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CORRELATES OF SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE IN ALCOHOL CRAVING: A STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN ANAMBRA STATE

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ABSTRACT

The study examined correlates of social intelligence in alcohol craving among undergraduate students in Anambra State. A sample of 321 students, consisting of 76 (23.7%) females and 245 (76.3%) males between the ages of 19 and 35 years (Mean = 25.41, SD = 5.78), was selected through a combination of cluster and simple random sampling techniques. Participants responded to standardized measures, including the Mini Alcohol Craving Experience, and Social Intelligence Scale. Utilizing a correlational research design, data were analyzed through Pearson Product Moment Correlation after verifying normality and linearity assumptions. The results showed significant negative relationship between social intelligence and alcohol craving ($r = -0.664$, $p < 0.05$). This outcome emphasizes the influence of psychosocial factor such as social intelligence on alcohol use behaviour. Based on the findings, the study recommends that universities implement interventions such as social skills workshops, group counselling, and peer mentorship programmes that enhance students' social and emotional competencies through curriculum integration or extracurricular activities, in

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order to nurture healthier interpersonal relationships and coping strategies that reduce the risk of alcohol dependence.

Keywords: Social intelligence, Alcohol craving, Undergraduate students.

Introduction

Alcohol consumption among university students has become a critical concern, especially in developing nations like Nigeria. In many universities, including those in Anambra State, students frequently use alcohol as a coping mechanism for stress, academic pressures, emotional dysregulation, and social anxiety. The implications of this behaviour extend beyond immediate health risks to include academic decline, interpersonal conflict, increased dropout rates, and even suicidal ideation (Okonkwo, et.al, 2023, 2023, Achebe & Onyemaechi, 2023; Ezeonuegbu & Okonkwo, 2022). Understanding the psychological and social factors that influence alcohol craving is essential for developing interventions.

Alcohol craving, defined as the intense desire or urge to drink, involves both cognitive and emotional processes (Tiffany & Wray, 2020). It is distinct from withdrawal symptoms and is a critical predictor of alcohol misuse and relapse (Garland et al., 2021; Franken, 2013). Craving is thought to be driven by neurobiological processes involving sensitization to stimuli previously associated with alcohol use (Robinson & Berridge, 2017). Repeated exposure to alcohol-related cues can turn occasional drinking into a compulsive pattern, where the 'wanting' becomes increasingly disproportionate to the actual pleasure derived (Field et al., 2019; Heinz et al., 2020).

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The addiction cycle progresses through binge/intoxication, withdrawal, and preoccupation/anticipation stages (Koob, & Volkow, 2016; 2018). During the binge stage, dopamine surges in the ventral striatum reinforce alcohol consumption. With chronic use, the brain undergoes neuro adaptations—particularly in the dorsal striatum—solidifying drinking as a habitual behaviour. In the withdrawal stage, negative affect and dysphoria emerge, influenced by alterations in the extended amygdala, often driving relapse (Sinha et al., 2021). The final stage, preoccupation/anticipation, is marked by heightened sensitivity to internal and external cues, with notable involvement of the prefrontal cortex and insula, affecting impulse control and craving awareness (Craig, 2017, Onyemechi, 2025, Onyemaechi, et al., 2023, 2022, 2021).

Social intelligence—the ability to navigate interpersonal situations effectively is also vital in managing peer-related influences. It involves empathy, social awareness, and conflict resolution skills, all of which help individuals avoid maladaptive responses like alcohol use (Goleman, 2016; Petrides et al., 2018). High social intelligence enables students to handle social stress without resorting to substance use, while deficits in these skills increase the likelihood of succumbing to peer pressure (Riggio, 2016; Abdullahi et al., 2022). Developing social intelligence has thus emerged as a promising protective factor in substance abuse prevention programs.

Although numerous studies have explored alcohol craving and its psychological correlates (Tiffany & Wray, 2020; Field et al., 2019), there remains a significant research gap in the Nigerian context. This study therefore seeks to fill that gap by investigating how social intelligence influence alcohol craving in undergraduate students in Anambra State. Addressing

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this issue is critical not only for academic success but also for the long-term psychological well-being of Nigerian youth.

Alcohol consumption among university students has become an escalating crisis, particularly within Nigerian public universities. The rate at which undergraduate students engage in alcohol use has reached disturbing levels, with many turning to alcohol as a coping mechanism for stress, academic pressure, and social acceptance. This growing trend not only undermines students' academic performance but also exposes them to a range of health risks, including addiction, mental health disorders, risky sexual behaviour, and violence. Despite various sensitization campaigns and institutional policies aimed at curbing this behaviour, the problem persists.

What makes this issue particularly concerning is the insufficient understanding of the psychological and social drivers of alcohol craving within this demographic. Existing interventions often fail to address the nuanced personal and interpersonal factors that may predispose students to alcohol dependence. Specifically, variable such as social intelligence—which have been individually linked to substance use in prior studies—have not been thoroughly examined in an integrated manner within the Nigerian context. The absence of such contextualized, evidence-based insights continues to hinder the development of effective, holistic strategies for prevention and rehabilitation.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to investigate how social intelligence as a psycho social factor influence alcohol craving among undergraduates in public universities in Anambra State. Addressing this gap is not just an academic exercise, but a critical step toward mitigating a

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public health challenge that threatens the well-being, productivity, and future of Nigeria's youth. Hence the specific objectives of the study include;

1. To examine if social intelligence will significantly correlate with alcohol craving among University undergraduate students in Anambra State.
2. To ascertain if social intelligence will significantly correlate with alcohol craving among male and female University undergraduate students in Anambra State.

Research Questions

The study sought to answer these research questions.

1. Will social intelligence significantly correlate with alcohol craving among University undergraduate students in Anambra State?
2. Will social intelligence significantly correlate with alcohol craving among male and female University undergraduate students in Anambra State?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated to guide the study;

1. Social intelligence will significantly correlate with alcohol craving among University undergraduate students in Anambra State.
2. Social intelligence will significantly correlate with alcohol craving among male and female University undergraduate students in Anambra State.

Method

Participants

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A total number of Three hundred and twenty-one (321) students drawn from Nnamdi Azikiwe University (NAU), Awka and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University (COOU), Igbariam Campuses served as participants for the study. They consist of 76 (23.7%) females and 245 (76.3%) males. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 35 years with mean age of 25.41 and standard deviation of 5.78. School data showed that 210 (65.4%) were drawn from COOU and 111 (34.6%) were drawn from UNIZIK. Faculty data revealed that 173 (53.9%) were selected from Social Sciences, 85 (26.5%) were selected from Management Sciences, 42 (13.1%) were selected from Education, and 21 (6.5%) were selected from Engineering. Departmental data showed that 71(22.1%) were from Psychology, 89 (27.7%) were from Criminology. 55 (17.1%) were from Public Administration, 18 (5.6%) were from Sociology, 17 (5.3%) were from Mass Communication, 17 (5.3%) were from Educational Foundation, 32 (10.0%) were from Accountancy, and 22 (6.9%) were from Electrical Engineering. Cluster and simple random sampling were used to select the Faculties and Departments from both Universities, while incidental sampling techniques which is non-probability sampling technique was used to select the participants randomly met in the school environment who were also students.

Instruments

Two instruments were used: Mini Alcohol Craving Experience (MACE) by Coateset al., (2017), and Social intelligence scale by Frankovsky & Birknerova (2014).

The Mini Alcohol Craving Experience (MACE) Coateset al., (2017)

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The MACE comprises 11-item questionnaires that assess the frequency alcohol craving experience of desire-related cognitions over the past week. The respondents will be asked to answer the questions as it relates to their personal life and drinking experiences by marking (*) in the 5-point likert type interval scale starting from, 1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neither agree nor disagree 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree. The scale has good internal reliability of 0.95. The researcher conducted pilot test and reported Cronbach alpha of 0.94 for the scale and a convergent validity of 0.72.

Social intelligence scale

This is a 21 item scale developed by Frankovsky and Birknerova (2014), to measure social intelligence among individuals. The scale obtained a reliability score of 0.90. A pilot study was conducted using a test re-test method to further test the reliability of the instrument and as well to obtain the norm for Nigeria use. The pilot study reported an alpha value of 0.89 and norm of 89.20, with a convergent validity of 0.76 with the prosocial behaviour scale developed by Afolabi (2013), while 3 experts face validated this instrument. The respondents were asked to state the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement in the appropriate part by marking (*) in the 5-point likert type interval scale starting from 1= Never, 2= Hardly ever, 3= Sometimes, 4= Often, 5= Very often.

Procedure

The researcher employed a simple random sampling technique to select faculties and departments for the study. The names of all faculties in the two universities were written on

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separate slips of paper, folded, and randomly drawn to determine which faculties would be included. Similarly, departments within the selected faculties were randomly chosen. Given that the departments were situated in different locations across the campuses, the researcher enlisted the assistance of class representatives from each department to serve as research assistants and facilitate data collection. Both the researcher and the research assistants administered the questionnaires to students who voluntarily agreed to participate. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. They were also given adequate time to complete the questionnaires. Out of 340 distributed questionnaires, 321 were properly completed and returned, and these were used for the final data analysis.

Design and Statistics

The study adopted a correlational design and Pearson Product Moment Correlation statistic was used to test the hypotheses and analyze the retrieved data using SPSS v26.

Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis

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	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Age	321	18	35	25.41	5.782	.034	.136	-1.122	.271
Social intelligence	321	38	102	71.48	11.939	.085	.136	-.184	.271
Alcohol craving	321	43	80	60.20	6.836	.130	.136	-.277	.271
Valid N (listwise)	321								

Table 1 showed that the data distribution for all three variables are approximately normal, as indicated by skewness and kurtosis values within acceptable ranges (±1). The sample consisted of 321 participants with ages ranging from 18 to 35 years. The mean age of 25.41 years indicated that the average respondent is in their mid-twenties, reflecting a young adult population typical of university students. The standard deviation of 5.78 shows a moderate spread in age distribution, indicating some diversity in the participants' ages. Alcohol craving was positively skewed (.130), reflecting relatively higher levels of alcohol craving among participants, with an SD of 6.836 suggesting moderate variability. Social intelligence (.085) exhibited a normal distribution, with an SD of 11.939 demonstrating a relatively wide variation in social intelligence levels.

Table 2: Correlation Table between social intelligence and alcohol craving among university undergraduate students in Anambra State.

Ojukwu Journal of Psychological Services
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Correlations

		Social intelligence	Alcohol craving
Social intelligence	Pearson Correlation	1	-.664**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	321	321
Alcohol craving	Pearson Correlation	-.664**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	321	321

****. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).**

Table 2 showed the correlation between social intelligence and alcohol craving. The Pearson correlation coefficient (-0.664) indicated a strong negative relationship between social intelligence and alcohol craving, suggesting that individuals with higher social intelligence tend to experience lower alcohol craving ($r = -0.664$, $p < 0.05$). This correlation is statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level (Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.000), meaning the likelihood of this result occurring by chance is very low. The sample size ($N = 321$) reinforced the reliability of this finding.

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Publication date: 26/05/2025; eISSN: 1595-6431; Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15516616

Table 3: Correlation Table between social intelligence and alcohol craving among male and female university undergraduate students in Anambra State.

Gender	Variable		Social intelligence	Alcohol craving
Male	**Social intelligence**	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.519**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0.00.
		N	245	245
	Alcohol craving	Pearson Correlation	-0.519**	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00.	
		N	245	245
Female	**Social intelligence**	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.214**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
		N	76	76
	Alcohol craving	Pearson Correlation	-0.214**	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
		N	76	76

****. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).**

Ojukwu Journal of Psychological Services
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The correlation statistics presented in the table 3 above examined the relationship between social intelligence and alcohol craving, disaggregated by gender (male and female). For male participants (N = 245), the Pearson correlation coefficient between social intelligence and alcohol craving is r = -0.519, with a significance level of p <0.05 (r = -0.519, p< 0.05, N =245). This indicated a strong negative and statistically significant relationship, suggesting that as social intelligence increases, alcohol craving decreases significantly among male students. For female participants (N = 76), the Pearson correlation coefficient is r = -0.214, also significant at p <0.05 (r = -0.214, p< 0.05, N =76), indicating a weaker but still significant negative relationship between social intelligence and alcohol craving. This implies that higher levels of social intelligence are associated with lower alcohol craving among female students, although the association is not as strong as that observed in male students. Overall, these findings suggest that social intelligence plays a protective role against alcohol craving in both genders, but the effect is more pronounced in males than in females.

Discussion

This outcome aligns with earlier studies that have identified social intelligence as a protective factor against risky behaviours, particularly substance use. For instance, research has demonstrated that individuals with higher social intelligence are better equipped to resist peer pressure and make healthier behavioural choices. A study by Nwankwo et al. (2019) found that adolescents with higher social intelligence levels were less likely to engage in substance use, highlighting the role of social intelligence in promoting adaptive behaviour. Similarly,

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Adeyemo (2010) reported that social intelligence significantly predicted alcohol abstinence. Umeaku, 2024, Biachi, et.al, 2025) among Nigerian university students, emphasizing its importance in substance use prevention.

One explanation for this relationship is the ability of socially intelligent individuals to regulate emotions and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships. Those with higher social intelligence often cultivate supportive peer networks that discourage harmful behaviour, including excessive alcohol consumption. This is supported by the findings of Okafor and Ogbu (2018), who observed that students with higher social intelligence levels were more likely to associate with peers who engage in positive behaviour, thereby reducing their exposure to substance use.

Additionally, the findings of this study align with the conclusions of Eze and Okonkwo (2021), who observed that individuals with lower social intelligence often struggle with emotional self-regulation and social judgment, increasing their vulnerability to substance use. Difficulty in managing interpersonal conflicts or social pressures may lead to reliance on alcohol as a means of escape. In contrast, students with higher social intelligence are more capable of resolving conflicts and navigating social environments without resorting to maladaptive behaviour.

These findings can be further explained through Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), which emphasizes that behaviour is learned through observation and interaction within social environments. Students with higher social intelligence are more likely to observe and imitate positive role models while avoiding behaviours that promote alcohol use. Their ability to interpret social cues and resist negative influences contributes to more informed and health-conscious decisions. Within the framework of this theory, social intelligence strengthens the individual's capacity to engage in positive behaviours and avoid situations that might encourage

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substance misuse, supporting the conclusion that it serves as a critical protective factor against alcohol craving.

The second hypothesis, which proposed a significant relationship between social intelligence and alcohol craving among male and female undergraduate students in Anambra State, was supported by the study's findings. When analyzed by gender, results showed a significant inverse relationship between social intelligence and alcohol craving in both male and female students. Among male undergraduates, there was a strong negative correlation, indicating that students with higher social intelligence experienced substantially lower levels of alcohol craving. For female students, the negative correlation was also significant though comparatively weaker, suggesting that social intelligence is also protective in this group, albeit to a lesser extent.

The observed gender differences in the relationship between social intelligence and alcohol craving suggest that the way social intelligence operates may vary between males and females in the context of substance use. For male students, higher social intelligence appears to play a more prominent role in navigating peer influence and avoiding alcohol use. Their ability to understand social dynamics, manage interpersonal interactions, and regulate emotional responses likely contributes to their reduced tendency toward alcohol craving (Iwamoto et al., 2020, Anazonwu, et al., 2017). In contrast, while female students also benefit from social intelligence, other psychological and interpersonal variables such as heightened emotional awareness, relational tension, or unique coping strategies may lessen its overall influence (Niu et al., 2022, Ezeokana, et al., 2017).

Further evidence by Schlegel and Mortillaro (2019) suggests that males may derive more advantage from the externally focused components of social intelligence, such as interpreting

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Home page: https://psyservicesjournal.org.ng, Volume 1, Issue 4, pp. 67-89
Publication date: 26/05/2025; eISSN: 1595-6431; Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15516616

social signals and managing influence within peer settings that often normalize alcohol consumption. Conversely, females may rely more on emotionally driven strategies, where constructs like emotional intelligence, relationship stress, and mood regulation carry more weight than social intelligence alone (Arslan, 2021). This implies that while social intelligence serves a protective function for both sexes, it interacts with distinct internal and social mechanisms depending on gender.

Delgado and colleagues (2018) reinforce this perspective by noting that socially intelligent males are more inclined to associate with peer groups that promote positive lifestyle choices, which further insulates them from substance-encouraging environments. For females, however, internal psychological dynamics or broader social pressures may complicate decision-making related to alcohol use, even when social intelligence is present, potentially diminishing its direct impact.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) offers a useful framework for understanding these gender-related patterns. Males who possess higher social intelligence may be more skilled at emulating behaviour modelled by peers and mentors who discourage substance use. Females, though equally capable of observational learning, might be more affected by emotionally intense interpersonal experiences, which could reduce the influence of social intelligence as a sole protective factor.

Conclusion

The findings of this study emphasize the critical role of social intelligence in mitigating alcohol craving among undergraduate students, with notable gender differences in the strength of this

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relationship. While higher levels of social intelligence are associated with lower alcohol craving in both male and female students, the effect is considerably stronger among males. This suggests that social intelligence functions as a protective factor against substance-related tendencies, particularly through mechanisms such as peer influence management, emotional regulation, and social decision-making. However, the gender disparity indicates that males and females may utilize or benefit from social intelligence differently due to underlying psychosocial and emotional factors. These insights highlight the need for gender-responsive prevention strategies enhancing social cognition and interpersonal skills for males, and combining these with emotional and coping interventions for females to more effectively reduce alcohol craving and promote healthier behavioural outcomes among university students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proffered.

1. Universities should incorporate social intelligence development into their counselling and student wellness programs. Workshops focusing on social awareness, empathy, and interpersonal problem-solving can equip students with the tools needed to resist peer pressure and manage social influences on substance use.

2. Since the study revealed a stronger correlation between social intelligence and reduced alcohol craving in males compared to females, interventions should be tailored accordingly. For female students, programs should integrate emotional regulation and stress-coping strategies alongside social intelligence training to address the broader range of psychosocial factors influencing substance-related behaviours.

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Publication date: 26/05/2025; eISSN: 1595-6431; Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15516616

3. Encouraging peer-led initiatives can reinforce positive behaviours and provide role models for adaptive social functioning. Male students, in particular, may benefit from peer mentorship programs that promote healthy decision-making and discourage substance use within socially influential circles.

4. Substance use prevention campaigns should go beyond awareness and include modules that teach practical social and emotional competencies. Highlighting the importance of social intelligence as a tool for resisting alcohol cravings could increase the relevance and effectiveness of such campaigns.

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