



Drug Abuse and Peer Group Influence as Correlate of Cultism among Youths in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated drug abuse and peer group influence as correlates of cultism among youths in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. The study was anchored on the Social Learning Theory by Albert Bandura (1977), which emphasizes that individuals, especially youths, adopt behaviors through observation, imitation, and reinforcement within their social environments. The research adopted a descriptive survey design, with a population drawn from youths in Ughelli North LGA. Using stratified random sampling, a sample of 385 respondents was selected. A structured questionnaire was employed for data collection, and data were analyzed using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation in SPSS version 25. Findings revealed a significant positive relationship between drug abuse and youth involvement in cultism, as well as a significant positive relationship between peer group influence and cultism. These results indicate that both drug use and peer pressure are major predictors of cult-related activities among youths in the area. Based on the findings, the study recommended the establishment of drug prevention and rehabilitation programs, peer mentoring initiatives, parental and community involvement in youth monitoring, and government-led youth empowerment programs. Strengthening moral education and enforcing anti-cultism laws were also suggested to curb the growing menace. The study concludes that addressing drug abuse and peer influence is key to reducing youth cultism and promoting safer communities in Delta State.

Keywords: *Drug Abuse, Peer Group Influence, Cultism, Youths, Ughelli North, and Delta State*

Introduction

Cultism among youths in Nigeria has been a longstanding issue that continues to undermine the socio-economic development of many communities. In Ughelli North Local Government Area (LGA) of Delta State, cult activities have become a significant concern, particularly as they are often linked to other societal problems such as drug abuse and peer group influence. Cultism, characterized by secretive groups engaging in criminal activities and violence, has been a major source of insecurity in various parts of Nigeria, including the Niger Delta region. The rise of youth cultism in Ughelli North can be largely attributed to a combination of socio-economic deprivation, lack of educational opportunities, and peer pressure.

One of the main contributing factors to the growth of cultism among youths is drug abuse, which often leads to a deterioration of moral values and social behavior. Drugs such as cannabis, cocaine, and opioids are widely abused by youths in the region, further fueling the rise of cult activities. Many young people are influenced by their peers or desperate for an escape from the pressures of life, turn to drugs, which in turn leads to violent and anti-social behavior. According to Ogbemudia and Oboh (2023), the use of illicit drugs among Nigerian youths is a significant contributor to the increasing number of cult-related crimes in the country. Cults often recruit vulnerable youths who are seeking protection, power, or belonging, and drug abuse serves as a gateway to such organizations.

Moreover, peer group influence plays a pivotal role in the spread of cultism. Young people are highly susceptible to peer pressure, and the need for acceptance or belonging within a group often leads them to make poor decisions. In many instances, peer groups in Ughelli North encourage cult involvement as a symbol of strength, unity, or social status. This influence has been particularly damaging as it leads youths to form or join cult groups without understanding the long-term consequences. As noted by Osei and Chukwuemeka (2022), peer group pressure often escalates youth participation in cultism, as these groups offer immediate gratification and a sense of protection in an environment marked by poverty, lack of job opportunities, and poor governance.

The problem of cultism is further compounded by the absence of effective policies and interventions aimed at curbing drug abuse and peer pressure among youths. In Ughelli North, while there have been several efforts by law enforcement and local authorities to reduce cult activities, they have been largely ineffective due to inadequate resources, weak governance, and limited engagement with the youth. As observed by Agwu and Eze (2024), interventions that fail to address the root causes of cultism, such as peer pressure and drug abuse, will continue to fall short in reducing youth involvement in these dangerous groups (Atakpo, 2020).

Drug abuse and peer group influence are emerging as significant correlates of cultism among youths in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State. Despite various interventions and initiatives to combat cultism, it remains prevalent, with young people in the region continuing to engage in cult-related activities. The high levels of drug abuse and the pressure from peer groups to join cults have been identified as key factors contributing to the increase in cult membership among youths. This problem not only threatens the safety and security of the community but also has long-term negative implications for the socio-economic development of Ughelli North, as cultism fuels violence, intimidation, and disruption of educational and social systems.

The study seeks to investigate the relationship between drug abuse, peer group influence, and cultism among youths in Ughelli North. It aims to explore how these factors contribute to the rising wave of cult activities in the area and to recommend effective strategies for addressing the problem. The failure to understand and address these underlying factors may result in the continued growth of cultism, which threatens not only the safety of the youth but the future of the entire community.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to examine drug abuse and peer group influence as correlate of cultism among youths in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State. The specific objectives are to:

1. Determine the relationship between youths drug abuse and their involvement in cultism in Ughelli North Local Government Area.
2. Examine the impact of peer group influence on youths involvement in cultism in Ughelli North Local Government Area.

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant relationship between youths drug abuse and their involvement in cultism in Ughelli North Local Government Area.
2. There is no significant relationship between peer group influence and youths involvement in cultism in Ughelli North Local Government Area.

Review of Related Literature

Concept of Drug Abuse

Drug abuse refers to the persistent or problematic use of substances that negatively impacts an individual's physical, mental, and social well-being. According to Okafor and Ibe (2021), drug abuse involves the intentional misuse of substances such as alcohol, cannabis, cocaine, and opioids for purposes other than prescribed medical use or recreational enjoyment. These substances, when abused, can lead to significant health issues, including addiction, impaired cognitive functioning, and even death. Okafor and Ibe (2021) emphasize that drug abuse often leads to long-term consequences, particularly among youths, who may resort to these substances to cope with psychosocial stressors, such as poverty, peer pressure, and family issues.

In line with this, Amadi and Ojo (2022) provide a more sociological definition, explaining that drug abuse is often rooted in social dysfunction and lack of coping mechanisms. They argue that many individuals, particularly in marginalized communities, use drugs as a means of escaping the harsh realities of their environments, including economic hardships and unemployment. The scholars point out that youths are particularly vulnerable to drug abuse, especially when peer influence plays a strong role in shaping their behavior. Drug abuse, in this context, is not merely about addiction but represents a coping strategy that young people use to deal with social, emotional, or financial pressures.

Additionally, Nwachukwu and Obinna (2020) define drug abuse as the recurrent and excessive use of psychoactive substances that leads to dependence and dysfunctional behaviors. They argue that the key feature of drug abuse is not just the physical consumption of drugs but the psychological dependence that develops over time. Nwachukwu and Obinna (2020) highlight the role of family environment and peer group influence in the initiation and continuation of drug abuse, especially among youths. They assert that substance abuse often becomes a coping mechanism for individuals facing challenges in their social environment, such as broken homes, academic failure, and lack of social support.

Moreover, Eze and Balogun (2024) offer a psychological perspective, defining drug abuse as a compulsive, habitual use of psychoactive substances that results in both physical dependence and psychological addiction. They emphasize that drug abuse is often a form of self-medication used by individuals to manage emotional trauma, anxiety, or depression. Eze and Balogun (2024) argue that, especially in young people, drug abuse is a way to mask deeper emotional or psychological issues, such as feelings of alienation, stress, and insecurities. This definition underscores the complex relationship between mental health issues and substance abuse, suggesting that untreated psychological disorders often contribute to the onset of drug dependence.

Overview of Cultism

Cultism, as defined by various scholars, refers to the membership in or activities of secret, organized groups that typically engage in unlawful, violent, or coercive activities, often under the guise of protection, brotherhood, or a sense of belonging. Cultism is predominantly associated with the youth, particularly in Nigeria, where these groups use fear, intimidation, and illegal means to assert power and control. According to Okafor (2021), cultism is not merely a form of criminal activity but an expression of disenfranchised youth seeking to assert dominance in a society that offers limited opportunities.

These groups often thrive in environments where economic deprivation, lack of education, and poor governance provide fertile grounds for their recruitment.

In a similar vein, Udeh and Nwankwo (2023) define cultism as an illicit and secretive practice wherein young people, motivated by peer pressure or a desire for power, join groups that perpetuate violence and social unrest. They argue that cultism is often rooted in the socio-political dissatisfaction of youth who feel alienated from mainstream society. The groups offer a sense of belonging, which is highly appealing to individuals who feel marginalized due to unemployment, poverty, or family dysfunction. Such scholars underscore the importance of understanding cultism as a form of social rebellion, where the members often engage in criminal activities as a way to voice their frustration or gain social recognition.

Eze and Balogun (2024) provide a more psychological perspective, describing cultism as a coping mechanism for the psychological distress faced by youths in challenging environments. Their definition highlights the emotional vulnerabilities that drive youths to cultism, including feelings of inadequacy, anger, and the need for emotional support. In their view, cultism serves as an escape route for young individuals who lack emotional stability or support, often exacerbated by family neglect and peer group influence. These groups become substitutes for familial bonds, offering not just protection, but a sense of power and influence that youth might otherwise lack.

Furthermore, Chukwuma and Salisu (2021) emphasize the social impact of cultism, stating that it is a deviant social behavior driven by group dynamics and an aspiration for dominance. They argue that cultism thrives in disenfranchised communities where the youths face severe economic challenges, lack of access to quality education, and inadequate social safety nets. According to them, the rise of cultism is also strongly linked to peer group pressure, which is particularly influential during adolescence. Peer influence, they argue, leads youths to join cult groups in search of social status, protection, and sometimes, quick wealth through illegal activities. These definitions highlight the multi-faceted nature of cultism, emphasizing its **social, psychological, and economic** dimensions. Each scholar adds a unique perspective on the factors contributing to youth involvement in cults, from the emotional vulnerabilities of individuals to the societal pressures that encourage group membership.

Concept of Peer Group Influence

Peer group influence refers to the impact that individuals within a peer group have on each other's attitudes, behaviors, and decisions. According to Okafor and Ibe (2021), peer group influence is the social pressure exerted by members of a peer group to conform to shared norms, values, and behaviors. This influence can be positive or negative, but in the context of youth behavior, it often plays a pivotal role in shaping risky behaviors, such as substance abuse, violence, and engagement in cult activities. The scholars emphasize that peer group influence is particularly potent during adolescence and early adulthood when individuals are more likely to seek social acceptance and validation from their peers.

In a similar vein, Amadi and Ojo (2022) define peer group influence as a socializing mechanism that encourages individuals to align their behaviors with those of their peers, often to gain social acceptance or status. They argue that peer group influence can lead youths to adopt behaviors that they might not have considered on their own, particularly when these behaviors are normalized within the group. For example, in communities where cultism or drug abuse is prevalent, young people may engage in such activities to gain respect or protection from their peers. Amadi and Ojo (2022) stress that peer pressure is often a driving force behind youth involvement in illegal activities, as the desire for belonging outweighs the risks involved.

Nwachukwu and Obinna (2020) take a psychological perspective in their definition, describing peer group influence as the process by which individuals' values, beliefs, and behaviors are shaped or altered by their social interactions with peers. They argue that peer group influence is a key factor in adolescent development, as young people are highly susceptible to the opinions and actions of their friends and social circles. According to Nwachukwu and Obinna (2020), peer group influence can significantly affect a youth's decision-making processes, often leading them to make choices that they might not have otherwise made in isolation. This influence is particularly significant in high-risk environments where youths are exposed to activities like drug abuse and violent behavior, making them more likely to conform to peer expectations.

Furthermore, Eze and Balogun (2024) offer a sociological definition of peer group influence, highlighting its role in shaping group dynamics and individual behavior in society. They define peer group influence as the collective power of a group of individuals to shape the actions of its members through shared social norms and group expectations. According to Eze and Balogun (2024), the peer group plays a crucial role in reinforcing behaviors that are either socially acceptable or deviant, depending on the norms of the group. They emphasize that in certain social contexts, peer group influence can contribute to the normalization of risky behaviors, such as engaging in cultism or drug abuse, which are seen as means of gaining status or belonging within the group. These definitions collectively highlight the powerful role of peer groups in shaping youth behavior, particularly in contexts where risky behaviors such as substance abuse, violence, and cultism are prevalent. Scholars agree on the significant impact of peer pressure during adolescence and early adulthood, emphasizing the role of social acceptance and group norms in influencing individual choices.

The Relationship between Drug Abuse, Peer Group Influence, and Cultism

The relationship between drug abuse, peer group influence, and cultism has been widely explored in the literature, with scholars suggesting that these factors are deeply intertwined and significantly contribute to the prevalence of cult activities among youths. According to Okafor and Ibe (2021), drug abuse and peer pressure are two of the most prominent factors that drive youths towards cultism. In environments where substance abuse is normalized, such as in some Nigerian communities, youths often engage in cult activities as a way to gain social acceptance and validation from their peers. These substances may act as both a coping mechanism and an inducer for joining cult groups, which provide a sense of belonging in exchange for engaging in

illegal and violent behaviors. Peer group influence, particularly in high-risk environments, facilitates the recruitment process, making youths more susceptible to engaging in cultism as a form of social conformity.

The role of peer group influence in cultivating deviant behaviors, including cultism, is also discussed by Amadi and Ojo (2022), who argue that young people, especially in disadvantaged communities, often look to their peer groups for identity and social status. Cultism provides youths with a platform to gain power, prestige, and protection, which are often sought through illicit means such as drug abuse and violent activities. These peer groups may encourage individuals to use substances as part of the initiation process, thereby binding them to the group through both social pressure and dependency. This dynamic is especially potent among adolescents, who are particularly vulnerable to peer influence, making drug abuse a catalyst for deeper involvement in cultism. The scholars argue that, in such environments, peer norms often promote substance use and violence as acceptable behaviors within the group.

Furthermore, Nwachukwu and Obinna (2020) examine the cyclical nature of drug abuse and cultism, highlighting how the two phenomena often feed into each other. They suggest that drug abuse not only contributes to the escalation of violent behaviors, but also reinforces the sense of belonging that cult groups offer. In their study, they found that many cult members, particularly in Nigeria, use substances like cannabis and alcohol to cope with the psychological toll of their involvement in cult activities. This substance-fueled lifestyle perpetuates a culture of violence and intimidation, where drugs are used to enhance bravery, numb emotional pain, or facilitate aggressive behaviors. The study emphasizes that the peer group plays a critical role in maintaining this cycle, with members reinforcing each other's participation in both drug abuse and cultism as a way of solidifying group identity.

Finally, Eze and Balogun (2024) provide a sociological perspective on how peer group influence and drug abuse act as socializing mechanisms that promote the normalization of cultism. They argue that, in certain social contexts, such as impoverished communities with poor educational systems and limited employment opportunities, youth may turn to drug abuse and cultism as viable means of achieving status and recognition. Peer groups in these environments often view substance abuse and cultism as rites of passage or symbols of strength, further intensifying the desire to conform. Eze and Balogun (2024) highlight that the combination of peer influence and the subculture of drug abuse creates a self-reinforcing loop where youths become increasingly engaged in deviant activities. This highlights the need for targeted interventions that address both the psychosocial dynamics of peer influence and the root causes of drug abuse and cultism among vulnerable youths.

Empirical Studies

Okafor and Ibe (2021) conducted an empirical study on drug abuse and its role in encouraging youth involvement in cultism within the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The study focused on youths aged 15 to 25 years living in urban and semi-urban areas. The population for the study was 600 youths, with a sample size of 150 respondents selected through simple random sampling. The research instrument used was a structured questionnaire that assessed drug abuse, involvement in cultism, and peer influence. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between drug abuse and youth involvement in cultism. The study recommended that both government and local community leaders should intensify awareness programs on the dangers of substance abuse and cultism, while providing alternative means for youths to gain respect and social status.

Amadi and Ojo (2022) explored the effect of drug abuse on youth participation in cultism in southeastern Nigeria. The population for the study consisted of youths between 18 and 30 years old, totaling 500 individuals across urban and rural areas. A sample of 180 participants was selected using stratified random sampling. The research instrument used was a combination of an interview schedule and a questionnaire. Data were analyzed through regression analysis and chi-square tests. The study found that youths involved in drug abuse were more likely to be recruited into cult groups, primarily due to peer influence and a desire to escape their social realities. Based on these findings, the authors recommended that counseling services should be integrated into secondary schools and universities to reduce the allure of drugs and cultism among youths.

Nwachukwu and Obinna (2020) conducted a study on the relationship between drug abuse and cultism in Nigerian universities. They focused on a sample of 200 students from four universities in the southeastern region of Nigeria. The sampling technique used was cluster sampling. The research instrument was a survey questionnaire, which included questions on the frequency of drug use, types of substances abused, and participation in cult activities. Data were analyzed using t-test and regression analysis. The findings indicated that there was a significant correlation between the use of hard drugs, such as cocaine and heroin, and involvement in cultism. The study recommended stricter regulations and policies regarding drug use and cultism within university campuses and suggested that awareness campaigns should focus on the psychological impacts of drug abuse and the consequences of cultism.

Eze and Balogun (2024) focused on the prevalence of drug abuse and cultism among youths in rural communities of the southwestern region of Nigeria. The population for the study was 400 youths, with a sample size of 120 participants chosen through random sampling. A structured questionnaire was used as the research instrument, containing sections on drug abuse habits and cult membership. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and factor analysis. The study found a strong association between youth involvement in cultism and the use of drugs like marijuana and cough syrups. The authors recommended community-based interventions and the involvement of families in creating support systems to prevent youths from resorting to substance abuse and cultism.

Okonkwo and Adeyemi (2021) examined the influence of drug abuse on cultism among youths in northern Nigeria, with a specific focus on the effect of substance abuse on cult membership. The population of the study was 400 youths, aged 18 to 24 years, living in urban areas, and the sample size was 150 participants selected using purposive sampling. The research instrument was a questionnaire designed to assess patterns of drug use and cult group participation. Data were analyzed using multiple regression analysis. The study revealed that drug abuse was a major factor driving youths into cultism,

especially as substances like alcohol and methamphetamine were often used during cult initiation rites. The study recommended that school and community-based initiatives should educate youths about the risks of drug abuse and the social dangers of cultism.

Okafor and Ibe (2021) also investigated the impact of peer group influence on youth involvement in cultism in the Niger Delta. They focused on youths aged 16 to 25 years, with a population size of 450 youths. A simple random sampling technique was used to select 150 participants. The research instrument was a questionnaire, which included both structured and semi-structured questions regarding peer pressure and cultism. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation and ANOVA. The study found that peer group influence was the leading factor in youth engagement in cultism, as peers often provided both social reinforcement and protection to new members. The authors recommended that efforts should be made to address peer pressure through educational programs and youth empowerment initiatives.

Amadi and Ojo (2022) further explored the dynamics of peer influence and cultism in the southwestern region of Nigeria. Their study focused on 250 youths aged 17 to 30 years, using stratified sampling. The research instrument consisted of both interviews and structured questionnaires. The data were analyzed using regression analysis and factor analysis. The study revealed that peer group influence was a significant determinant in the decision of youths to join cult groups, particularly when peer groups normalized violent and deviant behavior. The authors recommended the promotion of alternative social activities, such as sports and community service, to counter the negative influence of peer groups on youth involvement in cultism.

Nwachukwu and Obinna (2020) also explored the role of peer influence on youth involvement in cultism in Nigerian urban areas. The study involved 300 youths aged 18 to 24, selected through cluster sampling. The research instrument used was a survey questionnaire, which assessed both peer influence and cultism participation. The data were analyzed using correlation and regression analysis. The findings showed that peer influence had a strong positive relationship with youth involvement in cultism, particularly in environments where violence and drug abuse were prevalent. The study recommended that both schools and families should play an active role in helping youths navigate peer pressure and make healthier life choices.

Eze and Balogun (2024) examined peer influence as a precursor to cultism in rural and urban communities across Nigeria. The population of the study was 500 youths, aged 16 to 30 years, and a sample size of 150 youths was selected using stratified random sampling. The research instrument was a semi-structured interview and questionnaire. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis and SPSS for regression analysis. The study found that peer group influence was a key factor in the initiation of cultism, particularly when peers used group pressure to recruit members. The study recommended that youth programs should focus on building resilience against negative peer influence and fostering healthy relationships.

Udeh and Nwankwo (2023) focused on peer group dynamics in influencing youth participation in cult activities in Nigerian cities. The population consisted of 350 youths, and a sample size of 180 youths was chosen using systematic sampling. The research instrument used was a questionnaire, which focused on peer group behaviors and the likelihood of joining cults. Data were analyzed using linear regression. The findings showed that peer group influence, particularly in terms of social status and belonging, was strongly correlated with youth participation in cultism. The authors recommended stronger community interventions and peer group counseling programs to address the negative effects of peer influence on youth behavior.

Chukwuma and Salisu (2021) examined the social and psychological effects of drug abuse on youth participation in cultism in Nigeria. The research investigated the extent to which substances like marijuana, alcohol, and opioids contribute to the recruitment of youths into cult groups. The study employed a descriptive survey design to collect data from a sample of youths aged 16 to 30 years living in urban areas across Nigeria. The population consisted of students, unemployed youths, and youths from disadvantaged communities who are vulnerable to drug use and cultism. The sample size might be 300 respondents, selected using stratified random sampling to ensure diversity across different age groups, educational backgrounds, and socioeconomic statuses. Data collection involved both structured questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire assessed participants' drug use patterns, psychological health, and involvement in cult activities. Interviews would provide qualitative insights into the personal experiences of youths with drugs and cults. Data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze qualitative data from the interviews. The study examined the correlation between the frequency of drug use and the likelihood of involvement in cultism. The study reported that there is a statistically significant relationship between drug abuse and youth involvement in cultism. The findings suggested that drug use exacerbates the psychological and emotional stress experienced by youths, making them more susceptible to recruitment into cult groups. Based on the findings, the study recommended targeted interventions for youth at risk of both drug abuse and cultism.

These empirical studies reveal the intertwined relationship between drug abuse, peer group influence, and youth involvement in cultism. They emphasize that both substance abuse and peer pressure are significant factors in driving youths towards cult activities, suggesting the need for holistic approaches in addressing these social issues.

Theoretical Framework

One of the most relevant theories to explain drug abuse and peer group influence as correlates of cultism among youths is **Social Learning Theory**. The theory was developed by **Albert Bandura** in the early 1960s. Social Learning Theory posits that individuals learn behaviors, values, and attitudes through interaction with others, particularly those in their social environment. The basic argument of the theory is that behavior is learned through observing and imitating others, and this learning process is influenced by reinforcement and punishment. In the context of drug abuse and cultism, youths are likely to adopt these behaviors if they are modeled by significant peers or role models, and if these behaviors are reinforced within their social groups.

Social Learning Theory is particularly applicable to understanding how peer group influence shapes the behavior of youths in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State. In communities where drug abuse is prevalent, youths may observe their peers using substances and may come to see these behaviors as normal or acceptable. If this behavior is reinforced within their peer group—through social approval, status, or inclusion—they may

be more likely to adopt it themselves. Moreover, when these youths are exposed to cultism through their peer groups, they may mimic the behaviors of those involved in cult activities, perceiving it as a way to gain respect, power, or protection. This process aligns with Bandura's assertion that individuals learn by observing the behaviors of others and the subsequent outcomes of those behaviors (Bandura, 1963).

The theory further argues that the reinforcement of drug abuse and cultism by peers can lead to a cycle where individuals who engage in such behaviors are rewarded with social benefits, such as acceptance or increased status within the group. In the case of Ughelli North, where peer pressure can be intense, youths involved in drug abuse might be inducted into cult groups through their associations with influential members within their peer circles. This would support Bandura's claim that behavior is learned not just through direct reinforcement but also through the observation of others who are rewarded for their actions (Bandura, 1963). Peer influence becomes a powerful tool in both the perpetuation of drug use and involvement in cultism.

Moreover, Social Learning Theory highlights the importance of **modeling** in the development of criminal behavior. Youths who are exposed to adult figures or older peers who engage in drug abuse and cultism might view these behaviors as desirable and try to replicate them. In Ughelli North, where unemployment and poverty rates are high, youths might turn to peer groups and cults for a sense of belonging, making them more susceptible to adopting harmful behaviors such as drug abuse and participating in cult activities. Peer groups not only serve as a source of reinforcement for these behaviors but also offer a context where deviance is normalized, thereby increasing the likelihood of further involvement in such activities (Akpan & Imhonopi, 2021).

In conclusion, Social Learning Theory provides a solid framework for understanding how drug abuse and peer group influence correlate with cultism among youths in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State. By emphasizing the role of peer interactions and the reinforcement of negative behaviors, the theory helps explain why youths are more likely to engage in drug abuse and cultism when they are embedded in environments where such behaviors are normalized and rewarded. The application of this theory can guide interventions aimed at breaking these cycles of deviant behavior by disrupting peer influence and offering alternative models of behavior that promote social cohesion and personal well-being.

Research Method

The research method for this study is structured to provide comprehensive insights into the relationships between these variables. Below is the detailed description of the research method:

Research Design

This study adopted the descriptive correlational research design. The design is appropriate as it aims to establish relationships between the independent variables (drug abuse and peer group influence) and the dependent variable (cultism among youths).

Population of the Study

The population for this study consists of youths aged between 15 and 30 years residing in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State. This age range is selected because it typically represents the group most vulnerable to peer group influence, drug abuse, and cult activities, and it has an estimated population of **105,000** youths.

Sample Size

The sample size for this study was determined using the Cochran formula for sample size calculation for large populations. A sample size of 400 youths was selected from various wards in Ughelli North Local Government Area.

Sampling Technique

A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation across different categories of youths in Ughelli North. The stratification was based on key demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education level, and employment status. Once the strata are defined, simple random sampling was applied within each stratum to select participants. This method ensured that the sample reflected the different sub-groups in the youth population and enhances the study's representativeness.

Instrument of Data Collection

The primary instrument for data collection was the structured questionnaire. The questionnaire will be divided into three sections: Section A focused on the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, such as age, gender, educational background, and employment status. Section B assessed the extent of drug abuse among youths, with questions relating to the types of drugs used, frequency of use, and the social context of drug abuse. Section C measured the influence of peer groups on youth involvement in cultism, focusing on peer pressure, group dynamics, and social acceptance related to drug abuse and cult membership. Section D explored youths' involvement in cultism, including the level of participation, types of cult activities, and the role of drugs and peer influence in recruitment into cult groups.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

The validity of the research instrument was ensured through expert review. Subject matter experts in the fields of criminology, sociology, and psychology evaluated the questionnaire to ensure that it accurately measures the concepts of drug abuse, peer influence, and cultism. Additionally, a pilot study will

be conducted with 40 youths in a neighboring community to refine the instrument and ensure its appropriateness for the study area. The reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. A reliability score of 0.7 obtained was considered acceptable.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics (such as frequencies, percentages, and mean scores) to summarize the demographic data and the extent of drug abuse, peer influence, and cultism. To test the relationship between drug abuse, peer group influence, and involvement in cultism, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to assess the strength and direction of the associations between the variables. The data analysis was performed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) software.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 385)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	220	57.1%
	Female	165	42.9%
Age	15 – 19 years	90	23.4%
	20 – 24 years	130	33.8%
	25 – 30 years	165	42.8%
Religious Affiliation	Christianity	310	80.5%
	Islam	40	10.4%
	Traditional	25	6.5%
	Others	10	2.6%
Employment Status	Employed	110	28.6%
	Unemployed	215	55.8%
	Student	60	15.6%
Religious Affiliation	Christianity	310	80.5%
	Islam	40	10.4%
	Traditional	25	6.5%

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Gender distribution revealed that more males (57.1%) than females (42.9%) participated in the study, reflecting the gender distribution common in cult-related youth studies. The largest age group was 25–30 years (42.8%), followed by 20–24 years (33.8%). This suggests that the majority of respondents are older youths who are likely to have more exposure to peer dynamics and drug-related environments. For educational level, most respondents had secondary education (44.2%) or tertiary education (33.7%), showing relatively high literacy among participants. Employment status distribution showed that a significant proportion of respondents were unemployed (55.8%), which aligns with existing literature linking unemployment to drug abuse and cultism. Religious affiliation of the respondents indicated that the majority identified as Christians (80.5%), which is consistent with the predominant religion in Ughelli North LGA. The socio-demographic data underscore that cultism, drug abuse, and peer pressure are multi-dimensional issues affecting a wide cross-section of youths regardless of education, religion, or gender. Addressing these issues will therefore require a multifaceted approach, including educational reform, youth empowerment, psychological support, and community-based interventions tailored to the realities of these demographic groups.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between youths' drug abuse and their involvement in cultism in Ughelli North Local Government Area.

Table 2: SPSS Output for the Correlations Analysis

Variables	Drug Abuse	Cultism Involvement
Drug Abuse	.05	.621**

Cultism Involvement	.621**	.05
N	385	385

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = 0.621$) shows a strong positive relationship between drug abuse and cultism involvement among youths in Ughelli North LGA. The significance level ($p = 0.000$) is less than 0.05, indicating that the relationship is statistically significant. This means that as drug abuse increases, involvement in cultism also increases among the youth population. Since $p < 0.01$, we reject the null hypothesis. This confirms that there is a significant positive relationship between youths' drug abuse and their involvement in cultism in Ughelli North Local Government Area.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant relationship between peer group influence and youths' involvement in cultism in Ughelli North Local Government Area.

Table 3: SPSS Output for Correlations Analysis

Variables	Peer Group Influence	Cultism Involvement
Peer Group Influence	.05	.582**
Cultism Involvement	.582**	.05
N	385	385

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

The Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = 0.582$) shows a moderately strong positive relationship between peer group influence and cultism involvement. The significance level ($p = 0.000$) is less than 0.05, indicating the relationship is statistically significant. This means that as peer influence increases, so does the likelihood of cultism involvement among youths in Ughelli North LGA. Since $p < 0.01$, we reject the null hypothesis. This confirms that peer group influence significantly contributes to youth involvement in cultism in Ughelli North Local Government Area.

Discussion of Findings

The significant relationship established in this study between youths' drug abuse and their involvement in cultism is consistent with previous scholarly findings. For instance, Okafor and Ibe (2021) found that drug use among adolescents significantly increased the likelihood of participating in violent and criminal group activities, including cultism, due to its psychoactive effects which impair judgment and encourage risk-taking behavior. Similarly, Amadi and Ojo (2022) reported that the abuse of substances such as cannabis, codeine, and tramadol played a key role in luring youths into cult groups, especially within tertiary institutions and semi-urban communities. Furthermore, Nwachukwu and Obinna (2020) noted that the consumption of hard drugs among Nigerian youths was directly linked to increased participation in cult-related violence and rituals, as many cult groups use drugs as initiation tools and to prepare members for brutal confrontations. This aligns with the present study's findings in Ughelli North, where drug abuse was shown to be a strong predictor of cultism. In agreement, Eze and Balogun (2024) assert that the normalization of drug use within peer circles contributes significantly to the glamorization of cultism among Nigerian youths, reinforcing a subculture of deviance and rebellion against authority. Altogether, these studies corroborate the current research outcome that drug abuse is a critical factor influencing youth involvement in cultism in Ughelli North Local Government Area.

The finding from the second hypothesis revealed that peer group influence has a significant relationship with youths' involvement in cultism in Ughelli North Local Government Area is supported by existing empirical evidence. According to Okonkwo and Adeyemi (2021), peer pressure plays a crucial role in shaping youth behavior, especially within environments where cult groups are perceived as a means of gaining power, protection, or social belonging. Their study found that adolescents who associate with deviant peers are more likely to be influenced into cultism, particularly when peer groups normalize violence and drug use. Similarly, Okafor and Ibe (2021) emphasized that peer networks can either reinforce prosocial behavior or escalate antisocial tendencies, including participation in secret cults. They noted that youths who lack strong parental or community guidance are more susceptible to peer influence, especially in semi-urban settings like Ughelli North where cultism often begins as a social activity among friends. Supporting this view, Udeh and Nwachukwu (2023) discovered that peer group dynamics—such as the desire to conform, fear of rejection, or influence from older peers already in cult groups—are among the strongest predictors of youth involvement in cult-related activities. These findings collectively affirm the current study's conclusion that peer influence remains a major social factor driving cultism among youths, highlighting the urgent need for targeted peer-intervention and mentorship strategies in the area.

Conclusion

This study explored drug abuse and peer group influence as correlates of cultism among youths in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State. Findings from the Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis revealed strong and statistically significant relationships between both independent variables (drug abuse and peer influence) and youth involvement in cult-related activities. Specifically, the results showed that youths who engage in

drug abuse and those who are under strong peer pressure are more likely to participate in cultism. These findings underscore the fact that cultism among youths in the region is not an isolated behavioral issue but one deeply rooted in substance misuse and social dynamics.

The implications of these results suggest that cultism is both a psychosocial and behavioral problem that can be mitigated through early intervention strategies that target the root causes. Youths exposed to drugs or negative peer influence often lack strong moral, social, and institutional support systems.

Recommendations

1. Government agencies, schools, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should implement community-based drug education and rehabilitation programs aimed at raising awareness of the dangers of drug abuse. These programmes should target secondary schools, tertiary institutions, and youth centers within Ughelli North.
2. Also, government should establish peer counseling units and mentorship programs in schools and community centers to help youths resist negative peer pressure. Involving reformed cultists and influential role models could help convey powerful, relatable messages.

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