

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE****Trigger Factors of Substance Abuse and the Commonly Abused Substances among Secondary School Students as Reported by School Counsellors in Nigeria****Ajiboye Samuel Kolawole<sup>1\*</sup>, Mary Omolola Olajumoke Atoyebi<sup>2</sup>, Saidu Abubakar<sup>3</sup>, Bakinde Tosho Surajudeen<sup>4</sup>****OPEN ACCESS**

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**ABSTRACT**

**BACKGROUND:** This study specifically aimed to identify factors contributing to drug abuse among secondary school students in Nigeria and the commonly abused drugs as reported by school counsellors. It also examined the influence of sex and length of experience on school counsellors' reports of trigger factors and commonly abused substances among secondary school students.

**METHODS:** The target population comprised all school counsellors in Nigeria. Using a survey design with a convenience sampling technique, data were collected from 384 school counsellors. A structured questionnaire titled "Trigger Factors of Substance Abuse Questionnaire (TFAQ)" was used. The Cronbach formula was applied, and a reliability coefficient of 0.91 was obtained. Hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 alpha level.

**RESULTS:** The trigger factors of substance abuse among secondary school students, as reported by school counsellors, include peer pressure, availability of substances, media and technology influence, and curiosity. The predominantly abused substances are marijuana, codeine, and tramadol. Female school counsellors reported more trigger factors of substance abuse than their male counterparts.

**CONCLUSIONS:** The findings highlight the importance of addressing the trigger factors of substance abuse at both the student level (especially giving in to peer pressure) and the systemic level (especially the availability of substances and media influence). It is therefore imperative to develop and implement school-based programmes to inform students about the risks associated with substance abuse, focusing on the negative contributions of peer pressure, media influence, and curiosity. School-based interventions should prioritise peer resistance training programmes that equip students with the skills to navigate social pressures.

**KEYWORDS:** Trigger factors, Substance abuse, Secondary school students, School counsellors

## INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse, involving the harmful use of psychotropic substances for mind alteration such as alcohol and other illicit drugs, has emerged as a pressing global concern, affecting individuals and communities worldwide. It has become a phenomenon of concern because it threatens the wellbeing and future of secondary school students in particular and the younger generation at large. The involvement of secondary school students (whose population is composed of adolescents) in substance use poses tremendous and devastating impacts, which include poor academic achievement, mental health-related problems, social challenges, career unfulfillment, and increased morbidity and mortality (1). During secondary school years, developmental changes are more likely to contribute to susceptibility to increased engagement in substance use and addictive behaviours among students. Nonetheless, multiple factors may explain substance abuse, especially among growing adolescents in secondary schools. Among different personnel in the school system, school counsellors are often more likely to have sufficient information on trigger factors of substance abuse among in-school adolescents, owing to their frequent therapeutic relationships, which provide an avenue for sharing experiences between counsellors and students. Hence, this informed the focus of this study, which considers the perceptions of school counsellors in Nigeria on trigger factors of substance abuse among secondary school students.

Substance abuse can be viewed as a pattern of harmful use of any consumable (drugs) for mood-altering purposes. Such substances include alcohol, prescription and over-the-counter drugs, illegal drugs, inhalants and solvents, marijuana, nicotine, and even coffee (2). When a substance is used in a way that is not intended or advised, or when it is used in excess of what is prescribed, abuse may ensue. It follows that adolescents who take drugs may not necessarily develop an addiction or even a substance use disorder, as their inappropriate usage may not have progressed to addictive behaviour. Thus, substance abuse could be viewed as the “arbitrary” overdependence on or misuse of a

particular drug with the purpose of altering brain functions, with or without prior medical diagnosis from qualified health practitioners. In that direction, Schleim (3) stated that substance abuse is the harmful use of mind-altering drugs, and the term usually refers to problems with illegal drugs, which also include the harmful use of legal prescription drugs such as in self-medication.

Substance abuse is a severe and growing social problem that has the potential to ruin communities, schools, and individuals. Akpan et al. (4) revealed that most substance addicts started smoking at a youthful age. As adolescents grow older, they seek new thrills and gradually engage in harder substance abuse, suggesting that adolescents engage in substance abuse at different levels of education. Kaliszewski (5) stated that many young adolescents experiment with various types of drugs during their college years. It was further reported that as many as one in three students have abused alcohol at some point, and one in five students have used drugs unlawfully, including marijuana and valium.

Several factors account for substance abuse among secondary school students. Isako (6) asserted that poor home or family background is one of the factors contributing to students' involvement in substance abuse. Family background may have a significant influence on the behaviour and lifestyle of adolescents and, by extension, is essential in determining the likelihood of substance abuse while in secondary school. The studies of Shah et al. (7) and Onalapo et al. (8) indicate that the family environment is a critical determinant of adolescent behaviour, including substance use. Parental influence, family dynamics, and socio-economic status can all contribute to drug abuse; students from broken homes, single-parent families, or conflict-ridden families are at higher risk of substance abuse due to lack of parental supervision, neglect, and absence of strong role models. The vulnerability of adolescents to substance abuse could be linked to the fact that adolescence is a period for developing a personal sense of independence and self-identity—a process that involves separating from parental attachment and values, thus establishing new social ties, values, and ideas in school (9).

Umukoro et al. (10) found that the major determinants of substance abuse among (adolescents, invariably) secondary school students in South-South Nigeria were peer pressure, depression, and the need to boost confidence. In addition, Attila et al. (11) reported curiosity, peer pressure, poor socio-economic conditions at home, and the need for extra energy for daily activities as the strongest determinants of substance abuse, while Akunna and Lucyann (12) identified pleasure as a determinant factor of drug abuse among adolescents in secondary schools. Akinduyo et al. (13) inferred that media portrayals of substance use can glamorise consequences, as adolescents may be tempted to experiment with different drugs in order to experience the pleasure showcased in the media. Other factors that could trigger involvement in substance abuse behaviour among secondary school students include frustration, unsatisfactory school environments, and poor adjustment mechanisms. George and George (14) and Lin et al. (15) inferred that adolescents experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety, depression, curiosity, and socio-economic pressures may use substances as a coping mechanism.

There have been many studies conducted in Nigeria that provide empirical evidence on drug abuse among secondary school students. Onigbogi et al. (16) examined the prevalence of substance abuse among secondary school students in Lagos State and reported that attitudes toward substance abuse were positive among 233 respondents (61.6%), and that the most commonly abused substances were opiates such as codeine-containing cough syrup and tramadol (11.6%), followed by tranquilizers (9%), hallucinogens (5.6%), and amphetamines (5.3%), with the influencers of use being mainly family friends (31.4%), parents (22.9%), and peers (22.9%). Yunusa et al. (17) reported that 81.1% of respondents had abused a substance, with commonly abused substances including coffee, tramadol, local stimulant tea, cola-nut, and tobacco in Nigeria. Idowu et al. (18) reported that tramadol was the most abused substance, and respondents (secondary school students in Oyo) indicated that it was used to enhance academic

performance. In 2025, (19) found a lifetime prevalence of substance use of 47.6 percent, with current use within the past 30 days at 18.4 percent among secondary school students in Lagos, Nigeria. The most frequently used substances included alcohol, tramadol, codeine-containing cough syrups, cannabis, and caffeine-based stimulants. Similarly, in 2025, (20) reported a lifetime prevalence rate of 46.0 percent, a 12-month prevalence of 23.0 percent, and a 30-day prevalence of 14.0 percent among secondary school students in Enugu, Nigeria.

Similarly, Sadoh and Omuemu (1) found commonly abused substances in Nigeria to include cannabis, opioids (non-medical use of prescription opioids), cough syrup, tramadol, among others. George and George (14) reported profound consequences of substance abuse on secondary school students, including academic decline, increased incidence of anxiety and depression, and risky behaviours such as unsafe sexual practices. However, the existing literature is predominantly student-centred, with limited empirical attention devoted to the professional perspectives of school counsellors who are strategically positioned to identify, manage, and prevent substance-related problems within school environments. By focusing on counsellors rather than students or parents, the current study deviates from existing literature by highlighting the experiences of professional counsellors in addressing substance misuse among secondary school students in Nigeria. Therefore, this study provides information that can guide the development of contextually grounded counselling interventions, school-based preventive initiatives, and policy frameworks to address the menace of substance abuse among students.

Secondary school students benefit immensely from the support of school counsellors, who help them deal with behavioural and systemic issues that affect their wellbeing. As trained professionals, school counsellors are saddled with the responsibility of engaging students on issues that border on personal growth and development, as well as those that affect society at large. Thus, school counsellors are

often in the best position to identify and report various trigger issues related to substance abuse among students, owing to their constant interaction with them and their aim of providing helpful interventions. Hence, this study investigated the common substances misused by secondary school students as well as the trigger factors for drug use.

### Research Questions

1. What are the trigger factors of substance abuse among secondary school students as reported by school counsellors in Nigeria?
2. What are the predominantly abused substances among secondary school students as reported by school counsellors in Nigeria?

### Research Hypotheses

1. Sex will not significantly influence school counsellors' reports of trigger factors of substance abuse among secondary school students.
2. Length of experience will not significantly influence school counsellors' reports of trigger factors of substance abuse among secondary school students.

## METHODS

The study is quantitative and adopted a descriptive survey design by employing a proportion of the general population and using a questionnaire to collect information from respondents.

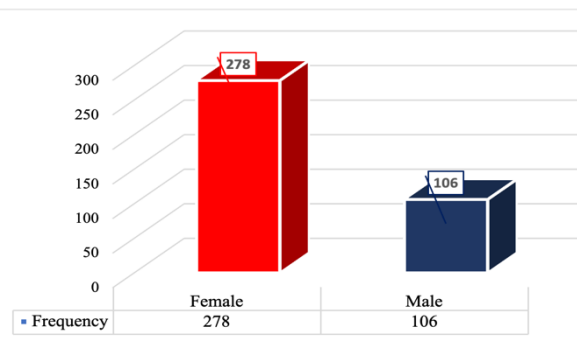
**Participants:** The study population included all secondary school counsellors in Nigeria, and the target population comprised participants at the 2024 annual National Conference of the Association of Professional Counsellors in Nigeria (APROCON), estimated at 768 school counsellors. A sample of 384 respondents was selected to participate in the research, representing 50% of the total study population. The study adopted a convenience sampling technique, which afforded the researchers the opportunity to meet school counsellors during their association's annual conference. This sampling was limited to school counsellors who attended the annual professional conference,

reflecting professional engagement and commitment to practice. Respondents' informed consent was obtained before participation, and institutional ethical approval was secured from the University of Ilorin. However, respondents were not required to include personal identifiers on the instrument in order to guarantee confidentiality and ethical practice.

**Instrument and method of data analysis:** After a thorough review of the literature, the researcher developed a questionnaire titled *Trigger Factors of Substance Abuse Questionnaire (TSAQ)*. The Cronbach formula was applied, and a reliability coefficient of 0.91 was obtained. The response pattern followed a modified Likert scale format with four options (Very True; True; Rarely True; Never True) on a continuum of 4–1. The midpoint is 2.50 ( $4+3+2+1 = 10/4$ ) and was used for decision-making. Thus, any item with a mean score of 2.50–4.00 was considered a significant trigger factor or commonly abused substance, while 1.00–2.49 was considered not significant. After being subjected to the split-half procedure and Cronbach statistical analysis, a reliability value of  $r = 0.91$  was obtained. The instrument measures trigger factors of substance abuse among secondary school students as reported by school counsellors. Descriptive (mean) and inferential (t-test and Analysis of Variance) statistical tools were used to test the two null hypotheses at a 0.05 alpha level.

## RESULTS

Figure 1 shows that the percentage of female respondents is significantly higher than that of male.



**Figure 1:** Dispersal of respondents by gender

Figure 2 reveals that respondents 0-5 years of work experience (173) participated more than 6 - 10 years (134) and 11 years and above (77). This could be an indication that school counsellors of

0-5 years of work experience are predominant in the professional association of counsellors in Nigeria.

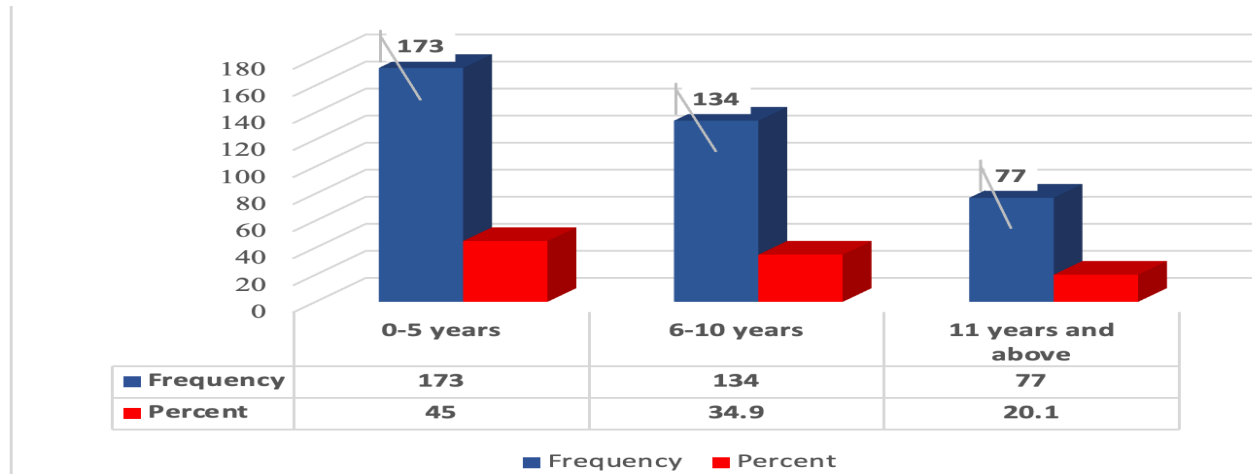


Figure 2: Dispersal of participants by years of work experience.

Figure 3 reveals that peer pressure, availability of substances, media and technology influence, and curiosity respectively are the most trigger factors influencing substance abuse among in-school adolescents because the mean scores range from 2.57 to 3.41, which are above the

mid-point (2.50) decision value. In contrast, mind-altering and family factors, with mean scores below 2.50, are relatively not significant trigger factors of substance abuse among in-school adolescents.

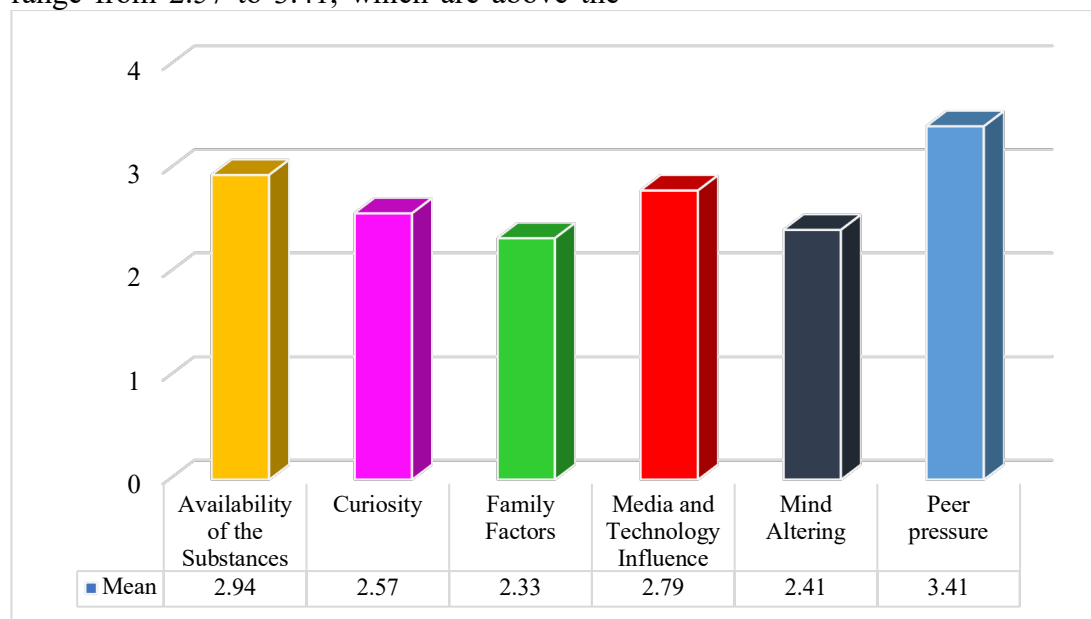
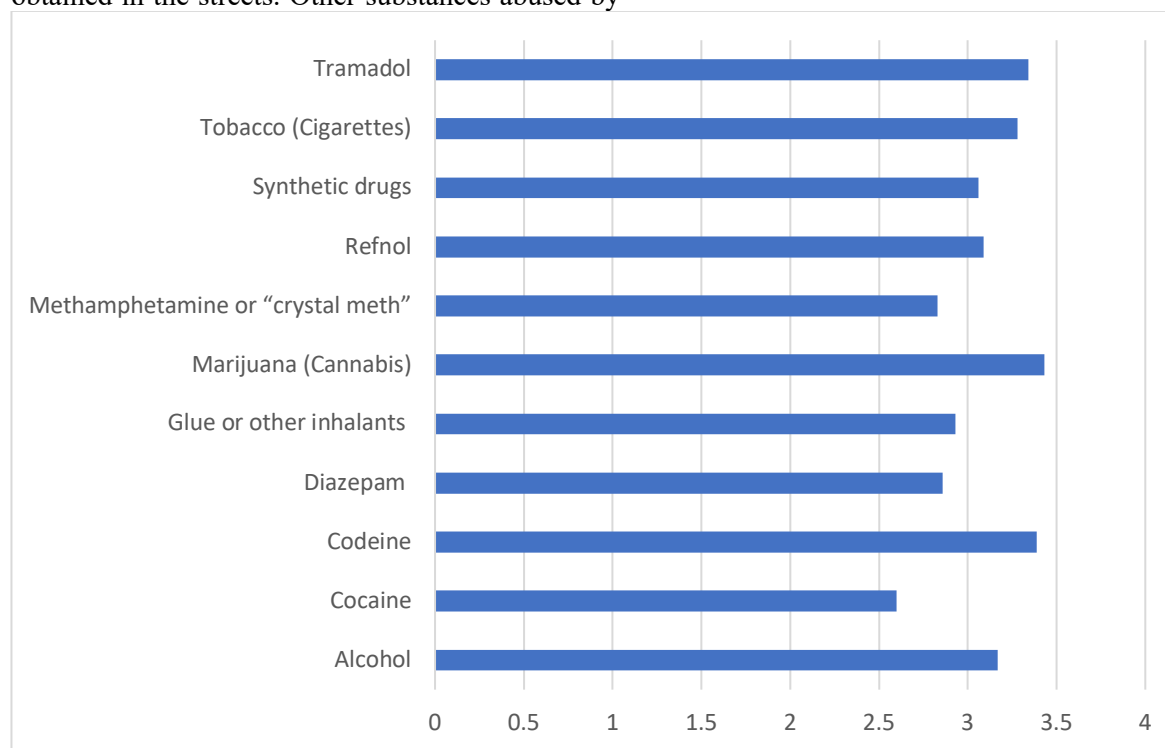


Figure 3: Trigger factor of substance abuse among secondary school students.

Figure 4 reveals that the predominantly abused substances are marijuana ( $\bar{x}=3.43$ ), codeine ( $\bar{x}=3.39$ ), and tramadol ( $\bar{x}=3.34$ ). Various factors might contribute to this, which could include availability and affordability of marijuana, codeine and tramadol because some of these could be obtained in the streets. Other substances abused by

in-school adolescents as reported by the respondents are: tobacco ( $\bar{x}=3.28$ ), refnol (Rohypnol) ( $\bar{x}=3.09$ ), synthetic drugs ( $\bar{x}=3.06$ ), glue or other inhalants ( $\bar{x}=2.93$ ), diazepam ( $\bar{x}=2.86$ ), methamphetamine ( $\bar{x}=2.83$ ), and cocaine ( $\bar{x}=2.60$ ).



**Figure 4:** Predominantly substances abused among secondary school students.

Table 1 shows that the p-value .01 is less than 0.05 alpha level, hence, the null hypothesis is therefore rejected. This indicates that there is significant difference in the trigger factors of substance abuse among in-school adolescents as reported by male and female school counsellors in Nigeria. Female school counsellors with higher mean of 45.87 reported more trigger factors compared to male

counsellors (41.22). The magnitude of the difference was significant, as evidenced by a large effect size, Cohen's  $d = 2.26$ , suggesting that gender accounts for a considerable proportion of variance in school counsellors' perceptions of substance abuse triggers among in secondary school students.

**Table 1:** Summary of t-test statistics showing difference in the trigger factors of substance abuse among in-school adolescents based on gender.

Gender	N	Mean	SD	df	Cal. value	t- Crit. value	t- p-value
Female	278	45.87	2.02	382	2.80	1.96	.01*
Male	106	41.22	2.16				

\*Sig,  $p < 0.05$

Table 2 revealed a p-value .275, which is greater than 0.05 alpha level. Thus, there is no significant difference in the trigger factors of substance abuse among in-school adolescents as reported by school counsellors in Nigeria based on years of work

experience. Thus, variation in years of work experience does not influence reports of trigger factors of substance abuse among in-school adolescents by school counsellors.

Table 2: ANOVA Summary showing difference in the trigger factors of substance abuse among in-school adolescents based on experience.

Groups	SS	df	MS	p
Between Groups	92.361	2	46.18	.275
Within Groups	4747.263	381	12.46	
Total	4839.624	383		

## DISCUSSION

The finding showed that the top-ranked trigger factors of substance abuse among secondary school students, as reported by school counsellors in Nigeria, are peer pressure, availability of substances, media and technology influence, and curiosity, which answered research question one. This might not be surprising because of the age and developmental characteristics of secondary school students, the majority of whom are undergoing adolescence, especially with tendencies such as yielding to peer pressure, exploring media and technology, and exhibiting excessive curiosity. These are often considered part of the typical developmental trajectory of secondary school-aged individuals, who are generally in the early and mid-adolescence stages (9). In addition, the availability of substances, especially within school premises or students' residences, is a potential factor that could tempt them to engage in substance abuse, as availability increases accessibility. Such factors could be regulated to protect society. Curiosity, as one of the dominant trigger factors, suggests that there might be inadequate educational initiatives aimed at discouraging substance use and providing students with factual information about the dangers inherent in the practice. The role of media and technology underscores the importance of regulating harmful content, promoting educational communication, and fostering the responsible use of media among secondary school students. Umukoro *et al.* (10) also found peer pressure to be the major determinant of substance abuse among

secondary school students in South-South Nigeria; Akinduyo *et al.* (13) identified media portrayals, while Bassi *et al.* (21) and Adesina *et al.* (22) reported curiosity as one of the strongest determinants of substance abuse. On the contrary, Onaolapo (8) found genetics and family factors to be the most prominent determinants of an individual's vulnerability to drug addiction, which is at variance with the present finding. This could be attributed to the fact that family factors, such as parenting style, household substance use, or genetic predispositions, are often less visible to counsellors unless explicitly disclosed by the student, unlike peer influence and students' curiosity, especially in school settings.

The analysis of substances abused by secondary school students indicates a diverse range of drugs, with marijuana being the most predominantly abused substance, followed by codeine, tramadol, tobacco, and alcohol. The availability, affordability, and uncensored media portrayal of these substances might account for their abuse among secondary school students. The results answered research question two. Thus, this finding is an eye-opener to the necessary measures required to curb the menace of substance abuse among adolescents, especially by discouraging secondary school students from using these substances through deliberate educational programmes and by preventing access to the substances most commonly abused. The abuse of codeine-containing cough syrups, tramadol, tobacco, and alcohol reflects the growing problem of pharmaceutical drug misuse. Studies (18, 23)

have earlier reported that the most abused drugs include marijuana, diazepam, codeine, tobacco, synthetic drugs, tramadol, inhalants, and retinol.

The result of hypothesis one showed a significant difference between male and female school counsellors' reports of trigger factors of substance abuse among secondary school students. Females reported more than males, which might indicate that female counsellors have more encounters with secondary school students who abuse substances than their male counterparts. This difference could be attributed to variations in gender perspectives, communication styles, or levels of sensitivity when identifying and reporting factors influencing substance abuse. This aligns with the position of Greenspan et al. (24), who stated that female counsellors are often more likely to be observant or empathetic toward the emotional and social factors associated with substance use among students. The result of hypothesis three revealed no significant difference in the trigger factors of substance abuse among secondary school students as reported by school counsellors in Nigeria based on their years of work experience. This finding suggests that school counsellors, regardless of their length of work experience, reported similar trigger factors of substance abuse among secondary school students.

This present study highlighted the critical roles of peer pressure, availability of substances, media and technology influence, and curiosity in triggering substance abuse among secondary school students in Nigeria. Furthermore, the study revealed a significant difference in the reports of male and female school counsellors in Nigeria but no significant difference based on their years of work experience. Overall, the study provides valuable insights into the factors contributing to substance abuse among secondary school students in Nigeria and underscores the need for comprehensive and targeted interventions to address this growing menace.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. School counsellors should establish structured awareness initiatives for students and teachers to address substance abuse risks and promote prevention, in line with the National Drug Law

Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) policy (Act Cap N30, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004).

2. Counsellors should leverage their professional expertise to create coordinated prevention and intervention strategies involving students and other stakeholders.

3. School management should ensure that students have access to counselling and support services to address substance abuse issues.

4. Government should establish and enforce regulations to limit the exposure of secondary school students to harmful media content relating to substances and promote responsible media usage.

5. School counsellors should collaborate with the government to develop and implement policies aimed at reducing the availability and affordability of harmful substances, particularly within the school environment.

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