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PEER RELATIONSHIP, PERCEIVED ACADEMIC STRESS, AND ALCOHOL USE AMONG UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATES IN AWKA, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Alcohol consumption has become increasingly common among youths in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Thus, necessitating this study that examined the role of peer relationship and perceived academic stress on alcohol use among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria. A total of 200 undergraduates that were selected using multi-staged sampling method were involved in this study; comprising 100 males and 100 females. Their ages ranged from 18 to 29 years, with a mean age of 22.53 years and a standard deviation of 2.49. Three instruments were used for data collection: the Index of Peer Relations, the Perceived Academic Stress Scale, and the Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test. The study was a cross-sectional survey and Pearson Product-Moment correlation was adopted for data analyses. The results showed that there was no significant relationship between peer relationship and alcohol use at $r = .08$, $p > .05$. However, there was a significant positive relationship between perceived academic stress and alcohol use at $r = .27$, $p < .01$. Based on these findings, the researchers recommended that university managements should introduce structured stress management and resilience training programs to help students effectively cope with academic challenges and pressure.

Keywords: peer relations, perceived academic stress, alcohol use, undergraduates, Awka, Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

Alcohol consumption among young people has become an issue of growing concern in many parts of the world. In Nigeria, evidence suggests that a significant proportion of youths in tertiary institutions engage in substance abuse, with some developing problematic drinking patterns (Dumbili, 2023; Okoye et al., 2019; Obi-Nwosu & Onuoha, 2025). While studies from Europe and other Western societies indicate a gradual decline in alcohol consumption among young people due to increasing health awareness and lifestyle changes, the situation in Nigeria appears to be different. Recent research indicates that many Nigerian youths who previously abstained from alcohol are increasingly adopting drinking habits, often influenced by changing social norms and peer dynamics (Caluzzi et al., 2021; Dumbili et al., 2022). In addition, some young people who already consume alcohol engage in heavy drinking as a way of constructing identity, gaining social acceptance, or adapting to social groups (Dumbili, 2022).

At the global level, alcohol consumption remains widespread. Reports from the World Health Organization indicate that more than two billion people worldwide consume alcohol, with approximately 1.3 billion classified as regular drinkers and about 185 million identified as new users (World Health Organization, 2024). Although alcohol use is a global phenomenon, the pattern of consumption varies across regions. In Africa, alcohol consumption rates have continued to rise in several countries, particularly among young people. Available statistics show that between 5.2% and 13.5% of individuals aged 15–64 years in Africa engage in alcohol use (World Health Organization, 2024). In many sub-Saharan African countries, alcohol consumption has

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gradually become normalized among adolescents and young adults, raising concerns about its health and social consequences (World Health Organization, 2019; Okoye et al., 2019).

In Nigeria specifically, several studies have documented patterns of risky drinking behaviour among young people. These behaviours include binge drinking, frequent alcohol consumption, and drinking in social settings where peer association is strong (Adeloye et al., 2022). Such practices are often associated with negative outcomes; including poor academic performance, risky sexual behaviour, accidents, and other health-related challenges. These concerns highlight the need to examine the social and psychological factors that may influence alcohol use among university students.

One of the major factors that has received considerable attention in the literature is peer relationship. Peer relationships refer to the social interactions and emotional connections that exist among individuals of similar age or developmental level (Wills et al., 2004). These relationships play an important role in adolescents' socialization and behavioural development because young people often spend substantial time with friends and classmates. Scholars have noted that peer relationships influence attitudes, behaviours, identity formation, and emotional well-being (Zhou et al., 2023; Onuoha et al., 2025; Emekpo et al., 2026). Positive peer relationships can promote emotional support, companionship, and healthy development. However, negative peer relationship, or association with toxic friends could encourage engagement in risky behaviours such as substance use, aggression, or delinquency (Onuoha, 2025).

Empirical studies have consistently shown that adolescents tend to associate with peers who share similar behaviours and attitudes. For instance, research indicates that young people who smoke,

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drink alcohol, or engage in other risky behaviours often belong to peer networks where such behaviours are common (DiClemente et al., 1996; Marlatt & VandenBos, 1997; Wills et al., 2004). According to Simons-Morton and Chen (2006), peer relationship, norms and expectations can significantly influence an individual's decision to initiate alcohol consumption. Similarly, Peltzer and Pengpid (2007) observed that many young people begin drinking alcohol in the company of friends. Although peer relationship play a vital role in adolescent development, they may also expose young people to behaviours that pose health and social risks.

Another important factor that may influence alcohol use among students is academic stress. Academic stress refers to the psychological strain or tension experienced by students when they perceive academic demands to exceed their coping abilities (Banerjee & Chatterjee, 2016). In the context of higher education, students are often faced with numerous academic responsibilities such as examinations, assignments, deadlines, competition with peers, and expectations from lecturers and parents (Onuoha, Umeobi et al., 2024; Obi-Nwosu et al., 2024). When these demands become overwhelming, students may experience emotional distress, anxiety, and reduced academic motivation.

Studies have shown that academic stress can have serious implications for students' mental health and overall well-being. For example, reports indicate that intense academic pressure has been associated with psychological distress and, in extreme cases, suicidal behaviour among students (Saha, 2017; Anene et al., 2025). Scholars have therefore described academic stress as a factor that can significantly disrupt students' academic and personal development (Kada-patti & Vijayalaxmi,

2012). When students experience persistent academic stress, they may resort to maladaptive coping strategies such as substance use, including alcohol consumption.

Furthermore, academic stress may arise from multiple sources, including heavy coursework, academic competition, financial difficulties, inadequate academic support, and fear of academic failure (Okoye et al., 2019). Sarkar and Saxena (2024) explain that academic stress often manifests as feelings of worry, frustration, or helplessness when students perceive academic tasks as difficult or unmanageable. Such experiences can negatively affect students' academic performance, self-concept, motivation, and psychological adjustment.

Given the increasing prevalence of alcohol use among university students and the potential role of social and psychological factors in shaping this behaviour, it becomes necessary to examine the role of peer relationships and perceived academic stress on alcohol consumption among students. Hence, understanding these relationships may provide useful insights for developing effective intervention strategies aimed at promoting healthier behaviours among young people in Nigerian universities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Beck's Cognitive Theory (Beck, 1967; Beck, 1976), which posits that individuals' emotions and behaviours are influenced not directly by external events, but by the meanings and interpretations they attach to those events. According to the theory, cognitive structures known as schemas shape automatic thoughts and determine how individuals perceive and respond to experiences. Dysfunctional beliefs and negative cognitive appraisals may lead to maladaptive emotional and behavioural outcomes.

In the context of the present study, undergraduate students who perceive academic demands as overwhelming may develop negative automatic thoughts characterized by anxiety, helplessness, and frustration. These cognitive distortions can increase emotional distress and predispose students to maladaptive coping behaviours such as alcohol use. Similarly, the influence of peer relationships on alcohol consumption depends largely on how students interpret peer interactions. Students with adaptive cognitive patterns may resist negative peer influence, whereas those with dysfunctional beliefs may be more susceptible to engaging in drinking behaviours.

Therefore, Beck's Cognitive Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how perceived academic stress and peer relationships could influence alcohol use among undergraduates. The theory suggests that alcohol consumption is not merely a consequence of environmental experiences but is largely determined by the cognitive interpretations individuals assign to such experiences.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In order to contribute to existing knowledge in this area, the study explored the following research objectives

1. To assess if there will be a relationship between peer relationship and alcohol use among undergraduates.
2. To assess if there will be a relationship between perceived stress and alcohol use among undergraduates.

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www.emsajpublishers.org/ijnsbh

HYPOTHESES

1. High peer relationship will positively as significantly correlate with alcohol use among undergraduates.
2. High perceived academic stress will positively as significantly correlate with alcohol use among undergraduates.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 200 undergraduate students that were selected using multi-staged sampling method participated in the study. The participants consisted of 100 males and 100 females, whose ages ranged from 18 to 29 years, with a mean age of 22.53 years and standard deviation of 2.33. All the participants were undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka.

Instruments

Three instruments were used to measure the variables in this study: the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT), the Index of Peer Relations (IPR), and the Perceived Academic Stress Scale (PAS).

Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT)

The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) is a 10-item self-report questionnaire developed by the World Health Organization in 1989, through an international collaborative study led by Babor to assess alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems among individuals. The

scale was later published by Babor et al. (2001). The scale measures three dimensions: alcohol consumption, symptoms of alcohol dependence, and alcohol-related problems experienced within the past year. Items on the AUDIT are scored on a four-point Likert response format ranging from 0 to 4. The total score is obtained by summing participants' responses to all items, producing a possible score range of 0 to 40. Higher scores indicate a greater level of problematic alcohol use. Specifically, a total score of 8 or above indicates hazardous or harmful alcohol use, while scores of 20 and above suggest possible alcohol dependence. The AUDIT has been widely used in both clinical and community settings. Saunders et al. (1993) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83, while Reinert and Allen (2007) reported reliability coefficients above 0.80 across different samples. In Nigeria, Adewuya (2005) validated the AUDIT among university students and reported a sensitivity of .94 and specificity of .92, indicating that the instrument is reliable for identifying alcohol-related problems among undergraduates. A pilot study conducted in this study, involving 36 undergraduate students of psychology in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, produced reliability coefficient of .83

Index of Peer Relations (IPR)

The Index of Peer Relations (IPR) was developed by Hudson et al. (1986) to assess the extent and severity of interpersonal relationship problems individuals experience with their peers. The instrument contains 25 items designed to measure the quality of peer relationships. Items 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 13, 14, 19, 20, 23, 24, and 25 are scored directly, while items 1, 4, 7, 8, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, and 22 are scored in reverse. Participants respond to each item using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time). To obtain the total score, the responses for

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both direct and reverse items are summed, after which 25 is subtracted from the total score. Sample items include "I get along very well with my peers" and "My peers treat me badly". Hudson et al. (1986) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .94 for the American sample. In Nigeria, Anumba (1995) reported a concurrent validity coefficient of .62 by correlating the IPR with the Hare Self-Esteem Scale (HSS), and a reliability coefficient of .94 was found, indicating strong internal consistency. Anumba (1995) further reported a norms value of 29.31 for males and 26.83 for females among secondary school students. Scores above the norm indicate negative peer relations, whereas scores below the norm suggest more positive peer relationships. The researchers conducted a pilot study involving 36 psychology students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, and reported reliability coefficient of .79; with mean score of 28.68 for males and 27.12 for females.

Perceived Academic Stress Scale (PASS)

The Perceived Academic Stress Scale (PASS) was developed by Bedewy and Adel (2015) to measure academic stress among university students. The scale consists of 18 items organized into three major components; which are, academic expectations, workload and examinations, and students' academic self-perceptions. Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (extremely irrelevant) to 5 (strongly relevant). Items 1–5 are reverse scored, while the remaining items are scored directly. Bedewy and Adel (2015) reported an internal consistency reliability coefficient of 0.70 for the scale. In the present study, a pilot study conducted among 36 psychology students produced a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .85, indicating good reliability for use among Nigerian students.

VOL. 2, ISSUE 1, PP 19–35, 2026 **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21932459
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www.emsajpublishers.org/ijnsbh

Procedure

After the researchers obtained approval for this study, they sought for introductory letter from the Head of Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Multi-stage sampling method was used in this study. First, simple random sampling method was employed in selecting Faculties of Education, Law, Physical Sciences, and Social Sciences from the list of faculties in the university. Simple random sampling method was further used in selecting four departments (Science Education, Public and Private Law, Industrial Physics, and Political Science) from the selected faculties. Thereafter, participants were selected using a purposive sampling method.

Prior to the administration of the research questionnaire, the researchers explained to the students the purpose and nature of the study as well as steps taken to ensure anonymity. Their informed consent was obtained before the copies of the questionnaire were administered to the participants that accepted to be part of the study; which was done under supervision, and was collected immediately upon completion. The participants' responses were subsequently coded and entered into SPSS for statistical analysis.

Design and Statistics

The study was a cross-sectional survey that adopted a correlational research design. Data were analysed using Pearson Product Moment to determine the relationship between peer relationship, perceived academic stress, and alcohol use.

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www.emsajpublishers.org/ijnsbh

Results

Table 1
Pearson Correlations for Peer Relationship, Perceived Stress, and Alcohol Use.

	Variables	1	2	3
1.	Alcohol	1		
2.	Peer R	.08	1	
3.	Perceived A. S	.27**	-19**	1

** Correlation is significant at .01 level. Note, Alcoh Abuse = Alcohol Abuse, Peer R = peer relationship, and Perceived A. S = perceived academic stress.

From table 1, it was revealed that no significant relationship existed between peer relationship and alcohol abuse among undergraduates at $r = .08$, $p >. 05$. However, the table showed that a positive and significant relationship existed between perceived stress and alcohol use among undergraduates at $r = .27$, $p <. 01$.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between peer relationship, perceived academic stress, and alcohol use among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria. The findings revealed that peer relationship was not significantly associated with alcohol use among the participants. Consequently, the first hypothesis was not supported. This finding contradicts previous studies that reported a positive association between peer influence and alcohol consumption among university students (Borsari & Carey, 2019; Okoye et al., 2019). These studies

emphasized that peer groups often shape substance use behaviours through social reinforcement, modelling, and pressure to conform.

From the perspective of Beck's Cognitive Theory (1967, 1976), the absence of a significant relationship suggests that peer interactions alone may not necessarily determine alcohol use behaviour. Rather, individuals' cognitive interpretations of peer experiences are more important than the social experiences themselves. Beck argued that behaviour is mediated by underlying schemas and automatic thoughts. Thus, students who maintain adaptive beliefs and healthy cognitive appraisals may resist engaging in alcohol consumption even when exposed to peers who consume alcohol. The finding therefore implies that undergraduate students may possess cognitive resilience that enables them to evaluate peer behaviours critically and make independent decisions regarding alcohol use.

Furthermore, the finding may reflect the influence of cultural and contextual factors within the Nigerian environment. In many African societies, moral values, religious beliefs, and family expectations often discourage excessive alcohol consumption. Such values may shape cognitive schemas that perceive alcohol use as undesirable or socially unacceptable. Consequently, these protective cognitions may weaken the influence of peer relationships on drinking behaviour. The finding highlights Beck's assertion that external experiences do not automatically produce behavioural outcomes; instead, the meaning individuals assign to those experiences determines their responses.

The second finding revealed a positive and significant relationship between perceived academic stress and alcohol use among undergraduates. This finding supports previous studies (Olapegba et

al., 2021; Pedrelli et al., 2020) which reported that students experiencing high levels of stress are more likely to engage in substance use as a coping mechanism. The finding suggests that increasing academic demands may predispose students to unhealthy behavioural responses.

This finding strongly supports Beck's Cognitive Theory. According to Beck, stressful situations do not directly cause maladaptive behaviour; rather, the individual's interpretation of those situations determines subsequent emotional and behavioural outcomes. Students who perceive academic challenges as overwhelming or beyond their coping capacities may develop negative automatic thoughts characterized by anxiety, frustration, helplessness, and hopelessness. Such dysfunctional cognitions may generate psychological distress, which in turn increases the tendency to adopt maladaptive coping strategies such as alcohol consumption. Therefore, alcohol use among stressed students may represent an attempt to regulate unpleasant emotions associated with negative cognitive appraisals of academic demands.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. University managements should introduce structured stress management and resilience training programs to help students effectively cope with academic challenges and pressure.
2. Parents and guardians should be encouraged to provide emotional support and guidance to their children in order to help them develop healthy coping skills and responsible decision-making behaviours.

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3. University counselling centers should intensify awareness campaigns on substance use prevention, and mental health promotion among undergraduate students.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between peer relationship, perceived academic stress, and alcohol use among undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria. The findings revealed that peer relationship was not significantly associated with alcohol use among the participants, whereas perceived academic stress demonstrated a positive and significant relationship with alcohol consumption. These findings suggest that although social interactions with peers may not necessarily predispose students to drinking behaviour, academic pressures and students' perceptions of such pressures constitute important factors associated with alcohol use.

Interpreted within the framework of Beck's Cognitive Theory, the findings underscore the importance of cognitive appraisal in understanding alcohol-related behaviours among undergraduates. The results imply that students' behavioural responses are influenced not merely by external experiences, but by the meanings they attach to those experiences. Consequently, students who perceive academic demands as overwhelming may be more vulnerable to adopting maladaptive coping strategies, including alcohol use.

Overall, the study highlights the complex nature of alcohol consumption among university students and emphasizes the need for interventions that promote adaptive coping mechanisms, cognitive restructuring, and effective stress management. Strengthening students' psychological resources may help reduce reliance on alcohol as a means of coping with academic stress and ultimately contribute to improved mental health and wellbeing among undergraduates

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