/Pattern	Interpretation
Gender	Female participants	*n* = 9 (75% of females)	Social acceptance is a primary motivator.	Females linked substance use to fitting into peer groups or avoiding social exclusion.

Category	Subgroup	Sample Size	Key Motivation/Pattern	Interpretation
	Male participants	$n = 6$ (75% of males)	Performance enhancement (e.g., sports).	Males associated substance use with improving physical stamina or social confidence in competitive settings.
Age	Older participants (17–19 years)	$n = 10$ (50% of sample)	Established substance use patterns.	Older students exhibited habitual use, often integrated into daily routines or social rituals.
	Younger participants (14–16 years)	$n = 10$ (50% of sample)	Experimental use via peer influence.	Younger students described initiation into substance use through curiosity or peer pressure.

Note. Data source: Participant interviews (Fieldwork, 2024). Percentages reflect subgroup proportions (e.g., 75% of females = 9/12; 75% of males = 6/8).

"As shown in Table 3, gender and age shaped distinct substance use motivations. While 75% of females linked drug use to social acceptance, an equal percentage of males cited performance enhancement, particularly in sports. Older students (17–19 years) exhibited habitual use, whereas younger peers (14–16 years) engaged in peer-driven experimentation.

Types and Patterns of Substance Use

Alcohol was the most commonly abused substance (90%), with "Panache" frequently cited. Cannabis products (75%) followed, while prescription drugs (50%) and tobacco (40%) were less prevalent (see Figure 1).

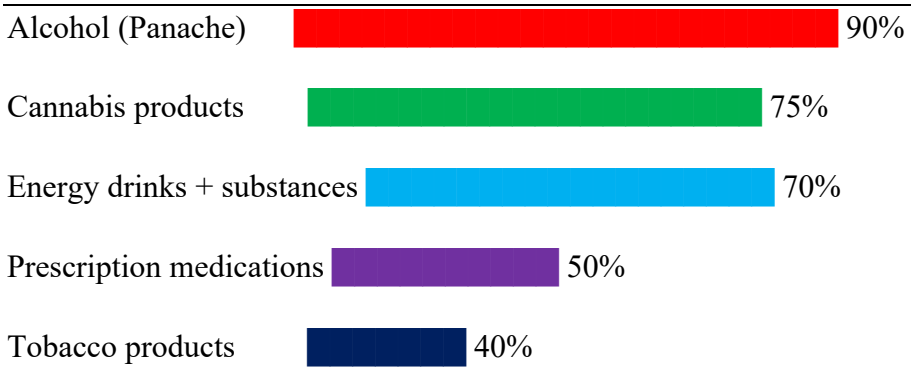
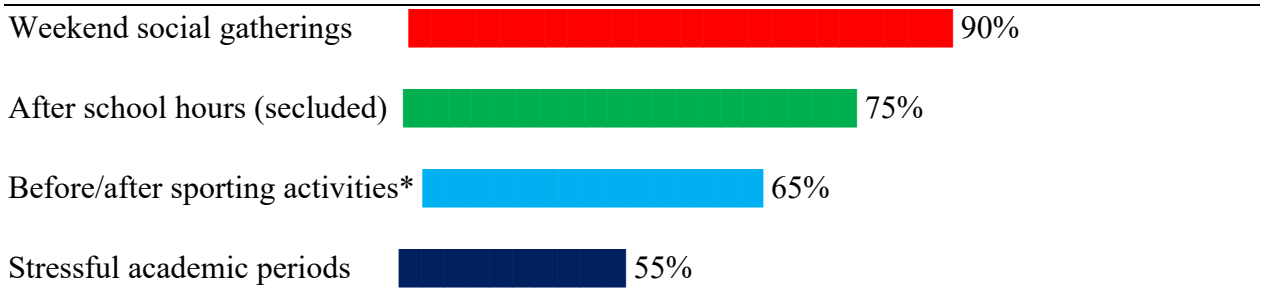


Figure 1. Frequency of Substance Types Reported by Participants (N=20)

The detailed analyses showed significant differences in substance use patterns related to various contextual factors (see Figure 2).

Substance use primarily occurred at weekend gatherings (90%) and secluded after-school settings (75%). Males (65%) associated use with sports, while 55% of participants cited academic stress as a trigger. Gender differences were also notable: 65% of male participants (n = 13) linked substance use to sporting activities, viewing cannabis as a way to enhance performance or social interaction. In contrast, 55% of all participants associated substance use with high-stress periods during their academic lives, suggesting it serves as a coping mechanism for academic stress.



*Male participants only (n=13).

Figure 2: Contextual Factors Influencing Substance Use Patterns (N=20)

A male participant explained his usage pattern:

"I use drugs sometimes before and mostly after my football matches." **(P5. 16 years, Male, Accra).**

Personality Factors and Vulnerability to Peer Pressure

Table 4: Personality Traits and Vulnerability to Peer Pressure in Substance Use (N=20)

Personality Trait	Prevalence	Participant Quote	Mechanism of Vulnerability
Fear/Anxiety	35% (*n* = 7)	*"I am scared of survival... when I take drugs, I'm able to overcome the fear."* – Male participant	Substances act as emotional regulators to mitigate anxiety.
Social Extroversion	45% (*n* = 9)	*"I am very friendly... the way I am has made me indulge in trying drugs."* – Female participant	Extroversion fosters conformity to group norms, enabling social facilitation.
Shyness/Social Anxiety	30% (*n* = 6)	*"I am a very shy person... taking drugs helps me overcome my shyness."* – Female participant	Substances reduce inhibitions, aiding social interaction.

Note. Data source: Participant interviews (Fieldwork, 2024).

As shown in Table 4, participants' personality traits significantly influenced their peer-influenced substance use. Social extroversion was the most prevalent trait, with participants using substances to align with group dynamics. Fear or anxiety and shyness were associated with internal psychological challenges, while substance use was used to mitigate distress. Extroverts often used substances to reinforce social cohesion, while introverted or anxious participants used substances to regulate emotional states or facilitate social interaction.

Coping Strategies and Resistance to Peer Pressure

Table 5: Coping Strategies for Resisting Peer Pressure (N=20)

Strategy	Prevalence	Illustrative Example
Selective peer associations	60% (*n* = 12)	Avoiding peers involved in substance use.
Extracurricular engagement	50% (*n* = 10)	Participation in sports, music, or religious groups.
Family support	40% (*n* = 8)	Guidance from family members.

Strategy	Prevalence	Illustrative Example
Personal refusal skills	35% (*n* = 7)	Assertive boundary-setting (e.g., "I just say no").
School counselling participation	30% (*n* = 6)	Attending sessions to learn coping techniques.

Note. Data source: Participant interviews (Fieldwork, 2024).

The study found five key coping strategies used as indicated in Table 5 by participants to resist peer pressure. Selective peer associations were the most common, involving avoidance of substance use peers. Extracurricular engagement and family support were protective factors, emphasising structured activities and guidance. Personal refusal skills and school counselling participation were less common, emphasising self-efficacy and institutional resources. The study highlights the interplay of individual, familial, and institutional strategies in mitigating peer-influenced substance use. A female participant described her strategy: *"I choose my friends carefully now. When I notice someone uses drugs or pressures others, I distance myself and focus on my studies and church activities instead*." **(P4, 14 years, Female, Accra)**

Discussion

The Role of Peer Relationships in Adolescent Substance Use

This study illuminates the complex interplay of peer relationships, gender norms, developmental stages, and identity formation in shaping substance use behaviours among Ghanaian secondary school students. The findings underscore the centrality of peer influence in both initiating and sustaining substance use while revealing critical nuances in how these dynamics intersect with cultural context, gender, and age.

Peer Influence and Social Contexts

Consistent with social network theory (McPherson, Barbosa-Leiker, Burns, Howell, & Roll, (2012), adolescents in this study gravitated toward peers with shared substance use behaviours, particularly in social contexts like weekend gatherings (90%) and unsupervised post-school settings (75%). This alignment with homophilous networks suggests that peer influence operates not merely through overt pressure but through the gradual normalisation of substance use within self-selected groups. As McGloin et al. (2014) posit, peer influence wanes when norms diverge, yet our participants' narratives revealed how shared interests—from football to partying—created environments where substance use became an implicit requirement for social belonging. This dynamic was amplified by Ghana's collectivist cultural ethos, where group cohesion often supersedes individual risk aversion (Drolet & Arcand, 2013).

Gendered Pathways to Substance Use

The gender distribution in our sample (60% female) challenges prior Ghanaian studies reporting higher male prevalence (Doku et al., 2012), potentially signalling shifting sociocultural norms. Females more frequently linked substance use to social acceptance, echoing Rivis et al.'s (2006) finding that relational priorities heighten susceptibility to peer influence. In contrast, 65% of males tied substance use to performance enhancement in sports or social settings, reflecting traditional masculine ideals of stamina and confidence. These divergent motivations suggest that prevention programs must move beyond generic messaging: interventions for females might emphasise assertive refusal within relational contexts, while male-focused strategies could target sports teams to dismantle associations between substance use and athletic performance.

Developmental Trajectories and Educational Transitions

The study examines developmental trajectories and educational transitions in substance use among adolescents. Younger adolescents engage in experimental substance use, often due to peer pressure, while older adolescents view substances as integral to social routines. Despite greater autonomy, 75% of older participants continue substance use in peer-driven settings. The study also highlights the critical influence of early adolescence on enduring behavioural trajectories, emphasising the need for targeted prevention programs for Form 1 students. The findings support the Problem-Behaviour Theory, which suggests substance use is linked to peer approval and provides adolescents with independence and maturity (Steinberg and Monahan, 2007; Jessor, 1987).

The Ghanaian Cultural Context and Global Influences

A unique contribution of this study is its *examination* of how global cultural influences interact with local contexts to shape substance use behaviours among Ghanaian adolescents. Several participants cited media influences, particularly American rap music videos, as normalising substance use:

"I love to watch American rappers singing and rapping, I see them drinking and smoking all sorts of things, so I will say I learned the habit of using drugs from them." **(P8, 14 years, Male, Accra)**

This finding supports Degenhardt et al.'s (2016) observation that globalisation has contributed to the normalisation of substance use across different countries. In the Ghanaian context, where traditional cultural values often discourage substance use, these global media influences create potential conflicts between traditional norms and emerging youth culture.

Recommendations

To effectively help young people resist the negative influences of an unhealthy social environment and alleviate academic stress, which can harm their well-being, it is crucial to have strong school programs. These programs must teach students how to maintain their health and recover from

difficulties, thereby building their resilience against drugs. Involving parents is also essential, as it ensures they are informed and open with their children, creating warm and supportive home environments.

High schools, in particular, should develop guidance counselling and extracurricular activities that provide students with meaningful pursuits and sympathetic ears when they need support. Schools should also conduct workshops and discussions about the dangers of drugs and the pressure that friends can exert. Parents need to be present for their children, offering advice and support to help them navigate peer pressure. Strong families that communicate well can significantly reduce the risk of drug abuse.

Additionally, churches, local organisations, and clubs should collaborate to raise awareness and support teens. Given the increasing involvement of girls in these issues, it is important to create programs specifically designed for them to address friendship pressures and drug use.

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