

Social Impact of Cannabis Smoking on Smokers in Owerri West LGA, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Cannabis is a weed derived from the cannabis sativa plant. It is usually smoked to get intoxicated. This act though rampant; seem not to have been socially accepted by the society. Thus, smokers of cannabis are labelled criminals and irresponsible even though these labels may be mere stereotype. In view of this, the study investigated the social impact of cannabis smoking on cannabis smokers. It tried to find out how cannabis smoking has affected the social relationship of cannabis smokers. The study adopted the labelling theory of Howard Becker because it explains the stereotypical stigma attached to cannabis smokers. The study adopted a qualitative research design and interviewed 2 criminologists, a Nigeria Drug, Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) commandant, 2 NDLEA officials and 10 cannabis smokers. Both primary and secondary sources of data collection techniques were adopted for this study however; findings were further discussed for better comprehension. The findings of this study revealed that, people do not disassociate themselves from cannabis smokers even though they believe cannabis smokers are criminals and are irresponsible because most criminals smoke cannabis. It was also revealed that smoking cannabis does not make individuals prone to criminal activities because it is not addictive but, could become a habit. Based on these findings, the study recommends that, government and non-government agencies (NGOs) create awareness on the negative consequences of smoking cannabis through the mass media and social media. It was also recommended that; the public be sensitized against negative stereotypes against cannabis users. In furtherance to this, law enforcement agencies should enforce the laws against cannabis and other drug producers, distributors and sellers so as to curb the spread of cannabis use in Owerri West LGA and Nigeria at large.

Keywords: Cannabis, Smoker, Social Effects.

Introduction

Background to the study

The various psychotropic compounds found in the cannabis plant are together referred to as cannabis. The Cannabis sativa plant is typically used to make cannabis. The plant has 104 distinct cannabinoids and at least 750 other compounds (Radwan *et al.*, 2015; Izzo *et al.*, 2009). Delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), cannabidiol (CBD), and cannabinol are the three main cannabinoids found in the cannabis plant (CBN).

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The main psychoactive cannabinoid is THC, and CBD, a non-psychoactive cannabinoid, comes in second.

Typically, cannabis is used in a water pipe or smoked as marijuana in a hand-rolled cigarette that may also contain tobacco to aid in burning (Hall & Degenhardt, 2009). To guarantee that the most THC is absorbed into their bodies, cannabis smokers, or individuals that consume cannabis normally, inhale the smoke deeply and hold their breath. This helps them to get intoxicated and also, to derive the maximum satisfaction they desire from the drug.

Brands *et al.*, (1998) stated that cannabis could have short-term health effect on individuals. According to them, these effects could be; intoxication marked by disturbances in the level of consciousness, cognition, perception as well as an effect in behaviour, and other psychophysiological functions and responses. He further added that, the magnitude of these effects usually, would depend on the dose used, the route of administration and the mind-set of the user.

In support of this assertion, Radhakrishnan *et al.*, (2014) opined that, THC binds to the brain's cannabinoid receptors and interferes with the body's natural cannabinoid system, resulting in possible euphoria, anxiety, hallucinations, or delusions.

Throwing more light on the negative impact of cannabis, Asbridge *et al.*, (2014) and Madras (2015) stated that, cannabis smokers are at least four times more likely to get into accident while driving and are more likely to get fired from their job than non-cannabis smokers (Compton *et al.*, 2014).

The Office on Drugs and Crime of the United Nations According to the 2013 World Drug Report, cannabis is the most widely used illegal drug worldwide. They claim that this may be the result of expanding studies on the therapeutic applications of cannabidiol (CBD) and delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), two compounds found in cannabis plants that have been shown to be effective in treating a variety of medical conditions, including glaucoma and epilepsy (Merritt *et al.*, 1980; Merritt *et al.*, 1981; Cunha *et al.*, 1980).

Cannabis can also be used to boost appetite in HIV patients, relieve pain and nausea in cancer patients getting chemotherapy, and treat both conditions, according to Mechoulam *et al.*, (2002) and Carlini (2004).

Despite these benefits, the global problem of cannabis smoking persists (The United Nations Organization on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2005). After Oceania and North America, Africa has the third-highest prevalence of cannabis usage in the world, according to estimates that range from 21.6 to 59.1 million users, or 3.8% to 10.4% of the population, in 2015 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2015).

The use of cannabis by adults and adolescents in Nigeria has become more worrisome especially as several users tend to experience psychological health problems like psychologically imbalance, insanity and maladjusted school situations. This effect extends to psychic addiction (the need to unwind, enjoy, be pleased, and feel comfortable), unanticipated accidents, increased focus on one's own internal processes (thoughts, feelings, and perceptions), respiratory issues, and memory impairment (NDLEA, 2015). According to Osarenren (2002), cannabis addiction can lead to truancy and absenteeism from job and school. He claimed that it might also result in aggressive behaviour against friends, family, and teachers, as well as high-risk sexual behaviour and armed robbery.

Anthony (2012) argued that cannabis use can cause personality disorders in young people, including stubbornness, poor social skills, depression, a sense of hopelessness, disrespect for elders, disruption of interpersonal relationships, particularly within the family, criminal behaviour, academic failure, vocational issues, and failure to experience normal adolescent growth (Fabuyi, 2000).

Peer pressure, parental influence, parental omission due to death, divorce, separation, or strife, and cannabis use have all been linked, according to the Nigerian National Drug Law Enforcement Agency

(NDLEA, 2015; Obianwu, 2005). Akanbi and Ajiboye (2014) contributed to this by stating that marijuana use is linked to family dissolution, violence, child abuse, wife abuse, and sexual abuse in various societies.

Other researchers like Ajayi and Ekundayo (2010) and Akanbi and Ajiboye (2014) went further to investigate the effect of cannabis on the wider society while Nwankwo, Obi and Nwosu (2013), Abdu-Raheem (2013) and Agbonghale and Okaka (2014) investigated the effect of cannabis on academic performance of users. But, literature seems to be limited in respect to the social implication of cannabis smoking on smokers.

However, there is no doubt that Cannabis smoking remains a social threat especially in contemporary times where its usage seems to have increased rapidly and has continued to trend amongst Nigerian youths. In spite of its predominant use, cannabis smoking may not have been socially accepted by the public. In most cases, cannabis smokers are tagged as irresponsible and criminals even when these allegations may only base on the habit of smoking cannabis. In some cases, these individuals are deprived of social and economic opportunities especially, as they are ascribe to be negative influence on the young and the society, at large.

In view of this, this study investigated the social impact of cannabis smoking on smokers in Owerri West LGA. The areas used for this study are places that close to Federal University of Technology (FUTO) and Federal Polytechnic Nekedi; where a large population of youths smoke cannabis. These places are; Umuchimma, Eziofodo and Nekedi. The study aims at assessing how cannabis smoking has affected the social relationships of smokers in Owerri West LGA.

Research Questions

The study gave answers to the following questions. They are:

1. How has smoking cannabis affected the social relationship of smokers in Owerri West LGA?
2. How does the society perceive cannabis smokers in Owerri West LGA?
3. How best can the social relationship of cannabis smokers be improved in Owerri West LGA?

Literature review

An Overview of Cannabis

The Cannabis sativa plant is typically used to make cannabis. According to the United Nations Organization on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2005, the usage of this plant was a factor in 119 000 emergency cases in 2002. According to data gathered by the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) Programme of the National Institute of Justice on the percentage of adult arrestees who tested positive for cannabis, this report showed that 41% of arrestees were male while 27% were female and tested positive for cannabis (Rosalie, 2010).

In a related study, Bennett (2008), who used 225 arrestees as his sample, discovered that 75% of the participants tested positive for cannabis at least once. He also noted that income-generating crimes including several types of theft, frequent shoplifting, handling stolen property, and other crimes like corruption, fraud, embezzlement, money laundering, promiscuous sex, and child abuse were associated with drug use.

Ajayi and Ekundayo (2010) discovered a strong link between cannabis use and anti-social behaviour in another study on cannabis. They claim that the majority of cannabis users frequently participate in organised crimes such drug trafficking, prostitution, adolescent killings, and other issues relating to social and criminal justice. They also discovered that teenage cannabis users have a history of engaging in a variety of antisocial behaviours, such as binge drinking, reckless driving, and unsafe sexual behaviour.

The association between cannabis use and criminality, according to Inciardi *et al.*, (2003), is interactive. They made the point that drug use is financed by crime, that drug use is encouraged by continued drug use, and that drug use is encouraged by increased crime.

Cannabis addicts will virtually do anything to earn enough money to support their habit, according to a 2009 United Nations report. These users typically make the most money from theft, prostitution, and drug dealing, according to Parker (2006). As a result, he asserted forcefully that there are some obvious connections between cannabis usage and criminal behaviour, particularly given the fact that many crimes are committed while under the influence of narcotics like cannabis.

Bennett (2008) asserted that both cannabis use and the use of other substances contribute to crime when analysing the relationship between criminal behaviour and cannabis use. He claims that the necessity for money or items to purchase narcotics drives criminal behaviour.

The social effects of drug use, such as cannabis use, on behaviour, according to Abdullahi *et al.*, (2014), are best understood when viewed from the abuser's relationship with his immediate community in the areas of moral decay, school dropout, high crime rates, family disintegration, prostitution, and rise in the number of psychopaths. Abdullahi *et al.*, (2014) noted that youths find it difficult to think or work without drugs when discussing the subject of moral degradation. They continued by saying that most parents find it challenging to discipline kids who are high on any kind of drug, and as a result, the majority of kids no longer respect their parents.

The above literature reviewed that cannabis smokers engage in criminal activities, unethical behaviours and risky sexual behaviours. But, these studies failed to look at the social relationship of cannabis smokers and how smoking cannabis has affected the social life of smokers.

Social Effect of Cannabis Smoking

Chikere and Mayowa (2011) stressed that drug addiction causes economic waste because it has a high financial cost for the individual user of drugs like cannabis (Gropper, 2005). Vandalism, weapon carrying, rape, test fraud, school violence, building, cultism, truancy, and anti-social behaviours are frequently linked to drug use, such as cannabis usage and drunkenness, according to Sanni *et al.*, (2010). According to their opinion, when these users are apprehended by Law Enforcement Agencies like the police, the money that they should be using to care for their welfare is typically paid to the police for their bailout.

The Drug Demand Reduction Unit, NDLEA, (2015b) reported that the impact of cannabis on youth's behaviour is financial mismanagement and loss of property, which supports this viewpoint. They claim that those who are heavily dependent on cannabis find it difficult to manage their finances and establish financial plans. They reduce their financial capacity since they use all of their income on marijuana.

According to Obianwu (2005), using illegal drugs like cannabis has led to several drug-related car accidents and health issues, including as disruptions of normal reproductive processes and long-term harm to the brain, heart, and lungs. He claims that these are major medical issues that will cost a lot of money to treat.

Similar research was conducted by Essien *et al.*, (2016) in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, on cannabis use and behavioural outcomes among adolescent youths. In Nigeria's Akwa Ibom State, they looked into how cannabis use affected young people's behaviour in the Ibesikpo Asutan Local Government Area. The study discovered a substantial link between teen disrespectful behaviour and cannabis use. Additionally, they discovered a strong link between cannabis usage and criminal behaviour in young adolescents. Further research found a strong correlation between cannabis usage and poor money management among young people in the study area.

The study advised parents to be active in providing care for their children, especially by keeping an eye on the company that their children keep. The study suggested that health education curricula for primary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions should include campaigns against cannabis use with a special

emphasis on the nature and effects of such drugs. Finally, the report advised that law enforcement agencies (Nigeria Police Force, National Drug Law Enforcement Agency, and the National Agency for Food, Drug Administration and Control) step up their efforts to combat drug misuse, including cannabis use.

In 2019, Sujitta, Manop, and Poonrut conducted a study on the economic, social, and health implications of cannabis use in Thailand. According to the study, people who use cannabis experience health issues. It was discovered that the potential financial effects of cannabis therapy include medical expenditures, lost income for cannabis users and their careers, costs associated with law enforcement, and potential legal costs. The study didn't find any expenses associated with unintentional losses, interpersonal friction, or criminal activity brought on by cannabis usage.

This literature focused more on the health and economic implications of cannabis use. Some other literature that focused on the social implications of cannabis use, failed to assess its social implications on users (smokers) but looked at it from the perspective of how cannabis affect the behaviour of users. Therefore, in a departure from these studies, this study will investigate the effect of smoking cannabis on the social life and social relationship of smokers.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the Labelling theory of Howard Becker because it best explains the attachment of stigmatizing stereotypes on individuals who exhibit behaviours that are termed “inappropriate” by the society or social control agents.

This theory postulates that social control agents and the society ascribes to some human behaviours as inappropriate and criminal and thus, begin to treat individuals who engage in such behaviour on the basis of the label they have attached to such behaviour.

Based on this theory, the society acknowledges cannabis as a drug and those who smoke cannabis as drug users or addicts. They further believe that smoking cannabis is common amongst criminals and that, such behaviour cannot be exhibited by responsible people.

Thus, they stereotypically stigmatize all cannabis smokers as criminals and irresponsible people. They therefore, discourage their children and relatives from associating with such people and evict them from their house. In eventuality they are in a position to employ these individuals who smoke, they more often than not do not offer them employment.

Similarly, when a crime has been committed, those who smoke cannabis are likely to be accused than non-cannabis smokers. Cannabis smokers are usually victims of abuses that are based on the stereotypical stigma which the society has placed on them.

Research Methodology

The study investigated the social impact of cannabis smoking on smokers in Owerri West LGA. The study is conducted at Umuchima, Eziobodo and Nekedi; where a lot of youth smoke cannabis. The study adopted qualitative research design because it is effective for a study like this that relies on the opinion of individuals. The study interviewed 15 persons which are; 2 criminologists, a Nigeria Drug, Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) commandant, 2 NDLEA officials and 10 cannabis smokers. Also, primary and secondary sources of data collection technique were used to gather data for this study.

Research Findings

Do people disassociate themselves from you because you smoke cannabis? / Do people dissociate themselves from cannabis smokers?

7 out of the 10 smokers that were interviewed stated that people do not disassociate themselves from them because they smoke cannabis and even if they do, they have not noticed it. The other 3 smokers stated that some people do not like associating with them but they do not really care.

The NDLEA officials and the criminologist stated that some people wouldn't mind associating with cannabis smokers while some would. One of the criminologist stated that those who feel cannabis smoking is against their religious faith and those who live a conservative life may not associate with those who smoke cannabis while those who are care free wouldn't mind associating with them. The NDLEA commandant stated that when those who do not smoke cannabis begin to hang out with those who do, they might be influenced into taking it. He further added that, though they rarely arrest drug users, if the law enforcement agencies raid a "joint", both smokers and non-smokers are usually arrested so that is why it is safer to disassociate oneself with cannabis smokers.

Do people believe that cannabis smokers are criminals? Why?

All the interviews agreed that people believe that cannabis smokers are criminals but they however, stated that it is not true. The commandant stated that most criminals smoke cannabis especially, before the carryout their criminal acts. The criminologists stated that it is difficult to disassociate a criminal act from cannabis smoking. One of the criminologists added that, those who made such assertions are not necessarily right but may not be far from the truth as smoking cannabis is a criminal act.

Are cannabis smokers irresponsible?

All the smokers stated that cannabis smoking has nothing to do with one being responsible or irresponsible as it usually, has to do with the way of life of an individual. One of the smokers gave an illustration with a tout and a banker who smoke cannabis and stated that their level of education and job differs and so will their behaviour.

In support of this, the NDLEA officials and the criminologist state that cannabis smoking is a wrong and unreliable way of measuring if an individual is responsible or not.

Are cannabis smokers criminals?

All the smokers stated that cannabis smokers are not criminals but one of the smokers stated that it doesn't mean one cannot commit a crime when he/she is under the influence of cannabis. The NDLEA commandant stated that, though it is a criminal offence to smoke cannabis, they often treat smokers as sick people and not criminals. The criminologists added that though smoking cannabis is a crime in Nigeria, and cannabis is often used by criminals, not all smokers are criminals. The NDLEA officials also, affirmed to this that, smokers are not criminals.

Do you think smoking cannabis makes one prone to criminal activities?

The smokers stated that smoking cannabis does not make one prone to crime. One of the smokers however stated that, except in exceptional cases where it's the individuals first time or the individual took the cannabis with other intoxicating substances.

The NDLEA official stated that cannabis isn't much of an addictive drug but, could become an habit when used regularly. According to him, because cannabis is not addictive, it reduces the likelihood of engaging in crime to feed the habit when the compulsion comes. The criminologist further added that most criminal activities amongst cannabis smokers are done out of free will or intoxication from other drugs and not the influence of cannabis.

Do all your friends smoke cannabis? / Can cannabis smokers keep friends that do not smoke cannabis?

All the smokers stated that they had friends who do not smoke cannabis except 2. The criminologists and NDLEA official stated that though it is unlikely for cannabis smokers to keep friends who do not smoke or abuse any drug, it isn't impossible. According to them cannabis smoking tends to unite smokers and help them feed their habit even when they have no fund.

How likely are those who smoke cannabis able to keep their job?

All the interviewees stated that cannabis smokers are able to keep their jobs. One of the smoker stated that, smokers do not smoke while working or around the office premises. Thus, the employer or other employees may not know the individual smokes cannabis.

One of the criminologist further added that cannabis smoking within the office premises could cause management to fire an employee.

Discussion of Findings

The research findings reviewed that, cannabis smokers are not necessarily, criminals and are not irresponsible. Though people believe they are criminals because they smoke cannabis but, this label placed on them are mere stereotype and not based on fact.

These individuals are also, not prone to crime because, cannabis isn't so addictive. It was reviewed that individuals who commit crime are more often intoxicated by other drugs or carry out those criminal acts based on free will.

The study also found out that, people do not disassociate with cannabis smokers but, association with them could cause the individual to get arrested or be influenced into smoking cannabis. Likewise, cannabis smokers keep friends that do not smoke cannabis even though some others don't but most smokers keep their job especially as they do not smoke within their office premises or during working hours.

Conclusion

Cannabis is an illegal drug that is commonly smoked in Nigeria by youths. Its usage has become a social problem especially, as it threatens the effective functioning of the brain and body as a whole. More worrisome is the link that has been established between cannabis smoking and crime, unethical behaviours and risky sexual behaviour; which seem to have influenced the negative stereotypical label attached to smoking cannabis over the years.

Though, most criminals smoke cannabis, some individuals who smoke cannabis are not criminals and are not irresponsible. These individual keep their job and play their role to the families and the society at large. In most cases, these individuals are not prone to crime except, individuals who use cannabis in combination with other intoxicating and addictive drugs like cocaine, codeine etc.

Basically, their relationships are not based on their smoking habit but on their personality as individuals. Thus, even though they tend to keep friends who also smoke cannabis, they also keep friends who do not smoke cannabis.

Recommendation

The following recommendations were made based on the findings above. They are:

Creation of Awareness: the government and non-government agencies (NGOs) should create awareness on the negative consequences of smoking cannabis through the mass media and social media.

The negative consequences of drugs like cannabis should be added to the school's curriculum. This should also incorporate counselling, rehabilitation and other ways to help drugs users

Provision of Rehabilitation: government should provide rehabilitation centres for drug users like cannabis smokers and also, make information about these centres easily assessable to the public.

Enforcement of Law: the law enforcement agencies should enforce the law against cannabis and other drug producers, distributors and sellers.

Sensitisation against Negative Stereotypes: there is need to sensitize the public against negative stereotypes against cannabis users. Rather, they should be sensitized to treat them as sick people and try to help their rehabilitation process.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors have no conflict of interest.

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