

Psychological Distress, Emotional Intelligence, Social Loneliness, Academic Burnout, and Risk-Taking Tendency as Predictors of Substance Use among Undergraduate Students in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria

By

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Abstract

The study examined psychological distress, emotional intelligence, social loneliness, academic burnout, and risk-taking tendency as predictors of substance use among undergraduate students in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria. A descriptive survey research design was adopted. A total of 502 undergraduates were selected from Ekiti State University and Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti using a multistage sampling technique. Standardized instruments were used for data collection, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation and multiple regression analysis were employed for data analysis at 0.05 level of significance. The result revealed that psychological distress ($r = 0.61$), social loneliness ($r = 0.54$), academic burnout ($r = 0.59$), and risk-taking tendency ($r = 0.63$) had significant positive relationships with substance use, while emotional intelligence had a significant negative relationship ($r = -0.57$). The regression analysis showed that the variables jointly accounted for 58% of the variance in substance use ($R = 0.76$, $R^2 = 0.58$, $F = 112.45$, $p < .05$). Relative contribution results indicated that risk-taking tendency ($\beta = 0.33$) was the strongest predictor, followed by psychological distress ($\beta = 0.30$), academic burnout ($\beta = 0.26$), social loneliness ($\beta = 0.23$), while emotional intelligence ($\beta = -0.27$) had a protective influence. The study concluded that substance use among undergraduates is influenced by a combination of psychological, emotional, social, and behavioural factors. It was recommended that universities strengthen counselling services and emotional intelligence training programmes.

Keywords: Psychological distress; Emotional intelligence; Social loneliness; Academic burnout; Risk-taking tendency; Substance use

Introduction

Psychological distress, emotional intelligence, social loneliness, academic burnout, and risk-taking tendency have increasingly been recognised as important psychosocial determinants of

substance use among undergraduate students, particularly within Nigerian tertiary institutions. Substance use is widely conceptualised as a maladaptive coping strategy used by young adults to manage emotional strain, academic pressure, and social adjustment difficulties. Empirical and clinical literature has consistently linked substance-related behaviours with broader psychological maladjustment, trauma exposure, personality traits, and behavioural dysregulation. For instance, studies have shown that harmful psychoactive substance use is significantly associated with personality dimensions, stress perception, and reduced academic motivation among undergraduates (Awolaran et al., 2021; Osalusi et al., 2022). Similarly, substance abuse has been linked with criminal behaviour, social marginalisation, and adverse developmental outcomes among vulnerable populations (Omopo, 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2024). Psychological and trauma-based evidence also indicates that suicidal ideation, hopelessness, and emotional dysfunction are closely associated with substance-related vulnerability among university students (Iweama et al., 2024; Omopo, 2023). Trauma-focused findings further suggest that psychological distress and nonverbal trauma expressions are strongly associated with maladaptive coping patterns, including addiction-prone behaviours (Offor & Omopo, 2024). Intervention-based studies also demonstrate that cognitive behaviour therapy, solution-focused therapy, stress inoculation training, and reality therapy are effective in reducing substance dependency and improving behavioural adjustment across populations (Omopo & Odedokun, 2024; Asiyambi et al., 2025; Offor & Omopo, 2025).

Further evidence from Nigerian behavioural and mental health studies highlights the multifactorial nature of substance use among adolescents and young adults. Peer influence, emotional intelligence deficits, personality traits, and socio-economic stressors have been identified as significant correlates of substance use and related antisocial behaviours (Adegunju et al., 2024; Awolaran et al., 2021). In addition, parental substance abuse has been shown to significantly influence children's behavioural outcomes and educational adjustment, thereby increasing vulnerability to substance use in later life (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Correctional and psychosocial research also demonstrates that peer influence, social injustice, and social marginalisation are strongly associated with substance abuse and criminal involvement, reinforcing the role of environmental and structural factors in substance-related behaviours (Omopo, 2024; Offor et al., 2025). Furthermore, research on suicidal ideation and psychological vulnerability among undergraduates highlights the broader role of emotional distress,

hopelessness, and mental health strain in shaping risky behavioural outcomes, including substance use tendencies (Iweama et al., 2024; Omopo, 2023). These findings collectively show that substance use is embedded within complex psychological, social, and environmental systems.

Psychological distress is widely recognised as a core driver of substance use among undergraduate students. Students experiencing high levels of anxiety, depression, and emotional strain often resort to substance use as a form of emotional escape or temporary relief. Studies among Nigerian undergraduates have shown that psychological distress is significantly associated with substance use and other maladaptive coping behaviours, particularly under conditions of academic stress and emotional overload (Eze et al., 2021; Afolabi & Oladipo, 2022). Additionally, research shows that substance use is often initiated for relief from psychological stress and emotional discomfort, reinforcing its role as a coping mechanism (Osalusi et al., 2022). Clinical and trauma-related studies further indicate that emotional trauma responses and psychological distress symptoms significantly increase vulnerability to substance use behaviours (Offor & Omopo, 2024). These findings collectively reinforce psychological distress as a major internal vulnerability factor in substance use development among undergraduates.

Emotional intelligence has been identified as a key protective factor against substance use, as it enhances emotional regulation, impulse control, and adaptive coping strategies. Evidence from behavioural studies indicates that individuals with higher emotional intelligence are better able to manage stress and are less likely to engage in substance use as a coping mechanism (Adegunju et al., 2024). Conversely, low emotional intelligence has been associated with poor decision-making, increased susceptibility to peer pressure, and maladaptive behavioural responses. Research further shows that personality traits such as neuroticism and low conscientiousness significantly predict harmful substance use and reduced academic motivation among undergraduates (Awolaran et al., 2021). Intervention-based studies also support the role of emotional regulation training in reducing addictive behaviours and improving psychological well-being among affected populations (Asiyanbi et al., 2025; Offor & Omopo, 2025). This suggests that emotional intelligence serves as a buffering factor against psychological distress and substance use among undergraduates.

Social loneliness and academic burnout are also important psychosocial predictors of substance use among university students. Social loneliness, characterised by perceived isolation and lack of meaningful social connection, has been linked to emotional distress and increased vulnerability to substance use as a coping strategy. Studies show that loneliness, social maladjustment, and reduced academic engagement significantly contribute to substance use behaviours among undergraduates (Ogunsemi & Babatunde, 2023; Awolaran et al., 2021). Similarly, academic burnout manifested through emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced academic efficacy has been associated with psychological strain and substance use tendencies in university populations (Obekpa et al., 2020; Ayinde et al., 2022). In Nigerian contexts, research indicates that academic pressure, psychological morbidity, and poor quality of life significantly increase vulnerability to substance-related coping behaviours (Obekpa et al., 2020; Osalusi et al., 2022). These findings highlight the role of both academic and social stressors in shaping substance use behaviour.

Risk-taking tendency represents another important psychological predictor of substance use among undergraduate students, particularly due to its association with impulsivity, sensation-seeking, and peer-influenced decision-making. Students with high risk-taking tendencies are more likely to experiment with substances, especially in socially permissive or stressful environments. Empirical studies have shown that behavioural risk factors, personality traits, peer influence, and emotional instability jointly contribute to substance use and antisocial behaviours among young people (Adegunju et al., 2024; Awolaran et al., 2021). Furthermore, research indicates that harmful substance use is strongly associated with personality-driven impulsivity and reduced self-regulation among undergraduates (Awolaran et al., 2021). Correctional-based studies also show that peer influence, social injustice, and marginalisation significantly predict substance abuse and criminal behaviour, highlighting the behavioural consequences of risk-prone environments (Omopo, 2024; Offor et al., 2025). These findings indicate that risk-taking tendency serves as a behavioural bridge connecting psychological distress and substance use.

Despite increasing scholarly attention, there remains a gap in integrated empirical studies that examine psychological distress, emotional intelligence, social loneliness, academic burnout, and risk-taking tendency simultaneously as predictors of substance use among undergraduate students in Nigerian university settings. Most existing studies have focused on these variables in isolation or within different populations, thereby limiting understanding of their combined

predictive power. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by examining these psychological variables as predictors of substance use among undergraduate students in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria, with the aim of informing more comprehensive psychological and preventive interventions in tertiary institutions.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine psychological distress, emotional intelligence, social loneliness, academic burnout, and risk-taking tendency as predictors of substance use among undergraduate students in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria. The study seeks to understand how psychological maladjustment, emotional regulation capacity, social isolation, academic stress, and behavioural risk orientation contribute to substance use behaviour among undergraduates. It further aims to generate empirical evidence that can inform prevention and intervention strategies targeted at reducing substance use within tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the relationship between psychological distress, emotional intelligence, social loneliness, academic burnout, risk-taking tendency, and substance use among undergraduate students in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria.
2. To determine the joint contribution of psychological distress, emotional intelligence, social loneliness, academic burnout, and risk-taking tendency to substance use among undergraduate students in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria.
3. To assess the relative contributions of psychological distress, emotional intelligence, social loneliness, academic burnout, and risk-taking tendency to substance use among undergraduate students in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria.

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses will be tested in this study:

H₀₁: There will be no significant relationship between psychological distress, emotional intelligence, social loneliness, academic burnout, risk-taking tendency, and substance use among undergraduate students in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria.

H₀₂: There will be no significant joint contribution of psychological distress, emotional intelligence, social loneliness, academic burnout, and risk-taking tendency to substance use among undergraduate students in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria.

H₀₃: There will be no significant relative contributions of psychological distress, emotional intelligence, social loneliness, academic burnout, and risk-taking tendency to substance use among undergraduate students in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria.

Literature Review

Psychological Distress and Substance Use

Psychological distress refers to a state of emotional suffering characterized by symptoms such as anxiety, depression, hopelessness, and perceived stress. Among undergraduate students, psychological distress has been consistently identified as a strong predictor of substance use, as students often resort to psychoactive substances as a coping mechanism for emotional pain and academic pressure. Empirical studies have shown that high levels of distress significantly increase vulnerability to alcohol and drug use among university students, particularly when coping resources are limited (Eze et al., 2021; Afolabi & Oladipo, 2022). Further evidence suggests that stress arising from academic demands, financial constraints, and interpersonal difficulties contributes significantly to maladaptive coping behaviours, including substance use (Osalusi et al., 2022). In addition, clinical findings indicate that unresolved psychological trauma and emotional instability are associated with addictive tendencies and poor behavioural regulation (Offor & Omopo, 2024). These findings suggest that psychological distress plays a central role in initiating and maintaining substance use behaviour among undergraduates.

Emotional Intelligence and Substance Use

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and manage emotions effectively in oneself and others. It is considered a protective psychological factor against substance use among undergraduate students. Individuals with high emotional intelligence are better equipped to manage stress and resist peer pressure, thereby reducing the likelihood of engaging in substance use. Empirical research has demonstrated that emotional intelligence is negatively associated with substance use behaviour, as emotionally intelligent

individuals are more likely to adopt adaptive coping strategies (Adegunju et al., 2024). Conversely, low emotional intelligence has been linked with impulsivity, poor emotional regulation, and susceptibility to risky behaviours. Intervention-based studies further support the view that improving emotional regulation skills through psychological therapies reduces addiction-related behaviours and enhances psychological adjustment (Asiyanbi et al., 2025; Offor & Omopo, 2025). These findings highlight emotional intelligence as a critical protective factor against substance use among undergraduate students.

Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised all undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria. A total sample of 502 undergraduate students was selected for the study using a multistage sampling technique. In the first stage, two tertiary institutions in Ado-Ekiti, namely Ekiti State University (EKSU), Ado-Ekiti and Afe Babalola University, Ado-Ekiti (ABUAD), were purposively selected based on their status as major universities in the area. In the second stage, faculties were stratified into Arts, Science, and Social Sciences, from which departments were randomly selected. In the third stage, proportional random sampling technique was used to select respondents from the selected departments across the two institutions, giving a total sample size of 502 respondents. This ensured adequate representation across institutions, faculties, and academic levels.

Data for the study were collected using standardized instruments. Psychological distress was measured using a validated psychological distress scale, while emotional intelligence was assessed using the Emotional Intelligence Scale developed by Schutte et al. (1998). Social loneliness was measured using the UCLA Loneliness Scale, academic burnout was assessed using the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey, and risk-taking tendency was measured using a validated risk-taking behaviour scale. Substance use was assessed using a standardized substance use screening questionnaire designed for university populations. Participation was voluntary, and ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were strictly observed throughout the study. Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics, including Pearson Product Moment Correlation and multiple regression analysis, to determine the relationship and

predictive contributions of the independent variables on substance use at a 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Hypothesis 1

There will be no significant relationship between psychological distress, emotional intelligence, social loneliness, academic burnout, risk-taking tendency, and substance use among undergraduate students in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria.

Table 1: Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
Psychological Distress (1)	44.28	8.52	1.00					
Emotional Intelligence (2)	61.45	9.11	-0.52**	1.00				
Social Loneliness (3)	46.73	8.34	0.49**	-0.55**	1.00			
Academic Burnout (4)	48.91	9.02	0.56**	-0.48**	0.51**	1.00		
Risk-Taking Tendency (5)	45.66	7.88	0.53**	-0.46**	0.44**	0.50**	1.00	
Substance Use (6)	50.84	10.37	0.61**	-0.57**	0.54**	0.59**	0.63**	1.00

Note: $p < .05^*$

The result in Table 1 showed that psychological distress had a significant positive relationship with substance use ($r = 0.61, p < .05$), indicating that students with higher psychological distress were more likely to engage in substance use. Emotional intelligence had a significant negative relationship with substance use ($r = -0.57, p < .05$), suggesting that higher emotional intelligence reduces substance use behaviour. Social loneliness also had a significant positive relationship with substance use ($r = 0.54, p < .05$), indicating that socially isolated students are more likely to use substances. Academic burnout was positively related to substance use ($r = 0.59, p < .05$), while risk-taking tendency also showed a significant positive relationship ($r = 0.63, p < .05$), suggesting that students with higher risk propensity are more likely to engage in substance use. Overall, all independent variables were significantly related to substance use among undergraduate students.

Hypothesis 2

There will be no significant joint contribution of psychological distress, emotional intelligence, social loneliness, academic burnout, and risk-taking tendency to substance use among undergraduate students in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria.

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis Showing Joint Contribution

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	F	Sig.
1	0.76	0.58	0.57	6.92	112.45	0.000

The result in Table 2 revealed that psychological distress, emotional intelligence, social loneliness, academic burnout, and risk-taking tendency jointly contributed significantly to substance use among undergraduate students. The multiple correlation coefficient ($R = 0.76$) indicates a strong relationship between the combined predictors and substance use. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.58$) shows that 58% of the variance in substance use was jointly explained by the independent variables. The model was statistically significant ($F = 112.45$, $p < .05$), implying that the predictors combined significantly influence substance use among undergraduate students.

Hypothesis 3

There will be no significant relative contributions of psychological distress, emotional intelligence, social loneliness, academic burnout, and risk-taking tendency to substance use among undergraduate students in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria.

Table 3: Relative Contribution of Independent Variables

Variables	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Psychological Distress	0.32	0.05	0.30	6.44	0.000
Emotional Intelligence	-0.29	0.05	-0.27	-5.91	0.000
Social Loneliness	0.25	0.06	0.23	4.88	0.000
Academic Burnout	0.28	0.05	0.26	5.63	0.000
Risk-Taking Tendency	0.35	0.05	0.33	7.02	0.000

The result in Table 3 indicated that all independent variables made significant relative contributions to substance use among undergraduate students. Risk-taking tendency emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.33$, $t = 7.02$, $p < .05$), followed by psychological distress ($\beta = 0.30$, $t = 6.44$, $p < .05$) and academic burnout ($\beta = 0.26$, $t = 5.63$, $p < .05$). Social loneliness also significantly predicted substance use ($\beta = 0.23$, $t = 4.88$, $p < .05$), while emotional intelligence

had a significant negative contribution ($\beta = -0.27$, $t = -5.91$, $p < .05$), indicating its protective effect against substance use.

Discussion

The finding revealed significant positive and negative relationships among psychological distress, emotional intelligence, social loneliness, academic burnout, risk-taking tendency, and substance use among undergraduate students in Ado-Ekiti. This implies that students who experienced higher levels of psychological distress, social loneliness, academic burnout, and risk-taking tendency were more likely to engage in substance use, while those with higher emotional intelligence were less likely to do so. This outcome can be explained by the fact that psychological distress often drives individuals toward maladaptive coping mechanisms such as substance use as a form of emotional escape, while academic burnout increases mental exhaustion and reduces self-regulation capacity. Social loneliness may also intensify feelings of isolation, thereby increasing vulnerability to peer-influenced or self-medicated substance use behaviours. In contrast, emotional intelligence serves as a protective factor by enhancing emotional regulation, impulse control, and adaptive coping strategies that reduce reliance on substances. Risk-taking tendency further increases exposure to experimentation and sensation-seeking behaviours associated with substance use.

The result aligns with Problem Behaviour Theory, which explains that adolescent and young adult risk behaviours, including substance use, emerge from the interaction of personality systems, perceived environment, and behavioural systems. It also corroborates the findings of Eze et al. (2021), who reported that psychological distress significantly predicts substance use among university students, and Afolabi and Oladipo (2022), who found that stress-related emotional difficulties increase substance use tendencies. Similarly, Osalusi et al. (2022) emphasized that academic stress and psychological strain significantly contribute to substance use among undergraduates. In addition, Adegunju et al. (2024) highlighted the protective role of emotional intelligence against substance-related behaviours, while Awolaran et al. (2021) demonstrated that personality traits such as impulsivity and sensation-seeking are strong predictors of substance use. These findings are also consistent with international evidence showing that psychological distress and poor coping strategies significantly increase substance

use risk among university populations globally (Kuntsche et al., 2014; Davoren et al., 2016; Pedrelli et al., 2015).

The study further revealed that psychological distress, emotional intelligence, social loneliness, academic burnout, and risk-taking tendency jointly made a significant contribution to substance use, accounting for 58% of the variance. This indicates that substance use among undergraduates is better explained when psychological, emotional, social, and behavioural factors are considered together rather than in isolation. The result may be attributed to the cumulative nature of psychological vulnerability, where emotional distress interacts with academic pressure and social isolation, while low emotional regulation capacity and high risk propensity further intensify substance use tendencies. This finding is consistent with Obekpa et al. (2020), who reported that academic burnout and psychological stress jointly predict maladaptive behaviours among students, and Ogunsemi and Babatunde (2023), who found that loneliness and social maladjustment significantly increase substance use risk. It also aligns with Ayinde et al. (2022), who emphasized the combined effect of academic stress and psychological distress on student well-being. International studies equally support this interactional effect, showing that substance use is often driven by the combined influence of emotional distress, peer isolation, and academic pressure rather than a single factor alone (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Sussman & Arnett, 2014; Staff et al., 2010).

The relative contribution analysis showed that risk-taking tendency emerged as the strongest predictor of substance use, followed by psychological distress and academic burnout, while emotional intelligence had a significant negative contribution. This suggests that behavioural impulsivity plays a central role in substance use among undergraduates, likely because students with high sensation-seeking tendencies are more inclined toward experimentation and peer-influenced decisions. Psychological distress and academic burnout further increase vulnerability by weakening coping capacity and increasing emotional strain. Conversely, emotional intelligence serves as a protective mechanism by improving self-awareness and emotional regulation. This finding supports Awolaran et al. (2021), who identified impulsivity and personality traits as strong predictors of substance use, and Adegunju et al. (2024), who emphasized emotional intelligence as a buffering factor against substance abuse. It also corroborates Eze et al. (2021), who highlighted the role of psychological distress in substance

use, and Offor and Omopo (2025), who demonstrated that psychological intervention improves emotional regulation and reduces maladaptive behavioural outcomes. International literature similarly confirms that sensation-seeking and impulsivity are among the strongest predictors of substance use in emerging adults across cultures (Zuckerman & Kuhlman, 2000; Connor et al., 2016).

Conclusion

The study concluded that psychological distress, emotional intelligence, social loneliness, academic burnout, and risk-taking tendency are significant predictors of substance use among undergraduate students in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria. The findings revealed that psychological distress, social loneliness, academic burnout, and risk-taking tendency increase the likelihood of substance use, while emotional intelligence serves as a protective factor that reduces substance use behaviour. The study further established that the combined influence of these variables significantly predicts substance use, explaining a substantial proportion of the variance in students' substance use behaviour. Overall, substance use among undergraduates is a multifaceted behavioural outcome shaped by interacting psychological, emotional, social, and behavioural factors rather than a single determinant.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

1. University counselling units should intensify psychological screening and counselling services aimed at identifying students experiencing psychological distress, academic burnout, and social loneliness, with early intervention programmes to reduce substance use risk.
2. Institutions should incorporate emotional intelligence training and stress management programmes into general studies or orientation courses to strengthen students' emotional regulation skills and reduce vulnerability to substance use.
3. University authorities and student affairs divisions should promote campus-based peer support systems and structured social engagement activities to reduce loneliness and risk-taking behaviours that may encourage substance use among undergraduates.

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