



Influence of social media in curbing the menace of drug abuse among youths in South-East, Nigeria.

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Abstract

This study critically examines the influence of social media in curbing escalating drug abuse among youths in South-East Nigeria, where the scourge of psychoactive substance has become a pandemic of public health and social concern. Specifically, it investigates how social media touchpoints drive awareness, youth sensitization, and behavioural change regarding drug use. Grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), the research explores how youths engage with digital content to satisfy informational and preventive desires relating to drugs. Using descriptive survey design with multistage sampling technique, 397 representative samples aged 15–30 years were selected across the five states of South-East geopolitical zone. Data analysis was guided by descriptive and inferential statistical tools, including mean score ranking through the Friedman test and SPSS version 16. Findings shows that digital media platforms (Facebook and Instagram) are dominant sources for drug related information (57.93%). Campaign effectiveness was substantiated by mean scores exceeding 4.0, indicating high levels of agreement on shifts in perception and behaviour change among youth. The study identifies key barriers to campaign efficiency as limited internet access, content fatigue, low creative engagement, insufficient funding, and weak institutional collaboration among government and civil organizations. The study concludes that social media potentials in drug prevention communication among youths is underutilized because infrastructural and operational shortfalls. And recommends a multi-sectoral and inter-agency approach; including public and private partnership to create contextual youth-focused digital content that resonate with them. Stronger synergy between government institutions, civil society organizations, and digital influencers is critical for sustaining impactful and scalable social media-driven interventions aimed at reducing the prevalence of drug abuse among youth.

Keywords: Social media, drug abuse prevention, youth engagement, digital touchpoints, Uses and Gratifications Theory, public health communication

Introduction

Drug abuse among youths is an emerging momentous social vice and public health issue in Nigeria, especially as the scourge continue to escalate to worrisome heights among adolescents with attendant consequences, including lack of concentration, poor academic performance, mental health crisis as well as societal instability. Contemporary findings from United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023) indicates startling trend as 14.4% of Nigerians from 14 to 64 years (over 14 million people) were believed to have consumed psychoactive substances in the past 12 months. This is mind boggling! Enough to be declared as an epidemic and health emergency. Moreso that it is remarkably more than global normal rate of 6% (UNODC, 2023) and reflects a growing predicament, with adolescents and young adults forming a significant percentage.

Akanbi, Godwin, Theophilus, Muritala and Ajiboye (2019) [4] in their study identified a strong link between psychoactive substance abuse with poor academic outcomes among students in Kwara State; validating how drug misuse hinders intellectual and social development. Similarly, Adeyeye (2018) [3] describes this problem as an escalating epidemic threatening Nigerian youths just as Kumar and Dangi (2019) [19] also warns that drug addiction significantly affects health and productivity of youths, leading to devastating effects on national progress.

This is consistent with the findings of Umeh, Ajuluchukwu and Abiola (2022) suggesting that the prevalence of drug misuse is preponderant within educational institutions. The

study among university undergraduates in Nigeria shows that 45.7% had taken some form of substance; highlighting that prescription opioids like such as tramadol and codeine are more frequently abused than cannabis (Umeh, Ajuluchukwu, & Abiola, 2022). The growing trends of locally made substances like "Monkey Tail," i.e. combination of homemade gin and cannabis leaves illustrates the evolving dimension or what I describe as dangerously destructive innovation in drug substance abuse in the country (Reuters, 2024). It is therefore logical to assert that drug abuse among youths is a ticking time bomb that may soon detonate, causing health, education, and social crisis of unimaginable proportion. Adeyeye (2018) [3] aptly describes drug abuse as reaching epidemic levels in Nigeria, especially among young people, highlighting urgent need for coordinated national action against psychoactive drug abuse by government, civic organizations.

A lot of factors have been identified to be responsible increasing appetite for psychoactive substances among Nigerian youth. They include prevailing socioeconomic uncertainties such as unemployment and extreme poverty, the influence of peer pressure, weak family structures, and the breakdown of traditional values (Okafor 2021: Independent Nigeria, 2024) [30]. Consequently, psychiatric experts have expressed concerns about the mental health implications of this escalating trend as many youth's exhibit symptoms of mental health. Sadly, reports have shown that

nine out of every ten inpatients at some psychiatric facilities have drug-related conditions, often presenting with co-occurring mental health disorders such as depression, psychosis, and suicidal tendencies (Punch, 2024).

Despite the magnitude of the problem that is tending towards health emergency, access to rehabilitation and treatment services remains grossly inadequate and mostly exorbitant for many victims. Additionally, existing facilities are often underfunded and inaccessible, particularly for vulnerable youth populations (Premium Times, 2021). Therefore, many victims are left untreated or poorly handled leading to regular relapse of the conditions. Consequent upon these incontrovertibly overwhelming challenges, understanding the scope and nature of drug abuse among Nigerian youth is critical for developing targeted public health interventions and evidence-based policies that prioritize prevention, treatment, and social reintegration with the aid of digital touchpoints.

The role of social in addressing drug abuse is increasingly gaining momentum. While Aribamikan (2022) ^[5] notes that social media may encourage drug-related behaviors, it also serves as a powerful tool for creating awareness its consequences and behavior change communication or campaigns. Lawhon and Herrick (2018) emphasize how digital media representations shape public perceptions and policy on drug use by reinforcing the hazards associated drug abuse repeatedly. Additionally, Muanya and Onyenucheya (2019) ^[21] call for urgent, innovative communication strategies, encompassing digital platforms, to combat substance abuse and support those affected. This study aims to explore social media's influence in reducing drug abuse among youths, acknowledging its potential to both worsen and alleviate the problem.

However, Olubiyi (2022) ^[35] emphasized that social media can effectively promote anti-drug awareness and behavioral change when strategically deployed. The consequences of substance abuse among youths are profound and multidimensional. Akanbi *et al.* (2019) ^[4] highlighted that psychoactive drugs consumption severely affect academic performance and social relationships among students in Kwara State, with longer lasting developmental consequences. Additionally, Obiechina and Isiguzo (2021) ^[29] emphasize that early school-based interventions combined with media campaigns are essential for the prevention of drugs epidemic among younger population. Undoubtedly, during crises like COVID-19, social media proved vital in mobilizing youth-led advocacy, campaigns, and education when traditional outreach was limited. Therefore, it can be deployed to galvanize social movement against drug abuse among youths (Okafor *et al.*, 2022).

Statement of the Problem

The South-East geopolitical zone, notable for cultural vibrancy, trade and industry and educational excellence is now notorious for drug addiction including cannabis, tramadol, morphine, pentazocine, codeine, fentanyl, Hydromorphone, tapentadol monkey tail and “mpkuru mmiri” that continues to threaten the mental health and stability of youth, and by extension the broader socio-economic fabric of society (UNODC, 2018; Eze, Njoku, & Amadi, 2024) ^[13]. The causative factors are numerous and multifaceted including unstable economy, unemployment, depression, peer pressure, and unregulated digital exposure. Despite the preponderance of drug abuse among youths in

South-East region, social media interventions in curbing this intractable public health and social problem remain fragmented and inconsistent.

Unarguably, the youths are more prone to high rate of substance abuse and of course, most reachable through digital platforms (Aribamikan, 2022) ^[5]. Previous interventions by government bodies like the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) and NGOs focused on offline, traditional campaigns through schools and community engagement with limited reach, impact and resonance (Adeyeye 2018) ^[3]. Suffices to emphasize that social media has become the dominant mode of communication among contemporary youths, often described as digital natives, digital first generation or netizens (UNESCO, 2023; Okoye and Ozioma 2024) ^[34, 41]. Again, Oduola and Ifabiyi (2025) notes that online touchpoints like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp have transformed into effective public spheres where attitudes are shaped, trends go viral, and youth identities are forged. Tsao *et al.*, 2021 recognised the persuasive power of digital storytelling and peer-led focused content in health communication.

Despite digital media wider reach and resonance with youth population, there is still lack of structured, data-driven, youth-focused social media campaigns to effectively combat drug abuse; leveraging on the viral potential it offers (Eze, C. E 2023; Eze, T. E., Njoku, C. J., & Amadi, P. F. 2024) ^[12]. Consequently, there is limited empirical evidence from the Nigerian milieu on what works, for whom, and under what conditions. This is consistent with the assertion that subsisting interventions do not reflect nor resonate with the prevailing realities of youths in South-East geographical space for lacking cultural touch, tone and relevance, creative depth, and youth-centric design (Guanah, J. S., Edike, F. K., & Ihiaeme, M. C. 2023; Eze, C. E. 2023) ^[12, 16]. While scholars have explored drug abuse's effects on youth academics and behavior (Akanbi *et al.*, 2019; Obiechina and Isiguzo, 2021) ^[4, 29], there is little research done specifically on social media's role in anti-drug efforts in the South-East (Oko-Epelle, L., Komolafe, O., Olawunmi, B., & Oyedeji, K. A. 2025) ^[32].

Therefore, this study addresses a critical knowledge gap: to what extent does social media actually shape awareness, attitudes, and behaviour change concerning drug misuse in South-Eastern Nigeria? What barriers hinder optimal digital engagement for prevention? And how can stakeholders harness the inherent potentials of social media to construct culturally resonant and sustainable solutions for youth behavioural change? By answering these questions, the research seeks not only to inform theory and practice but also to contribute to a rights-based and youth-inclusive model of drug abuse prevention in South-East and the rest of Nigeria and Africa.

Objective of the study

The study aims to examine the influence on social media in curbing the menace of drug abuse among youths in South-East, Nigeria, while ensuring the under listed specific objectives:

1. examine the extent to which social media platforms are utilized in creating awareness and sensitizing youths about the dangers of drug abuse.
2. assess the effectiveness of social media campaigns in influencing the attitudes and behaviors of youths towards drug abuse prevention.

3. identify the challenges limiting the strategic use of social media in curbing drug abuse among youths.

Research Question

To remain focused and adhere strictly to the research objectives, this study is guided by the following research question:

1. To what extent are social media platforms utilized in creating awareness and sensitizing youths about the dangers of drug abuse?
2. How effective are social media campaigns in influencing the attitudes and behaviors of youths towards drug abuse prevention?
3. What are the challenges limiting the strategic use of social media in curbing drug abuse among youths?

Statement of Hypothesis

Ho: There are no significant challenges limiting the strategic use of social media in curbing drug abuse among youths.

Significance of the Study

This study is important as it expands knowledge on the role of social media in tackling drug abuse among youths in South-East Nigeria. By exploring how digital platforms influence youth behaviour, the research offers valuable insights for government parastatals, public health communicators, educators, policymakers, and NGOs to design more effective online anti-drug campaigns. It evaluates current digital interventions, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and ways to improve youth engagement for healthier with minimal arbitral consumption of narcotic drugs. The study also benefits government and non-governmental organizations by pinpointing impactful strategies and content that drive behavioural change among youths. Additionally, it reveals challenges hindering strategic social media use, providing a basis for targeted policies and support systems to strengthen drug prevention efforts.

Scope of the Study

This study investigates the influence of social media in curbing drug abuse among youths, focusing on awareness campaigns, anti-drug messages, youth engagement, and the effectiveness of online sensitization efforts. The target population includes youths actively using platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, TikTok, and YouTube. It also examines challenges limiting the effective use of social media for drug prevention. Geographically, the study is confined to South-East Nigeria, covering Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Abia, and Ebonyi states. The time frame spans the last five years (2020–2025), a period characterized by increased youth social media activity and intensified anti-drug campaigns.

Operational definition of terms

▪ Social Media

Social media refers to digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube that are used to create, share, and disseminate information, including drug abuse awareness and prevention messages targeted at youths.

▪ Drug Abuse

Drug abuse is the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including illicit drugs and prescription

medications, by youths, leading to addiction, health risks, and social problems.

▪ Youths

In this study, youths refer to individuals between the ages of 15 and 35 residing in South-East Nigeria who are the primary targets or users of social media and are at risk of drug abuse.

▪ Curbing

Curbing refers to efforts, strategies, or actions taken through social media platforms to reduce, prevent, or eliminate the incidence and impact of drug abuse among youths.

▪ Awareness and Sensitization

Awareness and sensitization involve the process of informing and educating youths about the dangers of drug abuse, its consequences, and preventive measures through social media messages and campaigns.

Conceptual Review

Conceptual review is a critical component of any empirical research; providing clarity about the key concepts, constructs as well as theoretical underpinnings that frame the study. It unpacks the fundamental meanings, relationships or intersections, and basic assumptions entrenched in the concepts being studied. It helps researchers understand the terrain, justify the study, and establish scholarly grounding for empirical inquiry.

In the context of the current study being the influence of social media in curbing drug abuse among youths in South-East Nigeria, the conceptual review serves several vital purposes covering the following subheadings:

Synopsis of the Conceptual Landscape

Drug abuse, particularly among youth, remains a public health challenge and a rising threat social in many societies, including South-East and the rest of Nigeria. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2019) asserts that Nigeria has one of the highest prevalence of drug misuse in West Africa, with estimated 14.4% of its population (15–64 years) being victims of psychoactive drug use. The South-East region of Nigeria as the focus of this study is not exempt from this scourge.

Adeyeye (2018) ^[3] argues that Nigeria is facing a rising epidemic of drug abuse, particularly among young people, which poses significant health, psychological, and social risks. Drug abuse often led to addiction, criminal behavior, academic failure, and mental health problems, making it a pressing public health concern. Akanbi *et al.* (2019) ^[4] emphasized that the misuse of psychoactive substances among Nigerian students has a detrimental impact on their academic performance and overall well-being. This study is grounded in urgent need to explore innovative and youth-friendly approaches for prevention, particularly through media channels that resonate with the youth population who are the largest victim of narcotics. Obiechina and Isiguzo (2021) ^[29] pointed out that effective media strategies can serve as preventive tools by shaping youth perceptions and discouraging engagement in harmful behaviours like drug use.

The rise and penetration of social media introduces a potentially powerful and transformative tool for public health messaging, behavioural intervention, and social

change in the society; particularly among the youth demography. Social media is not just a communication platform but a participatory engagement space capable of redefining how society addresses drug-related crises through awareness, peer influence, advocacy, and community support. This conceptual review interrogates the connection between social media and drug abuse mitigation, focusing on their intersections within the context of South-East Nigeria. By focusing on the interplay between social media and drug abuse prevention, this study aims to contribute to evidence-based insights and practical interventions to address the scourge of drug misuse in South-East Nigeria

Conceptualizing Drug Abuse and Societal Dimensions

Drug abuse refers to the intentional misuse or excessive consumption of psychoactive substances whether legal or illegal such as cannabis, tramadol, codeine, and cocaine, in a manner that causes harm to the individual or society. This is in tandem with American Psychiatric Association (2013) explanation, noting that drug abuse is the maladaptive (dysfunctional) trend and pattern of psychoactive substance consumption leading to clinically significant impairment or distress, as outlined in diagnostic manual of mental disorder, fifth edition (DSM-V). In South-Eastern Nigeria, drug abuse includes the misuse of prescription drugs such as Tramadol and Codeine as well illicit substances such as cannabis and methamphetamine as a result of peer pressure, unemployment, psychological distress, and urban disillusionment (Aguocha, Madukwe, & Onyekwulufe, 2020).

Scholars like Okafor and Agbo (2021) ^[30] argue that the prevalence of drug abuse in the South-East is not just a health concern but also a sociocultural dilemma, where the quest for hyper-productivity, escapism, and misplaced self-validation fuels risky behaviours among youth with attendant multifaceted consequences including criminal behaviour, school dropouts, mental disorders, family dysfunction and community insecurity to mention a few (Obiechina & Isiguzo, 2020).

Conceptualizing Social Media as a Communication and Advocacy Tool

Social media refers to interactive digital platforms that allow users to create, share, and exchange information in virtual communities across geographical boundaries (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2015). Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and TikTok have become embedded in the daily communication practices of Nigerians, particularly youths. Consequently, it has become pivotal channels for shaping perceptions, behaviours, and norms (Aribamikan, 2022) ^[5].

Beyond entertainment, social media facilitates real-time communication, interactive engagement, and mass dissemination of information, digital activism, health education, and community mobilization thereby making it a powerful tool for awareness campaigns and behaviour change initiatives, especially among youths who are more digital savvy. Lawhon and Herrick (2018) agrees that digital media platforms have become pivotal in shaping public discourse on health-related behaviours, including drug use and addiction. This is consistent with the standpoint of Chukwuere and Chukwuere (2020), emphasizing that social media has democratized access to information in Nigeria,

enabling young people to participate in national conversations including health awareness, anti-drug campaigns, and peer counselling.

In public health communication domain, the role of social media in promoting behavioural change is well documented. Scholars like Heldman, Schindelar, and Weaver (2019) observed that targeted social media campaigns have been helpful in influencing youth behaviour concerning alcohol abuse and sexual health.

In the context of this study, relevance and strength of social media lies in its potential as a cost-effective and far-reaching medium for curbing the menace of drug abuse among youths in South-East Nigeria; and by extension the rest of Nigeria. It allows for the delivery of targeted messages, peer-to-peer advocacy, and exposure to anti-drug content that can influence knowledge, attitude, and behavior. Aribamikan (2022) ^[5] noted that social media plays a dual role it can either promote or prevent substance abuse, depending on how it is used. Therefore, understanding its influence is crucial for harnessing its preventive potential and designing effective intervention strategies aimed at discouraging drug abuse among Nigerian youths.

Intersections of Social Media and Drug Abuse Prevention

In attempt to unpack these connecting concepts, several thematic pathways emerge, including:

Awareness and Sensitization

Social media platforms serve as enablers of mass sensitization campaigns targeting drug abuse. Youth-centric organizations in Nigeria, such as National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), leverage Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube to disseminate anti-drug messages, organize virtual town hall interactions, and share recovery stories. These initiatives have a far-reaching influence compared to traditional mass media (Uwakwe and Emecheta, 2021).

Awareness and sensitization campaigns are strategic efforts aimed at educating the public about specific social, health, or behavioral issues, often with the intent of promoting preventive actions altering perceptions and behaviour change. Eze and Onyebuchi (2022) ^[14] emphasize that such campaigns involve disseminating targeted information to increase knowledge, trigger public discourse, and mobilize community action. These campaigns use diverse channels including posters, radio jingles, community outreach, and of course, digital platforms like social media to deliver anti-drug messages, particularly to youth demographics.

Awareness and sensitization campaigns are highly relevant as they form the basis for using social media to combat drug abuse among youths. Social media allows for interactive, real-time dissemination of educational content, making it a cost-effective tool for engaging young people who are active online. As Uche and Nwachukwu (2023) ^[26, 38] emphasize, effective social media-based awareness campaigns can reshape attitudes and correct misconceptions about drug use, thereby playing a vital role in preventive education and behavioral change among youths in South-East Nigeria.

Peer Influence and Counter-Narratives

While peer pressure is undeniably a strong factor influencing substance abuse, social media offers a counter-

narrative platform. Influencers, Rehabilitated drug users may be recruited as online influencers to share their recovery and transformation. Additionally, public figures can also engage audiences through relatable storytelling and “edutainment.” Peer-led campaigns resonate more with the youth, especially in informal digital settings (Okon, 2022).

Community Support and Recovery

Platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook host virtual support groups where recovering addicts and caregivers share experiences, coping strategies, and psychosocial support. These groups reduce stigma and facilitate reintegration (Onyeonoro, Nwaubani, & Ugwu, 2023) ^[40].

Surveillance and Early Warning Systems

Social media is increasingly being used as a digital surveillance tool to monitor drug-related conversations, emerging substance trends, and hotspots. Through hashtags and geotagged content, agencies can gather real-time data to inform responsive interventions (Edewor & Eyo, 2020).

Youths

The term "youths" generally refers to individuals within the transitional age bracket between childhood and adulthood. In Nigeria, the National Youth Policy defines youths as persons aged 15 to 29 years, whereas some studies extend this range to 15 to 35 years (Akanbi *et al.*, 2019) ^[4]. Youths are often characterized by high levels of energy, curiosity, peer influence, and risk-taking behavior, which makes them particularly vulnerable to social vices like drug abuse. Kumar and Dangi (2019) ^[19] noted that adolescence and early adulthood are critical developmental stages when individuals are most likely to experiment with drugs due to peer pressure, identity formation, or emotional stress. Youths are the central focus of this study because they represent the demographic most affected by both drug abuse and digital media influence in South-East Nigeria. As the primary consumers and content creators on social media, youths are highly susceptible to both positive and negative online influences. Muanya and Onyenucheya (2019) ^[21] stressed that the increasing involvement of youths in substance abuse in Nigeria calls for urgent and strategic communication responses.

Effectiveness and Reach

Effectiveness refers to the degree to which a communication effort achieves its intended outcomes, such as increasing awareness, changing attitudes, or influencing behavior. Reach, on the other hand, denotes the extent or scope to which a message or campaign can contact or engage the target audience. According to Adebayo and Okonkwo (2023) ^[1], effectiveness and reach are critical metrics in evaluating the success of digital health campaigns, especially on social media platforms. While effectiveness measures impact (e.g., change in drug-use behavior), reach focuses on the number and diversity of individuals exposed to anti-drug messaging.

In the context of this study, the relevance of effectiveness and reach lies in understanding how well social media campaigns are performing in sensitizing and influencing youths in South-East Nigeria against drug abuse. With the high penetration of mobile internet and social media use among Nigerian youths (Iheanacho & Adeola, 2022) ^[18], social media has the potential for broad reach. However, its actual effectiveness depends on the clarity, consistency, reliability, and interactivity of the message. Thus,

evaluating both dimensions allows stakeholders to determine whether social media is not only widespread in its message dissemination but also impactful in curbing drug abuse tendencies among the youth population.

Challenges in Social Media Advocacy

Despite the numerous advantages, social media advocacy faces several challenges that tend to wane its effectiveness in public health and social behaviour change campaigns. One of the main limitations is over-saturation of information, leading to reduced attention span and of course message fatigue among users. Ugochukwu and Bamidele (2022) pointed out that the volume of content on platforms digital media touchpoints like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok makes it difficult for targeted anti-drug messages to consistently reach the intended audience. Furthermore, misinformation and counter-narratives often glamorizing drug use can dilute the intended impact of advocacy messages. Additionally, lack of digital literacy, especially among campaign organizers and less-privileged youth segments, can affect both the design and reception of the advocacy. Budget constraints, inconsistent messaging, and the absence of follow-up offline interventions or engagements also contribute to the limited long-term impact of social media campaigns on youth behavior regarding drug use.

Digital divide is another fundamental challenge that cannot be ignored. Undoubtedly, not all vulnerable populations in the South-East have access to smartphones or reliable internet, consequently limiting the reach and impact of social media campaigns. The deepening problem of misinformation and false drug-related content or glorification of drug culture cannot be overlooked. Again, the problem around privacy concerns makes social media users hesitant to participate in open forums for fear of being exposed and framed with resultant stigmatization.

Lastly, there is a paucity of Nigeria-specific research that empirically investigates the impact of social media on drug abuse behaviours among youth, particularly in South-East states such as Enugu, Anambra, and Imo as very limited research has been done.

Theoretical Review

Understanding the relationship between social media touchpoints and the prevention of drug abuse efforts among youth in South-East Nigeria demands a robust theoretical underpinning. The researcher considers two relevant and complementary theories such as Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) and the Health Belief Model (HBM) offers the theoretical lens for interpreting how the youth demographic consume and respond to anti-drug messages on social media platforms.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

This theory originally conceptualized by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch (1973) emphasizing that media consumers intentionally seek out media content to satisfy specific psychological and social needs; including information, entertainment, identity formation, social interaction, and escapism (Katz *et al.*, 1973). Unlike earlier theories that portrayed audiences as passive, UGT underscores consumers' proactive role in seeking content that matches their specific need and motivations. It is worth mentioning that Ruggiero (2000) extended the theory to

digital media, noting increased interactivity and personal control on platforms like social media. Therefore, in the contemporary digital environments, UGT has evolved to explain how individuals, particularly youths engage with social media platforms not just passively and for entertainment but as part of their everyday media lifestyle (Whiting & Williams, 2018) ^[42]. Social media provides youth with interactive spaces where they can find relatable content, validate personal experiences, and shape behaviour, including those related to health and drug use.

Suitability and Justification

This theory provides key insights to understand how young people in South-East Nigeria consume and respond to anti-drug content on digital platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter. Okorie and Salawu (2021) ^[33] highlights that many Nigerian youths use social media not just for entertainment but to find information on sensitive issues like drug abuse, sexual health, and mental well-being which they hardly discuss in offline settings due to stigma and cultural taboos.

UGT helps to explain why and how individuals gravitate toward specific types of drug-related content such motivational stories of recovery, expert tips, or peer-group campaigns as well as the gratifications (satisfactions) they derive from such online engagements. For example, users who participate in recovery communities may do so for emotional support, while others may share anti-drug messages for social validation or identity indication.

Recent studies underscored the continuing relevance of UGT in studies that relates to digital media consumption and the motivations. Scholars like Asemah, Anum and Edegoh (2020) ^[6] found that personal gratifications such as information-seeking and social utility were strong prognosticators of social media content consumption and engagement regarding health-related content. Similarly, Udoh and Inyang (2022) ^[39] demonstrated that anti-drug campaigns on Instagram were more effective when aligned with users' personal gratifications, including desire for inspiration, humour and community validation.

Health Belief Model (HBM)

This theory social psychologists at the U.S. Public Health Service in the 1950s, and later refined by scholars such as Rosenstock and Becker. The explains why individuals choose to engage or not engage in health-promoting behaviours (Glanz, Rimer, & Viswanath, 2015) ^[15]. The model posits that behaviour change depends on several constructs including:

- Perceived susceptibility which the extent of vulnerability or how vulnerable one feels,
- Perceived severity which speaks to how serious one believes the consequences are,
- Perceived benefits which encapsulate individual's belief in the efficacy of the advised or proposed action(s),
- Perceived barriers which identify the costs or obstacles to taking the proposed action(s),
- Cues to action which refers to the triggers that prompt action(s), and
- Self-efficacy examines the confidence in one's ability to perform the behaviour.

Suitability and Justification for Study

Considering the geographical scope of the study, HBM is useful in examining how drug-related risk perception and beliefs influence youth behaviour on social media. If youth are exposed to online videos about the damaging effects of drug misuse including mental disorder, self-inflicted physical or incarceration; and identifies with the victim's unpleasant experiences, they may guide against perceived vulnerability and severity.

Likewise, social media can serve as a 'cue to action', encouraging users to avoid drugs, seek help, or share preventive messages they have seen online among his network. Therefore, HBM provides a framework for understanding whether exposure to these cues leads to a shift in personal belief systems and, ultimately, behavioural change (Chukwu, Okonkwo, & Olise, 2023) ^[8].

Existing studies corroborates the relevance of HBM in digital health promotion. Eze and Agbim (2021) found that perceived susceptibility and self-efficacy significantly influenced how youths in South-East Nigeria responded to HIV prevention messages on social media. Subsequently, Obi and Ekwe (2023) ^[28] reported that perceived severity and cues to action were key predictors of youth willingness to engage with online anti-drug campaigns. This agrees with the findings of Zhang, Jin and Peng (2019) ^[43] showing that young adults' responses to anti-drugs campaigns on Twitter were shaped by perceived vulnerability and the clarity of action prompts. All these studies underscored HBM's capacity to explain how health beliefs interact with media exposure to influence behaviour.

Intersection of UGT and HBM in the Study

While UGT focuses on user motivation and gratifications, HBM emphasizes belief systems and behavioural outcomes of individuals. Adopting both theories provide a dual explanatory framework:

- UGT helps identify why youth use social media for health information or community connection.
- HBM explains how belief systems about drugs and health risks are influenced by media content and how this leads to action or inaction by the individual.

Therefore, the combined theoretical consideration allows the study to capture both the media use behaviour and the psychological underpinnings associated with drug prevention efforts among young social media users in South-East Nigeria.

Method

Research Design

This study adopts the descriptive survey research design. The choice of this design is based on its ability to gather data from a large population and describe the current state of affairs without manipulating any variables (Creswell, 2014) ^[9]. Through this design, the researcher seeks to investigate how social media is utilized as a tool in curbing drug abuse among youths by examining perceptions, exposure levels, and behavioral changes. Descriptive design is particularly relevant because it provides a framework for exploring and quantifying the influence of awareness campaigns and behavior change communication disseminated through social media (Nworgu, 2015).

Population of the Study

The target population for this study comprises youths between the ages of 15 and 30 years in the South-East region who are active users of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and WhatsApp. This age group was selected based on reports indicating that it is most vulnerable to drug abuse and is highly engaged in online platforms (Akanbi *et al.*, 2019) [4]. The total population of South-Eastern states was estimated at 22 million people consisting of 37% youth demographics (National Population Commission NPC, 2016; National Bureau of Statistics BNS, 2017) [23]. This put youth population in the South-East zone at 8.14 million (approximately 8.0 million); however, a manageable representative sample was needed for empirical analysis.

Sample Size Determination

The Taro Yamane formula (1967) is applied to determine the sample size:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where n = sample size, N = population of the study, 1 = constant in value and e = error in margin usually 5% [0.05]

$$\text{Hence, } n = \frac{50351}{1 + 50,351(0.05)^2} = \frac{50351}{1 + 50,351(0.0025)} = \frac{50351}{1 + 125.8775} = \frac{50351}{126.8775} = 396.8$$

Thus, the sample size is rounded up to 397 respondents. Where sample size distribution will be carry out through the

use of Proportional Stratified Sampling. Thus $\frac{P_i}{P_{total}} \cdot n$ Where ni = sample size for each stratum (state), Pi = population of each stratum (state), Ptotal = total population of all strata and n = total sample size for the study respectively.

Sample Size Distribution

State	Population (Pi)	Proportion $\frac{P_i}{P_{total}}$ 397	Sample Size (Rounded)
Anambra	2,500,000	$\frac{2,500,00}{8,000,000}$ 397	124
Ebonyi	1,200,000	$\frac{1,200,00}{8,000,000}$ 397	60
Imo	1,600,000	$\frac{1,600,00}{8,000,000}$ 397	79
Abia	1,300,000	$\frac{1,300,00}{8,000,000}$ 397	65
Enugu	1,400,000	$\frac{1,400,00}{8,000,000}$ 397	69
Total	8,000,000	100%	397

Sampling Techniques

The study employed a multistage sampling technique, beginning with purposive selection of two major urban centers from each of the five Southeastern Nigerian states chosen for their high youth population and internet access (Etikan *et al.*, 2016) [11]. In the next stage, simple random sampling was used to select youths from schools, youth centers, and online communities within these cities, ensuring equal selection chances (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) [10]. This approach allowed the study to manage a large, diverse population while maintaining representativeness and enhancing the validity of the findings (Kumar, 2019; Babbie, 2021) [7, 19].

Instruments for Data Collection

Data for this study will be collected using a structured questionnaire that includes both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The questionnaire is divided into sections covering demographic information, patterns of social media usage, exposure to drug abuse prevention campaigns, and perceived behavioral outcomes. This approach aligns with the methodology used in studies like Aribamikan (2022) [5]. The questionnaire will be administered directly to respondents to ensure accurate and comprehensive data collection.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

Face and content validity of the instrument were established by presenting the draft to three experts in mass communication, psychology, and public health for review. Their feedback helped refine the items to ensure alignment with the study objectives. For reliability, a pilot study was conducted with 30 respondents outside the sampled states, and the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was calculated. A reliability score of 0.82 was obtained, indicating a high level of internal consistency and suitability for data collection (Nworgu, 2015).

Method of Data Analysis

Data collected was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics such as frequency tables, percentages were used to summarize the demographic characteristics. Inferential statistical tools such as Ranking Analysis are the Mean Score Ranking (also called Weighted Mean Ranking through Friedman Test was used to test relationships between variables like exposure to social media campaigns and behavioral change towards drug abuse. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 16 was used for the analysis, in line with standard quantitative analysis protocols (Creswell, 2014) [9].

Table 1 reveals the age distribution of the respondents in the study. The highest proportion of participants, 48.4% (192 respondents), falls within the 20–24 years age group, indicating that a significant portion of the study population is in early adulthood. This is followed by respondents aged 15–19 years, who constitute 25.9% (103 respondents), while those aged 25–30 years make up 25.7% (102 respondents). The near-equal representation between the youngest and oldest age brackets suggests a balanced spread of responses across late adolescence and early adulthood, highlighting the relevance of this demographic in evaluating the influence of social media on curbing drug abuse among youths in South-East Nigeria.

What is your gender?

S/N	Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Male	211	53.10%
2	Female	186	46.90%
	Total	397	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Table 2 presents the gender distribution of respondents. Out of the total 397 participants, 211 (53.1%) are male, while 186 (46.9%) are female. This indicates a relatively balanced gender representation, with a slightly higher number of male respondents. The closeness in percentages suggests that the perspectives gathered in the study reflect the views of both genders fairly equally. This balance is essential in understanding the influence of social media on drug abuse prevention among youths, as gender dynamics can

significantly shape media consumption patterns and responses to awareness campaigns.

What is your current level of education?

S/N	Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Secondary School	79	19.90%
2	Undergraduate (Diploma/University)	241	60.70%
3	Postgraduate	77	19.40%
	Total	397	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Table 3 shows the educational levels of the respondents. Out of the 397 participants, a majority 241 individuals (60.7%) are undergraduates pursuing diploma or university degrees. This is followed by 79 respondents (19.9%) who are in secondary school and 77 respondents (19.4%) who have attained postgraduate education. The dominance of undergraduate respondents suggests that the study largely reflects the views and experiences of young adults actively engaged in tertiary education, who are likely frequent users of social media. This educational profile is crucial to the study, as it highlights the segment of youths most exposed to social media and potentially most influenced by its drug abuse awareness campaigns.

Data Analysis

Analysis of objective 1

Note: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, UN=Undecided, D = Disagree and SD = Strongly Disagree

Table 1: Utilization of Social Media Platforms in Creating Awareness on Drug Abuse

Items	SA	A	UN	D	SD
Social media campaigns are a major source of anti-drug information.	111 (27.96%)	119 (29.97%)	61 (15.37%)	51 (12.85%)	45 (11.34%)
Facebook and Instagram are commonly used for drug abuse sensitization.	96 (24.18%)	131 (32.99%)	69 (17.38%)	57 (14.36%)	34 (8.56%)
Youths often engage with anti-drug messages on social media.	107 (26.95%)	132 (33.25%)	62 (15.62%)	46 (11.59%)	40 (10.08%)
Influencers help raise awareness against drug abuse.	103 (25.95%)	123 (30.98%)	50 (12.59%)	61 (15.37%)	50 (12.59%)
Government uses social media effectively to raise drug awareness.	109 (27.46%)	118 (29.72%)	64 (16.12%)	57 (14.36%)	39 (9.82%)

Table 1 indicates that most respondents view social media as a key tool for raising awareness about drug abuse, with over 57% acknowledging platforms like Facebook and Instagram as effective and engaging. However, there is noticeable skepticism about the role of influencers and government efforts, with around 28% doubting influencer

impact and only 57% affirming government effectiveness. Additionally, a significant portion of undecided responses suggests gaps in engagement or information. Therefore, while social media is widely accepted for advocacy, its success varies based on who delivers the message and how it is communicated.

Table 2: Effectiveness of Social Media Campaigns in Influencing Youth Attitudes and Behaviors

S/N	Items	SA	A	UN	D	SD
6	Social media campaigns have changed my attitude toward drug use.	117	119	69	57	35
7	Social media campaigns have influenced my behavior positively.	108	108	55	65	61
8	Anti-drug messages on social media are persuasive.	114	121	60	59	43
9	Campaigns encourage peer discussions about drug abuse.	104	125	58	63	47
10	Social media is more effective than traditional media for outreach.	122	118	58	62	37

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Social media campaigns have changed my attitude toward drug use.	397	4.2335	1.09092
Social media campaigns have influenced my behavior positively.	397	4.2132	.97165
Anti-drug messages on social media are persuasive.	397	4.2234	.95877
Campaigns encourage peer discussions about drug abuse.	397	4.0863	1.20275
Social media is more effective than traditional media for outreach.	397	4.2081	1.04605
Valid N (listwise)	397		

Table 2.1 shows that respondents generally view social media campaigns as effective in influencing youth attitudes and behaviors toward drug abuse. With all mean scores above 4.0, many agreed that these campaigns have changed their perspectives, are persuasive, and promote positive

behavior. Although there is some variation especially in how respondents perceive peer discussions the overall low standard deviations suggest strong consensus. These findings highlight the important role of social media in drug abuse prevention among youths in South-East Nigeria.

Table 4: Challenges Limiting Social Media in Curbing Drug Abuse

S/N	Items	SA	A	UN	D	SD
11	Lack of internet access limits anti-drug message reach.	103	122	62	61	39
12	Youths ignore posts due to content fatigue or disinterest.	119	114	59	54	41
13	Many anti-drug campaigns lack creativity and engagement.	101	141	54	55	36
14	Inadequate funding affects anti-drug media campaigns.	109	130	62	50	36
15	Weak collaboration between NGOs and influencers hampers impact.	122	126	53	49	37

NPar Tests

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Lack of internet access limits anti-drug message reach.	197	4.2335	1.09092	1.00	5.00
Youths ignore posts due to content fatigue or disinterest.	197	4.2132	.97165	1.00	5.00
Many anti-drug campaigns lack creativity and engagement.	197	4.2234	.95877	1.00	5.00
Inadequate funding affects anti-drug media campaigns.	197	4.0863	1.20275	1.00	5.00
Weak collaboration between NGOs and influencers hampers impact.	197	4.2081	1.04605	1.00	5.00

Table 3.1 summarizes respondents' views on the challenges affecting social media advocacy against drug abuse. With mean scores above 4.0 on a 5-point scale, respondents strongly agree that issues like poor internet access, content fatigue, and lack of creativity significantly hinder campaign effectiveness. Low standard deviations indicate general

agreement, though funding showed slightly more varied responses. Overall, the data highlights key barriers connectivity, content quality, and resources—that limit the impact of social media in addressing drug abuse among youths.

Friedman Test

Table 6: Ranks

	Mean Rank
Lack of internet access limits anti-drug message reach.	3.10
Youths ignore posts due to content fatigue or disinterest.	3.02
Many anti-drug campaigns lack creativity and engagement.	3.01
Inadequate funding affects anti-drug media campaigns.	2.84
Weak collaboration between NGOs and influencers hampers impact.	3.03

Table 3.2 highlights the top challenges limiting the effectiveness of social media campaigns against drug abuse among youths. The most significant issue identified is poor internet access (mean rank = 3.10), followed by weak NGO-influencer collaboration (3.03) and content fatigue among youths (3.02). Lack of creativity in campaigns (3.01) also emerged as a key concern, while inadequate funding (2.84) was seen as less critical. These findings emphasize that connectivity, partnerships, and engaging content are more pressing obstacles than financial constraints in enhancing social media advocacy.

associated p-value is .000. Since the p-value is less than the conventional significance level of 0.05, this indicates that there is a statistically significant difference in how the respondents ranked the various challenges. This result implies that not all challenges are perceived equally by the respondents, confirming variability in their importance or impact.

Decision Rule

If the p-value obtained from the Friedman Test is less than 0.05, reject the null hypothesis (which states that there is no difference in the rankings of the challenges). Given that the p-value is .000, which is less than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis that there is a significant difference in how youths perceive the challenges limiting the effectiveness of social media campaigns in curbing drug abuse. This finding underscores the need to prioritize interventions based on the specific challenges identified as more critical by the respondents.

Table 7: Test Statistics^a

N	197
Chi-Square	23.017
Df	4
Asymp. Sig.	.000

a. Friedman Test

Discussion of Results

The demographic analysis reveals that the majority of respondents fall within the 20–24 years age group (48.4%), followed closely by those aged 15–19 years (25.9%) and

Table 3.3 presents the results of a Friedman Test conducted to evaluate whether there are significant differences in the rankings of challenges limiting the strategic use of social media in curbing drug abuse among youths. The test statistic value is 23.017 with 4 degrees of freedom, and the

25–30 years (25.7%). This distribution demonstrates a balanced representation of late adolescents and young adults, making the findings highly relevant to understanding the influence of social media on drug abuse prevention among youths in South-East Nigeria. The gender distribution, with males slightly outnumbering females (53.1% vs. 46.9%), ensures that perspectives from both genders are adequately captured, which is important given the potential differences in media engagement and behavioral responses. Additionally, the dominance of undergraduate respondents (60.7%) highlights that the study primarily reflects views of youths who are more likely to be active on social media, providing critical insight into this demographic's interaction with anti-drug campaigns online. With over 57% of Youths perceive social media platforms, especially Facebook and Instagram, revealed that there are effective tools for drug abuse awareness, though doubts about influencer credibility and government efforts suggest room for improving message trustworthiness and engagement.

Social media campaigns have significantly influenced youth attitudes and behaviours toward drug abuse with mean agreement scores above 4.0, proving more persuasive than traditional media and fostering positive peer discussions that reinforce anti-drug messages.

Key challenges that constitute barriers include internet access (mean = 4.23), engagement issues (mean = 4.22), and collaboration weaknesses (mean rank = 3.03), the impact of social media campaigns including limited internet access, content fatigue, lack of creativity, and weak NGO-influencer collaboration, highlighting the need for improved infrastructure, innovative content, stronger partnerships, and adequate funding.

Summary of Findings

Based on various analysis carried out in the course of this study, it was discovered that:

1. The study found that youths generally perceive social media as a valuable platform for drug abuse awareness, with Facebook and Instagram recognized as key tools, though concerns remain about the credibility of influencers and government-led campaigns.
2. Social media campaigns were shown to positively influence youth attitudes and behaviors toward drug abuse, with high engagement and strong agreement on their effectiveness over traditional media.
3. Major challenges limiting the impact of social media campaigns include poor internet access, uncreative content, and weak collaboration among stakeholders, pointing to the need for improved infrastructure, innovation, and partnerships.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the significant role social media platforms in raising awareness and influencing positive attitudes and behaviors among youths regarding drug abuse prevention. While platforms like Facebook and Instagram effectively reach and engage the target demographic, challenges such as limited internet access, content fatigue, and insufficient collaboration among stakeholders hinder the optimization of these campaigns. To maximize the impact of social media advocacy, there is urgent need for more credible messaging, innovative and engaging content, stronger partnerships between

government agencies, NGOs and influencers as well as improved infrastructural support. Addressing these factors will enhance the effectiveness, optimization and sustainability of social media efforts in combating drug abuse among youths.

Recommendations

Based on various findings to this study, following recommendations were suggested:

1. Enhance the credibility and engagement of social media drug abuse campaigns by collaborating with trusted influencers and increasing transparency and responsiveness in government-led efforts.
2. Develop more creative, interactive, and more targeted content to sustain youth interest and encourage active peer discussions, leveraging the unique strengths of platforms like Facebook and Instagram.
3. Address infrastructural challenges by improving internet access in underserved areas and foster stronger partnerships between NGOs and influencers, while securing adequate funding to ensure the sustainability and wider reach of social media campaigns.

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