

# Perceived Factors Influencing Drug Abuse among University Students in Western Uganda

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**Abstract:** *The paper examines the perceived factors influencing drug abuse among university students in western Uganda. The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional study design where both qualitative and quantitative approaches were adopted. The results reveal that the perceived factors are categorical that to say demographic related factors (age, gender and religion), social factors (family influence, peer influence, social environment influence, mixed messages about drug abuse, lack of appropriate laws, poor enforcement of laws, Cultural factors, Weight management, poverty and Influence of celebrities), behavioural (rebelliousness, preconscious sexual activities, one drug leading to using others, antisocial behaviour e.g. theft, fighting, tendency to seek excitement, curiosity and night clubbing), individual characteristics factors (stress, student employment, rejection effects, poverty, poor self-esteem and poor performance in class) and campus factors which include stressful clearance process, university fees policy, permissiveness and un-exemplary staff.*

**Keywords:** Drug abuse, Substance abuse, Perception, University students

## 1. Introduction

Globally, substance abuse is a major public health issue (WHO, 2003), the increase in substance abuse among youths and its complications forms one of the most pressing health problems among students as an important and vulnerable group in society. In Uganda, it has been noted that, drug and substance use is a common phenomenon among school going children (Uganda Harm Reduction Network, 2003). In a study carried out in Uganda, (Kampala and Wakiso schools) the Network found out that, 71% of students were using drugs, with alcohol and cannabis taking the highest percentages and most of these were between ages 14-17. The study further noted that, drug and substance abuse is rendering the affected populations less economically productive. Absenteeism from school and work, crime and violence are among the commonly associated negative consequences drug abuse (NDA, 2006). Simons et al (2006) also observed that, the effects of drug and substance abuse in Uganda include: increase in crime levels including, domestic violence, and poor performance in school, risky sexual behaviour and practices including increased exposure to HIV/AIDS.

Over the past two decades, the use of drugs in Uganda has rapidly risen to unprecedented levels, engulfing the whole country. Drug abuse has been linked to problems of rising crime rate, unrest in schools, dysfunctional families and poverty. Youth are deliberately and tactfully recruited into the drug culture through uncontrolled media influences and social exposure. The use of hard drugs is on the increase and can be expected to grow even faster given that the East African region is rapidly becoming a transit point of drugs from Asia through West Africa into South Africa and Europe. The WHO has confirmed that there is a close relationship between drug abuse, violence and reckless sexual behaviour with consequences of unwanted pregnancies, STDs and HIV/AIDS (WHO, (2003). Habituation and drug addiction is also a problem that has

multiple devastating impacts on the youth, their health and social structure. There seem to be an increasing prevalence of drug abuse amongst university students despite the efforts of concerned bodies to curb this menace. University students are the most susceptible to drug use amongst different youth groups in Uganda because most of them live outside the watch of their parents or guardian (Government of Uganda, 2000). Unfortunately rehabilitation of drug addicts is an expensive undertaking that even developed countries have been unable to fund it adequately (Tsvetkova and Antonova, 2013). It is against such a background that this study set out to examine the perceived factors influencing drug abuse among university students with particular reference to Bishop Stuart University.

## 2. Methods

The study used a cross sectional-case study design to study the perceived factors influencing drug abuse among university students in western Uganda with particular reference to Bishop Stuart University students. Both qualitative and quantitative research approaches were used. Quantitative data was collected from 225 students using questionnaires whereas qualitative data was generated from Focus Group Discussions (Class Coordinators) and Key Informant's interviews that included Dean of students, University Counsellor, University Chaplain, Social Affairs Guild Minister and a hostel Custodian. The instruments constructed were subjected to scrutiny from academicians to ensure their validity and a pilot study was done to check their reliability and validity. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 2016 was used in analysing quantitative data while descriptive and inferential statistics were presented in form of tables, frequencies, and percentages. Thematic content analysis was used to give meaning to qualitative data which was presented and discussed alongside the quantitative data. The researchers sought permission to conduct the study from the Bishop Stuart University research and publications committee. The

safety of research participants was ensured through seeking a signed informed consent obtained from every participant in the study. All data collected was treated with utmost confidentiality by ensuring that individual particulars were stripped off identifiable particulars.

### 3. Results

In the first place we first analysed the demographic characteristics of the respondents and these included sex, age group, program of study and marital status. The results follow in table 1.

**Table 1:** Demographic characteristics of respondents (n=225)

Demographic characteristics	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	109	48
	Female	116	52
Age group	19 years or less	16	7.1
	20-23 years old	162	72.0
	24-27 years old	15	6.7
	28-31 years old	9	4.0
	32-35 years or more	23	10.2
Academic program	Diploma students	71	31.6
	Bachelors students	143	63.6
	PGD students	3	1.3
	Masters students	6	2.7
	PhD students	2	.9
Marital status	Single	183	81
	Married	42	19

**Source: Primary Data**

Result in table 1, show that most of the respondents were female i.e. 52% and then 48% were male. A big majority of 72% were in the age bracket of 20 – 23 years old, and 14.2% were 28 years and above. The study also found out that 63.6% were students pursuing bachelor programs, 31.6% diplomas and very few were doing postgraduate programs. The results also show that 81% were single students and 19% were married. Generally the results show an even distribution of respondents across the spectrum of the students' body.

### Perceived factors influencing drug abuse among university students

The results revealed that the perceived factors influencing drug abuse among university students were structured in five stratum namely; demographic related factors, social factors, behavioural, individual characteristics factors and campus factors.

#### Demographic Factors

The study sought to find out what respondents thought about the demographic factors that contribute to drug abuse among university students. The results follow Table 2.

**Table 2:** Perceived demographic factors influencing drug abuse (n=225)

Perceived Factors	Responses category				
	SA	A	NS	D	SD
Demographic Factors					
Age	(46.2%) 104	(24.4%) 55	(0.0%) 0	(10.7%) 24	(14.7%) 33
Gender	(6.7%) 15	(10.7%) 24	(36%) 81	(17.8%) 40	(14.7%) 33
Religion	(15.1%) 34	(7.1%) 16	(29.3%) 66	(9.3%) 21	(29.3%) 66

**Source: Primary Data**

Results in Table 2, show that 46.2% of student respondents strongly agreed that age influenced university students to abuse drugs, followed by 24.4% that agreed while 33% strongly disagreed. With regard to gender, the biggest number of respondents 36% was not sure whether it (gender) influenced students to abuse drugs. A balanced 29.3% of respondents were either not sure or strongly disagreed that religion influenced university students to abuse drugs. Overall age was the most strongly agreed demographic factor, followed by religion and lastly gender.

#### Social Factors

Information was also sought about the perceived social factors that were responsible for drug abuse among university students. Family, social environment and peer influence, cultural factors and poverty were among the factors posed as demonstrated in table 3.

**Table 3:** Perceived Social factors influencing drug abuse (n=225)

Social Factors	Responses Category				
	SA	A	NS	D	SD
Family influence	(29.3%) 66	(33.3%) 75	(4.4%) 10	(9.8%) 22	(10.8%) 21
Peer influence	(86%) 153	(18.7%) 42	(4.9%) 11	(6.7%) 15	(1.8%) 4
Social environment influence	(29.3%) 66	(39.1%) 88	(16.0%) 36	(4.0%) 9	(0.0%) 0
Mixed messages about drug abuse	(15.6%) 35	(27.1%) 61	(32.0%) 72	(8.9%) 20	(4.0%) 9
Lack of appropriate laws	(32.0%) 72	(29.3%) 67	(11.6%) 26	(10.2%) 23	(6.2%) 14
Poor enforcement of laws	(31.6%) 71	(30.2%) 68	(13.8%) 31	(7.6%) 17	(5.3%) 12
Cultural factors	(20.0%) 45	(32.0%) 72	(18.2%) 41	(7.1%) 16	(6.7%) 15
Weight management	(19.1%) 43	(18.7%) 42	(21.8%) 49	(9.8%) 22	(16.9%) 38
Poverty	(32.0%) 72	(23.1%) 52	(12.4%) 28	(8.4%) 19	(12.4%) 28
Influence of celebrities	(42.7%) 96	(33.3%) 75	(7.6%) 17	(3.6%) 8	(2.7%) 6

**Source: Primary Data**

Table 3 shows that 29.3% strongly agreed that family influence is responsible for drug abuse while 33.3% simply agreed. This is in contrast to peer influence where more respondents 86% strongly agreed that university students

abused drugs. In effect more respondents perceived peer influence compared to any other factor followed by influence of celebrities 42.7%, poverty and lack of appropriate laws 32%, poor enforcement of laws 31.6%

while the lowest 15.6% of respondents strongly agreed that mixed messages about drug abuse contributed to the problem. A close look at the results about respondents who strongly agreed appear to correlate with those who strongly disagreed across the different categories.

**Behavioural Factors**

Perceived behavioural factors that were responsible for drug and substance abuse among students respondents included rebellion, addiction, curiosity, antisocial behaviour to mention but a few.

**Table 4: Perceived Behavioural factors influencing drug abuse(n=225)**

Perceived Factors	Responses category				
	SA	A	NS	D	SD
Rebelliousness	(21.8%)49	(31.1%)70	(16.9%)38	(6.2%)14	(14.7%)33
Preconscious sexual activities	(14.7%)33	(40.0%)90	(8.4%)19	(14.2%)32	(6.7%)15
One drug leading to using others	(24.4%)55	(38.7%)87	(8%)18	(3.6%)8	(12.8%)29
Antisocial behaviors e.g. theft, fighting	(23.6%)53	(41.3%)93	(7.1%)16	(10.2%)23	(5.8%)13
Tendency to seek excitement	(24.9%)56	(43.1%)97	(10.2%)23	(5.3%)12	(4.9%)11
Curiosity	(45.3%)102	(43.1%)97	(8.4%)19	(1.3%)3	(0.0%)0
Night clubbing	(42.2%)95	(20.9%)47	(7.1%)16	(16.4%)37	(3.1%)7

**Source: Primary Data**

Findings in table 4 show curiosity 45.3% and night clubbing 42.2% strongly perceived behavioural factors by respondents. Save for preconscious sexual activities strongly agreed by the lowest 14.7% of the respondents the remaining factors of rebelliousness, tendency to seek for excitement and addiction among others were closely rated 21.8 % to 24.9% and strongly agreed as influencers of drug abuse. The fact that the biggest number of respondents strongly agreed that curiosity is behind drug abuse and none of the respondents strongly disagreed to such assertion positions it as a key behaviour factor in drug abuse.

**Individual Characteristic Factors**

Similarly the researchers found out the individual characteristic factors that influenced drug abuse among university students and the findings thereof are presented in the table 5 below;

**Table 5: Perceived Individual characteristics factors influencing drug abuse (n=225)**

Individual Characteristic Factors	Responses category				
	SA	A	NS	D	SD
Stress	(57.3%) 129	(33.3%) 75	(0.0%) 00	(2.2%) 5	(5.8%) 13
Student employment	(13.8%) 31	(26.2%) 59	(28.9%) 65	(8.4%) 19	(9.8%) 22
Rejection effects	(26.7%) 60	(32.4%) 73	(16.4%) 37	(3.1%) 7	(7.6%) 17
Poverty	(31.1%)	(32.4%)	(14.7%)	(6.7%)	(4.0%) 9

	70	73	33	15	
Poor self esteem	(30.7%) 69	(26.2%) 59	(14.7%) 33	(14.7%) 33	(4.9%) 11
Poor performance in class	(21.3%) 48	(21.3%) 48	(20.4%) 46	(13.8%) 31	(10.7%) 24

**Source: Primary Data**

Findings in table 4 show that 57.3% strongly perceived that students abused drugs due to stress, 33.3% also agreed with this view while very few respondents disagreed (2.2%). After stress followed poverty reported by 31.1%, poor self-esteem 30.7% while the lowest 13.8% strongly agreed that student employment caused drug abuse. It should be noted that an equal 21.3% strongly agreed or agreed that poor performance in class influenced students to abuse drugs. Another significant percentage of 20.4% were not sure, 13.8% said they disagreed and 10.7% strongly disagreed that poor performance in class influenced university students to abuse drugs and substances.

**Campus Factors**

Lastly the study found out that there were campus related factors that contributed to drug and substance abuse among university students and the information thereof is presented in table 6 below;

**Table 6: Perceived campus factors influencing drug (n=225)**

Campus Factors	Responses Category				
	SA	A	NS	D	SD
Stressful clearance process	(21.8%)49	(31.1%)70	(16.9%)38	(6.2%)14	(14.7%)33
University fees policy	(14.7%)33	(40.0%)90	(8.4%)19	(14.2%)32	(6.7%)15
Permissiveness	(24.4%)55	(38.7%)87	(8%)18	(3.6%)8	(132.9%)29
Un-exemplary staff	(23.6%)53	(41.3%)93	(7.1%)16	(10.2%)23	(5.8%)13

**Source: Primary Data**

The findings in table 6 show that Stressful clearance process on campus was the most strongly agreed factor responsible for drug and substance abuse. Permissiveness had a score of 24.4% strongly agreeing to it, 38.7% also agreed whereas 12.8% strongly disagreed. Un-exemplary staff was also reported to have had an influence on university students abusing drugs

whereby 23.6% strongly agreed, 41.3% agreed, 10.2% disagreed and 5.8% strongly disagreed. University fees policy had a score of 14.7% strongly agreeing to it, 40% agreed too.

## 4. Discussion

### Demographic Factors

Most respondents perceived demographic factors like age, gender and religious background to be responsible for drug and substance abuse among university students. The findings appear similar to an analysis of demographic risk factors which also suggests that, age and gender can predict the course of substance abuse (Tsvetkova and Antonova, 2013). Importantly age was cited by more respondents compared to other demographic factors. There are a number of factors that predispose age as critical a factor. Age goes with maturity and at times reasoning. For university students this may be handy particularly for fresh entrants who are not only young but are also more excited about campus life compared to continuing students. In most cases they live a restricted life style which opens up once at university. Peer pressure and influence are also more experienced at younger than older ages. The findings are therefore not isolated. Callen (2005) reports that the period of major risk for initiation into alcohol and marijuana reaches its peak between the ages of 16 and 18, and is completed by age 20. This period coincides with university age groups. While Callen also reports that the risk of trying other illicit drugs is highest at age 18 and declines by age 21, it is also suggested that, there are "ages of susceptibility" to substance abuse. Gender is also a factor that has been found to predict the probability of involvement in drugs and substance use. Johnston, et al (2003), conducted five national surveys of young adults including university students from 1975-1979 and found that, males reported higher use of alcohol and marijuana than females. Several studies have found that, males have a higher rate of alcohol and/or illicit drug use than do females (Johnson et al, 2003).

### Social Factors

Findings revealed that family background had a strong relationship with substance abuse among university students and this is in agreement with Kiiru, (2005) who conducted a longitudinal study among high school students on substance use and other problem behaviors. He found that family environment exerted significant indirect effects on adolescent alcohol use through peer influence, self-efficacy, and stress, and parental expectations significantly moderated all structural paths. Greater parental disapproval was associated with less involvement with friends and peers who use alcohol. There is little wonder therefore that the study found out that most of the university students abused drugs due to peer influence. Findings based on growth modeling analyses indicate that adolescents who perceive that peers and parents are using fewer substances and that their parents monitor their activities are less likely to increase their own substance use over time (Wills 2001). This fact is further confirmed by Casemore (2000) who established that adolescents who use substances are more likely to have friends who also use substances. Barrett, (2000) further contends that adolescents whose peer groups are involved in alcohol and other drugs are also more likely to become involved in the vice.

Lack of appropriate laws governing drugs greatly contributed to drug abuse among university students. It should be noted that Kasirye (2011) stressed that weak laws

of Uganda are among the factors that are behind substance abuse. Kasirye stated that a "drug abuser is fined with little amount of money which does not refrain others from abusing drugs. Drug abusers are fined between 100,000 to 200,000 Uganda shillings. Influence of celebrities was also cited to be a social contributing factor to drug abuse among university students whereby it was argued in the FGDs those celebrities especially musicians who carry a public image of abusing drugs and substances influenced the youth who admired their lifestyle into drugs and substance abuse. In fact Maithya (2009) who cited former Kenyan health minister Charity Ngilu who was reported to have said "When youth watch their heroes smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol on television and in movies they also copy without knowing the dangers" she asserted that such models paint a picture that youth learn to abuse drugs in very many ways and media plays some role in accelerating drug abuse.

It was further found out that culture contributed to drug abuse among university students. It should be noted that in all our African culture substances like alcohol are largely acceptable in the society and therefore students who are deeply entrenched in their cultures were prone to being victims of drug abuse in long run. Lastly poverty was another factor contributing to drug abuse among university students. It's imperative to note that Barrett, (2000); Johnson et al., (2003); NACADA, (2004); Kiiru, (2004) noted that social risk factors like poverty and dysfunctional family systems are closely related with a higher use of alcohol and other drugs, the adolescent who is from such family systems is more likely to become involved in drug and substance abuse.

### Behavioural Factors

About the behavioural factors, the study found out that rebelliousness was one of the behavioural factors responsible drug and substance abuse among university students. It should be noted that time and again students that are involved in strikes and or organising resistances against university policy are normally under the influence of substances. Casemore, (2000) argues that problem-behaviors, such as rebelliousness and precocious sexual and delinquent activities are intertwined with drug and substance abuse. Findings also revealed that one drug led to use other drugs for instance a student who abused tobacco had a big likelihood of abusing marijuana or alcohol too in other words certain substances predicted entry into other drug use. In fact Schilling and McAlister (2000) found that adolescents tend to begin with certain entry drugs such as cigarettes and liquor, then sequentially progress to marijuana and finally to harder drugs. Furthermore, most drug users do not limit themselves to one particular substance. Drug users typically use two or more drugs, and that those who use illicit drugs also tend to drink alcohol. The use of certain substances, such as alcohol and marijuana, can lead to increased use, as well as, the use of "harder" drugs (Johnson et al., 2003; and NACADA 2004). Almost similar to rebelliousness, antisocial behaviour like theft, fighting was also reported to have had an influence on university students abusing drugs just like tendency to seek excitement, curiosity and night clubbing. Qualitative data revealed that university students who often went out for clubbing were

very much susceptible to drug abuse irrespective of their gender. This was aggravated by even men who were willing to take campus girls for night clubbing in exchange for obviously sex. Furthermore night clubs were reported to have programs such as “campus night”, “ladies night”, “buy a beer and enter the club” which made students susceptible to drug abuse. It was also reported that some beer companies sponsoring university students in the clubs and giving them free beer.

### Individual Characteristic Factors

Similarly findings showed that stress was the leading cause of drug and substance abuse among university students, student employed that is to say those students who had some work to do yet were under parental care were reported to have been serial drug abusers. This is because they had the money to spend since they had nothing to worry about or to spend on besides they were still under the direct stewardship of their parents. It's imperative to note that respondents noted that some employed or working class students didn't abuse drugs because they had responsibilities and obligations elsewhere especially in their families. Thompson et al. (2001) contends that psychological variables such as self-esteem, motivation, developmental factors, and depression can also contribute to drug use. Similarly, students who are employed during school years are more susceptible to drug and substance use than those who do not work (Thompson et al. 2001). Rejection was cited as another individual factor that led university students to abuse drugs. This rejection could have had a romantic relationship aspect or just rejection by family and friends so victims chose to bury their loneliness in drugs. Barrett (2000) found that adolescents with a poor self-concept have a greater propensity for alcohol and other drug use than those with a positive self-concept. It is suggested by Casemore (2000) that young people who use chemical substances have a more difficult time with the developmental tasks of adolescence which include forming one's identity and separating from the nuclear family therefore substance and drug use can be the means by which adolescents escape from the negative feelings they have about themselves as a result of these psychological difficulties. Poverty and poor academic performance were also mentioned to have been one of the individual factors that influenced university students to abuse drugs. Barrett, (2000) noted that poor academic achievement has been found to influence students to abuse alcohol and other drugs. He (Barrett 2000) continues to argue that poor academic achievement and low academic aspirations significantly influence the onset of drug and substance. It should be noted that data from key informants and the Focus group discussions all agreed with the quantitative findings with a few supplements like ignorance about side effects of drug abuse, poor academic performance, lack of parental concern and care, need for cheap popularity, some working students had money to buy drugs, ironically others abused drugs in order to gain confidence especially during class presentations and reading hard.

### Campus Factors

It was found out that stressful clearance process by the university accounts department caused students a lot of stress and some (students) chose to vent their disappointment with the university in drugs. This was majorly experienced during examination time where accounts mixed up financial statements of students and sometimes causing them to miss examinations. University fees policy which required that before students sit for examination they must have cleared to zero balance was largely cited to cause drug and substance abuse. This was because students who had not completed fees by two weeks to examination time worried so much about the fees deadline and indeed some missed exams while others did part of the examinations. Another campus factor was permissiveness that is to say a lot of freedom to do whatever students wanted. It should be noted that university students are very free to do whatever that pleases them especially outside the university. Because this freedom some students abuse it by indulging themselves in to alcohol and other substance abuse. It was further revealed that some staff members especially the academic staff who were considered role models by the students did not live up to the expectations of the students. This is because they too (staff) on many occasions were found drunk in the suburbs neighbouring the university and besides some staff were also willing to buy alcohol for students. Qualitative data about the campus factors agreed with the data from questionnaires and supplemented that idleness of some students who had very few course units in a semester especially third years and those upgrading in second year, lack of strict rules and regulations in the university against drugs and substance abuse influenced students to abuse substances. Disappointments especially failure of exams, coursework, misplaced marks, lack of general assemblies or frequent seminars in the university about substance abuse, the university having no halls of residence, excitement especially due to guild campaigns and other university festivals, having no punishment in the university for drug abuse, the university assuming that students are mature and they don't need guidance and counselling and the university gates having no drugs and substance detectors. It was also observed that the environment around the hostels where students were staying was full of bars and this influenced students in to abuse drugs. It's imperative to note that several environmental factors also have been advanced in studies about drug abuse among university students especially in and around hostels (Kiiru 2004).

### 5. Conclusion

The study shows most of the respondents were aware of the factors that exposed university students to drugs and substance abuse. From the study it was found out that the most common demographic factor was age with a percentage of 46.2%, the most influencing social factor was peer pressure with 86, curiosity had 45.3% among the behavioural factors where as the most influencing individual factor was stress with 57.% and permissiveness was cored highly among the university related factors. Therefore there is need for early intervention that targets tertiary school students. More students should be made to develop drug abuse prevention strategies that target students at high risk. Appropriate intervention, health education efforts, support

and referral system should be established in tertiary institution to help curb this habit and counselling programmes be incorporated into the Universities health care system

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