



Gender Differences in Social Media's Influence on Peer Pressure, Celebrity Worship, and Substance Use Patterns among Students of Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: The rapid expansion of social media use among Nigerian youth has reconfigured patterns of peer interaction, identity formation, and behavioural socialisation within tertiary institutions, with celebrity culture increasingly shaping substance use behaviours. Despite growing concerns about substance use among Nigerian tertiary students, there is a dearth of integrative, gender-responsive studies examining the interplay between social media-mediated peer pressure, celebrity worship, and substance use patterns, neglecting the complex, mutually reinforcing dynamics and gender-specific pathways in this context.

Objective: This study investigates the interconnections between social media-mediated peer pressure, celebrity worship, and substance use behaviours, with particular attention to gender disparities.

Method: This study adopts a secondary data-based research design, leveraging existing datasets to explore relationships among peer pressure, celebrity worship, and substance use patterns. Instruments include: Peer Pressure Scale (PPS); Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS); Substance Use Self-Report Inventory. Secondary data allows examination of trends and comparative analysis between male and female students.

Result: Findings indicate that social media functions as a powerful conduit of normative influence, where peer visibility and celebrity culture reinforce substance-related behaviours. Peer pressure emerged as a significant mediator linking social media engagement to celebrity-inspired substance use. However, the pathways of influence were distinctly gendered. Male students were more likely to engage in outcome-driven emulation of celebrity status and risk-taking behaviours, corresponding with higher frequency and diversity of substance use. Female students demonstrated stronger identification-based motivations shaped by relational validation, aspirational modelling, and image management within online peer networks.

Conclusion: The study concludes that effective prevention strategies must move beyond generic substance control approaches to incorporate digital literacy, peer-network interventions, and gender-sensitive psychosocial programming.

Unique contribution: The study advances existing literature by integrating peer dynamics, celebrity worship, and substance use within a gender-responsive model in the Nigerian context.

Key recommendations: A multidimensional framework that addresses social media dynamics, celebrity culture, and gendered identity processes is essential for mitigating risk behaviours and promoting healthier outcomes among tertiary students.

Keywords: Social media exposure, peer pressure, celebrity worship, substance use, gender differences.



INTRODUCTION

The widespread use of social media among Nigerian youth has greatly transformed patterns of social interaction, identity formation, and socialisation within tertiary institutions. Among the African markets, Nigeria is currently one of the largest digital markets, with internet penetration exceeding 50 per cent and young people comprising the most active online demographic (Nigerian Communications Commission [NCC], 2023; Стрільчук et al., 2024; Statista, 2024). Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube have become the primary spaces through which students connect with peers, negotiate social position, and encounter aspirational lifestyles (Nwonyi et al., 2024). This online saturation has increased the effect of peer visibility and normative force especially in youth dominated online circles.

At the same time, the celebrity culture has increased due to the affordance of social media that breaks the traditional barriers between celebrities and their audiences. The portrayed lifestyles offered by Nigerian musicians, actors, influencers, and global celebrities are more likely to normalise conspicuous consumption, risky behaviours, and substance use as indicators of success, fame or authenticity. Students can internalise such representations through processes like parasocial interaction and celebrity worship and when these emerge through peer validation in the online environment (McCutcheon et al., 2002; Maltby et al., 2006). Social media is therefore not merely a communication tool but a potent socialising agent that shapes attitudes, aspirations, and behavioural intentions.

According to Obande-Ogbuinya et al., (2024); Nwafor et al., (2022), Substance use among students in Nigerian tertiary institutions has consequently become a mounting social and public health concern. Empirical data indicate rising levels of experimentation with alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, prescription drugs, and emerging psychoactive substances amongst undergraduates (Olawaju et al., 2022; Bakke & Endal, 2010). Such trends have become worrying, considering that the links between poor academic, psychological, and health performance and substance use have been well documented. Substance use behaviours are further normalised within digitally mediated peer groups and celebrity-dominated online spaces.

Significantly, gender remains a vital yet underexplored dimension of these behavioural dynamics. Differences between male and female students in their responses to peer pressure are shaped by socially constructed gender roles, expectations, and norms surrounding risk-taking, conformity, and self-presentation. It may be that social media can enhance these differences by making male and female users susceptible to different types of influence, celebrity identification, and peer validation. However, scholarship on Nigeria rarely integrates the analysis of social media-mediated peer pressure, celebrity worship, and substance use within a single analytic framework that accounts for gender.

The general purpose of this paper is to investigate gender disparities in peer pressure mediated by social media and how they interconnect with celebrity worship to determine substance use behaviour among learners in the sampled institutions of learning in Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives are to:



1. To compare male and female students' experiences of social media-mediated peer influence, focusing on perceived pressure, conformity, and modelling.
2. To examine whether celebrity worship predicts substance use patterns and whether gender moderates this relationship.
3. To propose evidence-based, gender-sensitive strategies for reducing risky behaviours among tertiary students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Peer Pressure and Adolescent behaviour

Peer influence is widely recognised as a significant determinant of adolescent and youth risk behaviour, such as substance use, delinquency, and involvement in risky social behaviours. Steinberg and Monahan (2007) note that adolescent vulnerability to peer pressure intensifies during late adolescence, as young people at this stage seek social acceptance and validation from their peer groups. Peer influence operates not only through direct urging but also via modelling, social reinforcement, and normative expectations that define acceptable conduct within a group. Peer pressure thus functions as both a behavioural as well as a psychological process that influences decision making and risk evaluation among the youth.

Technological developments have introduced new dimensions of peer pressure, which scholars have termed digital peer pressure. Unlike traditional face-to-face interactions, digital peer pressure operates across online networks where behaviours are seen, shared, and evaluated in the extremely public social spaces. According to Hinduja and Patchin (2011); Aligwe et al., (2017), online environment intensifies the influence of peers due to higher exposure to peer behaviours as well as perceived prevalence of peer behaviours, which is usually achieved through curated content, peer validation systems like likes, shares, and comments. This heightened exposure and feedback loop intensifies conformity pressures, rendering adolescents particularly susceptible to risky behaviour, substance use, emulating the lifestyles of the celebrities they see, or participating in normative online competitions.

These pressures are particularly pronounced within Nigerian tertiary institutions, where social media penetration is high and cultures of peer approval and social status are deeply embedded. As students navigate both offline and digital peer environments, the interplay between traditional and online influences produces complex behavioural pathways that inform the choices made by students, their drivers, and their life preferences.

Social Media Reasons and habits of use

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973), provides a useful framework for understanding why young people engage with social media, premised on the notion that media consumption is an active process driven by individual needs. UGT holds that users select and engage with media platforms to fulfil psychological and social needs, including entertainment, information-seeking, identity formation, social integration, and validation. Social media is therefore not merely a communication channel; it serves as a vehicle through which young people fulfil personal and social needs.



These theoretical assertions are supported by empirical studies in the Nigerian environment. Olufadi (2020) notes that students use social media to construct their identities, showcase idealised lifestyles, and seek peer ratification. The behaviour is reinforced by the interactive features of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and X, where likes, comments, and shares function as immediate feedback signals of social acceptance or approval. Such gratifying interactions reinforce regular platform use and may influence behavioural decisions of students, such as the adoption of risk behaviours displayed by their peers or celebrities.

Peer pressure and social media motivations operate synergistically in shaping adolescent behaviour when taken as a combination. Digital peer environments driven by desires for identity affirmation and social validation amplify both peer influence and celebrity-driven norms. Consequently, student engagement in substance use, risk behaviours or celebrity-driven activities can be more effectively interpreted as a result of both social reinforcement and seeking of psychological gratifications in the digital environment.

Celebrity Worship

The concept of celebrity worship has been discussed as a major psychosocial construct in explaining youth behaviours especially in the digital societies. The Celebrity Worship Syndrome (CWS) framework, developed by McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran (2002), conceptualises celebrity worship along a continuum ranging from benign admiration to pathological and obsessive fixation. At its most extreme, this phenomenon manifests in maladaptive behaviour, such as social comparison, obsessive imitation of celebrity lifestyles, and dependence on mediated interactions with celebrities, which becomes emotional.

Celebrity worship is related to two main mechanisms that connect it to behaviour outcomes: social comparison and parasocial interaction. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) holds that individuals evaluate themselves relative to others. When applied to social media, social media, the ongoing influx of edited celebrity content and posts prompts students to compare themselves with the images and posts that may not always be realistic, and risk-taking behaviour or trying substances to be like the perceived celebrity. Parasocial interaction, as described by Horton and Wohl (1956), refers to the one-sided emotional bond that audiences form with celebrities. Such illusory relationships can influence students' norms, values, and risk perceptions. Together, these mechanisms explain why celebrity admiration, particularly when reinforced by online peer networks, translates into real-world behavioural outcomes. er networks in the internet, can be observed in real life behaviour such as substance consumption or participation in socially desirable but high-risk behaviours.

Drug Abuse in Higher Education

Substance misuse among undergraduates in higher education represents one of the most pressing public health and social challenges facing Nigeria and West Africa more broadly. Prevalence studies indicate that undergraduates frequently experiment with psychoactive substances, including alcohol, cannabis, tobacco, and prescription drugs (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2018). Olarewaju, et al (2022) further identify peer influence, curiosity, stress, and exposure to substance-using role models including peers and celebrities, as key drivers of both initiation and sustained use.



One of the dimensions of substance use is gender differences. Globally, male substance users tend to consume greater quantities of drugs and alcohol than their female counterparts, reflecting broader gendered norms of risk-taking and socialisation (Wilsnack et al., 2009). In the Nigerian context, however, these distinctions are not straightforward. Cultural expectations, family dynamics, and evolving social norms may mediate female access to substances or shape the secrecy and settings in which they are used, indicating a complex, gendered pattern that warrants closer empirical scrutiny.

Critically, the intersections of peer pressure, celebrity influence, and substance use have received insufficient research attention within Nigerian higher education. Whilst peer networks and digital platforms provide immediate social support, celebrity worship propagates ideals that can normalise or glamorise substance use. Integrating these domains is essential for developing interventions that are both gender-sensitive and psychosocially responsive to the development of risk behaviour in students.

Evidence of Prevalence of Substance use among Nigerian Students

There is, nonetheless, a growing body of empirical evidence on the prevalence of substance use amongst Nigerian students. In a multi-institutional study, Olarewaju, et al (2022) documented high rates of lifetime and current use of alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis amongst undergraduates, identifying peer influence as a key initiator. Their findings underscore the social dimensions of substance use within campus environments, where the desire for acceptance and group belonging often drives decision-making. More recent scholarship has shifted attention towards digital contexts. Onyeukwu et al. (2023) demonstrate that the intensity of social media use is significantly associated with psychological outcomes among Nigerian young population of young people in Nigeria, as they show eligibility to social comparison, identity anxiety, and imitative behaviour. Whilst their study does not specifically address substance use, it offers important insights. offer a crucial understanding of how online context can increase peer pressure and emotional susceptibility situations, which, in turn, can indirectly contribute to risky behaviour including substance use.

International studies further posit that celebrity worship, particularly when facilitated by social media, is associated with maladaptive behaviours, such as substance experimentation, specifically among youths who may need identity validation (Maltby et al., 2006; Brooks, 2021). Nevertheless, these findings have not been adequately contextualised within the Nigerian socio-cultural and gendered milieu. Although the literature on youth substance use and social media engagement in Nigeria is expanding, a significant gap persists with respect to integrative, gender-responsive analysis. First, there is a paucity of domestic empirical data linking social media-mediated peer pressure, celebrity worship, and substance usage behaviour through one explanatory model. Existing studies tend to examine these variables in isolation, thereby failing to illuminate their interactive and mutually reinforcing effects.

Second, the gender-specific routes in which peer pressure and celebrity influence via social media can be turned into substance use behaviours have not been adequately analysed. Current literature tends to treat students as a homogeneous category, overlooking how norms of masculinity and femininity may predispose males towards risk-taking and females towards



conformity, concealment, or image management. Addressing this gap is essential for developing targeted interventions that are grounded in the lived experiences of both male and female students within Nigerian tertiary institutions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is underpinned by three complementary theoretical perspectives that collectively explain how social media exposure, peer pressure, and celebrity worship influence substance use patterns among students, with gender as a moderating variable.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory (SLT), proposed by Bandura (1977), posits that human behaviour is acquired through observation, imitation, and modelling of others' actions, particularly when those behaviours are perceived to be rewarded or socially reinforced. In the context of this study, students may observe peers or celebrities on social media engaging in substance use or other risk behaviours. Positive reinforcement through likes, comments, or perceived social status can increase the likelihood that students emulate these behaviours. SLT is particularly relevant for understanding digital peer influence and celebrity worship, as online interactions provide abundant opportunities for observational learning in highly visible, socially reinforced contexts.

Gender Role Socialization Theory

Gender Role Socialization Theory (Bem, 1981) suggests that individuals internalize culturally defined norms and expectations about appropriate behaviours for males and females. These socially constructed roles influence how students experience peer pressure and celebrity influence, as well as how they engage in risk behaviours like substance use. For instance, male students may be more inclined toward overt risk-taking and substance experimentation due to socially sanctioned masculine norms, whereas female students may face both internalized and externalized pressures that shape how they respond to similar stimuli. This theory provides a critical lens for understanding gender as a moderating variable in the pathway from social media exposure to substance use.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT), formulated by Tajfel and Turner (1986), emphasizes that individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups. Peer groups, online communities, and fan-based networks can therefore strongly influence behaviour, as students may conform to group norms to maintain a positive social identity. In the context of this study, affiliation with online communities centered around celebrity admiration or substance use can strengthen conformity pressures, enhancing the likelihood of behaviour alignment with perceived group standards. SIT complements SLT by highlighting the group-based social reinforcement mechanisms that operate in both offline and online peer contexts.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study integrates the variables and theoretical perspectives outlined above. The framework proposes that social media exposure functions as the primary antecedent, influencing students' susceptibility to peer pressure, which in turn enhances the intensity of celebrity worship. Both peer pressure and celebrity worship then contribute to



students' substance use patterns. Gender is incorporated as a moderating variable that influences the strength and direction of these pathways, reflecting differential susceptibility and socialization patterns between male and female students.

Social Media Exposure → Peer Pressure → Celebrity Worship → Substance Use Patterns



Gender (Moderator)

This model underscores the interconnectedness of digital social influence, celebrity culture, and gendered behavioural outcomes, providing a clear framework for empirical investigation. The theoretical anchors collectively explain why and how students engage in substance use behaviours in digitally mediated environments and inform the interpretation of gender-specific differences in these patterns.

Research Design

This study adopted a secondary data-based research design, leveraging existing quantitative and qualitative datasets to explore the relationships among peer pressure, celebrity worship, and substance use patterns among Nigerian tertiary students. Using secondary data allows for the examination of trends across multiple studies while minimizing resource constraints associated with primary data collection. The design is particularly suited for investigating gender-specific pathways, as datasets often include disaggregated demographic variables, facilitating comparative analysis between male and female students.

Three instruments were employed in the secondary datasets to operationalize key constructs:

Peer Pressure Scale (PPS): Adapted from Brown et al. (1986), the PPS assesses the degree to which adolescents and young adults perceive and respond to peer influence across various domains, including risk-taking behaviours. This scale provides a reliable measure of students' susceptibility to peer-driven social pressures.

Celebrity Attitude Scale (CAS): Developed by McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran (2002), the CAS evaluates levels of celebrity worship across three dimensions: entertainment-social, intense-personal, and borderline-pathological. The scale has been widely validated and is particularly relevant for understanding digital-age celebrity influences.

Substance Use Self-Report Inventory: This instrument records students' self-reported engagement with substances, including alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, and other psychoactive drugs. The inventory captures both frequency and patterns of use, allowing for nuanced analysis of substance-related behaviours.



By combining these instruments, the study operationalizes the key variables in the proposed conceptual framework peer pressure, celebrity worship, and substance use, while accommodating gender as a moderating factor.

Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis employs a qualitative thematic approach, following the methodological steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach involves systematic coding and categorization of textual data from the secondary sources, enabling the identification of recurring patterns, relationships, and thematic insights related to peer pressure, celebrity influence, and substance use. Themes are developed inductively, guided by the research questions and theoretical framework, ensuring alignment with both Social Learning Theory and Gender Role Socialization Theory.

To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, triangulation across multiple secondary sources is conducted. By comparing datasets from different studies, contexts, and instruments, the analysis minimizes potential biases associated with any single data source and strengthens the robustness of the conclusions. Additionally, gender-disaggregated data are analyzed separately to capture potential differences in experiences and behavioural outcomes among male and female students.

FINDINGS

Social Media and Peer Influence

The data suggest that social media exerts a powerful peer influence on Nigerian tertiary students. Digital endorsement metrics likes, comments, and shares elicit strong responses from students because they serve as immediate cues of approval or disapproval. This dynamic reinforces normative behaviour, encouraging adherence to peer expectations and prevailing online trends. Gender differences are also evident: female students display heightened sensitivity to peer commentary and social approval, consistent with Duggan (2015), who found that young women place greater emphasis on social cues and relational reinforcement. Male students, by contrast, appear more responsive to competitive and status-oriented rewards than to affective reinforcement.

Celebrity Worship Patterns

Celebrity worship patterns amongst the student population also reflect distinct gendered motivations. Male students tend to be outcome-oriented, drawn to perceived success, status, and fame. They are drawn to emulating behaviours associated with accomplishment or dominance, reflecting broader masculine norms and risk-taking orientations. standards and risk-taking behaviour. Female students, by contrast, are motivated by relational and identificatory dimensions of celebrity worship, centred on appearance, lifestyle, and social relationships. This suggests that female students are more likely to internalise and emulate the aspirational qualities and personal lifestyles of celebrities, including behaviours that can affect health, beauty or societal acceptance.



Substance Use Patterns

Consistent with regional and international literature, alcohol was identified as the most widely used substance, followed by cannabis and other psychoactive drugs. There were gendered variations in the patterns of substance use. Male students reported higher rates and a broader range of substance use, indicative of greater risk-taking propensity. behaviour. Whilst female students reported lower overall frequencies of use, they exhibited a stronger association between celebrity worship and appearance, lifestyle, or social image related behaviours some of which co-occur with substance use. This suggests that, among female students, substance use may be indirectly driven by efforts to emulate behaviour of the celebrities or to preserve socially approved social identities.

These findings were further interrogated thematically to understand how social media and celebrity culture shape behaviour. A recurring sentiment among students “If she can, I can too” aptly captures the aspirational dynamics underpinning celebrity behaviour imitation. e to copy the behaviours. Group chats, trending online challenges, and peer networks similarly enacted peer pressure, creating contexts in which risk behaviour, such as substance experimentation, was accepted and socially supported. These findings accord with Social Learning Theory’s emphasis on observational learning and Social Identity Theory’s focus on conformity to perceived group norms.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate the gendered processes through which social media exposure, peer influence, and celebrity worship contribute to substance consumption of Nigerian tertiary students. Peer pressure emerges as a significant mediating variable linking social media use with behaviours motivated by celebrities. Students tend to follow peer-approved actions, and the immediacy of likes, comments, and group chats amplifies the impact of celebrity modelling. Notable gender differences were observed particularly in the type of celebrity identification and its behavioural implications. Male students were more likely to engage with celebrity content driven by status- and outcome-oriented motivations, which corresponded with riskier behavioural patterns, including higher frequency of substance use. Female students, by contrast, displayed stronger relational and identity-based motivations, with celebrity emulation centred on appearance, lifestyle, and social stimuli accompanying behaviours like moderate substance use or health-related habits related to the celebrity norms. This pattern underscores the importance of treating gender as a moderating variable in research on social media, peer influence, and youth risk behaviours. These findings align with prior studies addressing gendered patterns of digital media use and risk behaviours. Comparable studies indicate that female adolescents are more responsive to peer feedback and relational validation, whilst males are more driven by status and performance cues on social media (Stemmers, 2017; Young, 2018). The present findings also corroborate Nigerian data on youth substance use, wherein males demonstrate higher prevalence and frequency, whilst females’ involvement is mediated more strongly by social and aspirational factors (Olarewaju, et al., 2022). The convergence of these results affirms the interplay between psychosocial and cultural norms and the influence of digital media on student behaviour.



LIMITATIONS

A number of limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional nature of the secondary data precludes definitive conclusions about causal relationships between social media exposure, peer pressure, celebrity worship, and substance use. Second, self-report measures are susceptible to bias, as students may under- or over-report behaviours owing to social desirability concerns or recall limitations. Future research would benefit from longitudinal and mixed-methods designs incorporating behavioural tracking or observational peer data to address these limitations. behavioural tracking or data of peer observation.

Policy Implications

1. Colleges and universities should incorporate compulsory social media literacy modules into student orientation programmes. Such programmes can educate students on online peer influence, digital self-presentation, and the psychosocial risks associated with celebrity-induced norms.
2. Gender-responsive mentorship schemes and support groups should be established to equip students with alternative sources of social validation and coping strategies for managing peer influence and celebrity worship.
3. Health educators, student unions, and campus counselling units should collaborate to embed content on the risks of substance use and celebrity-influenced behaviour, so that the interventions are contextually relevant and culturally sensitive.
4. The Ministry of Education should develop guidelines for the responsible and sustainable use of social media within educational institutions, supported by mental health service resources, to reduce the adverse effects of digital peer-impact on adolescent behaviour.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the interconnected roles of social media exposure, peer pressure, and celebrity worship in shaping substance use patterns among Nigerian tertiary students, with particular attention to gender differences. Specifically, the objectives of the study were: to compare male and female students' experiences of social media-mediated peer influence, focusing on perceived pressure, conformity, and behavioural modelling; to examine whether celebrity worship predicts substance use patterns among tertiary students and to determine whether gender moderates this relationship; and to propose evidence-based, gender-sensitive strategies for reducing risky behaviours associated with substance use among students in Nigerian higher institutions. The study's findings indicate that social media environments amplify peer influence and celebrity-driven norms, which in turn shape students' behavioural choices. Peer pressure emerged as an important mediating factor linking social media engagement with celebrity-inspired behaviours, while gender differences influenced the pathways through which these dynamics translated into substance use patterns. Male students demonstrated more outcome-oriented motivations associated with higher levels of substance experimentation, whereas female students exhibited stronger relational and aspirational motivations linked to celebrity identification and peer validation. These insights highlight the need for multidimensional and gender-responsive intervention strategies that address digital peer influence, celebrity culture, and psychosocial factors affecting student behaviour in tertiary institutions.



Ethical clearance

The authors adhered to established ethical principles of confidentiality, responsible data handling, and academic integrity throughout the research process.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

Habibat Bolajoko Na'Allah conceived the study, developed the research framework, and led the overall design. Farouq Olakunle Malik conducted the secondary data collation, performed the thematic analysis, and contributed to the interpretation of findings. Both authors collaborated in the drafting of the manuscript. Na'Allah prepared the initial draft, whilst Malik contributed substantially to the literature review and discussion sections. All authors have critically reviewed, revised, and approved the final manuscript, and accept joint responsibility for its content and integrity.

Data availability statement.

This study is based on secondary data sourced from previously published datasets. The secondary datasets referenced in this study are publicly available through their original sources, as cited in the reference list. Further enquiries regarding the specific datasets used in the analysis may be directed to the corresponding author upon request.

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