Counselling Strategies for Preventing and Addressing Substance Abuse Among Tertiary Institution Students in South-East Nigeria

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Abstract
Substance abuse among tertiary institution students remains a significant educational, psychological, social and public health concern in Nigeria. This conceptual article examines counselling strategies for preventing and addressing substance abuse among tertiary institution students in South-East Nigeria. The article draws on relevant literature on substance abuse, its associated factors and consequences, and the role of guidance and counselling in prevention and intervention. The analysis identifies peer pressure, curiosity, stress, availability of substances, and social and environmental influences as important considerations in counselling intervention. It proposes psychoeducation, peer counselling, stress-management counselling, life-skills training, individual and group counselling, motivational interviewing, cognitive-behavioural counselling, early identification, referral and follow-up support as key strategies. The article is anchored on Social Learning Theory and Cognitive-Behavioural Theory. It concludes that effective counselling should be preventive, developmental, therapeutic, student-centred and continuous, with tertiary institutions strengthening counselling services to reduce substance abuse and promote students' academic and psychosocial well-being.

Keywords: *counselling strategies, substance abuse, tertiary institution students, prevention, intervention, South-East Nigeria*

1.1 Introduction

Substance abuse remains a major public health, educational and psychosocial concern among young people, particularly those in tertiary institutions. The harmful or inappropriate use of psychoactive substances can adversely affect students' psychological functioning, academic engagement, interpersonal relationships, health and general well-being. Substance abuse among students is influenced by a combination of individual, interpersonal, social and environmental conditions rather than by individual choice alone. Factors such as peer influence, curiosity, academic and personal stress, accessibility of substances and social environments may increase students' vulnerability to substance-related behaviours. Consequently, addressing substance abuse among tertiary institution students requires interventions that extend beyond information provision and disciplinary measures to include appropriate psychological and counselling support.

Tertiary institution students constitute an important population for substance-abuse prevention because the transition into higher education is often accompanied by increased independence, exposure to new social networks and greater responsibility for personal decisions. Students may encounter peer groups and social environments in which the use of alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, pharmaceutical substances and other psychoactive substances is normalized or encouraged. Academic demands, adjustment difficulties, financial pressures and interpersonal challenges may further expose students to unhealthy coping behaviours. Apare and Enakpoya (2024), for instance, examined the relationship among substance use, peer social comparison, academic stress and psychological well-being among tertiary institution students, highlighting the relevance of psychosocial experiences in understanding substance-use behaviour among students.

The concern is particularly relevant in South-East Nigeria, where tertiary institutions accommodate a large population of young people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. Substance-use concerns among students in the region have attracted scholarly attention. Onuoha et al. (2024) examined substance-abuse issues among university undergraduates in Enugu State, while other Nigerian studies have examined the prevalence, patterns, correlates and consequences of drug and substance abuse among students in tertiary and other educational settings (Akinpelu et al., 2024; Ibobor et al., 2024). These studies indicate the continuing relevance of substance abuse as an issue requiring coordinated educational, psychological and health-related responses.

The consequences associated with substance abuse provide further justification for counselling intervention. Problematic substance use may interfere with students' concentration, motivation, attendance and academic engagement and may contribute to poor academic outcomes. It may also be associated with psychological difficulties, impaired judgement, behavioural problems, interpersonal conflict, health-related challenges and dependence. Okoro et al. (2024), for example, examined the relationship between alcohol and other psychoactive substance use and depression among medical students in Bayelsa State, demonstrating the importance of considering the psychological dimensions of substance use among students. These consequences suggest that institutional responses should address not only the occurrence of substance use but also the underlying factors and difficulties that may accompany it.

Counselling has an important role in responding to these challenges because guidance counsellors are professionally positioned to provide preventive education, psychological support, behaviour-change interventions, coping-skills development, early identification, referral and follow-up services. Counselling can assist students in developing effective ways of managing stress, resisting negative peer influence, improving decision-making, strengthening interpersonal skills and seeking appropriate assistance when substance-related difficulties arise. Udechukwu et al. (2024) emphasized the relevance of counselling support techniques in addressing drug abuse among students, while Uwadia et al. (2024) highlighted the role of guidance counsellors in preventing substance abuse and promoting appropriate intervention.

However, effective counselling responses to substance abuse should not be limited to occasional sensitisation campaigns. Prevention requires continuous and developmentally appropriate interventions that strengthen students' knowledge, coping abilities, life skills and capacity to resist social pressures associated with substance use. At the same time, students who are already experiencing substance-related difficulties require counselling approaches that are individualized, supportive and responsive to their level of need. Such approaches may include individual counselling, group counselling, motivational interviewing, cognitive-behavioural counselling, stress-management counselling, early identification, referral and follow-up support.

A comprehensive counselling response should also recognize that substance-abuse behaviour is influenced by both social and psychological processes. Students may learn substance-use behaviours through observation, imitation and reinforcement within their social environments, while their thoughts, beliefs, emotions and coping responses may influence the continuation of problematic behaviour. Consequently, counselling strategies should address both the social conditions that may encourage substance use and the cognitive and behavioural processes through which students respond to challenges. Peer counselling and education, psychoeducation, life-skills training, stress-management interventions and cognitive-behavioural approaches are therefore relevant components of a comprehensive counselling framework.

Despite the growing attention given to substance abuse among students, there remains a need for a coherent conceptual examination of how counselling strategies can be organized across prevention, early intervention and support for students experiencing substance-related problems. A counselling-focused approach is particularly important because substance abuse within tertiary institutions has implications not only for students' health but also for their academic development, psychological adjustment, social relationships and future functioning. The emphasis should therefore shift from viewing substance abuse solely as a disciplinary problem to understanding it as a multifaceted behavioural and psychosocial concern requiring preventive, developmental and therapeutic responses.

It is against this background that this conceptual article examines counselling strategies for preventing and addressing substance abuse among tertiary institution students in South-East Nigeria. The article focuses on the factors necessitating counselling intervention, the consequences of substance abuse requiring professional support, and counselling strategies that can be applied at preventive, early-intervention and continuing-support levels. The article further draws on Social Learning Theory and Cognitive-Behavioural Theory to provide a theoretical basis for understanding substance-related behaviour and the application of counselling strategies within tertiary institutions.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Substance abuse among students in tertiary institutions has become a serious concern because of its potential to undermine students' academic progress, psychological well-being, health and social relationships. The transition into tertiary education exposes students to greater independence, new peer groups, academic pressures and social environments that may increase their vulnerability to substance use. Despite efforts by institutions and relevant agencies to control substance abuse, the problem continues to persist among students.

The situation is particularly concerning in South-East Nigeria, where students are exposed to various substances, including alcohol, cigarettes, cannabis and other psychoactive substances. Evidence from the broader study indicates that alcohol, cigarette and cannabis were among the substances most commonly identified by students. The study also showed that peer pressure, curiosity and stress were prominent factors associated with substance abuse, while mental health problems, addiction, poor academic performance and other social and behavioural difficulties were identified as important consequences.

The persistence of these problems raises concerns about the adequacy of existing preventive and intervention measures within tertiary institutions. Although guidance and counselling services are expected to provide students with support for behavioural, emotional, social and academic difficulties, substance-abuse counselling may not always receive the sustained attention required. In addition, reliance on disciplinary measures without corresponding psychological and

developmental interventions may limit opportunities for early identification, counselling and rehabilitation.

The problem, therefore, is not merely the existence of substance abuse among tertiary institution students, but the need for comprehensive, preventive and therapeutic counselling strategies that address the factors contributing to substance use and the consequences experienced by affected students. There is consequently a need to conceptualize counselling approaches that can assist students to resist peer pressure, manage stress, make responsible decisions, develop healthy coping skills, seek help when necessary and sustain recovery.

It is against this background that this article examines counselling strategies for preventing and addressing substance abuse among tertiary institution students in South-East Nigeria, with emphasis on psychoeducation, peer counselling, individual and group counselling, stress-management training, life-skills development, motivational interviewing, cognitive-behavioural counselling, early identification, referral and follow-up.

1.3 Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to examine counselling strategies for preventing and addressing substance abuse among tertiary institution students in South-East Nigeria. Specifically, the article focuses on counselling approaches for preventing substance abuse and supporting students experiencing substance-abuse-related problems.

2.1 Conceptual Analysis

The conceptual framework for this article is anchored on three major concepts: substance abuse, factors associated with substance abuse, and counselling strategies for preventing and addressing substance abuse. These concepts provide the basis for understanding the nature of substance abuse among students in tertiary institutions, the factors that may contribute to substance-abuse behaviour, and the counselling approaches that can be employed to prevent, reduce and address substance-related problems among students in South-East Nigeria.

2.1.1 Substance Abuse

Substance abuse refers to the harmful, excessive or inappropriate use of psychoactive substances in a manner that negatively affects an individual's physical health, psychological functioning, social relationships or academic activities. It includes the non-medical or problematic use of substances such as alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, prescription medications and other psychoactive substances. Among tertiary institution students, substance abuse may take different forms and may be influenced by the purpose for which substances are used. Some students may use substances for recreation, experimentation, social acceptance, coping with stress or other personal reasons. Regardless of the motivation, repeated or harmful use may produce negative consequences for students' academic and psychosocial development. Recent Nigerian evidence indicates that substance use remains a concern among students. For instance, Onuoha et al. (2024) examined substance-abuse issues among university undergraduates in Enugu State, while Akinpelu et al. (2024) investigated the prevalence and pattern of drug abuse among public tertiary institution students in Osun State.

2.1.2 Substance Abuse among Tertiary Institution Students

Substance abuse among tertiary institution students refers to the problematic use of psychoactive substances by individuals enrolled in universities, polytechnics, colleges of education and other institutions of higher learning. Students may be particularly vulnerable because tertiary education represents a developmental period involving significant personal, social and academic transitions. Peer groups become increasingly influential, while students may have greater autonomy over their activities. Academic pressure, social relationships, financial difficulties and adjustment to a new environment may further increase vulnerability. Apare and Enakpoya (2024) reported relationships between substance use, peer social comparison, academic stress and psychological well-being among tertiary institution students. This suggests that substance-abuse prevention should consider the broader psychological and social experiences of students rather than focusing exclusively on the substances themselves.

2.1.3 Factors Necessitating Counselling Intervention

Peer Pressure: Peer pressure is an important factor in students' substance-use behaviour. Students may experiment with substances because their friends use them or because substance use is presented as socially acceptable within particular peer groups.

The broader study identified peer pressure as the leading perceived factor influencing substance abuse among tertiary institution students in South-East Nigeria. Consequently, counselling interventions should equip students with assertiveness, refusal and decision-making skills that enable them to resist negative peer influence.Peer counselling can also be used positively by training responsible students to promote healthy lifestyles and discourage substance use among their colleagues.

Curiosity: Curiosity may encourage students to experiment with substances, particularly when students have limited knowledge about their potential consequences. Some students may perceive experimentation as harmless or may underestimate the possibility of developing problematic use.

Counsellors should therefore provide accurate and age-appropriate psychoeducation about substance use. Rather than relying exclusively on fear-based messages, counselling should help students understand the short- and long-term implications of substance misuse and develop informed decision-making skills.

Stress: Academic and personal stress can contribute to unhealthy coping behaviours. Students may perceive psychoactive substances as ways of reducing tension, escaping emotional difficulties or coping with academic demands.

The broader study identified stress among the major perceived factors influencing substance abuse. Counselling programmes should therefore incorporate stress-management components, including time management, problem-solving, emotional regulation, relaxation techniques, coping skills and help-seeking behaviour.

Availability of Substances: The accessibility of psychoactive substances may increase opportunities for their use. Where substances are readily available within students' social environments, prevention becomes more challenging.

Counsellors should therefore collaborate with institutional administrators, student associations and relevant community stakeholders to promote environments that discourage substance use and facilitate early identification of students who may require support.

Social and Environmental Influences: Students' behaviour is influenced by the social environment in which they live and study. Accommodation arrangements, friendship networks, social activities and institutional culture can influence students' attitudes towards substance use.
Counselling interventions should therefore incorporate environmental approaches rather than focusing exclusively on individual students. Creating supportive campus environments and promoting healthy student activities can help reduce exposure to substance-use behaviours.

2.1.4 Consequences of Substance Abuse Requiring Counselling Intervention

Academic Consequences: Substance abuse may interfere with students' concentration, motivation, attendance and academic engagement. Persistent substance use may consequently contribute to poor academic performance and, in severe cases, withdrawal from educational activities. Counsellors should therefore monitor academic and behavioural changes and provide early intervention for students showing signs of declining academic functioning.

Mental Health Consequences: Mental health problems were among the prominent consequences identified in the broader study. Recent Nigerian research has also examined the relationship between psychoactive substance use and mental health among students (Okoro et al., 2024).
Counsellors should therefore be equipped to identify psychological difficulties associated with substance use and provide appropriate counselling or referral where specialized mental-health care is required.

Addiction: Repeated substance use may develop into dependence or addiction, making professional intervention increasingly important. Students experiencing problematic substance use may require sustained counselling rather than one-time awareness programmes.
Counsellors should help affected students recognize problematic patterns, develop motivation for change and obtain appropriate professional support.

Behavioural and Social Consequences: Substance abuse may be associated with impaired judgement, behavioural problems, conflict and difficulties in interpersonal relationships. Such problems can affect students' relationships with colleagues, lecturers, families and other members of the university community. Counselling should therefore address both substance use and its interpersonal consequences.

2.2.5 Counselling Strategies for Preventing Substance Abuse

1. Psychoeducation

Psychoeducation should constitute a major component of counselling for the prevention of substance abuse among tertiary institution students. Psychoeducation involves providing students with accurate and relevant information about commonly abused substances, their potential consequences, misconceptions surrounding substance use, and available sources of professional assistance. Counsellors can provide psychoeducational services through student orientation programmes, seminars, workshops, lectures, individual and group counselling sessions, posters and other information materials, student associations, and digital awareness programmes. However, substance-abuse prevention should be continuous rather than restricted to students' initial orientation. Regular psychoeducational activities can help reinforce knowledge, correct misconceptions and encourage students to make informed decisions regarding substance use.

2. Peer counselling and peer education

Peer counselling and peer education constitute another important strategy for preventing substance abuse among tertiary institution students, particularly because of the influence of peer relationships on students' attitudes and behaviours. Selected and appropriately trained students can serve as peer educators by promoting healthy behaviours, providing basic information about the risks associated with substance abuse, encouraging appropriate help-seeking, challenging positive perceptions of substance use, referring students who require professional assistance to counsellors, and supporting institutional substance-abuse prevention campaigns. However, peer educators should not replace professional counsellors. Rather, they should function as an extension of preventive counselling under the supervision and guidance of qualified counselling professionals.

3. Stress-management counselling

Stress-management counselling is also important in preventing substance abuse because students may experience academic, social and personal pressures that can make them vulnerable to unhealthy coping behaviours. Counsellors should provide structured programmes that equip students with appropriate strategies for managing stress. Such programmes may address time management, examination preparation, relaxation techniques, emotional regulation, problem-solving, healthy coping mechanisms and appropriate help-seeking behaviours. By helping students develop effective ways of managing academic and personal pressures, stress-management counselling can provide healthier alternatives to substance use.

4. Life-skills training

Life-skills training should also form part of preventive counselling programmes in tertiary institutions. Life-skills counselling equips students with practical abilities for managing situations that may expose them to substance use and other risky behaviours. Important areas include decision-making, assertiveness, communication, refusal skills, problem-solving, emotional regulation, self-management and interpersonal skills. Through these skills, students can become better prepared to evaluate situations, resist inappropriate social pressure, communicate effectively and make responsible choices. The emphasis of life-skills counselling should therefore be on strengthening students' personal and interpersonal capacities to cope with challenges without resorting to substance use.

5. Awareness and sensitisation campaigns

Awareness and sensitisation campaigns constitute another preventive counselling strategy. Tertiary institutions should organize regular awareness programmes involving guidance counsellors, health professionals, student leaders and other relevant stakeholders. Such programmes should provide students with factual information about commonly abused substances as well as emerging patterns of substance use. The messages should be presented in a non-stigmatizing and developmentally appropriate manner so that students are encouraged to understand the risks of substance abuse and seek assistance when necessary. Awareness and sensitisation should complement, rather than substitute for, continuous counselling services.

Taken together, these preventive counselling strategies emphasize knowledge development, positive peer influence, effective stress management, life-skills development and continuous awareness. Their application can strengthen students' ability to make responsible decisions, cope effectively with academic and social pressures, resist negative peer influence and seek professional assistance before substance-use problems become more serious.

2.2.6 Counselling Strategies for Students Experiencing Substance-Related Problems

1. Individual counselling

Individual counselling provides a confidential and supportive setting in which students experiencing substance-related problems can discuss their concerns with a professional counsellor. Through individual counselling, the counsellor can explore the student's pattern of substance use, reasons for use, peer relationships, academic pressures, emotional difficulties, coping strategies, readiness for behavioural change and available support systems. The individualized nature of the intervention enables the counsellor to understand the circumstances surrounding the student's substance-related behaviour and develop appropriate intervention strategies. Individual counselling should be conducted in a supportive, confidential and non-judgmental manner to encourage students to disclose their concerns and participate actively in the counselling process.

2. Group counselling provides

Group counselling provides students with opportunities to develop appropriate coping skills and obtain constructive social support within a structured counselling environment. It can be particularly useful for students experiencing similar substance-related challenges because interaction with others may promote shared learning, social support and the development of healthier behavioural patterns. Group counselling may address understanding substance use, coping with stress, resisting negative peer influence, emotional regulation, communication, decision-making and relapse prevention. The counsellor should establish appropriate group norms that promote confidentiality, respect and constructive participation while ensuring that the group process remains professionally supervised.

3. Motivational interviewing

Motivational interviewing is another counselling strategy that can be used to support students who are uncertain or ambivalent about changing problematic substance-use behaviour. Rather than relying primarily on confrontation or direct persuasion, the counsellor facilitates students' reflection on their substance-use behaviour and its relationship with their personal goals and aspirations. The counselling process may help students consider the perceived benefits and disadvantages of substance use, examine conflicts between substance use and educational aspirations, assess their readiness for change and identify realistic steps towards healthier behaviour. Motivational interviewing can therefore help strengthen students' intrinsic motivation to make positive behavioural changes.

4. Cognitive-behavioural counselling

Cognitive-behavioural counselling can assist students in understanding the relationship between their thoughts, emotions and behaviours associated with substance use. Through this approach, counsellors can help students identify situations or experiences that may trigger substance use, examine unhelpful beliefs and develop healthier responses. Intervention may involve identifying risky situations, challenging maladaptive thoughts, developing alternative coping strategies, managing emotional distress, strengthening self-control and preventing recurrence of problematic substance-use behaviour. Cognitive-behavioural counselling is therefore particularly relevant where students require assistance in modifying patterns of thinking and behaviour associated with substance use.

5. Early identification

Early identification is important in addressing substance-related problems because timely counselling intervention may prevent emerging difficulties from becoming more severe. Tertiary institutions should establish appropriate mechanisms through which counsellors can identify students who demonstrate significant changes in academic functioning, behaviour, emotional well-being or social relationships that may indicate substance-related difficulties. Early identification may occur through counselling contacts, self-referral, appropriate institutional support systems or referrals from responsible members of the educational community. Such processes should be conducted ethically, confidentially and without stigmatizing students.

6. Referral services

Referral services are necessary when students require professional assistance beyond the scope of routine counselling services. Counsellors should establish functional referral networks with qualified health professionals and appropriate treatment, rehabilitation and other specialized support services. Referral may be appropriate when a student's substance-related difficulties require specialized assessment, medical attention, intensive treatment or rehabilitation. Effective referral should involve appropriate coordination and, where ethically and professionally permissible, communication between relevant services to promote continuity of care.

7. Follow-up and relapse-prevention support

Follow-up and relapse-prevention support are important components of sustained counselling intervention. Counselling should not necessarily terminate immediately after an initial intervention because students may continue to encounter academic, social or personal circumstances that could challenge their progress. Follow-up enables counsellors to assess students' adjustment, reinforce healthy coping skills, encourage continued engagement with appropriate support services and identify emerging difficulties. Relapse-prevention counselling can further assist students in recognizing situations that may increase the likelihood of returning to problematic substance-use behaviour and developing appropriate strategies for managing such situations. Continuous follow-up therefore strengthens the sustainability of counselling outcomes and supports students' continued progress towards healthier behavioural patterns.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this article is anchored on Social Learning Theory and the Cognitive-Behavioural Theory. The two theories provide a psychological basis for understanding substance-abuse behaviour among tertiary institution students and for explaining how counselling strategies can be applied to prevent and address such behaviour. Social Learning Theory emphasizes the influence of observation, modelling and social reinforcement on behaviour, while Cognitive-Behavioural Theory focuses on the relationship among thoughts, emotions and behaviours. Together, the theories provide a complementary foundation for preventive and intervention-oriented counselling strategies among tertiary institution students in South-East Nigeria.

2.3.1 Social Learning Theory by Albert Bandura (1977)

Social Learning Theory, associated principally with Bandura (1977), explains that individuals can learn behaviours through observation, imitation and interaction with their social environment. Behaviour may be strengthened when individuals observe others engaging in a particular

behaviour and receiving rewards, acceptance or other forms of reinforcement. The theory therefore recognizes the important role of peers, role models and social environments in shaping individual behaviour. The theory is particularly relevant to substance abuse among tertiary institution students because students interact extensively with peers and may be influenced by the behaviours, attitudes and expectations prevalent within their social groups. Where substance use is perceived as acceptable or socially rewarding within a peer group, students may be more likely to experiment with or continue such behaviour. Conversely, positive peer models can encourage healthy behavioural choices and discourage substance use. Social Learning Theory therefore provides a theoretical justification for peer counselling, peer education, psychoeducation and awareness programmes as preventive counselling strategies. Counsellors can deliberately promote positive peer modelling by training responsible students to encourage healthy lifestyles, provide accurate information and direct students experiencing difficulties to professional counselling services. The theory also supports the creation of supportive institutional environments in which healthy behaviours are consistently modelled and reinforced.

2.3.2 Cognitive-Behavioural Theory

Cognitive-Behavioural Theory provides another important foundation for understanding and addressing substance abuse. The theory proposes that individuals' thoughts, beliefs and interpretations influence their emotions and behaviours. Consequently, problematic behaviours may be maintained by unhelpful patterns of thinking and ineffective behavioural responses to challenging situations. In relation to substance abuse, students may develop beliefs that substances provide effective means of coping with academic stress, emotional difficulties, peer pressure or other personal challenges. Such beliefs may influence substance-use behaviour and reinforce continued reliance on substances as a coping mechanism. Counselling based on the cognitive-behavioural approach can help students identify these unhelpful thoughts, examine their consequences and develop healthier alternative responses. The theory therefore provides a strong basis for cognitive-behavioural counselling, stress-management counselling, life-skills training and individual counselling. Through these interventions, counsellors can help students identify situations associated with substance use, modify unhelpful beliefs, develop effective coping strategies, strengthen problem-solving and decision-making skills, and manage emotional difficulties without relying on substances.

2.3.3 Relevance of the Theories to the Study

The two theories complement each other in explaining both the development and modification of substance-abuse behaviour among tertiary institution students. Social Learning Theory draws attention to the influence of peers and the social environment, while Cognitive-Behavioural Theory emphasizes the role of students' thoughts, emotions and behavioural responses.

Consequently, Social Learning Theory supports counselling strategies that modify students' social learning environments through peer counselling, peer education and positive behavioural modelling, whereas Cognitive-Behavioural Theory supports strategies that help students modify maladaptive thoughts and behaviours through individual counselling, cognitive-behavioural counselling, stress management and life-skills training. The integration of both perspectives therefore provides a suitable theoretical foundation for the proposed counselling strategies for preventing and addressing substance abuse among tertiary institution students in South-East Nigeria.

3.1 Implications for Guidance and Counselling Practice

The conceptual analysis has important implications for guidance and counselling practice in tertiary institutions in South-East Nigeria. First, counselling services should move beyond a predominantly crisis-oriented approach and adopt a stronger preventive orientation. Counsellors should provide regular substance-abuse psychoeducation, life-skills training and awareness programmes that equip students with appropriate knowledge, coping abilities and decision-making skills for avoiding substance abuse.

1. Counselling services should move beyond crisis intervention and adopt a preventive orientation. Counsellors should provide regular substance-abuse education and life-skills programmes.
2. The importance of peer influence suggests that peer counselling and peer education should become important components of prevention programmes.
3. The relationship between stress and substance abuse indicates the need for systematic stress-management counselling for students.
4. Counselling centres should develop early-identification and referral mechanisms to ensure that students experiencing substance-related difficulties receive appropriate support.
5. Counsellors should employ student-centred interventions, including individual counselling, group counselling, motivational interviewing and cognitive-behavioural approaches.
6. Tertiary institutions should strengthen collaboration among counsellors, health professionals, administrators, student leaders, families and relevant community agencies.
7. Counselling interventions should be non-stigmatizing and supportive. Students may avoid seeking help when they fear punishment, embarrassment or social rejection. A confidential and supportive counselling environment can encourage early help-seeking

4.1 Conclusion

Substance abuse among tertiary institution students in South-East Nigeria remains a significant concern that requires comprehensive and sustained counselling intervention. The conceptual analysis indicates that factors such as peer pressure, curiosity, stress, availability of substances and social and environmental influences can contribute to students' vulnerability to substance abuse, while substance-related problems may adversely affect students' academic, psychological, behavioural and social functioning. Counselling provides an important professional avenue for both preventing and addressing substance abuse among tertiary institution students. Preventive strategies such as psychoeducation, peer counselling and education, stress-management counselling, life-skills training, and awareness and sensitisation programmes can strengthen students' knowledge, coping abilities, decision-making skills and resistance to negative influences. For students already experiencing substance-related problems, individual counselling, group counselling, motivational interviewing, cognitive-behavioural counselling, early identification, referral and follow-up support provide appropriate avenues for intervention. The theoretical perspectives underpinning the article further demonstrate that substance-related behaviours can be influenced by social learning, as well as by the interaction of thoughts, emotions and behaviours. Consequently, effective counselling should address both the social environment surrounding students and the cognitive and behavioural processes associated with substance use. The article therefore concludes that counselling responses to substance abuse should be preventive, developmental, therapeutic, student-centred and continuous. Tertiary institutions in South-East Nigeria should strengthen professional counselling services and integrate preventive education, early intervention, referral and follow-up into their student-support systems. A coordinated

counselling approach involving counsellors, institutional authorities, health professionals, student leaders, families and relevant stakeholders can contribute to reducing substance abuse and promoting healthier academic and psychosocial functioning among tertiary institution students.

5.1 Recommendations

1. Tertiary institutions should strengthen guidance and counselling services by providing adequate professional counsellors, appropriate counselling facilities and necessary resources for the prevention and management of substance abuse among students.
2. Counsellors should provide continuous substance-abuse psychoeducation and sensitisation programmes through orientations, seminars, workshops, counselling sessions and other student-development activities to improve students' knowledge and correct misconceptions about substance use.
3. Peer counselling and peer education programmes should be established and professionally supervised to help students resist negative peer influence, promote healthy behaviours and encourage appropriate help-seeking among their colleagues.
4. Counsellors should provide structured stress-management and life-skills counselling to equip students with appropriate coping, decision-making, assertiveness, communication, problem-solving and refusal skills that can reduce vulnerability to substance abuse.
5. Tertiary institutions should establish effective early-identification and referral systems to enable counsellors to identify students experiencing substance-related difficulties and connect those requiring specialized assistance with appropriate health, treatment and rehabilitation services.
6. Counsellors should adopt appropriate student-centred intervention strategies, including individual counselling, group counselling, motivational interviewing and cognitive-behavioural counselling, based on the needs and circumstances of students experiencing substance-related problems.
7. Tertiary institutions should promote collaborative and non-stigmatizing approaches to substance-abuse intervention by strengthening cooperation among counsellors, health professionals, administrators, student leaders, families and relevant agencies, while ensuring that students can seek counselling support without unnecessary fear of judgement or social rejection.

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