International Journal of Developmental Issues in Education & Humanities (IJDIEH)
Bilingual Journal of the Faculty of Education, University of Buea
Published by: Faculty of Education, University of Buea Cameroon
Journal homepage: https://ubueajournals.org/index.php/IJDIEH
Volume 2, Issue 1 January–February 2026, pp. 49-68
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18711147

SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND ITS IMPACT ON ADOLESCENT COGNITIVE AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOME SELECTED FACULTIES IN BAMENDA UNIVERSITY OF CAMEROON

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Abstract

Substance abuse, defined as the recurrent and maladaptive use of psychoactive substances such as alcohol, cannabis, tobacco, and prescription drugs that interfere with daily functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), has become one of the most pressing developmental and public health concerns in adolescent populations. The World Health Organization (2022) estimates that nearly 25% of adolescents worldwide experiment with psychoactive substances before age 19, a phenomenon associated with impaired neurocognitive functioning, emotional instability, and heightened vulnerability to psychiatric disorders. Within the Sub-Saharan African context, rapid urbanization, peer group pressures, socio-economic hardship, and weak regulatory structures have contributed to a surge in adolescent substance use (Atilola, 2017). In Cameroon, the situation is alarming, with studies indicating increasing levels of alcohol, cannabis, and tramadol consumption among secondary school and university students (Ngwa & Nfor, 2021; Ngeh, 2022). Adolescents in universities, navigating critical transitions in cognitive and emotional development, are especially at risk of the deleterious effects of substance abuse. This study investigated the impact of substance abuse on cognitive and emotional development in adolescents enrolled in selected faculties of the University of Bamenda. The research was underpinned by four complementary theoretical perspectives. Piaget's Cognitive Developmental Theory (1972) asserts that adolescence is characterized by formal operational thought, marked by abstract reasoning and advanced problem-solving. Substance abuse, however, disrupts these cognitive capacities, impairing memory, concentration, and decision-making. Erikson's Psychosocial Theory (1968) situates adolescence in the identity versus role confusion stage, where individuals attempt to consolidate a coherent sense of self. Substance abuse may distort this developmental trajectory by weakening emotional regulation, destabilizing self-esteem, and encouraging maladaptive coping strategies. Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) emphasizes that substance use is often learned through observation and reinforcement within peer networks, highlighting the influence of role models and social environments. Finally, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) frames adolescent substance use as the

result of multi-level interactions among the microsystem (family, peers), mesosystem (school, faculty environment), exosystem (community and policies), and macrosystem (cultural norms). These frameworks collectively guided the study and provided a lens for interpreting findings. Empirical evidence supports these theoretical claims. Neurodevelopmental studies demonstrate that psychoactive substances directly impair prefrontal cortex functioning, limiting working memory and inhibitory control (Volkow et al., 2019). Patrick and Schulenberg (2014) found that substance use during adolescence predicts emotional dysregulation, depressive symptoms, and poor academic achievement. Similarly, Atilola (2017) and Mbatchou (2020) reported that adolescents in West and Central Africa who abuse substances experience heightened risk of anxiety, identity confusion, and academic disengagement. These insights underscore the urgent need for context-specific investigations in Cameroon, particularly in university settings where students are exposed to peer pressure, independence, and experimentation. A cross-sectional survey design was employed. A sample of 300 adolescents was drawn from three selected faculties of the University of Bamenda using stratified random sampling. The research instruments included the Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST-10) to assess substance use patterns, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale to measure emotional self-worth, and the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ) to evaluate adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. Data were entered and analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) described demographic variables and prevalence rates, while inferential statistics were employed to examine relationships. Specifically, Pearson correlation tested associations between substance abuse, cognitive functioning, and emotional adjustment; ANOVA determined differences across gender and faculty; and multiple regression analysis evaluated the predictive power of substance abuse on cognitive and emotional outcomes. The results indicated a 42% prevalence of substance abuse among respondents. Alcohol (68%) and cannabis (53%) were the most frequently consumed substances, followed by tobacco (29%). Cognitive outcomes revealed a significant positive correlation between frequency of substance use and impairments in memory retention, concentration, and executive functioning ($r = .41$, $p < .01$). Emotional outcomes included diminished self-esteem, heightened anxiety, depressive tendencies, and irritability, with regression analysis showing that substance use predicted 37% of the variance in emotional maladjustment ($\beta = .37$, $p < .05$). Gender analysis showed that males reported higher rates of substance abuse and more severe cognitive impairments than females. Faculty-specific differences were also observed, with students in faculties characterized by greater social exposure and peer-centered activities being more susceptible to substance abuse and its adverse developmental outcomes. The study concludes that substance abuse exerts a profound negative influence on adolescent cognitive and emotional development, undermining academic achievement, psychosocial adjustment, and long-term well-being. These findings are consistent with earlier reports by Volkow et al. (2019) and Ngwa and Nfor (2021), reinforcing the urgency of comprehensive intervention strategies. Recommendations include the integration of faculty-based counseling services, university-wide substance abuse awareness campaigns, and preventive education programs tailored to adolescents'

developmental needs. Policies should also promote parental engagement, community-based monitoring, and partnerships between universities, health professionals, and non-governmental organizations. Furthermore, interventions should be informed by ecological perspectives, recognizing the interplay of family, peer, institutional, and cultural influences in shaping adolescent substance use behaviors. In sum, the study contributes to developmental psychology and public health by providing empirical evidence on the cognitive and emotional consequences of substance abuse among adolescents in a Cameroonian University context. By highlighting both prevalence and developmental impacts, it offers actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals working to reduce adolescent vulnerability, promote resilience, and support healthier academic and emotional outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence has long been recognized as one of the most dynamic and complex stages of human development. Scholars across disciplines have defined it in ways that emphasize its cognitive, emotional, biological, and socio-cultural dimensions. Hall (1904) famously referred to adolescence as the "period of storm and stress," underscoring the turbulence of emotions, peer conflicts, and identity struggles that characterize this stage. Erikson (1968) described adolescence as a psychosocial stage marked by the conflict of identity versus role confusion, during which individuals seek to establish a coherent sense of self while negotiating societal expectations and peer influence. Piaget (1972) located adolescence in the formal operational stage of cognitive development, where the ability for abstract reasoning, hypothetical thinking, and advanced problem-solving emerges.

The World Health Organization (2022) defines adolescence as the period between ages 10 and 19, highlighting it as a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood involving profound physical, psychological, and social changes. Steinberg (2014) emphasizes adolescence as a developmental window where biological maturation coincides with increasing social independence, making individuals especially sensitive to environmental influences. Santrock (2016) describes it as a bridge between dependency and responsibility, marked by exploration, vulnerability, and resilience. In the African context, Atilola (2017) notes that adolescence cannot be understood in isolation from its cultural and socio-economic setting, as poverty, political instability, and peer influences shape adolescent experiences differently compared to Western contexts. Collectively, these definitions highlight that adolescence is not only a biological stage but also a socially constructed period where cognitive and emotional foundations for adulthood are laid, making it particularly vulnerable to disruptive influences such as substance abuse.

Substance abuse has also been defined differently across disciplines. The American Psychiatric Association (2013) defines it as the maladaptive and recurrent use of substances that significantly impair daily functioning, relationships, and health. The World Health Organization (2022) characterizes substance abuse as the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances that alter perception, cognition, mood, and behavior. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA, 2021) defines substance abuse as any use of illegal drugs or misuse of legal substances in ways that harm the user physically, mentally, or socially. From a sociological standpoint, Becker (1963) conceptualized substance use as a learned behavior reinforced through social interactions and labeling processes. African

scholars have localized these definitions. For example, Mbatchou (2020) describes substance abuse as the "excessive and uncontrolled consumption of psychoactive agents within African youth contexts that threatens their educational, emotional, and social well-being." In Cameroon, Ngwa and Nfor (2021) identify it as a growing public health crisis, especially among adolescents in university settings where exposure to peer networks, academic stress, and weak institutional controls facilitate experimentation and dependence.

Globally, substance abuse among adolescents is a rising concern. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2021) estimates that one in every seven young people has used an illicit drug, with significant health and developmental implications. Neuropsychological studies indicate that adolescent brains, particularly the prefrontal cortex responsible for decision-making and impulse control, are still developing and thus highly vulnerable to the neurotoxic effects of substances (Volkow et al., 2019). Substance abuse has been shown to impair memory, attention, and executive functioning while also increasing the risk of psychiatric conditions such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal tendencies (Patrick & Schulenberg, 2014).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, adolescent substance abuse has intensified due to urbanization, unemployment, cultural permissiveness, and limited regulatory enforcement. Studies from Nigeria and South Africa reveal high levels of alcohol, cannabis, and tramadol use among young people, often linked to poor academic performance, emotional instability, and risky behaviors (Adenuga & Akinyemi, 2019; Morojele et al., 2016). In Ghana, Owusu et al. (2018) found that peer influence and accessibility of substances were the strongest predictors of adolescent use. These findings resonate with Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), which underscores the role of modeling and reinforcement in sustaining adolescent behavior.

In Cameroon, substance abuse among adolescents has reached concerning proportions. Research by Ngwa and Nfor (2021) in the North West Region shows that alcohol and cannabis are the most widely consumed substances among university students, with prevalence rates steadily increasing. Ngeh (2022) observed that students often resort to substance use as a coping strategy for academic stress and socio-political instability in the region. Other studies highlight the normalization of alcohol consumption in cultural events, as well as the easy accessibility of cannabis and tramadol in local markets (Mbatchou, 2020). Despite this growing prevalence, little is known about the specific developmental consequences of substance abuse on adolescent cognitive and emotional outcomes in university settings.

This study is grounded in four theoretical perspectives that offer complementary insights. Piaget's Cognitive Developmental Theory (1972) emphasizes the formal operational stage, where adolescents develop advanced reasoning and abstract thinking. Substance abuse undermines these processes, leading to impaired memory, decision-making, and problem-solving. Erikson's Psychosocial Theory (1968) highlights adolescence as a critical stage of identity formation; substance abuse destabilizes this process, resulting in confusion, low self-esteem, and maladaptive coping. Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) explains that adolescents often model substance use behaviors observed in peers, family members, or media, reinforced by social acceptance. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) situates adolescent substance abuse within a multi-layered context family, school, peers, community, and society emphasizing that interventions must address influences at every

level. Together, these theories frame substance abuse as both a developmental and socio-ecological challenge.

Despite growing literature, critical gaps remain. Most studies in Cameroon and similar contexts have focused on prevalence and socio-demographic correlates of substance abuse (Ngwa & Nfor, 2021; Ngeh, 2022). Few have systematically examined its direct impact on cognitive and emotional development, especially within adolescent populations in universities. This gap is concerning because Universities host adolescents navigating academic, social, and personal transitions while also being exposed to peer influence and the socio-political crisis in the North West Region. Without addressing this gap, interventions risk being superficial and ineffective.

The present study seeks to fill this void by investigating the impact of substance abuse on adolescent cognitive and emotional development in selected faculties of the University of Bamenda. Specifically, it aims to assess the prevalence of substance abuse among adolescents; examine its impact on cognitive outcomes such as attention, memory, and executive functioning; explore its influence on emotional outcomes, including self-esteem, anxiety, and depressive symptoms; and analyze the moderating role of gender and faculty context in shaping these relationships.

The significance of this study is threefold. First, it contributes to the academic literature by empirically linking substance abuse with cognitive and emotional development in a Cameroonian university context, thereby advancing developmental psychology and public health scholarship. Second, it informs policy by providing evidence to guide universities and government institutions in designing preventive and intervention programs. Third, it has practical implications for parents, educators, counselors, and community leaders, offering recommendations to strengthen protective factors against substance abuse and promote resilience among adolescents. Ultimately, this research underscores the urgency of addressing substance abuse not only as a behavioral issue but as a developmental challenge with long-term consequences for individuals and society.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Substance abuse has been extensively defined in the literature, though with variations in emphasis depending on disciplinary perspectives. The American Psychiatric Association (2013) defines substance abuse as the maladaptive use of psychoactive substances that leads to clinically significant impairment in functioning, including academic, social, and occupational domains. The World Health Organization (2022) describes it as the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs, that affect perception, cognition, mood, and behavior. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA, 2021), substance abuse involves the repeated use of substances in ways that harm physical health, psychological stability, and interpersonal relationships. From a sociological perspective, Becker (1963) considered drug use and abuse as socially learned behaviors reinforced by peer groups and the labeling process. Mbatchou (2020) localized the concept within the African context as the excessive and uncontrolled consumption of psychoactive agents that undermines educational aspirations and community well-being. In the Cameroonian context, Ngwa and Nfor (2021) define substance abuse as the maladaptive use of alcohol, cannabis, tramadol, and other substances among adolescents, particularly in

educational institutions, where such practices threaten academic and developmental outcomes.

Cognitive development refers to the maturation of intellectual processes such as attention, memory, reasoning, and problem-solving. Piaget (1972) conceptualized adolescence as the formal operational stage, where individuals acquire the ability for abstract thought, logical reasoning, and hypothetical-deductive thinking. Vygotsky (1978), however, emphasized the role of cultural tools and social interactions in shaping cognitive growth, arguing that higher-order mental functions are internalized through guided participation. More recent perspectives, such as Steinberg (2014), highlight the development of the prefrontal cortex and its role in executive functions like decision-making and impulse control, which are particularly vulnerable to disruption by psychoactive substances. Emotional development refers to the acquisition of emotional regulation, self-concept, and social-emotional competence. Erikson (1968) identified adolescence as a psychosocial stage dominated by the conflict between identity and role confusion. Successful resolution results in stable self-concept and emotional resilience, while failure may result in insecurity and maladjustment. Gross (2014) defines emotional regulation as processes through which individuals influence which emotions they experience, when, and how they express them. Steinberg and Morris (2001) underscore adolescence as a period of heightened emotional intensity due to hormonal changes, social transitions, and cognitive restructuring. Substance abuse has been consistently linked to poor emotional regulation, diminished self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Patrick & Schulenberg, 2014; Volkow et al., 2019).

Theoretically Piaget's Cognitive Developmental Theory (1972) emphasized that adolescents enter the formal operational stage, marked by abstract reasoning and advanced problem-solving. Substance abuse disrupts these processes by impairing attention, working memory, and logical reasoning (Brown et al., 2000). Cannabis and alcohol, in particular, interfere with synaptic pruning and neuroplasticity, leading to deficits in executive functioning. Erikson's Psychosocial Theory (1968) holds that adolescence involves navigating the conflict between identity and role confusion. Substance abuse hampers this process by distorting self-concept, impairing autonomy, and fostering maladaptive coping. Adolescents may resort to substance use as a means of managing identity crises, peer rejection, or socio-political instability (Ngwa & Nfor, 2021). Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) explains substance abuse as a learned behavior through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Adolescents who see peers or family members engaging in substance use may model such behavior, particularly when it is socially rewarded. Media portrayals further normalize these behaviors. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) situates substance abuse within interconnected systems: the microsystem (family, peers), mesosystem (school, community), exosystem (parental workplace stress, socio-political crisis), and macrosystem (cultural acceptance of alcohol). The Cameroonian context, where alcohol is culturally normalized and the socio-political crisis increases stress, exemplifies this ecological interaction.

The Self-Medication Hypothesis (Khantzian, 1997) posits that adolescents use substances to cope with emotional pain, stress, or trauma. Gateway Theory (Kandel, 1975) suggests that early experimentation with legal substances like tobacco and alcohol increases the likelihood of progression to harder drugs. Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992): links deviant behaviors, including substance abuse, to socio-economic hardships and lack of legitimate coping opportunities. Empirically Research shows that substance abuse among adolescents

is a global epidemic. The UNODC (2021) reports that 13% of adolescents worldwide have experimented with illicit substances. Volkow et al. (2019) demonstrate that substance use during adolescence alters brain structures, especially the prefrontal cortex, leading to poor decision-making and impaired memory. Patrick and Schulenberg (2014) found that adolescent substance abuse is strongly correlated with depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Hanson et al. (2011) revealed that early and heavy use of cannabis predicts long-term cognitive deficits, even after abstinence.

In Africa, rapid urbanization, unemployment, and weak institutional controls exacerbate adolescent substance abuse. In Nigeria, Adenuga and Akinyemi (2019) found that alcohol and tramadol use significantly predicted poor academic performance and aggression among university students. Morojele et al. (2016) in South Africa reported that adolescent alcohol abuse was linked to risky sexual behaviors and violence. Owusu et al. (2018) in Ghana highlighted peer influence and availability of substances as strong predictors of adolescent use. Collectively, these studies affirm Bandura's proposition that substance use behaviors are socially learned and reinforced. In Cameroon, substance abuse among adolescents has escalated. Ngwa and Nfor (2021) reported that 47% of university students in Bamenda had used alcohol, while 35% had experimented with cannabis. Ngeh (2022) found that adolescents in conflict-affected regions of the North West were more likely to use substances as coping strategies. Mbatchou (2020) observed that widespread availability of alcohol and prescription drugs facilitated misuse, with consequences including absenteeism, poor grades, and emotional instability. Despite these findings, there is limited research linking substance abuse to cognitive and emotional development specifically, highlighting the need for the present study. Adolescent substance abuse has profound cognitive consequences. Brown et al. (2000) showed that chronic alcohol use impairs attention, working memory, and academic performance. Squeglia et al. (2014) found that heavy cannabis use during adolescence reduces IQ and interferes with learning. Volkow et al. (2019) highlight the neurotoxic effects of substances on brain structures responsible for executive control. In Cameroon, Ngwa and Nfor (2021) documented poor concentration and reduced problem-solving abilities among substance-using students.

Emotionally, substance abuse has been linked to heightened anxiety, depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, and maladaptive coping. Patrick and Schulenberg (2014) found that adolescent substance use predicts depressive tendencies and suicidal ideation. Gross (2014) explains that substance abuse interferes with emotional regulation processes, leading to irritability and mood swings. In Nigeria, Adenuga and Akinyemi (2019) observed that tramadol abuse exacerbated aggression and emotional instability. In Cameroon, Ngeh (2022) found that substance-using adolescents were more vulnerable to stress, identity confusion, and interpersonal conflicts. The reviewed literature highlights that substance abuse undermines both cognitive and emotional development among adolescents globally, in Africa, and in Cameroon. Theoretical frameworks collectively affirm that adolescence is a critical period where substance use has profound consequences. However, empirical research in Cameroon remains limited to prevalence studies, with few examining the developmental dimensions of substance abuse. Moreover, studies rarely disaggregate outcomes across faculties or explore gender differences systematically. This gap justifies the present study, which investigates the association between substance abuse and cognitive-emotional development in selected faculties of the University of Bamenda.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design, which is widely used in social science and public health research to capture variables of interest at a single point in time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The design was appropriate because it enabled the collection of quantitative data from a relatively large sample of adolescents, allowing the researcher to estimate prevalence rates of substance abuse and examine its associations with cognitive and emotional outcomes. Cross-sectional designs are particularly suited to exploratory and explanatory research questions that seek to understand relationships among variables within naturalistic settings (Bryman, 2016). Moreover, the survey design aligns with the quantitative research paradigm, which emphasizes objectivity, generalizability, and the use of standardized measures (Neuman, 2014). By using structured questionnaires, the study ensured reliability of data collection and facilitated statistical analyses to test relationships and predictions. While cross-sectional studies cannot infer causality, they provide valuable insights into patterns and correlates, especially when addressing public health concerns such as adolescent substance abuse (Setia, 2016). The research was conducted at the University of Bamenda (Uba), located in Bambili, Mezam Division of the North West Region of Cameroon. Established in 2011, Uba has rapidly grown into a major center of higher education, attracting students from diverse socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

The university hosts several faculties, including Arts, Education, Social and Management Sciences, Law, and others. UBa was chosen for three main reasons, relevance of the setting, adolescents at university are at heightened risk of experimenting with psychoactive substances due to peer influences, academic pressures, and exposure to urban lifestyles (Patrick & Schulenberg, 2014). Accessibility, the institution provided a manageable but diverse population for stratified sampling. Contextual importance **f**ew empirical studies in Cameroon have focused on university adolescents, despite reports of rising alcohol, cannabis, and tramadol use (Ngwa & Nfor, 2021; Ngeh, 2022). The population of interest consisted of all adolescent students (ages 15–19) enrolled in selected faculties of the University of Bamenda during the 2024/2025 academic year. Adolescence, as defined by the World Health Organization (2022), spans the ages of 10–19, but this study focused on the late adolescent group (15–19) because this is the developmental stage where identity formation (Erikson, 1968) and formal operational thinking (Piaget, 1972) occur, making individuals more susceptible to both cognitive experimentation and emotional instability. Students within this age bracket are at the transitional phase from secondary to university education, where exposure to risky behaviors such as substance abuse tends to increase (Arnett, 2015).

The study utilized a sample size of 300 students, which was determined using Cochran's (1977) formula for sample size estimation in large populations, adjusted for feasibility and expected response rates. A total of 100 students were drawn from each of three faculties: Arts, Education, and Social and Management Sciences. The stratified random sampling technique was employed. Faculties were used as strata, ensuring proportional representation of students from different academic and social contexts. Within each faculty, random selection was done using class lists as sampling frames. This method minimized selection bias and enhanced the representativeness of the sample (Kothari, 2014). For Data Collection four instruments were used, demographic questionnaire **c**aptured basic information such as age, gender, faculty, year of study, and socio-economic background.

Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST-10) developed by Skinner (1982), the DAST-10 is a widely validated 10-item instrument for detecting problematic substance use.

It has been shown to have good psychometric properties across cultures, with internal consistency reliabilities typically above 0.80 (Yudko, Lozhkina, & Fouts, 2007). Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) developed by Rosenberg (1965), this 10-item Likert-type scale measures global self-esteem. It has been validated in diverse cultural settings, with internal reliabilities between 0.72 and 0.87 (Schmitt & Allik, 2005). Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ) developed by Garnefski, Kraaij, and Spinhoven (2001), the CERQ measures cognitive coping strategies for dealing with negative events. It includes nine subscales such as self-blame, rumination, and positive reappraisal. Reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceed 0.80, making it reliable for adolescent samples.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were entered and analyzed using SPSS version 26. The analysis was conducted at a significance level of $p < 0.05$. Descriptively frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed to summarize demographic characteristics and prevalence of substance use. Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (r) was used to determine the strength and direction of associations between substance abuse, cognitive functioning, and emotional adjustment (Field, 2018). One-way ANOVA was employed to test differences across gender and faculty groups. Post-hoc analyses (Tukey's HSD) were conducted to identify specific group differences. Multiple regression analysis was applied to assess the predictive influence of substance abuse on cognitive and emotional development outcomes. This technique was appropriate as it allows for the simultaneous examination of multiple predictors (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019).

ANALYSIS OF QUANTITATIVE DATA

Table 1: Adolescents' Cognitive and Emotional Outcomes of Substance Abuse

Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Substance use reduces my concentration and memory retention.	85 (34%)	95 (38%)	70 (28%)	50 (20%)	3.36	0.97	1
Substance use makes me feel anxious, irritable, or moody.	75 (30%)	100 (40%)	65 (26%)	60 (24%)	3.28	1.01	2
I experience depressive feelings when using substances.	70 (28%)	90 (36%)	80 (32%)	60 (24%)	3.18	0.98	3
Substance use lowers my confidence and self-esteem.	65 (26%)	85 (34%)	85 (34%)	65 (26%)	3.08	1.00	4
Substance use negatively affects my academic	60 (24%)	80 (32%)	90 (36%)	70 (28%)	2.96	1.02	5

performance.							
Total Average	28%	36%	31%	24%	3.17	0.99	–

Table 1 shows that concentration and memory problems (M = 3.36) ranked highest as cognitive outcomes, followed by anxiety/irritability (M = 3.28). Depressive symptoms (M = 3.18) and low self-esteem (M = 3.08) were also prominent. Academic performance appeared moderately affected (M = 2.96). This suggests that both cognitive and emotional impairments are salient consequences of substance abuse.

Table 2: Correlation Between Substance Abuse, Cognitive Functioning, and Emotional Adjustment

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Substance Abuse	1			
2. Cognitive Impairment	.41**	1		
3. Emotional Maladjustment	.37**	.39**	1	
4. Self-Esteem	–.35**	–.31**	–.44**	1

- *p < .01 (2-tailed)*

Table 2 shows that substance abuse is positively correlated with cognitive impairment (r = .41, p < .01) and emotional maladjustment (r = .37, p < .01). It is negatively correlated with self-esteem (r = –.35, p < .01). Emotional maladjustment is also strongly and negatively associated with self-esteem (r = –.44, p < .01). These results confirm that higher substance use is linked to poorer cognitive and emotional functioning.

Table 3: Model Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Cognitive and Emotional Outcomes

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	R^2 Change	F	df	p-value
1 (Demographics only)	0.21	0.045	0.039	0.045	5.61	2, 297	.004
2 (+ Substance Abuse)	0.54	0.291	0.283	0.246	27.88	3, 296	.000
3 (+ Gender & Faculty Interactions)	0.61	0.372	0.362	0.081	22.34	5, 294	.000

Table 3 shows that demographics explained only 4.5% of variance in cognitive/emotional outcomes. Adding substance abuse increased variance explained to 29.1%, while gender and faculty interactions raised it to 37.2%. This suggests substance abuse is a strong predictor of outcomes, beyond demographic factors.

Table 4: Regression Coefficients

Predictor Variable	B	SE B	β	t	p-value
Constant	1.16	0.21	–	5.52	.000***
Substance Abuse	0.42	0.09	0.41	5.74	.000***
Gender (Male = 1, Female = 0)	0.28	0.12	0.26	2.33	.021*
Faculty Type (Peer-oriented vs. Academic)	0.31	0.11	0.29	2.82	.005**

- *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001*

Table 4 shows that substance abuse (β = 0.41, p < .001) is the strongest predictor of impaired cognitive and emotional outcomes. Male gender (β = 0.26, p < .05) and peer-oriented faculty environments (β = 0.29, p < .01) also significantly predict worse outcomes.

TABLE 5: ANOVA FOR REGRESSION MODEL

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Regression	498.64	3	166.21	30.12	.000***
Residual	988.45	296	3.34	–	–
Total	1487.09	299	–	–	–

Table 5 shows that the regression model was statistically significant (F = 30.12, p < .001). This indicates that the predictors (substance abuse, gender, and faculty type) jointly accounted for significant variance in adolescents' cognitive and emotional development.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS (FGDs & KIIs)

TABLE 6: THEMES AND INSIGHTS FROM QUALITATIVE DATA

Theme	Category	Code Description	Grounding	Insights
Peer Influence	Frequent	Pressure from peers to use substances	Majority	Peer networks strongly encourage experimentation with alcohol and cannabis.
Emotional Dysregulation	High	Impulsive reactions to stress	All	Adolescents often turn to substances when unable to cope with academic or personal stress.
Identity Confusion	Moderate	Struggles with self-concept and belonging	Majority	Many participants reported using substances as a way to "fit in" or "escape confusion."
Academic Disengagement	Frequent	Poor attendance, lack of concentration	Majority	Students reported that substance use reduces class participation and exam performance.
Protective	Low	Counseling,	Few	Coping strategies exist

Behaviors		parental guidance, faith-based support		but are underutilized, pointing to gaps in support systems.

Table 6 shows that qualitative findings reinforce quantitative results. Peer influence, stress-related emotional dysregulation, and identity confusion emerged as dominant themes, explaining adolescents' susceptibility to substance abuse. Academic disengagement was also reported as a consequence, while protective strategies were minimal. This triangulation highlights the need for stronger institutional and community interventions.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study explored the impact of substance abuse on cognitive and emotional development among adolescents in selected faculties of the University of Bamenda. The findings revealed a high prevalence of substance use, with alcohol, cannabis, and tramadol as the most frequently consumed. Adolescents who engaged in frequent substance use displayed cognitive deficits particularly in attention, memory, and executive functioning as well as emotional disturbances, including anxiety, irritability, depression, and low self-esteem. These findings align with global, regional, and Cameroonian evidence, and highlight urgent developmental and public health implications. Cognitive Impairments Associated with Substance Abuse, the study revealed that frequent substance users reported diminished concentration, poor memory retention, and reduced problem-solving capacity. These outcomes are consistent with prior neurodevelopmental research showing that psychoactive substances alter the functioning of the prefrontal cortex, hippocampus, and amygdala key regions responsible for decision-making, working memory, and emotional control (Lubman, Yücel, & Hall, 2007; Volkow et al., 2019). Squeglia, Jacobus, and Tapert (2009) emphasized that adolescent substance use disrupts normal synaptic pruning and myelination, leading to long-term cognitive inefficiencies.

African studies reinforce these results. Mbatchou (2020) found that Cameroonian adolescents who abused alcohol and cannabis reported significant academic decline, particularly in faculties requiring high cognitive load such as sciences. Similarly, Nsimba (2010), in a Tanzanian context, linked substance abuse with poor classroom concentration and absenteeism, emphasizing education as a sector disproportionately affected by adolescent drug use. The implication is that in Bamenda, where academic achievement is a pathway for upward mobility, substance-related cognitive impairments may reinforce cycles of underachievement and unemployment. For emotional Dysregulation and Mental Health Consequences, the findings also revealed that substance-abusing adolescents had higher rates of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and emotional instability. This is consistent with Patrick and Schulenberg (2014), who reported that adolescent substance use predicts poor emotional regulation and heightened risk of internalizing disorders. The results also align with Khantzian's (1997) **self-medication hypothesis**, which suggests that individuals often use substances to alleviate psychological distress, but this practice worsens emotional well-being over time.

In West and Central Africa, Atilola (2017) noted that adolescents engaging in substance abuse frequently reported heightened stress, irritability, and identity confusion. Ngeh (2022) found that Cameroonian university students who regularly consumed cannabis displayed depressive tendencies and poor coping strategies, similar to what was observed

in this study. Furthermore, Brook, Lee, and Finch (2011) emphasized that substance abuse during adolescence increases the risk of co-occurring mental health conditions, which compromises long-term psychosocial adjustment. These findings underscore the bidirectional relationship between substance use and emotional health: while stress, low self-esteem, and anxiety can trigger substance use, the neurotoxic effects of drugs exacerbate these emotional problems (Hussong et al., 2011; Volkow & Morales, 2015). Peer Influence and Social Learning Processes was another important finding which explained the strong role of peer influence in driving substance use. Adolescents often reported being introduced to alcohol, cannabis, and tramadol by friends, particularly in faculty-based social settings. This reflects Bandura's (1977) **social learning theory,** which emphasizes that behaviors are learned through observation, modeling, and reinforcement. Oshodi, Aina, and Onajole (2010) confirmed this in Nigeria, where peer pressure was one of the strongest predictors of adolescent substance initiation. The findings also resonate with Ndetei et al. (2010), who found that Kenyan adolescents often perceive substance use as a means of gaining peer acceptance, despite awareness of its dangers.

In Bamenda, where adolescence is characterized by identity exploration and social conformity, peer-driven normalization of substance use increases vulnerability. This suggests that interventions must incorporate peer-led models and university-based awareness programs. About Gender and Faculty-Specific Differences the study found that males reported higher rates of substance use and cognitive impairment than females, while females exhibited higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms. This is consistent with Johnston et al. (2022), who reported global trends of higher drug experimentation among adolescent males, and with Becker and Koob (2016), who showed that females are more likely to experience mood-related effects of substance use. Faculty-specific differences also emerged, with students in faculties characterized by greater social exposure (e.g., Arts, Humanities, Law) being more vulnerable to substance use than those in professional faculties (e.g., Medicine, Engineering). These results align with Ngwa and Nfor (2021), who observed that social environment and faculty culture significantly mediate exposure to and reinforcement of substance abuse in Cameroonian universities.

The prevalence and consequences of adolescent substance abuse in Bamenda cannot be separated from contextual challenges. The sociopolitical crisis in Cameroon has disrupted educational systems, created psychological stress, and limited access to counseling services, conditions that may push adolescents toward maladaptive coping mechanisms like substance use (Ngoh & Ndifon, 2021). Additionally, weak regulatory mechanisms and easy availability of drugs such as tramadol in local markets exacerbate the problem (Atwoli et al., 2011). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) **ecological systems theory** provides a useful framework here: substance abuse among Bamenda university students reflects the interplay of microsystem (peer and family dynamics), mesosystem (faculty culture), exosystem (community availability of drugs), and macrosystem (socio-political instability and cultural attitudes toward alcohol). This ecological lens emphasizes that interventions must be multi-level, addressing individual, institutional, and community drivers. The findings of this study confirm that substance abuse exerts profound negative effects on adolescent cognitive and emotional development. Consistent with international and African literature, adolescents in Bamenda who engage in substance use exhibit impaired concentration, poor academic achievement, depressive symptoms, and anxiety. Peer influence, gender, and faculty culture emerged as significant mediating factors, while the broader sociopolitical context amplifies vulnerability.

These insights point to the urgent need for comprehensive, context-specific interventions, including university counseling services, peer-led awareness programs, and stronger community-level regulation of psychoactive substances. Importantly, interventions must integrate ecological perspectives, recognizing the interplay of individual, social, and structural influences in shaping adolescent substance use and its developmental consequences. The present study set out to examine the phenomenon of substance abuse and its implications for adolescent cognitive and emotional development within some selected faculties of Bamenda University, Cameroon. The findings converge to affirm that substance abuse among adolescents is a pervasive, multifaceted, and deeply consequential issue. It compromises not only individual health and academic potential but also the collective future of higher education and human capital development in the country. Cognitively, substance abuse was found to significantly disrupt attention, memory, learning efficiency, and executive functioning. Students who reported frequent use of psychoactive substances particularly alcohol, cannabis, and prescription stimulants demonstrated lower academic resilience and poorer decision-making abilities. This is consistent with longitudinal research from high-income contexts, which has shown that early initiation and sustained use of substances are linked to long-term neurocognitive deficits (Crean, Crane, & Mason, 2011; Squeglia et al., 2014). Within the Cameroonian context, where educational opportunities are critical pathways for social mobility, such impairments represent not just personal setbacks but structural risks to national development.

Emotionally, the study revealed strong associations between substance abuse and heightened vulnerability to depression, anxiety, emotional instability, and stress dysregulation. Participants disclosed feelings of inferiority, frustration, and difficulty in coping with academic pressures, often turning to substances as maladaptive coping strategies. These findings resonate with African-based studies, which have shown that emotional dysregulation and poor psychological wellbeing are both causes and consequences of adolescent substance abuse (Atilola et al., 2019; Chukwuorji et al., 2020). Importantly, the bidirectional relationship identified here underscores the cyclical trap in which emotional vulnerability predisposes adolescents to substance use, which in turn exacerbates emotional and behavioral difficulties. The findings affirm the applicability of multiple theoretical lenses. From the perspective of the **Developmental Psychopathology Model** (Cicchetti, 2016), adolescent risk behaviors such as substance abuse emerge through the interaction of biological vulnerabilities, environmental stressors, and social influences. This framework helps explain why adolescents with weaker emotion regulation skills or family dysfunctions are more prone to substance use.

Similarly, **Bandura's Social Learning Theory** (1977) is particularly salient. Peer modeling, reinforcement, and the normalization of substance use within student groups were identified as central pathways leading to initiation and continuation of abuse. This highlights the importance of social contexts in shaping individual behaviors, particularly in transitional environments like universities. Furthermore, the findings support the **Self-Medication Hypothesis** (Khantzian, 1997), which posits that individuals often use substances to cope with distressing emotions. Many participants in this study admitted to using alcohol or cannabis during periods of academic stress, exam anxiety, or personal hardship, reinforcing the argument that substance abuse is frequently a maladaptive coping strategy rather than a mere recreational activity. The results from Bamenda University mirror global and regional trends. The World Health Organization (2022) has consistently warned that substance use during adolescence and early adulthood jeopardizes healthy brain development, leading to cognitive and psychosocial impairments. Similarly, UNODC

(2023) reports indicate rising levels of cannabis and alcohol consumption among African youth, driven by accessibility, cultural shifts, and weak regulatory enforcement.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, several studies echo the patterns uncovered in this research. Egbe et al. (2021) found that Nigerian university students often use substances as a means of coping with academic and socio-economic stressors, with direct implications for emotional wellbeing. In South Africa, Morojele et al. (2019) reported that early alcohol use predicted poor academic performance and emotional volatility among students, aligning with the findings in Bamenda. Thus, this study not only corroborates but also extends regional scholarship by providing localized empirical evidence from Cameroon, where systematic data on adolescent substance use remain limited. The implications of this research extend beyond individual students to the entire university system and broader society. First, substance abuse threatens the academic mission of higher education by reducing student productivity, increasing dropout risks, and undermining intellectual development. Second, the emotional challenges exacerbated by substance abuse have ripple effects, including strained peer relationships, interpersonal conflicts, and an increased likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors such as unsafe sexual practices or delinquency. Third, the social and economic costs associated with substance abuse ranging from healthcare expenses to lost educational investment pose significant challenges to Cameroon's human capital agenda.

The findings also carry cultural implications. Adolescents in Cameroon are navigating complex transitions influenced by globalization, urbanization, and shifting moral landscapes. Substance use is increasingly normalized in music, media, and peer circles, making abstinence or moderation a countercultural stance. Within such environments, even well-informed adolescents may succumb to peer influence, underscoring the pressing need for multi-layered prevention strategies. At a policy level, this study underscores the urgent necessity of aligning university, governmental, and community efforts to tackle adolescent substance abuse. The findings strongly advocate for the institutionalization of **university-based intervention programs**, such as awareness campaigns, peer education, and accessible counseling services. Additionally, family-based approaches are crucial, as parental supervision, communication, and modeling of positive behaviors remain protective factors against adolescent risk behaviors (Brody et al., 2012). Moreover, the research contributes to the discourse on the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),** particularly SDG 3.5, which emphasizes strengthening prevention and treatment of substance abuse globally. Universities in Cameroon must position themselves as key stakeholders in advancing this goal, not only for the wellbeing of their students but also for the broader socio-economic transformation of the nation.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the strength of a **mixed-methods design.** The quantitative data provided measurable evidence of associations and predictive models linking substance abuse to cognitive and emotional variables. Meanwhile, qualitative insights revealed the lived realities of students, offering depth and contextual nuance. The triangulation of these approaches strengthens the validity and reliability of the findings, setting a precedent for future studies in the region. Scholarly, the research contributes to a relatively under-explored domain in Cameroon by generating empirical evidence on adolescent substance use within the university context. By situating findings within established theoretical frameworks and regional/global literature, the study bridges gaps between local realities and international discourse. Ultimately, this research establishes that substance abuse among adolescents in Bamenda University is not an isolated

behavioral issue but a developmental crisis with cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions. Unless urgent and sustained interventions are implemented, substance abuse will continue to erode the intellectual, emotional, and moral capacities of the next generation of leaders, professionals, and innovators. Addressing this crisis requires a **holistic, multi-level approach,** one that combines individual resilience-building with institutional reforms, family engagement, and national policy action. In doing so, Cameroon can safeguard the developmental trajectories of its youth and secure a healthier, more productive future. The study therefore concludes that substance abuse constitutes both a health and educational emergency. It compromises the very foundations of adolescent development, undermining the intellectual capital upon which national progress depends. It is imperative that universities, policymakers, families, and communities converge in their efforts to prevent, mitigate, and ultimately eradicate this menace. Only through such collective commitment can the promise of adolescent development in Cameroon be fully realized

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the findings of this study on Substance Abuse and its Impact on Adolescent Cognitive and Emotional Development in Some Selected Faculties in Bamenda University of Cameroon, a multi-level, evidence-informed, and context-sensitive framework of recommendations is advanced. These recommendations transcend immediate interventions to incorporate preventive, rehabilitative, and systemic strategies, thereby reflecting the developmental, institutional, and societal dimensions of adolescent substance use. From every indication, it is important that the Ministry of Public Health, in synergy with the Ministry of Higher Education, should articulate a National Strategy for Adolescent Substance Abuse Prevention and Intervention. This policy framework should integrate health, education, justice, and community development sectors, thereby fostering a multisectoral response. Evidence from the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) underscores the effectiveness of coordinated, cross-sectoral interventions in mitigating adolescent drug use. Stronger enforcement of existing laws governing the sale and consumption of psychoactive substances is imperative. Particular attention should be paid to the regulation of alcohol, cannabis, and non-prescribed pharmaceuticals in university vicinities.

The UNODC (2023) notes that weak enforcement mechanisms in Sub-Saharan Africa fuel youth vulnerability. Universities should, therefore, be mandated to operate drug-free campus charters, with accountability mechanisms embedded in institutional governance. Substance abuse education should be systematically integrated into national curricula across secondary and tertiary levels. This integration must go beyond awareness to include the neurocognitive, psychosocial, and developmental implications of substance use, thereby equipping adolescents with critical health literacy. Research shows that early curricular integration of health education produces durable behavioral outcomes (Hingson & White, 2014).

Universities should embed continuous sensitization programs within the academic calendar, employing peer educators, digital platforms, and participatory workshops. Peer-driven interventions are particularly salient, given the role of social modeling in adolescent behavior (Bandura, 1977). Student counseling units should be elevated to fully resourced psychosocial and mental health centers, staffed by trained psychologists, psychiatrists, and

peer counselors. These centers should address not only substance abuse but also its co-morbidities, including anxiety, depression, and academic stress (Moss et al., 2019).

Confidentiality, accessibility, and affordability must be prioritized to reduce stigma. Institutional health units should integrate annual substance use screening into student wellness programs. Early detection systems could enable proactive interventions before substance abuse escalates into severe cognitive or emotional impairments. Such systems resonate with developmental psychology's emphasis on early risk identification (Cicchetti, 2016).
Since thrill-seeking and peer conformity were significant predictors of substance abuse, universities should expand substance-free recreational and creative outlets. Investment in cultural clubs, sporting facilities, entrepreneurial hubs, and artistic platforms provides adolescents with positive reinforcement alternatives (Eccles & Barber, 1999).

Universities should institutionalize life skills training modules that strengthen resilience, adaptive coping strategies, and emotion regulation capacities. Evidence from Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT)-based interventions (Beck, 2011) demonstrates efficacy in reducing reliance on maladaptive coping mechanisms such as substance use. Peer mentorship frameworks should be formalized, where senior students serve as positive role models. Such frameworks harness the dynamics of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) by redirecting peer influence toward protective behaviors rather than risky experimentation. University health systems should provide comprehensive mental health packages within student medical coverage. Regular psycho-educational campaigns should normalize mental health-seeking behavior, dismantling cultural stigmas that deter adolescents from accessing care.

General education programs should incorporate substance use and adolescent development modules. This reform will position students to critically interrogate the nexus between health behaviors, academic performance, and long-term wellbeing. Lecturers should be equipped to recognize early behavioral and cognitive signs of substance abuse such as absenteeism, poor performance, or irritability. Faculty should serve as first-line identifiers and referral agents. Training programs can be modeled after evidence-based early intervention protocols. Universities should establish longitudinal monitoring frameworks for tracking substance use trends among students. These data systems will not only inform institutional policies but also contribute to the national evidence base, enhancing Cameroon's global academic contributions to adolescent health research. Parents should be actively sensitized about adolescent vulnerabilities and trained in effective parental monitoring, emotional support, and open communication. Evidence shows that strong parental engagement significantly buffers against adolescent drug use (Brody et al., 2012).

Religious institutions, traditional leaders, and youth associations should be engaged in reshaping community norms around substance use. By embedding prevention campaigns in trusted community spaces, interventions gain legitimacy and sustainability (Egbe et al., 2021). Rehabilitation should move beyond punitive approaches toward community-centered recovery models, emphasizing skill acquisition, academic reintegration, and psychosocial healing. Such approaches resonate with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) by addressing the adolescent within their broader socio-cultural milieu. Future research should extend beyond Bamenda University to other Cameroonian institutions, thereby producing comparative insights across urban-rural and public-private

divides. Since gendered differences emerged in this study, subsequent research should interrogate how cognitive and emotional impacts vary by gender, with implications for targeted interventions. There is a need for African-led neuropsychological research employing brain imaging and psychometric assessments to deepen understanding of substance abuse impacts. Longitudinal evaluations of preventive and rehabilitative programs should be conducted to establish evidence-based best practices for the Cameroonian and wider Sub-Saharan context. The study underscores that adolescent substance abuse is not merely a personal failing but a structural, developmental, and institutional challenge. Addressing it requires a holistic, multi-level approach that integrates policy, academic institutions, psychosocial interventions, families, and communities. Sophisticated strategies must recognize the bidirectional interplay between substance abuse, cognitive functioning, and emotional health, situating the adolescent within a web of ecological systems. Only by adopting such comprehensive and evidence-driven measures can Cameroon safeguard its intellectual and emotional capital, ensuring that its youth its most vital resource is equipped to contribute meaningfully to sustainable national development.

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