INTRODUCTION

Psychoactive substances are chemical substances that, when taken, have the ability to change an individual's consciousness, mood or thinking processes (WHO, 2004). Alcohol is among the commonest psychoactive substances used (Ihezue, 1988; Adelekan et al., 1993; Akindutire & Adeboyega, 2012; Daramola, 2004; Yakasai, 2010; Yusuf, 2010). It is socially accepted and serves as 'gateway' to the use of other substances. As such young people begin experimenting with alcohol and cigarette (Adelekan et al., 1993). Factors such as peer pressure, dysfunctional home settings, advertisement and inability to cope with stress have been associated with onset of substance use (Adelekan et al., 1993; Salaudeen et al., 2011).

Alcohol use and its negative effects on health are very high among the general population globally. Among students, continuous and excessive use has been linked to poor academic performance and school drop-out (Ukwayi et al., 2013; Wechsler, 1995). Alcohol is a leading cause of morbidity and mortality among college students in the United States (Hingson et al., 2005). Several studies have shown very high rates of alcohol use and abuse among students in secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria (Awoyinfa, 2012; Kypri et al., 2001; Odejide, 1989; Pela, 1989; Abiodun et al., 1994). Some of these studies have also found that alcohol use begins in childhood or early adolescence.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Location and Participants

The study was conducted at the mini-campus of the University of Abuja, located at Gwagwalada. Abuja is the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) and the capital of Nigeria. It is located in the north

reported (Essien, 2010; O'Malley, 2002). The minor differences in the rates of alcohol use reported by the different studies could be due to differences in methodologies and study populations. However, they all indicate high rates of alcohol use among students of higher learning. Current alcohol use was higher among males. Some studies have also reported higher prevalence of alcohol use among males (Ukwayi et al., 2013; Okogbenin, 2008). Males are generally more daring and adventurous; as such, more likely to use alcohol and other psychoactive substances. Most respondents used alcohol for the first time between the ages of 11 and 18 years. Similar ages of onset have also been previously documented (Ukwayi et al., 2013; Okogbenin, 2008). This is the adolescence age group when most people are very active, energetic and seeking new experiences. Adolescents are also prone to external influences as we found that most of them were influenced into using these substances by friends or watching adults, who also use these substances; this has also been previously reported (Akindutire & Adeboyega, 2012). This therefore emphasizes the importance of promoting positive influences especially on adolescents. However, current use of alcohol was found to be commonest among those aged 18 to 23 years. This was also reported previously (Ukwayi et al., 2013).

Participants from polygamous homes and dysfunctional families were found to be taking alcohol currently, more than those from monogamous and/or stable families. Another study had found higher rates of alcohol use in general among students from polygamous, unstable or broken homes than those from monogamous or stable homes with cordial family relationship (Essien, 2010; Fatoye, 1998). It is easily appreciated that children from monogamous and stable homes are likely to receive more care and attention than those from polygamous and dysfunctional homes who are exposed to diverse influences. No significant difference was found in the rates of current alcohol use between the 3rd and 4th year students. It could be because both share almost similar campus exposures and experiences. Perhaps there may be differences between them and students at lower levels. This has to be explored in others studies. Current alcohol use was highest among participants from the North central zone of the country. Possible reasons for this observation have to be further explored. They could be due to individual and collective attributes of these students and not necessarily due to academic burden/stress.

DISCUSSION

The data showed that there were more female than male participants. This reflected the proportion in the total students' population. This is contrary to other studies on substance use among students in tertiary institutions which showed male dominances in populations (Daramola, 2004; Onofa, 2006). The admission policy of the university could account for this difference. The lifetime and current use of alcohol were found to be 56.5% and 33.3% respectively. Similar and slightly higher rates have been previously

Figure 1.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Alcohol use is very common among students, especially in universities and other higher institutions all over the world. The trends are increasing in Nigeria and other developing countries. Also students have diffculties stopping habitual use of alcohol. In view of the well-documented and avoidable morbidities and mortalities associated with the use of alcohol, it is important to extensively study the extent of use and associated factors among students of higher learning, as to have comprehensive data to enable planning and implementation of appropriate programmes and interventions to protect and improve their health and well-being. It is also recommended that mental health and counselling programmes be incorporated into the universities health care system to cater for these needs.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

Authors' Contributions

Both authors contributed at all stages in the conceptualization and conduct of the study. Specifcally, UIU initiated the study and did the preliminary literature search and methodology. CUE did the data collation, analysis and fnal write-up. Both read through and approved the fnal manuscript. did this.

Majority of students who have used or still using alcohol are aware of some of the major harmful effects. This study however did not focus on specifc harmful effects. The questionnaire just asked if the students knew alcohol is harmful or not. It would have been more useful if knowledge of specifc harms was documented. Most of the students also report to have diffculties stopping the habit as has been previously reported (Okogbenin, 2008). This underscores the importance of studying the extent of alcohol among students with the aim of instituting relevant and appropriate interventions to help them.

The limitations of this study as observed are that it was restricted to only full time and 3rd/4th year students. However, the reasons for these have been stated. The fndings are refective of what obtains among university students.

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