

Prevalence of drug use and cultism amongst senior secondary school students in Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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Drug use and cultism amongst senior secondary school students is fast gaining attention as a public health issue and social malaise in Ebonyi State. Drug use and cultism have been identified as amongst social vices that permeate senior secondary schools in Nigeria and even in high schools globally. In this letter, the report of a primary qualitative research on the prevalence of this pandemic (drug use and cultism amongst senior secondary school students) from private and public senior secondary schools in Ebonyi State, Nigeria was presented. In primary qualitative or quantitative research, a first-hand information is obtained directly from the original source (the participants) by the researcher. Semi-structured interview was used as data collection instruments. Semi-structured interviews are widely appraised for being flexible, hence it will be utilised to obtain primary data that will give information on the experiences of the senior secondary students on the rate at which they use drugs and participate in cult activities. The semi-structured interview was administered online in order to accommodate as many senior secondary school students as possible. Also the use of online mode enabled many senior secondary school students who could have been feeling shy or afraid to disclose that they engage in cultism or drugs to make contribution without being detected. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. Whether qualitative or quantitative research, purposive sampling is generally utilised to map out and show specific population groups that are identified to the area of interest of the researcher (Singh, & Masuku 2014). In this study, the criterion and snowball sampling techniques were used. Criterion sampling are mostly utilised to recruit participants that satisfied the actual specifications or requirements of the researcher (Palinkas et al., 2015). For the Criterion sampling, the criteria included: i) male or female senior secondary students in public or private school in Ebonyi State and whose age was 18 years or above, ii) male or female senior secondary students in public or private school in Ebonyi State that has engaged in drug use, and iii) male or female senior secondary students in public or private school in Ebonyi State that belongs to a secret cult. Snowball sampling in qualitative research enables the researcher to advertise the research by himself/herself, through the participants, or through words of mouth (Parker, Scott & Geddes, 2019). Therefore, using the Snowball sampling technique, I posted the research title to different social media accounts and also shared the information with other senior secondary students that may fit the criteria. Since snowball sampling also gives room for participants to recommend other potential participants to take part (Robinson, 2014), the snowball sampling strategy helped me to get many potential participants. Through the snowballing sampling technique, I was able to get participants that spans across very wide age group, ranging from 18 years to 33 years. Further, the snowballing sampling technique helped me to use word of mouth to attract many participants from diverse age range. Additionally, the intent for purposively employing an online approach of semi-structured interview in the study was to pull senior secondary students from: i) all socioeconomic background (poor, middle-class, rich), ii) senior secondary school student from public or private secondary school from any location in Ebonyi State, iii) senior secondary school student of any status (disability, or no disability), and iv) senior secondary school students from different parenting (single, divorced, husband and wife, adopted, etc). The sample size was one hundred and sixty (160) students. Seventy five (75) were males whereas eighty five (85) were females. The population of students that were aged between 18 to 22 years was seventy five (75) percent, those aged between 23 to 26 years were eighteen (18) percent, and those that were aged between 27 to 33 years were seven (7) percent. Additionally, one hundred (100) students were from public secondary school while the remaining sixty (60) were from private secondary schools. I administered the semi-structured interview online using mobile phone. The semi-structured interview was composed of ten open-ended questions that I developed. The questions covered: i) attempt by secondary school student to take drug or having taken drugs previously, or is currently taking drugs, ii) attempt by secondary school student to belong to a cult or having belonged to a cult previously, or currently belongs to a cult, iii) whether parents takes drug or belongs to a cult, iv) current state of mental health of the secondary school student, v) method of recruitment into drug use and cultism, vi) reasons

for taking drugs or belonging to a cult or both, vii) what type of drug have you ever used or is still using, viii) which cult do you belong to, ix) is there a counselling unit for drug use and cultism in their schools, and x) impact of drug use and belonging to cult on the academic performances of those secondary school students. The semi-structured interview was designed to last for thirty (30) minutes. Additionally, the interview data, and the interviewees were all coded in order to ensure confidentiality of the information and that of the participants. Accordingly, male students from public secondary students were coded as MS, female from public secondary schools as FS, male students from private secondary students were coded as MPS, and female from private secondary schools as FPS. The data analysis was done through the use of thematic analysis. In a primary qualitative research, thematic analysis serves as an empirical inductive approach to obtain data (Terry et al., 2017). Theme can be defined as an integration of coded data that are grouped together due to their relatedness, similarities or patterns. Searching for a theme is always open-ended. As discussed in the literature (Clarke and Braun, 2017), thematic analysis recognises similarities and pattern in a data, enabling to use the theme to proffer solution to the research question (Belotto, 2018). The major themes that emerged from the study are: i) drug use amongst senior secondary student are on the increase, ii) drug use and belonging to a cult was due to peer group pressure, including the need to feel high and get what one wants more easily, iii) majority of the students that do drugs and belong to a cult are more from middle class to wealthy parents, iv) Black Axe Confraternity was the most popular cult group, followed by Buccaneers in the study area, v) metamorphine and tramadol were the commonest drug used by those youngsters, vi) drug use induced depression and hallucinations in those senior secondary students, vii) taking drugs and belonging to a cult have remained a secret to their parents, and viii) the academic performances of the students were negatively impacted on. These themes can be seen clearly from the extracts of the interviewees as given in extracts 1 to 4 that were given as representative of the data.

Extract 1.

“Well, the truth is, my friends lured me into this. I mean taking metamorphine. I was initiated into Black Axe when I was in SS2. However, I’ve been enjoying many privileges since then. Yeah men! At least, I don’t knock those babes wey dey do shakara for me before. No teacher go yarn trash for me for this school. Yes ooo. It’s good to belong.” E dey pain you? E dey sweet me ooo. After all my Papa na Senator. It’s a secret to my parents anyway. My teacher sabi say I go get WAEC (West African Examination Council), class or no class. Infact I dey see my grades after taking my metamorphine. (MS1).

Extract 2.

“It was my friend Evelyn that made me know about it. We have been friends since we met at senior secondary school in this private school after our junior secondary school from different schools. She was always moving with the big boys, despite she is a lesbian. I envied her and persuaded her to carry me along. She taught me how to sniff things, take met, smoke Indian hemp, and also get big links with the outer society. We enjoy intimacy. I belong to Black Axe confraternity. I’m proud of it, though it’s a big secret to my parents (FS1).

Extract 3.

“Yes, Yes, Yes, If you belong, you belong. If you no belong, you no belong. After all, my mumsy no go know say I belong. My mumsy dey ride latest Prado. Who be that teacher wey go blab. Who be that babe wey no go fall. Yes my friends are my ultimate. They brought me into this fold and I’m happy. My WAEC go dey fine. I don’t need to read to pass. Tramadol is the best. I’m always scared and I don’t know why. I feel something is missing. I’m an axe man. If you want to hug transformer, that’s your business. There’s no counselling unit. I have not heard of it before. (MPS1).

Extract 4.

“I’m a buccaneer. My parents are not aware that I’m into drugs and cultism. Met and Tram are my best. My teachers fear me and I’m popular. Okey introduced me into this. I’ve had three abortions for him. What can I do. I wish I had a counsellor on time. (FPS1).

As indicated in those extracts, metamorphine and tramadol are amongst the drugs that are mostly used by senior secondary school in the study area. These findings supports that of Idowu et al (2018) that Tramadol was the most commonly abused substance apart from alcohol. Participants reported that 39.0% of the substance was abused in a study that involved the prevalence and factors associated with substance abuse in selected public schools in Ogbomoso, South-West Nigeria. The study highlighted the need to intensify awareness against substance abuse among secondary school students in Nigeria (Idowu et al., 2018). Additionally the findings in the present study was corroborated by Abonyi et al. (2022) which revealed that the major drugs commonly abused by teenagers include tramadol, methamphetamine, marijuana/cigarette, codeine and others in a study that involved Drug Intake Among Teenagers in Nigerian Primary and Secondary Schools in western Nigeria.

Abonyi et al. (2022) identified peer pressure, bad parenting, economic challenges/hardship, unconducive school environment as the reasons for this prevalence of drug use by the students. The study highlighted the importance of having social workers in secondary schools and a clinical centre established in each school, including counselling as a way forward to mitigate this scourge. Peer groups and fluent parents were also identified as risk factors to increased drug use and cult activities in the present study. This finding was supported by the reports of Adje, Oyita & Eniojukan (2015). According to the literature (Onigbogi, Ojo & Babalola, 2023; Nabofa, 2021; Gana & Njodi, 2019), substance abuse among Nigerian in-school youth has been on the rise in recent times with attendant physical and mental health consequences. The substances that were mostly consumed by senior secondary schools students includes opiates such as codeine-containing cough syrup and tramadol (11.6%), followed by tranquilizers (9%), hallucinogens (5.6%) and amphetamines (5.3%) with the influencers of use being mainly family friends (31.4%), parents (22.9%) and peers (22.9%) (Onigbogi, Ojo & Babalola, 2023). The use of opioids, gender, educational level, type of school management, and geographical economic distribution were identified as major determinants of drug use prevalence among students in private and public schools in Lagos (Soremekun, Folorunso & Adeyemi, 2020). This supports socioeconomic factor as a risk factor as was identified in the present study. Based on the findings as given in the eight (8) themes, it was recommended that government should set up active counselling unit in all public and private secondary schools in the study area. Parents should also try to visit their wards very frequently in the school in order to identify what their children are into on time.

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