

Social Media Trends And Drug Experimentation Behaviour Among Teenagers: The Nigerian Perspective

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Abstract

The paper analyzed the trend of social media use and its impact on the behavior of teenagers experimenting with drugs, specifically within Nigeria, considering the impact of exposure to peer, celebrity, and entertainment content. The objectives of this paper were to: investigate the trend of use of social media among Nigerian teenagers, determine the level to which exposure to drug content raises the rate of experimenting, and establish the trend within social media platforms and content that positively or negatively stimulates any form of experimenting among teenagers. The theoretical framework proposed for this paper includes the Social Learning Theory and the Social Norm Theory. The paper was conducted using a survey method, mainly targeting Senior Secondary Two and Three school-going teens within six secondary schools chosen within the South-South geopolitical region of Nigeria. The paper targeted 367 teens using proportionate stratified random techniques, considering a population of 7,820 school-going teens within the chosen secondary schools. The paper made use of a structured questionnaire technique, analyzing the data using descriptive analysis methods. It was found that adolescents are active on social media sites and that, to a great extent, social interactions and entertainment are the main motivations. It was also found that content generated by peers and celebrities/influencers is a strong motivator to induce curiosity and experimentation with drugs. However, educative and anti-drug content, as well as trends on social media sites moderated by peers and parents, are strong discouraging factors. It was concluded that the impact of social media on the experimentation of adolescents with drugs is conditional not only on the use of social media sites but on the nature of the content. It

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proposes that adolescents' social media sites should be supervised, evidence-based anti-drug preventive programs should be encouraged, and certain regulations should be enforced to restrict access to deleterious content on social sites.

Keywords: Social media, drug experimentation, teenagers, celebrity content, anti-drug campaigns.

INTRODUCTION

Being a teenager in Nigeria, as it is the case with other countries, is a stage of experimentation and identity creation. However, it is the interference of social media in the lives of these youngsters that makes the Nigerian scenario unique. Social media platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and Whatsapp have become a normal habitude for youngsters to develop their social lives, pass their leisure time, as well as imprint behaviors indicative of 'acceptable,' 'desirable,' and 'normal' through behaviors from others. Studies conducted from Port Harcourt establish a strong link between use and drug abuse among youngsters, who through platforms like Instagram, TikTok, among others, got exposed to drug use information on marijuana, tramadol, among others (Eze, Njoku, & Amadi, 2024). These platforms are not objective; rather, their logarithms target interactively engaging postings that include representations of risk behaviors from positive platforms. Even if social media contains messages of public health, it is difficult to imagine that the mass of uncontrolled messages would help teenagers distinguish between promotional or entertaining information and factual warnings about drug risks. Another study in the state of Kwala shows that adolescents with excessive use of social media report both enhanced peer influence and drug use, portraying social media as an implicit but real predictor of experimentally engaged drug behaviors. The implication that ensues, therefore, concerns the ways that online risk exposures, validations of peers, and drug-associated online visibility interact to influence the interpretations of teenagers of risk versus reward behaviors.

The Nigeria environment shows that the extent of influencing experiments for drug use through social media is not exclusive to any particular zone or group of people. For instance, in Enugu State, undergraduate participants believed that the use of alcohol and other drugs through celebrities and social media actors encouraged alcohol and other drug use (Odenigbo & Ajibo, 2025). This is similar to the findings on social media research worldwide wherein frequent viewing of substance use posts correlates positively with the potential for adolescents to see the use of alcohol and drugs as something socially



acceptable or desirable (Kelly et al., 2023). Certainly, the role of peers in teen decisions cannot be underestimated, yet social media adds to that network far-off peers with similar ideals and wishes. It appears this environment can stretch curiosity and experiments past the limits of familiarity for parents and school authority guardianship. Findings from University of Abuja, as well as other tertiary institutions, indicate that there is a relation between unregulated use of social networks and higher propensities for drug abuse among students, an issue that indicates a legitimate concern about health prospects as well as learning participation (Giwa Muyibat Omobolanle, 2025). The issue also indicates that experimental drug behavior can continue due to a lack of necessary critical reflections among users in respect to digital networking.

Understanding drug experimentation among Nigerian teenagers today requires understanding both the perils and potentials of social media. Not all digital exposure promotes harmful behaviour. Indeed, social media-based interventions show promise when social media is used deliberately to deliver targeted anti-drug messaging. One intervention study in Nigeria reported that structured social media campaigns reduced young people's propensity to engage in drug abuse over a two-year follow-up period, thus supporting the notion that these platforms can be used for prevention and education if the content is purposeful and evidence-based. Anti-drug campaigns by agencies like the NDLEA also illustrate how social avenues can be very effective in public health communication when messages are clear and relevant to their youth audiences. Nonetheless, such positive uses may have a tough time competing with the volume and popularity of other content that trivialises or idealises the use of drugs. In Nigeria's socio-economic setting that can be complex for teens who may be struggling with unemployment, limited recreational options, and stress factors, the temptation to try what seems exciting and available through social media may be high. It is therefore important for any effective intervention to locate the research in an understanding of concrete realities while remaining current with the ever-evolving role of technologies. This research project specifically does just that.

Statement of the Problem

Drug use among teenagers has long been recognised as a public health and social concern in Nigeria, traditionally linked to factors such as peer pressure, family environment, economic hardship and community influences. Ideally, adolescents ought to receive clear guidance from parents, schools, religious institutions and regulatory agencies that discourages risky behaviour and promotes healthy choices. In recent years,

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however, the rapid spread of social media has altered the social space in which Nigerian teenagers grow, interact and form values. Platforms that should ideally serve as channels for creativity, learning and positive engagement increasingly expose young users to content that portrays drug use as fashionable, entertaining or harmless. This situation presents a dilemma. While national policies and school-based programmes emphasise drug prevention, teenagers are simultaneously immersed in digital environments where substance use is normalised and sometimes celebrated by peers, influencers and celebrities. The concern deepens because much of this exposure occurs privately through mobile devices, beyond the direct supervision of parents and teachers. Despite rising reports of teenage drug experimentation and related harms, there remains limited empirical evidence in Nigeria that clearly explains how specific social media trends shape attitudes, curiosity and experimentation with drugs among teenagers. Existing studies often focus on general causes of drug abuse without giving sufficient attention to the role of digital media patterns and online social influence. This gap weakens policy responses, media regulation and youth focused interventions. Addressing this gap is necessary to provide context specific evidence that can guide educators, health communicators and regulators in responding to a fast-changing social reality shaped by social media.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were to:

1. examine the patterns of social media use among teenagers in Nigeria;
2. assess the extent to which exposure to drug related content on social media influences drug experimentation among Nigerian teenagers;
3. identify the specific social media trends and content types that encourage or discourage drug experimentation among teenagers in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Patterns of Social Media Use among Teenagers in Nigeria

Social media has become an integral and everyday reality for teenagers all over the world. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), “social media can be defined as a set of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” to create and facilitate social interactions and communications. The American Psychological Association equally regards social media as “forms of electronic communication, mostly web-based, involving transmission, storage, and retrieval of

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information, ideas, messages, and/or content through online communities using digital technology with the intention of instant, global, or direct communication.” In Nigeria, studies have shown that teenagers are very active on social networking platforms as almost all teenagers use their smartphones to log into sites such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, among others, multiple times a day (Ismail, 2021). The use of social media by Nigerian adolescents is not generalised; its patterns differ depending on the reasons, interests, and daily programs of these adolescents. Amidst all these varying patterns, social media remains an important aspect of an adolescent’s life in Nigeria as it becomes an aspect to connect with others, satisfy their need for amusement, learn, or express themselves. In an attempt to understand these varying patterns among adolescents, some common patterns they undergo are as follows:

Frequency of Access and Daily Engagement

Nigerian youths use social media platforms almost daily, sometimes several times a day. According to survey data, a vast majority of school-going youths have regular access to these platforms via their smartphones, checking the platforms several times a day upon rising and several times before sleeping (Akafa et al., 2024). The regular access to these platforms was motivated by the urge to connect with friends, catch up on social events, and keep up with the trends. The culture of checking these platforms several times a day and posting updates had become second nature to these youths, even at the expense of other behaviors, such as reading and communication with family members.

Purpose-Driven Use

Nigerian teenagers engage in the use of social media platforms for a host of activities that go beyond mere communication. According to school-going students interviewed by Akafa et al. (2024), social media is primarily used by Nigerian teenagers for socializing, posting updates on life, entertainment, and a feeling that accompanies group associations. They use the social media platforms for updates on current events, fashion, music, and entertainment. Many Nigerian youths engage in visual-based social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube because the visual content is instant entertainment and gets recognition from peers through the likes and comments that accompany the visual content; such behavior is a habit.



Instrumental and Academic Use

While many adolescents are using social media for social purposes, others are also utilizing these online platforms for educational pursuits. Evidence among Nigerian university students has suggested the following platforms are used for exchanging learning materials, assignments, and co-authoring educational projects: WhatsApp, YouTube, and Twitter (IJEH & Iburho, 2023). While not prevalent among secondary school students, it appears learning can actually benefit from social media if these platforms are carefully leveraged for academic communication purposes. This has been more prevalent among the older age group of adolescents when they are revising for an examination or balancing academic responsibilities.

Identity Expression and Peer Interaction

Social media practices among teenagers in Nigeria involve identification with their posts, comments, and profile interactions. The teenagers produce and upload posts that represent their personal interests, lifestyles, dreams, and affiliations. The engagement with fellow teenagers assumes the status of an important aspect of their social life. The behavioral practices of keeping up with trends, memes, dance challenges, and responses to posts among fellow teenagers strengthen social identities. This active involvement of peers assumes the status of an important social media practice that defines interactions among teenagers.

Social Media Exposure and Drug Experimentation Behaviour among Teenagers

Social media has become central to the social experiences of adolescents, and that involvement, indeed, carries real implications for how teenagers perceive and eventually engage in drugs. Public health evidence confirms that the more young people are exposed to substance-related social media content, in pictures, videos, or posts about alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs, the more likely they are to contemplate using such substances themselves. In one study involving middle and high school-aged youth, published in *Substance Use & Misuse*, researchers found that adolescents who had viewed social media posts about substances had significantly higher odds of reporting the use of alcohol, cannabis, e-cigarettes, or multiple substances, compared to those not exposed to such online content. The association was observed not only across platforms but also across substance types; for example, exposure to drug or alcohol posts in the past year was associated with increased odds of lifetime use of the substances studied among the sample of youth. This research aligns with earlier work showing that social



media offers a window into peer norms that often present drug use as ordinary or even aspirational, thereby shaping young people's beliefs about the acceptability of experimenting with drugs in real life (Liu et al., 2024). Although this study was conducted in the United States, its findings have relevance for Nigerian adolescents who use similar platforms and experience similar patterns of exposure.

Research in Nigeria suggests that social media exposure plays a role in shaping adolescents' attitudes toward substances, even when overall levels of use are difficult to quantify. A survey of in-school adolescents in Kwara State showed that high levels of social media use and peer pressure were significant predictors of substance abuse tendencies among students (Alwajud-Adewusi, Oduola & Ifabiyi, 2025). While the study noted that overall substance abuse levels were comparatively low in the sampled schools, the strength of the relationship between social media and peer influence points to social platforms as environments where behaviour norms are reinforced, including those related to drug use. Teenagers who engage more on social media encounter frequent peer-related content, and the reinforcement of social approval through likes and comments can indirectly endorse risky behaviours that include substance use. Nigerian adolescents often model behaviours they see online, and when peer circles normalise or trivialise drug use, it increases the likelihood that an individual will view experimentation as something common or acceptable (Alwajud-Adewusi et al., 2025). These findings mirror global evidence where social media exposure helps shape perceptions of drug use norms among youth, reinforcing attitudes that can precede experimentation.

The type of content teenagers see on social media matters. Research tracking millions of posts across multiple global platforms found that most substance-related content tends to depict drug and alcohol use in a positive way rather than highlighting risks or harms (Rutherford et al., 2022). Although this particular study was not conducted in Nigeria, the trends it highlights are relevant for Nigerian teens who use the same platforms. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram and YouTube were shown to host a high volume of visually compelling clips where substance use is framed as fun, humorous or glamorous. Such portrayals can inadvertently reduce perceived danger and increase curiosity among youth who are still developing decision-making skills and susceptibility to social influence. When young people regularly see these kinds of posts, the perception that "everyone is doing it" or that substance use is part of a desirable lifestyle can take root. What appears entertaining in an online clip can translate into lowered inhibitions and greater willingness to experiment offline. In contexts where public health messaging about



substance harm is less visible or less engaging than user-generated content, the balance tips towards glamorised portrayals (Rutherford et al., 2022).

Peer-generated content is also powerful because it feels authentic and relatable to teenagers. In many studies, what teenagers see from their friends or classmates, not necessarily celebrities, has a stronger impact on behaviour because it represents real lived behaviour within their social circle. Research led by the Stanford University School of Medicine shows that youths who encounter posts from peers about substance use have higher odds of engaging in those behaviours themselves, even when controlling for other influences (Liu et al., 2024). This is especially relevant in the Nigerian context where peer networks on platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook are tightly woven into daily routines. Teens often exchange videos or memes about parties, gatherings and celebrations that prominently feature alcohol or drug use. This kind of peer content acts as an informal norm-setting mechanism. When teenagers observe positive reactions such as emojis, comments, shares, it signals social approval, making experimentation appear less risky and more socially rewarding. The social reinforcement mechanisms of these platforms reward behaviours that attract attention, which in turn encourages repetition of those behaviours offline (Liu et al., 2024).

There are cases where social media amplifies real-world drug trends among teenagers. In Nigeria, research shows that hashtags and content formats have been used to normalise the trade and use of substances such as codeine syrup and tramadol. Journalistic investigations and academic discussions point to instances where teenage audiences encounter posts that trivialise heavy cough syrup consumption or portray unprescribed tramadol use as a way to cope with stress or social pressure. These portrayals can influence teenagers who are curious, looking for peer validation or seeking ways to manage emotions without support systems. Although direct empirical studies on specific Nigerian social media trends are limited, reports from public health sources indicate rising views of substance-related content among young Nigerians, and that such exposure correlates with higher interest in experimenting (Akintayo, 2025). These emerging patterns illustrate that social media does not merely reflect offline behaviour; it participates in shaping what youth see as normal or typical behaviour in their generation.

Exposure to substance-related content on social media can also intersect with psychological and emotional factors that influence teenage behaviour. Evidence from ecological momentary assessment studies in adolescent cohorts indicates that days on which young people encounter drug-related posts correlate with increased likelihood of substance use that same day (Frontiers in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2024).



Negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety or stress can heighten this effect because substance use may be seen as a coping mechanism. For many teenagers, social media serves as a constant backdrop to daily life. The curated narratives of carefree enjoyment, coupled with real-time feedback from peers, can reinforce beliefs that drug use is an appropriate or effective way to counter negative feelings, especially when these messages are repeated over time. These findings suggest that social media exposure does not operate in isolation; it interacts with emotional and social drivers of behaviour which can push some teenagers towards experimenting with substances when they might not otherwise consider doing so (Frontiers in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2024).

There are some signs that social media use can also be harnessed to counter harmful influences, though challenges remain. For example, interventions delivered through social media such as educational campaigns that focus on the harms of drug use, have shown some effectiveness in reducing teenagers' propensity to engage in substance use when the messages are engaging and targeted (Ahmad et al., 2022). In Nigeria, researchers found that structured social media-based programmes that include skill-building and motivational content led to reductions in drug abuse risk among youth participants compared with control groups, especially after sustained exposure over time. These findings show that while social media can expose teens to positive portrayals of drug use, it can also serve as a vehicle for prevention efforts if the content resonates with youth and provides credible alternatives to risky behaviours. The potential for social media to support prevention highlights the importance of strategic communication that is both culturally relevant and engaging to young Nigerian audiences (Ahmad et al., 2022).

Despite these opportunities, much remains unknown about the full extent of social media's role in teenage drug experimentation in Nigeria. Existing research often relies on cross-sectional surveys, which can point to associations but not causal pathways. There is limited longitudinal data that tracks how exposure to specific social media content over time influences drug experimentation behaviours among Nigerian teens. There is also a need for deeper qualitative studies that explore how teenagers interpret substance-related posts in their cultural contexts and how these interpretations translate into real-world decisions. Filling these gaps is critical. Without firm evidence that traces the paths from digital exposure to behaviour change, policymakers and educators must rely on generalised assumptions rather than tailored strategies that can mitigate risks or enhance protective messaging. This gap makes it essential for future research to focus on the unique features of Nigerian social media environments, the types of content most



accessed by youth, and how these interact with broader social determinants of substance use.

Social Media Trends and Content Influencing Teenage Drug Use

This section turns attention to the specific social media trends and content forms that shape how teenagers perceive, discuss and experiment with drugs. While earlier sections established patterns of social media use and links between exposure and behaviour, this section narrows the focus to the kinds of digital content that repeatedly surface in teenagers' online spaces and subtly frame drug use as normal, attractive or socially acceptable. These trends do not operate in isolation. They are sustained through peer approval, platform design and cultural cues that resonate strongly with young users. Drawing from Nigerian and international studies, the discussion highlights dominant social media trends that influence teenage drug experimentation and explains how these trends work in everyday digital life. The major social media trends and content influencing teenage drug use include:

- i. Celebrity and influencer promotion of substance use
- ii. Peer generated content and online social validation
- iii. Entertainment driven drug portrayals in music and short videos
- iv. Hashtag culture and challenge-based trends
- v. Algorithm driven content repetition and visibility

Celebrity and Influencer Promotion of Substance Use

Celebrity culture occupies a powerful space in the lives of Nigerian teenagers, and social media has made access to celebrities and influencers immediate and constant. Popular musicians, actors and online personalities often share lifestyle content that includes alcohol consumption, smoking or references to other substances. Research shows that adolescents are more likely to model behaviours exhibited by admired public figures, especially when such behaviours appear to attract success, wealth or social approval (Kelly et al., 2023). On platforms like Instagram and TikTok, substance use is frequently embedded within glamorous narratives of fame, leisure and freedom. These portrayals rarely include discussion of consequences, creating a one-sided image that can lower teenagers' perception of risk. Studies published in *The Lancet Public Health* indicate that exposure to influencer alcohol promotion increases positive attitudes towards drinking and raises the likelihood of experimentation among adolescents



(Critchlow et al., 2023). Nigerian teenagers consume the same global content, making these findings relevant locally.

In Nigeria, music videos and influencer posts often circulate widely among teenage audiences through reposts on WhatsApp and Instagram. A content analysis of Nigerian music videos found frequent visual references to alcohol and other substances, often presented as symbols of success and enjoyment (Osumah & Adebayo, 2022). When these images are shared repeatedly across platforms, they become familiar and socially reinforced. Teenagers begin to associate substance use with maturity and social relevance. This influence is intensified when celebrities interact directly with fans through comments and live sessions, blurring the distance between aspirational figures and everyday life. Research among African youth shows that this perceived closeness increases imitation, especially in contexts where alternative role models are limited (Nyamnjoh, 2021). Such dynamics raise concern because teenagers may adopt behaviours without critical reflection, assuming that what appears acceptable for celebrities is equally safe or desirable for them.

The problem is not merely visibility but endorsement. Some influencers explicitly promote alcohol brands or reference drug use in humorous or celebratory tones. Even when posts are not paid advertisements, repeated casual displays function as informal endorsements. Studies in youth communication show that adolescents often fail to recognise promotional intent in influencer content, interpreting it instead as genuine lifestyle sharing (Moreno et al., 2022). This makes regulatory efforts difficult, particularly in Nigeria where influencer marketing guidelines are still evolving. As a result, teenagers remain exposed to subtle but persistent messages that frame drug use as part of a successful modern identity, reinforcing curiosity and experimentation.

Peer Generated Content and Online Social Validation

Peer generated content represents one of the strongest influences on teenage behaviour because it reflects the actions of people within a young person's immediate social circle. Social media platforms thrive on sharing everyday experiences, and for many Nigerian teenagers, this includes posting pictures or videos from parties, gatherings and casual hangouts where alcohol or other substances are present. Research consistently shows that adolescents are more influenced by peer behaviour than adult instruction, particularly when that behaviour appears socially rewarded (Liu et al., 2024). On social media, likes, comments and shares function as public markers of approval. When posts involving substance use attract positive engagement, they signal acceptance

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and desirability within the peer group. Studies published in *Substance Use and Misuse* demonstrate that teenagers who see substance related posts from friends are significantly more likely to experiment with drugs themselves, even when they previously held negative attitudes towards such behaviour (Liu et al., 2024). This pattern applies across cultural contexts and has been observed among African adolescents as well. In Nigeria, peer networks on WhatsApp and Instagram are often tightly knit, involving classmates, neighbours and extended social circles. Content shared in these spaces carries weight because it comes from trusted sources. A single viral video within a school group chat can normalise behaviour far more quickly than formal health education messages can counter.

The pressure to belong intensifies this influence. Teenagers who choose not to participate in activities shown online may feel excluded or labelled as unsophisticated. Research among secondary school students in southwestern Nigeria found that fear of social exclusion was a significant predictor of willingness to experiment with alcohol and other substances when peers portrayed use positively online (Adebisi & Alabi, 2023). This social pressure does not always involve direct encouragement; often it works through silence and repetition. Seeing peers repeatedly post about substance use without negative consequences can gradually erode resistance. Over time, experimentation becomes framed not as deviant behaviour but as a normal part of teenage social life. This process highlights how social media extends peer influence beyond physical spaces into constant digital presence.

Entertainment Driven Drug Portrayals in Music and Short Videos

Entertainment content sits at the heart of teenage engagement on social media, and music videos, skits and short clips play a major role in shaping attitudes towards drug use. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts are dominated by brief, visually appealing content that prioritises humour, rhythm and spectacle. Within this space, references to alcohol, smoking and other substances are often woven casually into lyrics, dance routines and comedic scenes. Studies show that repeated exposure to such portrayals can lower adolescents' perception of harm and increase curiosity about experimenting with drugs (Romer & Moreno, 2017). In Nigeria, popular music genres such as Afrobeats frequently circulate on social media alongside dance challenges and fan generated videos that amplify the reach of the original content. When lyrics referencing alcohol or drug use are repeated and celebrated through dance trends, the message becomes normalised and detached from real life consequences.



Content analyses of music videos accessible to Nigerian youth reveal frequent depictions of alcohol consumption, smoking and intoxication framed as symbols of enjoyment and social success (Osumah & Adebayo, 2022). These portrayals rarely show negative outcomes, focusing instead on pleasure, confidence and group bonding. Teenagers who repeatedly consume such content may begin to associate drug use with creativity, popularity and adulthood. Research published in *Journal of Adolescent Health* indicates that adolescents who engage heavily with music related content that includes substance references are more likely to initiate use earlier than peers with lower exposure (Primack et al., 2018). The short video format intensifies this effect because it encourages repeated viewing and imitation. A fifteen second clip can be watched dozens of times in one sitting, reinforcing messages without deliberate reflection.

In Nigeria, the influence of entertainment content is strengthened by the cultural value placed on music and performance as expressions of identity. Teenagers often participate in trends to demonstrate belonging and relevance. When these trends include subtle or overt references to drug use, participation may involve mimicking behaviours associated with those substances, even if only symbolically at first. Over time, symbolic imitation can shift into real experimentation, particularly when combined with peer encouragement and easy access to substances. This pattern underscores how entertainment driven portrayals on social media move beyond passive viewing to active participation, making them a powerful influence on teenage behaviour.

Hashtag Culture and Challenge Based Trends

Hashtag culture plays a significant role in organising and amplifying content on social media, and teenagers are among its most active participants. Hashtags help content travel quickly across networks, allowing trends to spread far beyond their original creators. Some hashtags associated with partying, nightlife or relaxation often include visual references to alcohol or drug use. Research shows that adolescents who engage with such hashtag driven content are more likely to encounter repeated portrayals of substance use framed as routine social behaviour (Vaterlaus et al., 2021). In Nigeria, hashtags linked to parties, campus life and weekend enjoyment frequently circulate among teenage users, exposing them to curated images and videos that emphasise substance use as part of social celebration.

Challenge based trends intensify this exposure. Social media challenges invite users to replicate actions shown in a video, often with the promise of visibility or peer recognition. While not all challenges involve substances, some trends include drinking



games or humorous portrayals of intoxication. International studies published in *Pediatrics* highlight how challenge participation can pressure adolescents into risky behaviours because opting out may result in social exclusion (Nagata et al., 2020). Nigerian teenagers, who place high value on peer approval, may feel compelled to participate even when they recognise potential harm. The challenge format reduces perceived seriousness by framing actions as play rather than risk. In several African contexts, researchers have observed that viral challenges spread rapidly through WhatsApp groups among young people, bypassing moderation and parental oversight (Mutsvairo & Bebawi, 2019). Once a challenge gains traction, repetition reinforces acceptability. Teenagers see peers completing the challenge without immediate consequences, which can weaken caution. Hashtag driven trends also allow substance related content to be rediscovered long after its initial posting, sustaining exposure over time. This persistence means that even teenagers who do not actively seek such content may encounter it repeatedly through algorithmic recommendations. The cumulative effect can shape attitudes gradually, making experimentation appear less exceptional and more like a shared social ritual.

Algorithm Driven Content Repetition and Visibility

Social media algorithms play a quiet but powerful role in shaping what teenagers see online. Platforms are designed to maximise engagement, often promoting content similar to what users have previously watched or interacted with. Research published in *New Media and Society* shows that once adolescents engage with substance related content, algorithms are likely to recommend similar posts, increasing repeated exposure (Kumar et al., 2022). This repetition can normalise drug use by making it appear common and widely accepted. Teenagers may come to believe that substance use is widespread among their peers simply because the algorithm continually presents such content.

In the Nigerian context, where regulation of online content is limited, algorithm driven visibility raises concerns. Teenagers who watch a single video involving alcohol or smoking may soon encounter many more similar clips, even without actively searching for them. Studies on youth media consumption show that repeated exposure shapes perceived norms, which strongly influence behaviour during adolescence (Perkins, 2021). When algorithms prioritise sensational or entertaining substance related content, they indirectly reinforce risky behaviours. This effect is difficult for parents and educators to counter because it occurs privately on personal devices. The challenge with algorithmic influence is its subtlety. Teenagers often believe they are choosing what they watch,

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unaware that platform design is guiding those choices. This perceived autonomy can make external warnings feel irrelevant or exaggerated. Research in digital sociology suggests that adolescents rarely question why certain content appears repeatedly in their feeds, focusing instead on immediate entertainment value (Livingstone & Stoilova, 2021). In such an environment, drug related content can gain prominence without deliberate intent from the user.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Social Learning Theory and the Social Norms Theory as conceptual lenses for examining how social media trends influence drug experimentation behaviour among teenagers in Nigeria. Social Learning Theory was advanced by Albert Bandura in 1977, building on earlier behavioural learning models, and fully articulated in his work *Social Learning Theory* (Bandura, 1977). The theory holds that human behaviour is learned through observation, imitation and modelling, especially when individuals observe behaviours being rewarded or socially approved. Central to the theory are the concepts of observational learning, vicarious reinforcement and self-efficacy. Behaviour is not learned solely through direct experience but also through watching others, particularly role models perceived as attractive, successful or relatable. Applied to this study, Social Learning Theory explains how teenagers observe drug related behaviours on social media through peers, influencers, musicians and celebrities, and internalise such behaviours as acceptable or desirable. When substance use is portrayed alongside social approval, humour or popularity, teenagers may imitate these behaviours offline, expecting similar rewards. Critics of Social Learning Theory argue that it places strong emphasis on external modelling while underplaying individual agency and structural constraints such as poverty or access to substances (Akers, 2017). Others note that not all observed behaviours are imitated, as personal values and family influence may moderate effects (Bandura, 2001). Despite these critiques, the theory remains relevant to this study because it provides a clear explanation of how repeated exposure to substance related content on social media can translate into experimentation among teenagers through observation and imitation rather than direct encouragement.

Social Norms Theory, associated primarily with the work of Perkins and Berkowitz in the mid nineteen eighties, offers a complementary explanation for teenage drug experimentation in social media spaces. The theory was first articulated in studies of college alcohol use, which showed that individuals often misperceive the behaviours and attitudes of their peers, and that these misperceptions influence personal behaviour



(Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). The core argument is that people tend to conform to what they believe is normal behaviour within their reference group, even when those beliefs are inaccurate. In this study, Social Norms Theory explains how social media can distort teenagers' perceptions of how common or acceptable drug use is among their peers. When teenagers repeatedly encounter posts that depict substance use without visible consequences, they may assume that most people their age are experimenting, even if this is not the case. Research has shown that such perceived norms strongly predict substance use among adolescents (Perkins, 2002; Rimal & Lapinski, 2015). Critics of the theory point out that correcting misperceptions does not always lead to behaviour change and that norms operate alongside other influences such as stress and availability (Neighbors et al., 2016). Nonetheless, the theory remains useful for this study because it highlights how social media environments can amplify perceived norms and subtly pressure teenagers into experimentation, even in the absence of direct peer coercion.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a survey research design, which is appropriate for examining patterns of social media use and its influence on drug experimentation among teenagers without manipulating variables. The survey design allows for systematic collection of self-reported data from a large population while providing the flexibility to analyse relationships between social media exposure and behaviour. The population of the study comprised students in selected secondary schools in the six states of the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers. One school was purposively chosen from each state to ensure geographic representation and diversity in student backgrounds. The selected schools were: Uyo High School, Uyo (Akwa Ibom); Nembe Grammar School, Nembe (Bayelsa); Mary Slessor Memorial Grammar School, Calabar (Cross River); Government Secondary School, Asaba (Delta); Edo College, Benin City (Edo); and Government Secondary School, Port Harcourt (Rivers). These schools were chosen due to their large enrolment figures and mix of students from various socio-economic backgrounds, making them suitable for studying social media influence. The total population of Senior Secondary School Two and Three students in these schools, obtained from school administrative records, was 7,820 students, representing adolescents most active on social media and at higher risk of experimentation behaviours.



The sample size for the study was calculated using Yamane's formula for a finite population at a 95 percent confidence level and 5 percent margin of error. Substituting the population size of 7,820 and margin of error of 0.05 yielded a sample size of approximately 367 respondents. To ensure proportional representation across the six schools, a proportionate stratified random sampling technique was employed. The number of respondents from each school was determined based on the proportion of SS2 and SS3 students relative to the total population. Within each stratum, simple random sampling was used to select individual respondents from class registers, giving each eligible student an equal opportunity for inclusion. This approach enhanced the representativeness of the sample, reduced sampling bias, and ensured that the findings accurately reflect the experiences of teenagers across the South-South region. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and analysed with descriptive statistics to examine patterns, relationships, and influences between social media use and drug experimentation.

Data Analysis

RQ1: What are the patterns of social media use among teenagers in Nigeria?

Table 1: Frequency of access

Frequency of access	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Multiple times daily	192	52
Once daily	115	32
2-3 times per week	41	11
Less than once per week	19	5
Total	367	100

The data in Table 1 indicate that the majority of teenagers, representing 52%, access social media multiple times daily, while an additional 32% use it once daily, showing that a combined 84 percent of respondents engage with social media on a very frequent, almost daily basis. In contrast, only a small proportion, 16%, access platforms less than three times per week, highlighting that intermittent or low engagement is uncommon among this group. This pattern underscores the central role social media plays in teenagers' daily routines, functioning as a constant avenue for social interaction, entertainment, and information seeking. The implication is that such high-frequency use significantly increases exposure to peer, influencer, and entertainment content, including



posts related to substance use, thereby amplifying opportunities for observation, social reinforcement, and potential imitation of risky behaviours such as drug experimentation.

Table 2: Purpose of Use

Pattern of Use	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Social interaction / chatting	209	57
Entertainment / video / music	85	23
Academic / information seeking	43	12
Identity expression / posting	30	8
Total	367	100

The data in Table 2 show that most teenagers use social media for social interaction and chatting (57%), followed by entertainment (23%), academic purposes (12%), and identity expression (8%). This indicates that social media primarily serves social and leisure functions, increasing teenagers' exposure to peer and influencer content, including substance-related posts, which may influence experimentation with drugs.

Table 3: Type of Content Engagement

Content Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Peer content/friends' posts	165	45
Influencer / celebrity content	102	28
Music / short video content	70	19
Educational / academic content	30	8
Total	167	100

The data in Table 3 highlight that teenagers' social media engagement is dominated by peers and popular figures, with nearly half of respondents (45%) interacting most with friends' posts and a significant portion engaging with influencer or celebrity content. Music and short videos also attract notable attention, whereas educational content occupies a very small share of teenagers' online activity. This pattern underscores how social media is largely a space for social validation, entertainment, and trend-following, increasing exposure to content that can normalise risky behaviours, including experimentation with drugs.



RQ 2: To what extent does exposure to drug-related content on social media influence drug experimentation among Nigerian teenagers?

Table 4: Exposure to Drug-Related Content and Influence on Experimentation (n = 367)

Exposure / Influence	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Exposure to Drug-Related Content		
Frequently (daily / multiple times per week)	145	40
Occasionally (once per week / few times per month)	122	33
Rarely / never	100	27
Influence on Curiosity to Experiment		
Strong influence	99	27
Moderate influence	122	33
Low / no influence	146	40
Reported Experimentation (lifetime)		
Yes	87	24
No	280	76
Total	367	100

The data in Table 4 highlight that exposure to drug-related content on social media is substantial, with 40 percent of teenagers encountering such content frequently. This frequent exposure appears to influence curiosity, as a combined 60 percent of respondents report moderate to strong influence on their interest in experimenting with substances. Despite this, actual reported experimentation remains lower, with 24 percent admitting to having tried drugs at least once, while the majority (76 percent) have not. These findings suggest that while exposure and curiosity are closely linked, not all teenagers translate online influence into real-life experimentation. The implication is that social media serves as a significant conduit for shaping attitudes and curiosity toward drugs, reinforcing the need for targeted interventions to mitigate potential behavioural outcomes.



RQ 3: Which social media trends and content types encourage or discourage drug experimentation among teenagers in Nigeria?**Table 5: Social Media Trends and Content Influence on Drug Experimentation**

Content / Trend	Encouraging Experimentation		Discouraging / Neutral	
	f	%	f	%
Celebrity / influencer posts	83	23	21	6
Peer-generated content	88	24	7	2
Entertainment / music videos / short clips	66	18	32	9
Hashtag / challenge trends	74	20	144	39
Educational / anti-drug content	56	15	163	44
Total	367	100	367	100

The data in Table 5 highlight that certain social media trends strongly encourage drug experimentation among teenagers, particularly peer-generated content (24%) and celebrity or influencer posts (23%). In contrast, educational or anti-drug content and hashtag or challenge trends tend to discourage or have a neutral effect, with 44% and 39% of respondents respectively indicating these influences. This pattern suggests that social media content is not uniformly risky; while peer and celebrity posts increase curiosity and potential experimentation, deliberately designed educational content and moderated trends can counteract these influences, emphasising the importance of targeted prevention strategies in online spaces.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**Research Question 1: What are the patterns of social media use among teenagers in Nigeria?**

The findings indicate that social media forms a central and frequent aspect of daily life for Nigerian teenagers. With 52% accessing platforms multiple times daily and an additional 32% engaging once daily, it is evident that nearly 84% of adolescents in the study maintain high levels of digital presence. Social interaction emerges as the primary purpose of engagement (57%), followed by entertainment (23%), with academic and identity-based uses trailing behind. This pattern reflects that social media is primarily a



social and recreational environment rather than an academic or instrumental tool for teenagers. From a theoretical perspective, this aligns with Social Learning Theory, which posits that behaviour is learned through observation, imitation, and vicarious reinforcement (Bandura, 1977). High-frequency engagement exposes adolescents repeatedly to peer behaviours, trends, and influencer activities, increasing opportunities for observational learning. Scholars have highlighted that adolescents' attention is particularly attuned to content that is socially rewarding, entertaining, or visually appealing, making repeated exposure more influential than occasional encounters (Rutherford et al., 2022). Moreover, peer content and influencer posts dominate teenagers' attention, reinforcing the observation that social media functions as a site of behavioural modelling, where norms, tastes, and practices are communicated subtly through routine engagement (Liu et al., 2024). The implication is that digital environments constitute both a virtual peer network and a learning arena, where teenagers internalise cues regarding acceptable and desirable behaviours. In Nigeria, the widespread and near-constant use of mobile devices ensures that these cues are persistent and immersive, shaping adolescents' perception of what constitutes normative social interaction. The frequency and purpose-driven use of social media suggest that any behavioural influence, whether positive or negative, is compounded by the repetitive and participatory nature of online engagement, underlining the platform's potential to facilitate or hinder adolescent development depending on the type of content encountered.

Research Question 2: To what extent does exposure to drug-related content on social media influence drug experimentation among Nigerian teenagers?

The data show that exposure to drug-related content is substantial, with 40% of teenagers encountering such material frequently and 33% occasionally. This exposure appears to influence curiosity, as 60% of respondents report moderate to strong effects on their interest in experimentation, although actual reported use remains at 24%. These findings illustrate a crucial distinction between attitudinal influence and behavioural enactment; repeated online exposure fosters curiosity and normalises substance use even if not all adolescents act upon it. The Social Learning Theory provides a clear lens for interpreting these findings. According to Bandura (1977), adolescents learn not only through direct experience but also through observing models, peers, celebrities, and influencers, who perform behaviours that are either rewarded or socially approved. Social media amplifies these observational opportunities, offering constant visual reinforcement of substance use in a manner that appears socially sanctioned, entertaining, and

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consequence-free. Scholars have argued that digital environments uniquely intensify vicarious reinforcement because likes, comments, and shares signal approval, creating feedback loops that increase the likelihood of behavioural imitation (Liu et al., 2024; Moreno et al., 2022). In the Nigerian context, adolescents' frequent and socially oriented engagement magnifies the effect of exposure, especially as peer validation is culturally salient in shaping identity and decision-making. Nevertheless, the gap between curiosity and experimentation suggests that other moderating factors such as parental guidance, personal values, and availability of substances, mediate whether curiosity translates into actual use. The implication is that social media functions as a catalyst for normative perception of drug use and curiosity, reinforcing the need for interventions that reduce exposure to substance-related content or enhance adolescents' critical engagement with online material. These results underscore that while social media is influential, behavioural outcomes are contingent upon both online and offline environmental factors.

Research Question 3: Which social media trends and content types encourage or discourage drug experimentation among teenagers in Nigeria?

The findings reveal a nuanced landscape of influence, where peer-generated content (24%) and celebrity/influencer posts (23%) strongly encourage drug experimentation, while educational or anti-drug content (44%) and moderated trends such as hashtag challenges (39%) exert discouraging or neutral effects. These patterns underscore that social media influence is neither uniform nor deterministic; rather, the nature of the content determines its behavioural impact. The Social Norms Theory is particularly relevant here, as it explains how repeated exposure to specific behaviours online can create misperceptions of prevalence and acceptability (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). When adolescents observe peers or admired figures experimenting with substances without visible consequences, they are likely to overestimate the normality of such behaviours, which can increase willingness to imitate or experiment. Scholars argue that adolescents are especially sensitive to peer approval and aspirational identification, making influencer and peer-generated content powerful vectors for normative pressure (Liu et al., 2024; Nyamnjoh, 2021). Conversely, anti-drug messaging and structured educational content act as counter-normative interventions, providing alternative behavioural models that challenge the perception that experimentation is typical or desirable. The finding that educational content has the highest discouraging influence reinforces the potential for strategic, theory-informed interventions. This also aligns with Social Learning Theory, which posits that observation of negative consequences or



alternative behaviours can inhibit risky practices (Bandura, 2001). The implication is that policymakers and educators can harness social media strategically, leveraging relatable, engaging content to establish protective norms while mitigating exposure to encouraging trends. Importantly, the study highlights that intervention cannot rely solely on blanket exposure reduction; the type, credibility, and social resonance of content are critical in shaping adolescent perceptions, curiosity, and behavioural intentions.

CONCLUSION

The research investigated social media trends and their role in influencing drug experimentation amongst teens in Nigeria with a focus on how adolescents are influenced by exposure to social and entertainment content. The results show that although adolescents are very social media-active for socializing and entertainment purposes, their exposure to social media content about drugs may have a subtle normalizing effect and may spark their curiosity about trying the substance. The results also suggest that educational social media content may counteract this and reveal the potential of social media interventions in adolescents. The implications of this report are that social media impact on experimenting with drugs among the young is contingent not only on the interaction frequency but on the nature and acceptability of the social media content. Without intentional engagement with social media to impact prevention and awareness, the young remain at the risk of indirect encouragement on social media about the engagement of unsafe behaviors. Therefore, the intervention will be impactful by deploying social media content with the culturally relevant message discouraging drug-related substances in a manner that transforms social media from a platform for the transmission of unsafe behaviors to behavioral decision on social media by Nigerian youth.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were raised:

1. Schools and parents need to supervise teenagers when they are using social media so as to moderate exposure.
2. Strict monitoring by such government agencies and social networking site regulators is necessary to remove and restrict teenagers from accessing age-inappropriate content.



3. Health education professionals as well as NGOs must develop attractive anti-drug campaigns on social networking sites that will counter the effects of peer/influencer-based content that promote experimentation.

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