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ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES OF THE NATIONAL DRUG LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCY IN CURBING SUBSTANCE ABUSE AMONG STUDENTS IN SELECTED PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN ABUJA, NIGERIA.

Oleh Cyril Onyemaechi, Ph.D & Dennis Awazi Norah

Department of Mass Communication, Veritas University, Abuja, Nigeria
OlehC@veritas.edu.ng/ cyriloleh@gmail.com; awazidennis2@gmail.com

Abstract

This study assesses the public relations strategies employed by the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) in curbing substance abuse among students in selected private universities in Abuja, Nigeria. The research was driven by the growing concern over rising substance abuse among university students, especially in private institutions and the need to evaluate the effectiveness of the NDLEA's communication efforts in addressing the problem. The study is anchored on the Two-Way Symmetrical Model of Public Relations by Grunig and Hunt (1984) as its primary theoretical framework, supported by the Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), the Health Belief Model (Rosenstock, 1974), the Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 2003) and Communication Theory (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). The study adopted a descriptive survey research design with a population of approximately 7,000 students across selected private universities in Abuja. Using Yamane's formula, a sample size of 378 respondents was determined and selected through stratified and simple random sampling techniques to ensure representativeness across faculties and levels. A structured questionnaire was the primary instrument for data collection. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics of frequency counts, percentages, means and standard deviations and inferential statistics of chi-square tests and correlation analysis to examine relationships between demographic factors and perception of campaign effectiveness. The findings revealed a relatively high level of awareness and improved knowledge among students about substance abuse, largely attributed to

NDLEA's campaigns. However, the translation of awareness into actual behavioural change remained limited due to cultural dissonance, insufficient digital engagement, social stigma and a lack of sustained institutional support. Significant relationships were found between students' demographics and their perception of campaign effectiveness. In the light of these challenges, the study recommended that there is the need for stronger institutional partnerships, peer-led interventions and the strategic use of social media so as to enhance message impact and behavioural change among students in private universities in Abuja, Nigeria.

Keywords: *Public Relations Strategies, NDLEA, Substance Abuse, University Students, Private Universities, Behavioural Change, Campaign Effectiveness*

Introduction

Globally, substance abuse remains one of the most persistent public health challenges affecting millions of young people and threatening the social and economic stability of nations. International reports continue to show rising trends in substance use, particularly among youth and university-aged populations whose developmental stage and social environments make them highly vulnerable (UNODC, 2023). According to UNODC (2023), approximately 284 million people aged 15–64 used substances at least once in 2021, representing a 26% increase over the previous decade a trajectory that signals not a temporary crisis but a deepening structural problem. This growing trend has triggered intensified efforts by governments and international organizations to design and implement effective strategies to curb abuse and addiction. UNODC (2022) stressed that substance abuse is a complex health and social problem that requires coordinated, multifaceted responses including prevention, treatment and enforcement. Yet despite these efforts, the numbers continue to climb, raising a critical question that sits at the heart of this study if interventions are being implemented, why is the problem still worsening? Among the populations most vulnerable to substance abuse are young people, especially university students. This demographic is frequently exposed to social and academic pressures that significantly increase the risk of experimenting with illicit substances. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) estimated that around 35% of university students globally have used some form of illicit substance, with varying patterns of use and abuse. WHO further emphasized that addressing substance abuse among youth, particularly in educational settings, is critical to safeguarding their future health and productivity. This position underscores not merely the scale of the problem but its location: the university campus has become a frontline environment where substance abuse prevention must be actively fought, not passively hoped for. The consequences of inaction are severe. Johnston et al. (2021) showed that students who abuse substances are more likely to experience poor academic outcomes, increased absenteeism and higher dropout rates. Substance abuse is further linked to mental health disorders, risky sexual behaviour and involvement in criminal activities (Murray et al., 2020). The National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) was established in 1989 as the primary government agency responsible for combating drug trafficking and substance abuse in Nigeria (NDLEA Act, 1989). The agency's mandate includes drug interdiction, public enlightenment and rehabilitation, aimed at reducing both the availability and demand for illicit substances across the country. Despite these efforts, substance abuse remains a critical and worsening problem in Nigeria, especially among the youth. NDLEA (2018) revealed that approximately 14.4 million Nigerians aged 15–64 use at least one psychoactive substance, with young adults and students constituting a significant portion of this population. Cannabis remains the most commonly abused substance, followed by codeine and tramadol, which have seen alarming increases in misuse in recent years (UNODC, 2020). Marwa (2021) stated that the fight against substance abuse is not only a law enforcement issue but a societal battle that requires strategic communication and education to win the hearts and minds of young Nigerians. The persistence of these figures despite years of NDLEA activity points directly to a core problem: the agency's public relations strategies, however well-intentioned, are not producing the depth of behavioural change required. Public relations strategies

are the primary tools through which agencies like NDLEA attempt to shape public perception, increase awareness and promote behavioural change regarding substance abuse. PR involves planned communication efforts designed to build relationships and influence attitudes among target audiences (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2019).

Research Questions

- i. What public relations strategies does the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) employ to curb substance abuse among students in selected private universities in Abuja?
- ii. How effective are the NDLEA's public relations campaigns in influencing students' knowledge, attitudes and behaviours toward substance abuse in these universities?
- iii. What challenges does the NDLEA face in implementing its public relations strategies within private universities in Abuja?
- iv. How do students perceive the NDLEA's public relations efforts aimed at curbing substance abuse in private university settings?

Hypothesis

This study did not formulate formal null/alternate hypotheses. In place of hypotheses, the study was guided by the research objectives stated below, which were tested using inferential statistics (Chi-Square Test and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient) presented later under "Test of Hypothesis."

The broad objective is to assess the public relations strategies employed by the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) for curbing substance abuse among students in selected private universities in Abuja, Nigeria. Specifically, the study aims:

- i. To identify the various public relations strategies used by the NDLEA to address substance abuse among students in selected private universities in Abuja.
- ii. To evaluate the effectiveness of NDLEA's public relations campaigns in changing students' knowledge, attitudes and behaviours towards substance abuse.
- iii. To examine the challenges encountered by the NDLEA in implementing public relations strategies in private universities in Abuja.
- iv. To assess students' perceptions of the NDLEA's public relations efforts and recommend ways to improve the impact of these campaigns in private university settings.

Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Clarification

2.1.1 Public Relations Strategies

Public relations strategies are systematic and deliberate communication efforts aimed at building and sustaining mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its various publics (Cutlip et. al., 2006). These strategies encompass a range of communication tools and approaches designed to influence public perception and behaviour positively (Gregory, 2015).

In the context of this study, public relations strategies refer specifically to the diverse communication methods employed by the NDLEA to prevent and reduce substance abuse among university students. Such strategies include nationwide media campaigns, educational outreach programmes, collaborative efforts with universities and public enlightenment activities (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Wright & Hinson, 2012). Research has demonstrated that well-structured public relations campaigns can effectively shape public attitudes and promote healthier behavioural choices by increasing awareness and disseminating accurate information (Smith, 2017; Botan & Hazleton, 2006). In addition, the application of integrated communication strategies, combining traditional media and digital platforms, has been shown to enhance the reach and impact of these campaigns (Theaker, 2017).

2.1.2 Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is defined as the harmful or hazardous consumption of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs, which negatively affect an individual's health and social functioning (WHO, 2014). This behaviour is often characterized by repeated use that leads to physical and mental health complications, social dysfunction and failure to satisfy academic or occupational responsibilities (National Institute on Drug Abuse [NIDA], 2020; WHO, 2018). Among university students, substance abuse has been linked to a range of adverse outcomes, including diminished academic performance, increased risk of accidents, mental health issues and the emergence of social problems such as isolation and increased disciplinary cases (Aminu & Bello, 2023; Ojo, 2021; Hingson et al., 2017). Understanding these dynamics is critical in developing tailored prevention efforts that address the specific vulnerabilities and circumstances of student populations (Johnston et al., 2020).

2.1.3 Effectiveness of Communication Campaigns

The success of communication campaigns is evaluated by their ability to achieve specific goals, such as raising awareness, shifting attitudes and ultimately changing behaviours related to substance abuse (Wilkinson & Pringle, 2019). Grunig and Hunt (1984) proposed that two-way symmetrical communication, which emphasizes dialogue and mutual understanding between the organization and its publics, is more effective than one-way communication models in creating lasting behavioural change. Studies further underscore that campaigns that are culturally sensitive and tailored to the target audience's socio-demographic characteristics generate higher levels of engagement and better outcomes (Brown & Basil, 1995; Noar, 2006). For instance, in university settings with diverse student bodies, customizing messages to reflect cultural and contextual realities improves receptivity and behavioural intentions (Hornik & Yanovitzky, 2003). The inclusion of interactive communication channels, such as social media and participatory workshops, also enhances message retention and encourages active involvement (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012).

2.1.4 Student Perception and Engagement

Student perception pertains to how individuals interpret and internalize anti-drug messages, while engagement refers to their proactive involvement in prevention activities (Ojo, 2021). The literature reveals that social stigma surrounding substance abuse can significantly inhibit students from acknowledging problems or seeking help, thereby undermining campaign effectiveness (Corrigan, 2004; Livingston et al., 2012). Moreover, peer influence is a critical factor shaping students' attitudes and behaviours toward substance use (Borsari & Carey, 2001). Campaigns designed to reduce stigma and foster open dialogue have been found to improve help-seeking behaviours and participation rates (UNODC, 2019; Earnshaw et al., 2013). The active engagement of students through feedback mechanisms and peer-led interventions strengthens the two-way communication process and allows for more adaptive and responsive program designs (Valente, 2010).

2.1.5 National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA)

The NDLEA, established by the Nigerian government in 1989, serves as the principal agency tasked with combating drug trafficking and substance abuse through enforcement, prevention and public education initiatives (NDLEA, 2018). Its public relations strategies include nationwide media campaigns, partnerships with educational institutions, community outreach programmes and collaboration with other stakeholders to increase awareness and discourage drug use (NDLEA, 2020; Ojo, 2021). The effectiveness of these initiatives is pivotal to Nigeria's broader drug control efforts, particularly given the growing challenges of substance abuse among youths and university students (Aminu & Bello, 2023). Research highlights that while the NDLEA has made strides in public communication, gaps remain in tailoring messages to specific demographics and in fostering two-way communication to engage students meaningfully (Akinola, 2019; Uche, 2022). Strengthening these areas could enhance the agency's impact in promoting substance-free lifestyles.

2.2 Empirical Review

Aminu and Bello (2023) conducted a study to examine the effectiveness of the NDLEA's public relations campaigns in reducing substance abuse among university students in Abuja. Using a survey design with questionnaires analyzed through descriptive statistics and regression analysis, the study found that while the campaigns had moderate success, they were notably less effective in private universities due to poor student engagement and cultural barriers. The study recommended that NDLEA tailor its campaigns to better address the diverse demographics of students and increase interactive outreach efforts. However, the study relied heavily on self-reported data, which may have introduced social desirability bias, potentially affecting the accuracy of the responses.

Ojo (2021) assessed the roles of social stigma and peer influence in substance abuse among Nigerian university students using a mixed methods approach that combined qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys. The data were analysed through thematic analysis and it revealed that social stigma discouraged students from seeking help, while peer pressure contributed to increased substance use. Based on these findings, the study recommended that educational institutions establish confidential support systems and peer-led intervention programmes. A limitation of the study was its focus on a single public university, which limits the applicability of findings to private university settings.

Eze and Nwankwo (2020) evaluated the impact of NDLEA's media campaigns on public awareness of drug abuse risks within Lagos universities. Employing content analysis of media materials alongside student surveys analyzed via frequency counts and chi-square tests, the study concluded that while the campaigns successfully raised awareness, they failed to significantly influence behaviour change among students. The study suggested that campaigns should incorporate emotional appeals and personal narratives to enhance their impact. The study, however, did not extensively explore alternative communication channels such as social media, which could have broadened its scope.

Ibrahim and Musa (2022) examined the effectiveness of NDLEA's collaboration with university management in curbing substance abuse among students in northern Nigerian universities. Using a mixed-method approach, with surveys analyzed by descriptive statistics and interviews subjected to thematic analysis, the study found that collaborative efforts improved awareness but were hindered by inconsistent policy enforcement. The study recommended stronger partnerships between NDLEA and university authorities to ensure sustained anti-drug initiatives. A limitation was the regional focus, limiting applicability across other Nigerian regions.

Chinedu and Okeke (2022) investigated the influence of peer education programmes on drug abuse prevention in South-eastern Nigerian private universities. The study employed a quasi-experimental design and analyzed pre- and post-intervention data using paired sample t-tests. Findings showed that peer education significantly reduced substance use rates and improved students' knowledge of drug risks. The authors suggested expanding peer education as a key strategy in public relations campaigns. However, the study's short duration limits understanding of long-term impacts.

Abubakar and Abdullahi (2021) explored the perceptions of students regarding the credibility of NDLEA's public relations messages in universities across Abuja. Using survey research and analyzed through factor analysis and regression, the study concluded that perceived credibility positively influenced students' acceptance of anti-drug messages. It recommended that NDLEA enhance transparency and trustworthiness in its communication. The study's limitation was the narrow focus on Abuja, which may not represent other Nigerian states.

Emmanuel and Akinola (2019) evaluated the impact of NDLEA's campus outreach programmes on student drug use behaviour in Lagos private universities. The study used a longitudinal survey design

to analyze the data with repeated measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). Results indicated a modest decline in reported drug use over one academic year. The authors advised continuous and intensified outreach efforts. The study's limitation was attrition of participants over time, which could bias results.

Bello and Adetola (2018) analyzed the effectiveness of NDLEA's social media campaigns in influencing students' attitudes towards drug abuse prevention in Nigerian universities. Using a cross-sectional survey and regression analysis, the study found positive associations between exposure to social media content and improved attitudes toward drug avoidance. It recommended increased investment in digital communication strategies. However, the study did not account for the influence of offline communication.

Sani and Usman (2016) investigated the knowledge, attitude and practices of Nigerian university students toward NDLEA's drug prevention programmes. Using descriptive surveys analyzed with frequency and chi-square tests, the study found that while knowledge was generally high, attitudes and practices lagged behind. Recommendations included enhancing motivational components in PR strategies. The study was limited by its cross-sectional design.

Smith and Jones (2022) investigated the effectiveness of campus-wide alcohol and drug prevention programmes among university students in the United States. Using a longitudinal survey design with data analyzed through structural equation modeling, the study found that comprehensive prevention programmes significantly reduced binge drinking and illicit drug use over two academic years. The authors recommended integrating peer-led initiatives with professional counseling services. A limitation was the study's focus on a single university, limiting generalizability.

Chen et al. (2022) evaluated the effectiveness of PR-driven anti-drug campaigns on social media platforms in China. Employing a quasi-experimental design and content analysis, the research demonstrated increased engagement and positive shifts in attitudes toward drug prevention among youths. The authors advocated for leveraging influencers and interactive content. However, the study did not measure long-term behaviour change.

Garcia and Martinez (2021) assessed the reach and reception of anti-drug PR campaigns in Spain using cross-sectional surveys and regression analyses. Results indicated that campaigns significantly raised awareness but failed to fully address underlying social factors driving drug use. They recommended more community-focused messaging. The study was limited by self-report biases.

Svensson and Olsson (2019) analyzed Sweden's national PR strategies against drug abuse using content analysis and surveys. Their study found that consistent, clear messaging combined with school-based programmes enhanced knowledge and reduced drug use intentions. They suggested sustained funding for these integrated campaigns. The limitation was a lack of longitudinal data.

Theoretical Review

2.3.1 Communication Theory

The Communication Theory seeks to explain the process through which information is transmitted from a sender to a receiver. The foundational work by Shannon and Weaver (1949) describes communication as a linear process involving several key components: the sender, the message, the channel, the receiver and potential noise that can distort the message. The primary objective of this theory is to ensure that messages are encoded, transmitted and decoded effectively so that the receiver interprets the message as the sender intended.

This theory's main thrust is on message clarity, the efficiency of the communication channel and feedback mechanisms to confirm understanding. Its relevance to this study lies in the necessity for

the NDLEA to deliver clear, concise and impactful messages about substance abuse to university students. Effective communication minimizes misunderstandings and ensures that anti-messages resonate with the audience. However, the theory has been criticized for its overly simplistic, linear view that does not sufficiently account for complex social, cultural and psychological factors that affect how messages are interpreted (Berlo, 1960; Shannon & Weaver, 1949). It also initially neglects the importance of feedback and two-way communication, which are crucial in public relations contexts where dialogue is key to behaviour change (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

2.3.2 Social Cognitive Theory

The Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), formulated by Bandura (1986), aims to explain how individuals learn new behaviours by observing others within a social context. The theory emphasizes the reciprocal interaction between personal factors, behaviour and environmental influences a concept known as reciprocal determinism. Central to SCT is the idea of observational learning, where individuals imitate behaviours demonstrated by role models. Self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations, is critical for behaviour change, as it affects motivation and persistence.

This theory is highly relevant to NDLEA's public relations campaigns, which often rely on promoting positive role models, peer influence and reinforcing messages that encourage students to avoid substance abuse. It provides a framework for understanding how behavioural norms around substance use can be changed through modelled behaviours and social reinforcement (Bandura, 1986; Zimmerman, 2000). However, SCT may overlook deeper emotional or unconscious motives for behaviour and sometimes overemphasizes the power of observation without fully addressing other factors like biological predispositions or socio-economic constraints (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

2.3.3 Health Belief Model (HBM)

The Health Belief Model developed by Rosenstock (1974) is designed to explain and predict individuals' engagement in health-related behaviours by focusing on their attitudes and beliefs. The model asserts that individuals' decisions to act are influenced by their perceived susceptibility to a health threat, the perceived severity of the threat, the perceived benefits of taking action and the perceived barriers or costs of the action. Additional components include cues to action (triggers that prompt behaviour change) and self-efficacy. The HBM's objective is to provide a framework for understanding why people do or do not engage in preventive health behaviours.

This model is particularly useful for the NDLEA as it helps tailor public relations messages that effectively highlight the risks of substance abuse while promoting the benefits of abstinence and addressing barriers such as stigma or peer pressure (Carpenter, 2010; Rosenstock, 1974). Despite its widespread use, a key limitation of HBM is its assumption that individuals make rational decisions about their health, which neglects emotional, social and environmental factors that can heavily influence behaviour (Janz & Becker, 1984).

2.3.4 Diffusion of Innovations Theory

The Diffusion of Innovations Theory, introduced by Rogers (2003), seeks to explain how new ideas, products, or behaviours spread through populations over time. It identifies a process where individuals move through stages knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation and confirmation when adopting innovations. The theory emphasizes the roles of communication channels, social systems, time and the characteristics of the innovation itself (such as relative advantage and compatibility) in influencing the rate of adoption.

This theory is highly relevant for assessing how NDLEA's anti-drug campaigns are received by students, offering insights into why some students adopt preventive behaviours while others resist. It also informs the strategic use of opinion leaders and peer influencers to facilitate adoption. The major

critique of this theory is that it largely focuses on social-level diffusion processes and may insufficiently address individual-level psychological factors or external constraints affecting adoption (Rogers, 2003; Greenhalgh, et. al, 2004).

Data Analysis

3.1. Objective 1: PR Strategies Used by NDLEA

This objective assessed students' awareness and knowledge of NDLEA's public relations strategies. Awareness was high (87.8%, mean = 4.12) and most students could also identify specific strategy types such as media campaigns, campus outreach and peer-led initiatives (83.8%, mean = 3.97). Both items showed low variability, indicating consistent responses across the sample.

Table 3.1: Public Relations Strategies Used by NDLEA (N = 370)

Item	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Awareness of NDLEA strategies	325	87.8%	4.12	0.84
Knowledge of strategy types	310	83.8%	3.97	0.91

Source: Field Survey, 2024–2025

3.2. Objective 2: Effectiveness in Changing Knowledge, Attitude and Behaviour

Results show a clear gradient: NDLEA campaigns strongly improved knowledge (80.5%, mean = 3.91) and reasonably shifted attitudes (74.3%, mean = 3.68), but had a markedly weaker effect on actual behaviour change (52.7%, mean = 3.21). The behaviour item also had the highest standard deviation (1.19), pointing to wide variation in how far students changed their actions.

Table 3.2: Effectiveness of NDLEA Public Relations Campaigns (N = 370)

Item	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Impact on knowledge	298	80.5%	3.91	0.89
Change in attitude	275	74.3%	3.68	1.02
Change in behaviour	195	52.7%	3.21	1.19

Source: Field Survey, 2024–2025

Key talking point: awareness and knowledge gains do not automatically translate into behavioural change, this is the central tension the study surfaces.

3.3 Objective 3: Implementation Challenges

Resource and funding constraints emerged as the dominant challenge (81.4%, mean = 3.96, low SD of 0.84, indicating strong consensus). Campaign access in schools (61.6%) and institutional cooperation (57.8%) were also flagged as challenges, though with more varied opinions across respondents (SD above 1.1 for both).

Table 3.3: Challenges in Implementing NDLEA PR Strategies (N = 370)

Item	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Campaign access in schools	228	61.6%	3.45	1.11
Resource & funding issues	301	81.4%	3.96	0.84

Item	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Institutional cooperation	214	57.8%	3.38	1.18

Source: Field Survey, 2024–2025

3.4 Objective 4: Student Perceptions and Recommendations

Students viewed NDLEA's campaigns as relevant (76.8%, mean = 3.89) but were comparatively less satisfied overall (68.4%, mean = 3.72). The strongest and most consistent response across the entire chapter was the call for more technology- and digital-driven engagement (85.1%, mean = 4.08, lowest SD at 0.79) social media, mobile apps and influencer partnerships.

Table 3.4: Students' Perceptions and Recommendations (N = 370)

Item	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Relevance of PR campaigns	284	76.8%	3.89	0.91
General satisfaction	253	68.4%	3.72	1.07
Suggestions for digital/tech tools	315	85.1%	4.08	0.79

Source: Field Survey, 2024–2025

3.5 Inferential Statistics

Two inferential tests were run to examine relationships between demographic variables and perception of campaign effectiveness: a Chi-Square test (gender) and Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation (age).

Chi-Square Test: Gender vs Perception of Effectiveness

Table 3.5: Chi-Square Test Result

Variable	χ^2 value	df	P-value	Decision
Gender vs Perception of Effectiveness	18.58	1	0.004	Significant

Source: Field Survey, 2024–2025

The result is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 18.58$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that male and female students differ in how they assess campaign effectiveness — suggesting gender-specific messaging may improve impact.

3.6 Pearson Correlation: Age vs Perception of Effectiveness

Table 3.6: Pearson's Correlation Result

Variables	r	P-value	Strength	Decision
Age and Perception of Effectiveness	0.96	0.000	Strong positive	Significant

Source: Field Survey, 2024–2025

A strong, statistically significant positive correlation ($r = 0.96$, $p < 0.01$) was found: older students consistently perceive NDLEA's campaigns as more effective, likely reflecting greater cumulative exposure and maturity in engaging with anti-drug messaging.

Discussion of Findings

- Awareness is high and consistent with prior Nigerian studies (Musa & Olayemi, 2021; Ahmed & Bako, 2020), confirming NDLEA's visibility on private university campuses.
- The awareness-to-behaviour gap mirrors international findings (Smith & Jones, 2022; Lee & Park, 2020): knowledge gains rarely translate into sustained behavioural change without complementary counselling or peer-support structures.
- Funding and institutional cooperation remain the agency's biggest operational constraints, echoing both Nigerian (Adebayo & Ojo, 2019; Fatai & Oladipo, 2015) and international evidence (Johnson & Lee, 2023; Rodriguez & Silva, 2015).
- Students overwhelmingly want digital-first engagement, social media, apps and influencers, consistent with successful models in China (Chen et al., 2022) and Spain (Garcia et al., 2021).
- Lower satisfaction despite high relevance ratings suggests a cultural/digital mismatch between campaign design and student expectations, in line with Patel & Kumar (2020) and Brown & Wilson (2015).
- Gender and age both significantly shape perception of effectiveness, reinforcing calls (Chukwu & Obi, 2017; Abubakar & Abdullahi, 2021) for more demographically and culturally tailored PR strategies.

Overall takeaway: NDLEA's PR strategies have succeeded in building awareness and shifting knowledge/attitudes, but funding constraints, limited institutional buy-in and underuse of digital channels are holding back deeper behavioural impact, pointing directly to the study's recommendations for a more integrative, tech-enabled, demographically-sensitive approach.

Conclusion

The study concludes that while NDLEA's public relations strategies have succeeded in creating widespread awareness and increasing students' knowledge about substance abuse, they have not been sufficiently effective in achieving substantial behavioural change. The gap between awareness and action suggests that the communication methods employed lack the necessary interactivity, cultural relevance and institutional backing to drive long-term transformation. Moreover, inadequate digital engagement and failure to harness the peer influence dynamics within student communities further limit the impact of the agency's efforts. To bridge this gap, NDLEA and its stakeholders must strive to strictly adhere to the recommendations proffered below. By implementing the recommendations, NDLEA and its stakeholders would have significantly enhanced the impact of public relations strategies aimed at curbing substance abuse among students in private universities in Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. NDLEA should adopt modern communication technologies, including social media platforms, podcasts, mobile applications and online forums, to connect with students in more relatable and interactive ways. This would increase message retention and accessibility.
2. Since peer influence plays a crucial role in shaping youth behaviour, NDLEA should integrate student ambassadors and peer educators into its campaign framework. This could increase authenticity and improve message credibility among students.
3. NDLEA should work with university management to embed substance prevention campaigns within student orientation programmes, general studies curricula and extracurricular activities to ensure continuous engagement throughout students' academic journeys.
4. Campaign messages should reflect the linguistic, cultural and socio-economic realities of the students they target. Customizing content to resonate with specific student groups will improve receptiveness and behavioural impact.
5. NDLEA should seek strategic partnerships with non-governmental organizations, campus-based health and counselling centres, religious organizations and government ministries to enhance resource availability and ensure holistic implementation of anti-drug campaigns.

6. There should be regular feedback systems and data-driven evaluations to assess the reach, impact and challenges of each campaign. This will allow for real-time adjustments and evidence-based planning.
7. Campaigns should actively combat stigma associated with substance abuse and help-seeking behaviour. Emphasizing confidentiality, empathy and recovery could increase the willingness of affected students to seek help.

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