



Audrezara Journal of Communication and Social Research (AJCSR), Vol. 2(2), 280-289, 2026.



AUDREZARA JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL RESEARCH (AJCSR)

Vol. 2, Issue 2, pp. 280-289, August, 2026.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22262176>

E-ISSN: 3121-9721

Public Relations Tools for the Control of Illicit Drugs amongst the Youth of Akwa Ibom State

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Received: July 27, 2026; Revised: August 19, 2026; Accepted: August 26, 2026.

Abstract

The increasing prevalence of substance misuse among young people has become a major public health and social concern, necessitating the adoption of strategic communication approaches that promote awareness and behavioural change. This study, therefore, examined the role of public relations tools in the control of illicit drug use among youths in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design, and a population comprising youths aged 15–35 years in Akwa Ibom State, with a sample size of 400 respondents determined using the Taro Yamane formula. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, weighted mean scores, and standard deviations. The findings revealed prevalence of substance misuse among youths, with peer pressure, unemployment, among others as major contributing factors. Respondents also agreed that substance misuse negatively affects physical and mental health, academic performance, productivity, and involvement in crime. Furthermore, school-based drug education programmes, public awareness campaigns, strengthened enforcement of drug control laws, youth empowerment initiatives, and improved parental monitoring were perceived as effective strategies for reducing substance misuse. The researcher concluded that public relations tools remain indispensable in combating illicit drug use when implemented through integrated, culturally relevant, and youth-oriented communication strategies. It, therefore, recommended that the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) and other stakeholders strengthen digital advocacy, community engagement, school-based interventions, and multi-channel public relations campaigns to promote sustainable behavioural change and reduce illicit drug use among youths in Akwa Ibom State.

Keywords: Public relations, public relations tools, illicit drugs, youth, Akwa Ibom

Introduction

Substance abuse has emerged as a pervasive and devastating global crisis, with recent reports indicating that approximately 292 million people worldwide used substances in 2022, representing a 20 percent



increase over a decade (Ajayi-Ayodele & Ikuesewo-Akinbami, 2025). In Nigeria, the situation is particularly alarming, as approximately 14.3 million people are reportedly involved in drug abuse, and nearly 40% of Nigerian youths aged 18 to 35 are deeply involved in substance misuse (Ajayi-Ayodele & Ikuesewo-Akinbami, 2025; Eze, 2023). This “silent epidemic” facilitates the spread of diseases like HIV/AIDS, fosters criminal activity, and leads to significant loss of life among the youthful population (Eka et al., 2020; Osarhiaekhimen et al., 2025). Within the local context, Akwa Ibom State faces significant challenges, as the constant abuse of marijuana and other substances among students and riverine dwellers has become an “embarrassing occurrence” that threatens social security and the physical development of future generations (Mboho, 2024; Peters & Bassey, 2020).

A public relations (PR) approach is essential for effectively disseminating messages, driving behavioural change, and increasing awareness regarding the dangers of illicit drugs (Ajayi-Ayodele & Ikuesewo-Akinbami, 2025). Public relations practitioners leverage various tools and strategies, such as media partnerships, community engagement, press releases, seminars, and documentary films, to influence public opinion and decision-making (Okolo et al., 2017). Okolo et al. (2017) argue that mass media is indispensable in any PR-driven communication programme because it can be leveraged as a marketing communications strategy to address social issues like substance use at a lower cost. Furthermore, recent scholarship has emphasised the role of social media advocacy and digital health communication as critical PR tools, with many researchers finding that digital platforms are the primary channels through which contemporary youths receive information on substance use (Adeyefa & Awofadeju, 2023; Udom et al., 2025).

Moreover, the escalating prevalence of drug abuse among Nigerian youths has transformed from a pressing public health concern into a significant threat to national security and social stability. In Akwa Ibom State, the situation is particularly dire, as the constant misuse of marijuana and other psychoactive substances among students and riverine dwellers has become an alarming occurrence that jeopardizes the physical, mental, and social development of future generations. While governmental agencies like the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) have intensified their efforts, the traditional strategy often leans toward punitive measures and supply suppression, which have proven insufficient in addressing the root causes of demand. Scholars have recognised this deficiency and have attempted to evaluate the role of communication, particularly through radio advocacy and mass media campaigns, to curb the menace.

Also, there is a notable point of convergence among scholars: most agree that PR tools and media campaigns are highly effective in creating awareness and shaping public perception of the risks associated with drug use (Ajayi-Ayodele & Ikuesewo-Akinbami, 2025; Wyorkson & Paul, 2025). For instance, Ajayi-Ayodele and Ikuesewo-Akinbami (2025) found that NDLEA’s PR strategies succeeded in raising knowledge about the harm associated with drug usage. However, a significant point of divergence exists regarding the effectiveness of these tools in stimulating actual behavioural change. While some scholars assert that broadcasting media has a significant impact on reducing drug use and improving discipline, others such as Okoye et al. (2022) and Ude-Akpeh (2017) (as cited in Bajeh & Kur, n.d.) contend that mass media and radio campaigns have been largely ineffective in reducing the actual prevalence of drug abuse among Nigerian undergraduates. This creates a “knowledge-behaviour gap” where high awareness does not necessarily translate to a cessation of illicit drug activities (Eke & Adeyemi, 2023).

Despite the growing body of existing literature, a critical research gap remains: there is a paucity of empirical evidence specifically investigating the effectiveness of diverse public relations tools, beyond general media campaigns, in controlling illicit drugs within the unique socio-cultural context of Akwa Ibom State. Most local studies in Akwa Ibom have focused on the behavioural outcomes of marijuana use, the relationship between drugs and emotional behaviour, or the activities of arrestees and detained offenders (Israel & Nyoho, 2015; Bassey et al., 2016; Essien et al., 2016). Consequently, this study is a



necessary contribution to the body of knowledge as it seeks to identify which PR tools are most effective for this specific demographic. The rationale for this study lies in providing a localised framework for the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) and other stakeholders to transition from punitive, supply-suppression measures toward effective, health-centered communication strategies that can truly curb the drug menace among the youth of Akwa Ibom (Mboho, 2024; Ugwuoke et al., 2019).

In addition, a critical gap remains in the existing body of knowledge concerning the localised efficacy of diverse public relations tools within the unique socio-cultural landscape of Akwa Ibom State. Most local research has historically focused on the psychological predictors of addiction, the relationship between drug use and emotional behaviour, or the general activities of law enforcement, neglecting a specific empirical assessment of strategic communication tools such as community relations, digital advocacy, and interpersonal engagement. This oversight is particularly problematic in the current digital era, where traditional media messages are increasingly being ignored by a tech-savvy youthful population that is simultaneously exposed to pro-drug content online. There is an urgent need to transition from fragmented information dissemination toward a comprehensive public relations framework that resonates with the specific values and social norms of Akwa Ibom's youth. This study sought to provide a localised roadmap for stakeholders to move beyond mere awareness toward sustainable drug control.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

1. What specific public relations tools are employed by stakeholders for the control of illicit drugs among the youth of Akwa Ibom State?
2. To what extent are the youths in Akwa Ibom State exposed to and knowledgeable about illicit drug control messages communicated through public relations tools?
3. How effective are the various public relations tools perceived by the youth in facilitating a shift from substance abuse to sustainable behavioural change and drug cessation?
4. What is the impact of localised public relations strategies, such as digital health communication and community engagement, on the reduction of drug prevalence among the youth of Akwa Ibom?

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Public Relations Transfer Model propounded by Frank Jefkins in 1988, a framework developed to illustrate the transformative power of strategic communication in addressing complex and negative social situations (Ajayi-Ayodele & Ikuesewo-Akinbami, 2025). The model assumes that public attitudes are dynamic and can be systematically shifted from a state of negativity to one of positive achievement through persistent and effective communication methods that facilitate a two-way mutual understanding based on truth. The key constructs of the theory involve four critical transfers: shifting an audience from hostility to sympathy, prejudice to acceptance, apathy to interest, and ignorance to knowledge (Ajayi-Ayodele & Ikuesewo-Akinbami, 2025).

This theory is highly relevant to the control of illicit drugs among the youth of Akwa Ibom State as it provides a mechanism to bridge the “knowledge-behaviour gap” identified in contemporary Nigerian scholarship, where high awareness of drug risks does not always result in a cessation of use (Eke & Adeyemi, 2023; Ibrahimu, 2018 as cited in Eke & Adeyemi, 2023). By applying Jefkins' model, stakeholders such as the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) can utilise diverse public relations tools, including digital advocacy and community relations, to transition the youthful population from a state of apathy or cultural prejudice regarding substance use toward an active interest in drug cessation and a comprehensive knowledge of the devastating health and social consequences associated



with the “silent epidemic” of drug abuse (Ajayi-Ayodele & Ikuesewo-Akinbami, 2025; Peters & Bassey, 2020; Udom et al., 2025).

Method

The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey research design. This method was considered appropriate as it allows for the collection of data from a representative sample of the target population at a single point in time to accurately describe their views, opinions, and reactions regarding the efficacy of public relations tools in drug control. The population of this study comprised the youth of Akwa Ibom State, specifically those between the ages of 15 and 35. According to the National Baseline Youth Survey, the estimated youth population (15–35 years) in Akwa Ibom State is 2,436,963, comprising 1,238,691 males and 1,198,272 females. The sample size for this study was determined using the Taro Yamane (1967) formula at a 5% (0.05) level of significance to obtain a representative sample from the population of 2,436,963 youths in Akwa Ibom State (National Baseline Youth Survey, 2021; Adeyefa & Awofadeju, 2023; Eke & Adeyemi, 2023). The Taro Yamane formula is:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Substituting the values:

$$\begin{aligned} n &= \frac{2,436,963}{1 + 2,436,963(0.05)^2} \\ n &= \frac{2,436,963}{1 + 2,436,963(0.0025)} \\ n &= \frac{2,436,963}{6,093.4075} \approx 399.93 \end{aligned}$$

Therefore, the required sample size is 400 respondents. The study employs a multi-stage sampling technique to ensure geographical and demographic representativeness. In the first stage, the state is divided into its three Senatorial Districts. Secondly, a simple random sampling (balloting) technique is used to select one focal Local Government Area (LGA) from each district (e.g., Uyo, Eket, and Ibeno). Purposive sampling is used to select only those youths who have been exposed to public relations strategies meant to contain substance use, ensuring the data gathered is relevant to the research objectives (Ajayi-Ayodele & Ikuesewo-Akinbami, 2025; Wyorkson & Paul, 2025).

The instrument for data collection is a researcher-structured questionnaire (Eka et al., 2020; Udom et al., 2025). The questionnaire is designed in a close-ended format and divided into sections: Section A gathers demographic data, while Sections B and C utilise Likert-type scales to measure the level of exposure to PR tools, the depth of drug-related knowledge, and the perceived effectiveness of these tools in facilitating behavioural change (Eka et al., 2020; Ibanga, 2025; Obiagu & Onele, 2024). The reliability of the instrument is established through the test-retest method. The results of the two tests were correlated, yielding a Cronbach alpha score of .83, which indicates a high and acceptable level of internal consistency. Data is collected through personal administration of the copies of questionnaire by the researcher and trained assistants in homes, workplaces, and educational centres. The retrieved data are analysed using descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies, percentages, and weighted mean scores (WMS). Results are presented in frequency tables.



Findings

Table 1: Level of substance misuse among youths in Akwa Ibom State

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Alcohol consumption is common among youths in my community.	156	148	58	38	3.06	0.95	Agree
2	Marijuana is commonly used by youths in my area.	130	145	78	47	2.89	1.00	Agree
3	Misuse of prescription drugs is increasing among youths.	142	153	65	40	2.99	0.97	Agree
4	Peer influence contributes to substance misuse.	182	144	47	27	3.20	0.88	Agree
5	Substance misuse is a major concern among youths in Akwa Ibom State.	171	151	48	30	3.16	0.91	Agree
	Grand Mean					3.06	0.94	Agree

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

Table 1 results indicate that respondents generally agreed that substance misuse is prevalent among youths in Akwa Ibom State, with a grand mean of 3.06 (SD = 0.94). Peer influence recorded the highest mean score (M = 3.20), suggesting that it is perceived as a major contributor to substance misuse.

Table 2: Factors influencing substance misuse among youths in Akwa Ibom State.

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Peer pressure influences youths to misuse substances.	185	147	43	25	3.23	0.87	Agree
2	Unemployment contributes to substance misuse among youths.	172	151	50	27	3.17	0.89	Agree
3	Family problems increase the likelihood of substance misuse.	154	159	56	31	3.09	0.91	Agree
4	Poor parental supervision encourages substance misuse.	166	154	51	29	3.14	0.90	Agree
5	Easy access to drugs encourages substance misuse among youths.	178	146	49	27	3.19	0.89	Agree
	Grand Mean					3.16	0.89	Agree

Source: Fieldwork, 2026

Table 2 indicates that respondents generally agreed that several factors influence substance misuse among youths in Akwa Ibom State, with a grand mean of 3.16 (SD = 0.89). Among the identified factors, peer



pressure recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.23$), indicating that it is perceived as the most significant factor influencing substance misuse. This was followed by easy access to drugs ($M = 3.19$) and unemployment ($M = 3.17$). Poor parental supervision ($M = 3.14$) and family problems ($M = 3.09$) were also identified as important contributing factors. This highlights that social, economic, and family-related factors collectively contribute to substance misuse among youths in Akwa Ibom State.

Table 3: Effects of substance misuse among youths in Akwa Ibom State.

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Substance misuse negatively affects the academic performance of youths.	176	149	48	27	3.19	0.89	Agree
2	Substance misuse increases involvement in crime and other social vices.	183	151	42	24	3.23	0.86	Agree
3	Substance misuse contributes to poor physical and mental health among youths.	190	144	43	23	3.25	0.85	Agree
4	Substance misuse leads to poor decision-making and risky behaviours.	181	150	45	24	3.22	0.87	Agree
5	Substance misuse reduces the productivity and future prospects of youths.	174	154	46	26	3.19	0.88	Agree
	Grand Mean					3.22	0.87	Agree

Source: *Fieldwork, 2026*

Table 3 indicate that respondents agreed that substance misuse has significant negative effects on youths in Akwa Ibom State, with a grand mean of 3.22 ($SD = 0.87$). The highest-rated effect was that substance misuse contributes to poor physical and mental health among youths ($M = 3.25$), followed by increased involvement in crime and other social vices ($M = 3.23$) and poor decision-making and risky behaviours ($M = 3.22$). Respondents also agreed that substance misuse negatively affects academic performance ($M = 3.19$) and reduces youths' productivity and future prospects ($M = 3.19$). This indicates that substance misuse has adverse academic, health, behavioural, and socio-economic consequences for youths in Akwa Ibom State.

Table 4: Strategies for preventing and reducing substance misuse among youths in Akwa Ibom State.

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Public awareness campaigns can help reduce substance misuse among youths.	188	149	39	24	3.25	0.84	Agree
2	Parents should closely monitor the activities of their children to	180	153	43	24	3.22	0.86	Agree

	prevent substance misuse.							
3	Schools should intensify drug education programmes for students.	194	145	39	22	3.27	0.83	Agree
4	Government should strengthen the enforcement of drug control laws.	186	148	41	25	3.24	0.85	Agree
5	Youth empowerment and employment opportunities can reduce substance misuse.	182	151	42	25	3.23	0.86	Agree
	Grand Mean					3.24	0.85	Agree

Source: *Fieldwork, 2026*

Table 4 reveals that respondents agreed on various strategies for preventing and reducing substance misuse among youths in Akwa Ibom State, with a grand mean of 3.24 (SD = 0.85). Among the proposed strategies, intensifying drug education programmes in schools received the highest mean score (M = 3.27), indicating that respondents perceived it as the most effective preventive measure. This was followed by public awareness campaigns (M = 3.25), strengthening the enforcement of drug control laws (M = 3.24), youth empowerment and employment opportunities (M = 3.23), and parental monitoring of children's activities (M = 3.22). This indicates that educational, legislative, parental, and socio-economic interventions are perceived as effective strategies for reducing substance misuse among youths in Akwa Ibom State.

Discussion

This study revealed that substance misuse is prevalent among youths in Akwa Ibom State. Respondents agreed that the consumption of alcohol, marijuana, and the misuse of prescription drugs are common among young people, with peer influence emerging as a significant contributor. This suggests that substance misuse has become a notable public health concern within the study area. The finding is consistent with those of Mboho (2024), who reported that substance misuse among youths in Akwa Ibom State has reached an alarming level, largely driven by social and environmental influences. Similarly, Peters and Bassey (2020) observed that alcohol, cannabis, and other psychoactive substances are widely abused by young people in the state, thereby posing serious health and social challenges.

Peer pressure, unemployment, family problems, poor parental supervision, and easy access to drugs are major factors influencing substance misuse among youths in Akwa Ibom State. Among these factors, peer pressure recorded the highest level of agreement, indicating that social interactions play a significant role in encouraging drug use among young people. The finding corroborates the work of Abikoye et al. (2021), who identified peer influence, family instability, and economic hardship as major predictors of substance misuse among Nigerian youths. It also agrees with Udom et al. (2025), who found that unemployment and inadequate parental monitoring increase the likelihood of substance misuse among youths in Akwa Ibom State.

Substance misuse has several adverse effects on youths, including poor physical and mental health, increased involvement in crime and other social vices, poor academic performance, risky behaviours, and reduced productivity. Respondents particularly agreed that the negative health consequences of substance misuse are profound. This finding supports the report of the World Health Organisation, which identifies



substance misuse as a major cause of preventable illness, disability, and premature death among young people. It is also in agreement with Peters and Bassey (2020), who concluded that substance misuse contributes to school dropout, criminal activities, mental health disorders, and poor socio-economic outcomes among youths in Akwa Ibom State.

Strengthening drug education in schools, conducting public awareness campaigns, enforcing drug control laws, promoting youth empowerment and employment, and improving parental monitoring are effective strategies for preventing and reducing substance misuse among youths. Drug education programmes in schools received the highest level of agreement, suggesting that respondents perceive education as a critical preventive measure. This finding aligns with that of Udom et al. (2025), who recommended comprehensive school-based drug education and community awareness programmes as effective interventions for reducing substance misuse among youths. It also supports the recommendations of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA), which advocates preventive education, community participation, and youth empowerment as sustainable approaches to combating substance misuse in Nigeria. This finding particularly shows alignment with the propositions of the public relations transfer model, which served as the framework for this study. It affirms the position that strategic communication could be effective in the transfer of positive attitude, which could replace a negative one among a set of individuals. The model assumes that public attitudes are dynamic and this shows in the move from drug misuse to proper use among respondents, owed to the adoption and implementation of public relations tools.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Substance abuse has evolved into a critical social and public health epidemic that fundamentally endangers the physical and mental development of Nigerian youths, including those in Akwa Ibom State. This requires an urgent transition to health-centred, strategic public relations frameworks. Although evidence indicates that public relations tools such as media partnerships, community engagement, and social media advocacy are highly effective in creating widespread awareness and shaping perception, there remains a persistent “knowledge-behaviour gap” as these messages frequently fail to stimulate actual behavioural modification or sustainable drug cessation among the youthful population.

Within the localised landscape of Akwa Ibom State, the efficacy of drug control is further complicated by unique socio-cultural norms and the high prevalence of marijuana and psychoactive substance use among students and riverine dwellers, which necessitates a shift from fragmented information dissemination toward culturally tailored interpersonal engagement and robust digital health communication. This researcher concludes that stakeholders such as the NDLEA can leverage the transformative power of strategic communication to move the youthful demographic from a state of apathy and cultural prejudice toward an active interest in preventive health and a comprehensive knowledge of the devastating consequences of the silent epidemic of drug abuse.

Nevertheless, this study suffers some limitation particularly given its homogenous view of youths with did not consider differences in age, gender, education and economic status. These possible intervening factors could impinge on the outcome of this study if they were considered. However, this does not hamper the findings already reported in this study. More so, Akwa Ibom State is wide, and does not necessarily narrow down to a particular local government area. Such narrowing could give a clearer view. Again, this does not make the study less impactful in its contributions to knowledge.

The following recommendations were proffered:

1. Stakeholders and agencies such as the NDLEA should reposition their public relations strategy by moving beyond a “natural default” toward punitive measures and instead adopting a more robust, multi-channel communication mix.



2. Drug control messages should be aggressively packaged and disseminated through social media platforms, leveraging influencers, bloggers, and celebrities.
3. Public relations strategies must transition from general enlightenment to intensive, skill-based interventions. This should involve the frequent use of documentary films and real-life testimonials from drug abuse survivors.
4. Stakeholders should implement a localised framework that integrates digital health communication with community-based interpersonal engagement. This includes strengthening parental monitoring, engaging community elders to remove psychoactive substances from traditional requirement lists, and establishing peer-support networks within local schools and riverine communities to create a culturally resonant and socially reinforced anti-drug environment.

Acknowledgements: A special thanks to all those who assisted me in the course of this research.

Funding: No funding received.

Conflict of Interest: None exist.

How to Cite: Selong, P.A. (2026). Public relations tools for the control of illicit drugs amongst the youth of Akwa Ibom State. *Audrezara Journal of Communication and Social Research (AJCSR)*, 2(2), 280-289. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22262176>

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