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Victims or Criminals? Knowledge, Perceptions, and Attitudes of Ghanaian University Students on Illicit Drugs and Substance Users

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Abstract

Illicit drugs and other substances are serious threats to global health and security. Thus, there have been several global efforts to enact and enforce strict humane drug laws and adequate interventions to curb the trade and use of drugs. Nevertheless, there is a dearth of research in the area of knowledge, perception, and attitude of high-risk populations, like West African university students, to guide interventions and the implementation of drug laws. In this study, we explored the knowledge, perception, and attitude of university students regarding available illicit drugs and drug users in Ghana. Adopting a cross-sectional correlational design, our results from 562 students showed that a large proportion of Ghanaian students were aware of the widely used drugs. The majority of our participants reported having heard of alcohol, cocaine, and heroin. However, fewer people reported knowing drugs such as lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD). We observed that university students in Ghana shared positive attitudes towards drug users. Participants in our study viewed drug users and problem drug users as victims who needed support rather than criminals needing punishment. Future research is required among mental health service providers and law enforcement agencies to explore their knowledge, attitude, and perception of drug users and other related issues.

Keywords: attitude, drug users, Ghana, illicit drugs, knowledge, perception, university students.

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1. Introduction

The illegal use of narcotic drugs is a major global health problem that requires a multiplicity of efforts and interventions (Babor, 2010; Sobko, 2020). Evidence shows significant worldwide epidemiological data regarding the high youth risk of drug use over the years (DuPont et al., 2018; Frisher et al., 2007). In 2012, a 5.3 % past-month cannabis use and 7.1 % lifetime amphetamine use were indicated among Ghanaian high school students (Oppong Asante, 2019). His study identified school-going problems like truancy, bullying, and physical attack experiences significantly correlated with drug use. According to Kabore et al. (2019), drug abuse in West African countries, like in Ghana, is affected by multisystemic dimensions at the individual, community, and policy levels.

In 2014, an urgent need for policy structures that focus on human rights and public health values was initiated by the disproportionate effect of draconian drug laws across West Africa. The reasoning is that most of the laws in the African sub-region regarded drug use or abuse as a criminal offense punishable with imprisonment up to 25 years in Nigeria, 20 years in Togo, and 5 years in Ghana (Bridge, Loglo, 2017). Notwithstanding these punitive measures, West Africa has seen a spike in drug trafficking, development, and use (United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, 2017).

Although the damage caused by the growing use of drugs in the area is worrying, the effects of applying a punitive approach to coping with the drug issue have been more troubling. The West Africa Commission on Drugs [WACD] (2014), for example, called for the decriminalization of marijuana possession for personal use. According to the commission, evidence demonstrates that drug (ab)use criminalization exacerbates health and social issues, places excessive pressure on the criminal justice system, and encourages corruption in West Africa. Consequently, a Model Drug Law was formulated to guide countries in West Africa in considering illicit drug policy reforms. As a result, the reconsideration of drug policies in Ghana is in line with WACD's 'decriminalisation' pattern enshrined in the 2017 Ghana Narcotic Control Commission Bill (Shaw, Bird, 2017).

Besides the extant drug policy and drug issues in Ghana, there is a need to explore the knowledge, perception, and attitude of young people, especially those in the universities. Arguing from the findings of Kabore et al. (2019), university students in Ghana are relevant in aiding the successful implementation of drug laws and policies. Also, they have vital roles as the younger population to fight against illicit drug use, provide accurate drug-related information, and help transform the attitudes towards drug users. Consequently, the accuracy of the awareness and attitude of society related to drugs among students of higher learning institutions are critical to Ghana's success in this current humane drug fight (Aboagye et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2013). Therefore, our present study seeks to investigate the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of Ghanaian university students towards illicit drugs and substance users.

2. Materials and methods

Design

A cross-sectional correlational design was used to investigate the knowledge, perception, and attitude of university students regarding illicit drugs and their users in Ghana. The cross-sectional correlational design has been adopted and used in a similar context by scholars such as Fendrich and Mackesy-Amiti (2000), Valdebenito et al. (2015), and Windarwati et al. (2021).

Ethical approval

The University of Cape Coast Institutional Review Board granted ethical approval (UCCIRB/CHAS/2020/38). Formal consent was received from all participants before the inception of the data collection via email. We followed all requisite ethical considerations required for human studies.

Sample

Overall, 562 were sampled for the study. Among them, 59 % were males while 40 % were females. An additional 1 % preferred not to state their gender. Regarding their marital status, 76.7 % were single while 21.7 % reported being married. Furthermore, participants reported a mean age and the standard deviation of 26 and 5.84 years respectively. The early adult group (18-27) was represented 61 % while the adult group (28-37) represented 34 % of the total sample. The educational background of participants showed that most respondents were at level 400 (52.7%) followed by level 300 (16.5 %). The rest included 14.8 % of postgraduate students (levels 500, 600, 700, 800, and 900), 8.2% level 200 and 7.8 % level 100. According to the participants, 61.6 % were residents while the rest (38.4 %) were nonresidents. Concerning their

region of residence, the majority 46.9 % of the students originated from the southern sector of Ghana (Accra, Ashanti, and Central Regions) with an additional 8 % from Western and Western North Regions. Further, the eastern sector of Ghana (Eastern, Oti, and Volta Regions) and northern sector (Ahafo, Bono, Bono East, North East, Northern, Savanna, Upper East, and Upper West Regions) represented 30.5 % and 14.6 % respectively.

Measures

Participants completed a 19-item Knowledge on Illicit Drug Issues Scale that was adopted from the study of Bryan et al. (2000). The tool is comprised of two major sections; Sections A (12 items on drug-related knowledge and behaviours) and B (8 items on demographic characteristics like sex, age, level of education, etc.). Most of the items in section A were measured on a 5-point Likert scale from: “strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “not sure”, “agree”, and “strongly agree” while few of them offered only two or three options: “yes”, “no” and/or “maybe”. Participants were allowed to select suitable options in Section B to answer demographic questions on age, sex, educational level, etc.

As our survey tool was adapted from the survey questionnaire of Bryan et al. (2000) without a report on internal consistency and reliability, a pilot study was conducted within two weeks before the data collection and 10 students from the Cape Coast Technical University were sampled. The pilot study indicated an acceptable Cronbach alpha reliability value of 0.74 (George, Mallery, 2003). Additional validity testing was conducted to further enhanced the adapted scale.

Procedure

Formal permissions were sought from appropriate authorities in selected universities following ethical approval. Voluntary calls were made for student participation through their emails and willing students who signed formal consents were included in the study. Interested participants who met the inclusion criterion of being valid students were recruited. Due to the heightened COVID-19 infections in Ghana during the data collection period, we used an online survey approach. The entire data collection process lasted between May and July 2020.

Data analysis

Analysis of survey responses was conducted after data cleaning and transformation were completed. Descriptive analysis of frequency distribution with percentage responses was assessed for specific questions concerning knowledge regarding drugs and drug user issues. To analyse bivariate relationships for ordinal variables, Chi-square contingency tables were examined with commensurating probability values less than 0.05 deemed to be statistically significant. All analyses were done using the Stata Statistical Software 14.2 (StataCorp, 2015).

3. Results

Level of drug awareness among Ghanaian students

As can be seen from Table 1, the students appear to have a generally good level of awareness about drugs. Over 80 % of respondents reported that they had heard of cannabis. Interestingly, the majority of participants reported having heard of alcohol (95.7 %), cocaine (95.2 %), and heroin (80.2 %). However, fewer people reported having heard of drugs such as lysergic acid diethylamide [LSD] (28.7 %).

Table 1. Awareness of Illicit Drugs among Ghanaian Students

Types of Drugs	Frequency	Percentage (%)	
		Yes	No
Alcohol	537	95.7*	4.3
Amphetamines	255	45.5	54.5
Caffeine	489	87.2*	12.8
Cannabis, Marijuana, or Hashish	478	85.2*	14.8
Cocaine	534	95.2*	4.8
Heroin	450	80.2*	19.8
LSD	161	28.7	71.3

Nicotine	399	71.1*	28.9
Valium 5/10	279	50.3*	49.7

Notes: n=561. *More represented by over 50%

Students experience with cannabis use and knowledge of drug users

Responses in Table 2 indicate that most of the participants knew someone who smoke cannabis (61 %), as well as someone with a drug use problem (65 %). However, only a few (13 %) reported ever smoking cannabis personally.

Table 2. Students experiential knowledge of drugs and drug users

Variable	Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
I know someone who smokes cannabis	No	219	39
	Yes	342*	61
	Maybe	6	10
I have ever taken cannabis	No	488	87
	Yes	67	13
I know someone with a drug use problem	No	195	35
	Yes	366*	65

Notes: n=561. *More represented by over 50 %

Experiential knowledge of drug users, perceptions, and attitudes

Chi-square tests of independence were conducted to determine the associations between participants’ sociodemographic variables and personal knowledge of cannabis users (see Table 3 for details). Generally, more participants felt that drug addicts are not given a fair chance to get along in society, especially cannabis smokers (66 %), an idea also held by non-smokers too (44 %). Another favourable attitude is shown by more participants disapproval of the perception that drug addicts were criminals instead of victims. Even participants who don’t know someone with problem drug use (59 %) tended to see drug addicts more as victims rather than criminals and more of them (59 %) will not avoid those who abuse drugs. However, this view was strangely contrasted by cannabis smokers (34 %), even though 42 % of them were not sure whether they tend to avoid drug addicts.

Table 3. Experiential knowledge of drug users, perceptions, and attitudes

Drug addicts are not given a fair chance to get along in the society						
Have you ever taken cannabis?	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Total	X^2	ρ
Maybe	2 (33 %)	3 (50 %)	1 (17 %)	6	16.578	.035
No	163 (33 %)	111 (23 %)	214 (44 %)	488		
Yes	12 (18 %)	11 (16 %)	44 (66 %)	67		
Total	177	125	259	561		
I would see drug addicts more as criminals than victims						
I know someone with a drug use problem	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Total	X^2	ρ
No	115 (59 %)	20 (10 %)	60 (31 %)	195	16.793	.002
Yes	186 (51 %)	64 (17 %)	116 (32 %)	366		
Total	301	84	176	561		
I would tend to avoid someone who abuses drugs						
I know someone with a drug use problem	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Total	X^2	ρ

No	84 (43 %)	26 (13 %)	85 (44 %)	195	29.043	<.001
Yes	217 (59 %)	56 (15 %)	93 (26 %)	366		
Total	301	82	178	561		
I would tend to avoid someone who abuses drugs						
Have you ever taken cannabis?	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Total	X^2	ρ
Maybe	1 (17 %)	2 (33 %)	3 (50 %)	6	27.493	<.001
No	108 (22 %)	146 (30 %)	63 (48 %)	488		
Yes	16 (24 %)	28 (42 %)	16 (34 %)	67		
Total	125	176	82	561		
Almost all drug addicts are dangerous						
Have you ever taken cannabis?	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Total	X^2	ρ
Maybe	4 (66 %)	1 (17 %)	1 (17 %)	6	32.867	<.001
No	195 (40 %)	92 (19 %)	201 (41 %)	488		
Yes	40 (60 %)	8 (12 %)	19 (28 %)	67		
Total	239	101	221	561		
It would bother me to live near a drug addict						
Have you ever taken cannabis?	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Total	X^2	ρ
Maybe	1 (17 %)	3 (50 %)	2 (33 %)	6	31.005	<.001
No	132 (27 %)	75 (15 %)	281 (58 %)	488		
Yes	37 (55 %)	9 (13 %)	21 (32 %)	67		
Total	170	87	304	561		

Notes: n=561. X^2 =Chi-Square

4. Discussion

The results from our survey complement the existing data on students' knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes toward drug users. Our findings show that university students in Ghana had a generally good level of awareness of commonly used drugs. The majority of respondents reported having heard of alcohol, cocaine, and heroin. However, fewer people reported a fair awareness of drugs such as LSD. This may be attributable, at least in part, to the lower profile which these drugs have in the local media compared with alcohol, cannabis, and cocaine. For example, cannabis is known to be the most widely used illegal drug in Africa (Degenhardt et al, 2008). Also, alcohol advertisement has been shown to affect the consumption habits of university students in Ghana (Bremini, 2019). Another aspect of awareness of illicit drugs is participants' personal history of drug use, as well as personal knowledge of a drug user and problem drug user. In general, almost 13 % smoked cannabis while 61 % and 65 % were acquainted with cannabis users and problem drug users respectively. This finding supported the report by the United Nations Office of Drug and Crime (2017) that high drug use and related-health cost were highly associated with young people. This is also supported by the findings of Oppong Asante (2019) who observed drug use history even among high school students in Ghana.

Additionally, our findings indicated that the pattern of responses to questions about the perception and attitude of students toward drug users were positive. Largely, drug addicts were not necessarily characterised by seeing them as criminals or people to be avoided. However, there was an appreciable number of individuals that expressed fear towards drug addicts or users, and as such, would not like to live near them. Comparing this with findings in India, 59 % of the participants had a neutral attitude while 41 % of them had a positive attitude regarding drug addicts (Treveli, Devi, 2016). Consequently, our study showed that most participants were sympathetic, in the sense that they felt drug users and addicts were not given a fair chance to get along in society. Thus, society also has to take the blame for discriminating against such vulnerable individuals who rather need help than punishing them. Unfortunately, the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (2017) observed that stigma and discrimination were commonly applied to drug-dependent individuals. Also, their report noted that professionals working with them usually compromise the implementation of quality treatment interventions, development of treatment

facilities, training of health professionals, and investment in recovery programmes (United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, 2017).

5. Conclusion

This study has contributed to a better understanding of students' knowledge, perception, and attitudes regarding illicit drugs and their users in Ghana. Based on the research findings, it can be stated that:

- University students had generally good knowledge about most illicit drugs and harmful substances.
- They largely showed sympathy and positive attitudes towards problem drug users and felt that society should be more supportive than before.

Further studies on perceptions and attitudes of other stakeholders such as the community leaders like chiefs, religious leaders, police, prison officers, mental health service providers, and judiciary service workers are needed to understand to provide a holistic picture of current drug perceptions and attitudes in Ghana. Additional studies on drug policy reform acceptance by Ghanaians and state agencies could shape the debate along evidential lines to break the current stalemate between international best practices and domestic norms.

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7. Conflict of interest

We hereby declare that we have no conflict of interest in the conduct of this study or declaration of results

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