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SCHOOL CLIMATE AND EMOTIONAL DISTRESS AS PREDICTORS OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE AMONG SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN KWARA STATE NIGERIA

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Abstract
This research investigates school climate and emotional distress as predictors of substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria. This study adopted a quantitative survey of correlational type. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to select students across the strata to ensure proportional representation. Self-developed structured instruments were administered to 346 senior secondary school students in the State. Namely: School Climate and Emotional Distress questionnaires. The two instruments were subjected to pilot testing through test-retest method and found to have a reliability index of 0.62 and 0.71 respectively. Findings of the study revealed that there is a positive statistically significant relationship between school climate and substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria (r = .35, p = .00); there is a positive significant relationship between emotional distress and substance abuse among senior secondary school students (r = .25, p = .00); school climate and emotional distress jointly have a significant predictive influence on substance abuse among senior secondary school students; and there is relative contributions of school climate and emotional distress to the prediction of substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria. Therefore, recommendations were made that teachers and psychologists should work together to provide frequent mental health education, counselling, and emotional support programs to assist students develop coping mechanisms for emotional distress also, teachers and psychologists should work together to provide frequent counselling and emotional support programs to assist students develop coping mechanisms for emotional distress.
Keyword: School climate, Emotional distress, Substance abuse, Secondary school and Kwara state

Introduction

It has been observed that youths and adolescents enrolled in Nigerian institutions constitute one of the populations most vulnerable to substance abuse because of their encounter with developmental transitions, academic tasks, increased independence, peer influence, identity formation, and exposure to diverse social environments. Although many students successfully adapt to these new developmental demands through healthy coping strategies, others experience emotional strain and may adopt maladaptive coping behaviours, including the misuse of psychoactive substances. These observations have stimulated growing interest in understanding the institutional and psychological conditions under which substance abuse develops among Nigerian secondary school students. In the same vein, Psychologists and behavioural scientists have continuously emphasizing that substance abuse is influenced not only by individual personality characteristics but also by some environmental and psychological factors. Various psychological theories propose that individuals' behaviours develop through continuous interactions between personal experiences and the environments within which they live and function (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). More so, characteristics of educational environments, including school climate, together with students' emotional disposition have become important variables in addressing behavioural outcomes an instant of substance abuse. Within the psychological premises, substance abuse is no longer considered solely as an individual behavioural problem but also as a complex phenomenon resulting from the interaction of biological, psychological, social, and environmental influences. Various psychological studies increasingly recognize that maladaptive behaviours such as substance abuse often develop when individuals encounter persistent environmental stressors or psychological difficulties that exceed their available coping resources.

Recently, researchers have shifted from merely considering the prevalence of substance abuse to identifying the psychological and contextual factors that predict its occurrence such as school climate and emotional distress. School climate refers to students' perceptions of the quality and character of school life, including interpersonal relationships, institutional support, safety, fairness, leadership, teaching and learning practices, and opportunities for personal development (Cohen et al., 2009). Research has consistently shown that positive school climates promote academic achievement, emotional well-being, resilience, and healthy behavioural adjustment, whereas negative school climates are associated with emotional distress, aggression, disciplinary misconduct, and engagement in risky behaviours (Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013). The National School Climate Council described school climate as the quality and character of school life based on patterns of people's experiences of school, including norms, goals, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, leadership, and organizational structures. This definition emphasizes that school climate is experienced rather than merely observed, making students' perceptions central to understanding the influence of educational environments on behavioural outcomes (Cohen et al., 2009).

More importantly, psychological factors have increasingly been recognized as important predictors of behavioural outcomes among adolescents. One of the investigated psychological variables is emotional distress. Emotional distress refers to a state of psychological discomfort characterized by persistent feelings of anxiety, sadness, frustration, emotional tension, helplessness, or worry that may interfere with an individual's ability to function effectively in daily life. Unlike psychiatric disorders, emotional distress is not necessarily indicative of a diagnosable mental illness; rather, it represents a continuum of emotional experiences that may vary in severity and duration depending on an individual's circumstances and coping resources. Consequently, individuals experiencing emotional distress may continue to perform their daily activities while simultaneously experiencing significant psychological strain (Mendive, 2009). According to American Psychiatric Association (2022), emotional distress refers to psychological discomfort characterized by symptoms such as anxiety, sadness, frustration, hopelessness, emotional exhaustion, and persistent psychological tension. Persistent emotional distress has been associated with impaired decision-making, poor coping ability, reduced academic functioning, and increased vulnerability to maladaptive coping behaviours, including substance abuse (Khantzian, 1997; Sanni & Aransi, 2020).

The World Health Organization (2023) described substance abuse as the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs, in a manner that results in adverse physical, psychological, social, or occupational consequences. This description emphasizes that substance abuse is not determined merely by the frequency of substance use but by the extent to which such use impairs an individual's health and functioning. The commonly abused substances include alcohol, cannabis, tramadol, codeine-containing syrups, tobacco products, cocaine, amphetamine-type stimulants, and various prescription medications used without medical supervision. Several Nigerian studies have attributed this growing trend to peer influence, family instability, emotional difficulties, academic stress, and availability of psychoactive substances, media exposure, and weak institutional supervision (Sanni & Aransi, 2020).

Several empirical studies have been conducted by various researchers on the considering variables, for instance a study conducted by Cohen et al., (2009); Thapa et al., (2013) found that positive school climates function as protective factors against maladaptive behaviours. Students who perceive supportive educational environments are less likely to engage in aggression, violence, delinquency, absenteeism, and substance abuse because positive institutional experiences strengthen emotional resilience, social connectedness, and adaptive coping strategies. Conversely, negative school climates may increase psychological strain, weaken institutional attachment, and encourage engagement in risky behaviours as alternative coping mechanisms. Reid et al. (2006) found discovered that a poor school climate, specifically a lack of enforcement of school regulations and the prevalence of unsafe school surroundings, had both direct and indirect consequences on teenage drug use via violence victimisation. Valenzuela et al. (2023) discovered that negative school atmosphere aspects such as discrimination, unclear

school regulations, insufficient safety, harassment, and poor interpersonal treatment were substantially connected with higher alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana usage. Contrarily, Sznitman and Romer (2014) revealed that, while a good school climate significantly reduced cigarette and marijuana beginning, as well as the progression of cigarette use over time, it did not significantly lower alcohol use. Chau and Chau (2024) discovered that teenagers with more mental challenges, including depressive symptoms and other markers of emotional distress, were much more likely to use alcohol, nicotine, cannabis, and other illicit substances. This conclusion contrasts with the findings of Teesson et al. (2024) found that, while psychological distress and alcohol use frequently coexist during adolescence, therapies that successfully reduced psychological distress did not consistently result in equivalent decreases in alcohol use.

Among adolescents now a day, it has been observed that substance abuse is associated with numerous adverse outcomes. These include impaired academic performance, reduced cognitive functioning, emotional instability, depression, anxiety, aggression, disciplinary problems, interpersonal conflict, risky sexual behaviour, criminal involvement, and poor occupational adjustment (Sanni & Aransi, 2020). The cumulative effect of these has made substance abuse one of the most important behavioural problems confronting educational institutions worldwide, Nigeria inclusive. Within Nigeria, substance abuse has become increasingly prevalent among students attending secondary schools and tertiary institutions. Against this background this study intends to investigate school climate and emotional distress as predictors of substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria. The major problem of this study, therefore, is to examine the contradictions that have emanated from the various findings of previous researches on school climate and emotional distress as predictors of substance abuse among senior secondary school students. Besides, from the available literature at the researcher's disposal, it has been discovered that those past studies left some gaps unfilled. And from the review of related literature conducted by earlier researchers, none of these studies dealt with the relationship between school climate and emotional distress as predictors of substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria. As a result of the limitations observed in the past studies with particular reference to the variables covered, the area of their operation and sample size, to make up part of this study therefore, this study examined the relationship between school climate and emotional distress as predictors of substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine school climate and emotional distress as predictors of substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria. Specifically, it examines:

1. determine the relationship between school climate and substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria.
2. examine the relationship between emotional distress and substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria.
3. determine the joint predictive influence of school climate and emotional distress on substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria.
4. determine the relative predictive influence of school climate and emotional distress on substance abuse senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria.

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested in the context of this study

$H0_1$: There is no significant relationship between school climate and substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria.

$H0_2$: There is no significant relationship between emotional distress and substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria

$H0_3$: School climate and emotional distress will not jointly and significantly predict substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria.

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$H0_4$: School climate and emotional distress will not make a significant relative contribution to the prediction of substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria

Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative survey design to obtain relevant data from the respondents. This design is appropriate for assessing the relationship between the two variables of interest in this study. The target population consisted of all senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria. The sample includes three hundred and forty six (346) senior secondary school students selected across senior secondary schools in Ilorin South local government of Kwara State, Nigeria. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to select students across the strata to ensure proportional representation. From each stratum, students were randomly selected, ensuring equal opportunity for inclusion and enhancing the generalisability of the findings. Data were collected using a self-developed scale on the school climate and emotional distress consisting of two sections: Demographic information of the respondents and items on the questionnaire. The questionnaire features mainly multiple-choice and Likert-scale items and was designed to be simple and easy to comprehend. To ensure content validity, the instrument undergoes a pilot test with a small group of students that were not included in the final study. Feedback from this group was used to refine the questions. Additionally, the items in the questionnaire were reviewed by the experts in psychology to ensure clarity and relevance. The instrument's reliability was tested through a test-retest method, whereby the same questionnaire was administered twice to the same groups that were not participated in final study under similar conditions. A high level of consistency in responses was indicated reliability, therefore, a reliability index of 0.62 and 0.71 were recorded. Quantitative data was used such as frequencies, percentage, and means. Inferential statistical analyses including correlation analysis, regression analysis to analyse the data collected at 0.05 level of significance.

Ethical standard was strictly adhered to throughout the research process. The following measures were taken in the process: Participation is voluntary, anonymity and confidentiality was ensured; no identifying information was collected. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences and data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

Results

Hypothesis 1: There is no statistically significant relationship between school climate and substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria

In order to test this hypothesis, respondents'' responses to the school climate and substance abuse questionnaire were collated. The data collected from the study was analysed as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: PPMC Analysis of the Relationship between School Climate and Substance Abuse among Senior Secondary School Students in Kwara State, Nigeria

Variable	No	Mean	Std	Df	Cal.r	Sig.(2-tailed)	Decision
School Climate	346	84.42	14.51	344	.35	.00	**Rejected**
Substance Abuse	346	41.27	10.62				

***p* < 0.05**

The result presented in Table 1 shows that there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between school climate and substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria (r = .35, *p* = .00). The obtained correlation coefficient of 0.35 indicates a moderate positive relationship, suggesting that changes in school climate are significantly associated with changes in substance abuse among the students. Since the probability value (*p* = .00) is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis (H01), which stated that there is no significant relationship between school climate and substance abuse, was rejected. This implies that school climate is significantly related to substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria.

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Hypothesis 2: There is no statistically significant relationship between emotional distress and substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria.

In order to test this hypothesis, respondents' responses to the emotional distress and substance abuse questionnaire were collated. The data collected from the study was analysed as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: PPMC Analysis of the Relationship between Emotional Distress and Substance Abuse among Senior Secondary School Students in Kwara State, Nigeria

Variable	No	Mean	Std	Df	Cal.r	Sig.(2-tailed)	Decision
Emotional Distress	346	58.42	9.89				
				344	.25	.00	**Rejected**
Substance Abuse	346	41.27	10.62				

***p* < 0.05**

The result presented in Table 2 indicates that there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between emotional distress and substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria (r = .25, *p* = .00). The obtained correlation coefficient of 0.25 shows a low positive relationship, implying that higher levels of emotional distress are associated with higher levels of substance abuse among the students, although the strength of the relationship is relatively weak. Since the probability value (*p* = .00) is less than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis (H02), which stated that there is no significant relationship between emotional distress and substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria, was rejected. This finding indicates that emotional distress is significantly related to substance abuse among the students.

Hypothesis 3: School climate and emotional distress will not jointly and significantly predict substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria

To test this hypothesis, the responses of 346 secondary school students who participated in the study were analysed. The School climate and emotional distress were regarded as the independent variables, while substance abuse was considered as the dependent variable.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis of the Joint Predictive Influence of School Climate and Emotional Distress on Substance Abuse among Senior Secondary School Students in Kwara State, Nigeria

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Inference
Regression	5103.33	2	2551.66			
Residual	33781.14	343	98.49	25.91	.00	S
Total	38884.46	345				
ρ < 0.05						

a. Dependent Variable: Substance Abuse

b. Predictors: (Constant), School Climate, Emotional Distress

The result presented in Table 3 reveals that school climate and emotional distress jointly have a statistically significant predictive influence on substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria. The regression analysis produced an F-value of 25.91 with a corresponding p-value of .00, which is less than the 0.05 level of significance. This indicates that the regression model is statistically significant, implying that the combined effect of school climate and emotional distress significantly predicts substance abuse among the students. Consequently, the null hypothesis, which stated that school climate and emotional distress do not jointly predict substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria, was rejected. The finding suggests that both school climate and emotional distress, when considered together, are significant predictors of substance abuse among the students.

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Hypothesis 4: School climate and emotional distress will not make a significant relative contribution to the prediction of substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria

To test this hypothesis, data obtained from the 346 senior secondary school students who participated in the study were analysed using multiple regression analysis. School climate and emotional distress served as the independent (predictor) variables, while substance abuse was treated as the dependent (criterion) variable.

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis of the Relative Contributions of School Climate and Emotional Distress to the Prediction of Substance Abuse among Senior Secondary School Students in Kwara State, Nigeria

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
Model	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	15.57	3.73		4.17	.00
School Climate	.21	.04	.29	5.17	.00
Emotional Distress	.13	.06	.12	2.22	.03

ρ < 0.05

a. Dependent Variable: Substance Abuse

The result presented in Table 4 shows the relative contributions of school climate and emotional distress to the prediction of substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria. The findings indicate that both predictors made statistically significant independent contributions to substance abuse. Specifically, school climate had the greater predictive influence (β = .29, t = 5.17, p = .00), indicating that it is the strongest predictor of substance abuse in the model. Emotional distress also made a significant positive contribution (β = .12, t = 2.22, p = .03), although its influence was weaker than that of school climate. Since the probability values for both variables are less than the 0.05 level of significance, each variable significantly predicts substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria. These findings suggest that while both school climate and emotional distress are important predictors of substance abuse, school climate exerts a relatively stronger influence on students' substance abuse than emotional distress.

Discussion of the Findings

Finding revealed that there was a positive and statistically significant relationship between school climate and substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria. This finding may be related to the fact that the school environment has a significant impact on students' behaviour and decision-making. A school climate with poor teacher-student relationships, improper supervision by the school management, bullying, peer pressure, and bad disciplinary policies may expose students to negative factors that raise their risk of substance abuse. On the other hand, a supportive and well-regulated school climate offers pupils guidance, emotional security, and pleasant peer connections, all of which discourage substance use. This finding corroborates with the findings of Reid et al. (2006), who found that a poor school climate, specifically a lack of enforcement of school regulations and the prevalence of unsafe school surroundings, had both direct and indirect consequences on teenage drug use via violence victimisation. In addition, Valenzuela et al. (2023) discovered that negative school atmosphere aspects such as discrimination, unclear school regulations, insufficient safety, harassment, and poor interpersonal treatment were substantially connected with higher alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana usage. Contrariwise, Sznitman and Romer (2014) discovered that, while a good school climate significantly reduced cigarette and marijuana beginning, as well as the progression of cigarette use over time, it did not significantly lower alcohol use.

Finding of this study further revealed that there was a positive and statistically significant relationship between emotional distress and substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria. This finding could be explained by the tendency of emotionally upset students to use maladaptive coping techniques. Students who are depressed, anxious, stressed, lonely, or frustrated may turn to alcohol or other psychoactive substances to escape emotional suffering or relieve psychological discomfort. Thus, higher levels of emotional

discomfort are more likely to be related with substance misuse. This finding supports the findings of Chau and Chau (2024), who found that teenagers with more mental challenges, including depressive symptoms and other markers of emotional distress, were much more likely to use alcohol, nicotine, cannabis, and other illicit substances. This conclusion contrasts with the findings of Teesson et ,al. (2024), who found that, while psychological distress and alcohol use frequently coexist during adolescence, therapies that successfully reduced psychological distress did not consistently result in equivalent decreases in alcohol use. This finding differs from the current study, which found a substantial positive connection between emotional distress and substance usage among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria.

Finding revealed that school climate and emotional distress jointly have a statistically significant predictive influence on substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria. This result could be attributed to the combined effects of environmental and psychological factors on students' behavioural outcomes. While an undesirable school environment may expose adolescents to risk factors such as peer pressure and insufficient assistance, mental discomfort may impair their ability to cope successfully with these obstacles. The interplay of these school-related and emotional factors raises the chance of students indulging in substance misuse. This finding is consistent with the finding of Villanueva-Blasco et al. (2024), who found that diverse aspects of school life strongly predicted alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis use, whereas drug usage predicted problem behaviour. Similarly, Halladay et al. (2024) revealed that students with depressive symptoms and other mental health issues were more likely to be in the high polysubstance-use group, whereas positive school climate, school belonging, and school safety significantly reduced the likelihood of substance use.

The finding of this study revealed that the relative contributions of school climate and emotional distress to the prediction of substance abuse among senior secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria. This finding could be due to the fact that both school climate and emotional discomfort independently influence students' propensity to abuse substances, albeit with varying magnitudes. School climate played a larger role because adolescents spend a significant amount of time in the school environment, where teacher support, peer interactions, punishment, and school safety all have a direct influence on their behaviour. Emotional anguish also played a significant role, since students suffering psychological challenges may be more open to using substances as a coping method. These finding highlight the importance of addressing environmental and psychological factors in attempts to prevent substance addiction among secondary school students. This finding is corroborating with that of Villanueva-Blasco et al. (2024), who found that different aspects of school life had varying contributions to predicting substance use, with certain school elements having higher predictive effects than others.

Conclusion

Based on the data collected, collated analysed and interpreted, the study concludes that substance addiction among senior secondary school students in Kwara State is influenced by both school-related (school climate) and psychological factors (emotional distress). It emphasises the significance of fostering a friendly, safe, and conducive school environment while also addressing students' emotional and mental well-being as critical components of substance addiction prevention. The findings imply that interventions targeted at preventing substance misuse should take a comprehensive strategy that combines good school climate initiatives with accessible counselling, mental health assistance, and other psychosocial services. Such comprehensive initiatives are anticipated to boost students' resilience, encourage healthy behavioural choices, and contribute to better scholastic and developmental results.

Recommendations

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

1. To prevent substance abuse among students, school administrators should promote positive relationships between teachers and students, strengthen safety measures, enforce fair disciplinary policies, and encourage positive peer interactions.

2. Teachers, psychologists, and parents should work together to provide frequent mental health education, counselling, and emotional support programs to assist students develop coping mechanisms for emotional distress among others.
3. Government through its ministry of education, and other stakeholders in education should implement comprehensive substance abuse prevention programs that integrate school climate improvement initiatives with mental health promotion.

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