

Research Report

“It makes me work strong”: Cannabis and cannabis use persistency in a Nigerian city

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Abstract - Cannabis use has been researched comprehensively, especially in the western societies. In Africa, there is also a corpus of literature on cannabis use. In Nigeria, particularly in Awka, southeast Nigeria, there is a dearth of qualitative empirical research on cannabis use among different classes of people. This study sets out to understand cannabis use motive in Awka and why cannabis users persist in using cannabis. In-depth interview (IDI) was conducted among 18 participants selected through snow balling. The interviews were conducted between November 2018 and June 2019. Data collected were transcribed and analyzed and two major themes of coping and enhancement were generated. Data showed non-medical use of the drug by the participants. Findings suggest among others that cannabis use has continued because it helps users to cope with life challenges. Also, cannabis is seen as a boost to strength among users, especially those who do jobs that demand sustained physical energy, among others, and enhancement functions users derive from it. Consequently, there is the need for practical policy to tame recreational cannabis use in this Nigerian City.

Keywords: cannabis and coping, cannabis and enhancement; cannabis, cannabis use motives, persistence cannabis use, Southeastern Nigeria

Introduction

Sometime in 2018, the author became friends with a cannabis user. As time went by, the author engaged him in conversations to understand why he uses cannabis. The researcher's aim was to understand why he uses cannabis, as it is illegal in Nigeria (Tribune 2019). Despite his knowledge of the reported health effects and challenges of withdrawal that may be associated with cannabis use, he is not in a haste to quit.

Research has shown that while cannabis has medical health benefits (Lev-Ran *et al.* 2014: 797), there are also challenges associated with it (Hall 2015; Tashkin 2013). While this evidence on medical use of cannabis abound, non-medical use of cannabis is rising. This recreational use of cannabis has led to different innovations on drug use (Ugwu & Dumbili 2021; Dumbili 2020). Consequently, there is abuse of the drug and this abuse has implications to the individuals and the society at large. Despite harassment by law enforcement agents (Ugwu & Dumbili 2021; Ediom-Ubong 2018), cannabis use/abuse has continued. This raises the need for more qualitative empirical research to understand cannabis use motive and why cannabis use persists in Awka, south east Nigeria.

Cannabis and Cannabis Use Motives

Cannabis use has been extensively researched across the world. Much of these studies have been on the health effects of cannabis use. For instance, in an attempt to determine the correlation between cannabis use and depression, Lev-Ran *et al.* (2014: 797) concluded that, "cannabis use, and particularly heavy cannabis use, may be associated with an increased risk for developing depressive disorder".

Furthermore, Hall (2015) conducted a study to determine changes in the evidence on the adverse health challenges of cannabis. The study concluded that the epidemiological literature in the past 20 years shows that cannabis use upsurges the risk of accidents and can produce dependence. Likewise, there are reliable associations between regular cannabis use and poor psychosocial effects and mental health in adulthood. Moreover, in a study to determine the effect of cannabis smoking on the

lungs, Tashkin concludes that regular use of cannabis causes airway injury leading to symptoms of chronic bronchitis in some smokers but no physiological or high-resolution computed tomography evidence of emphysema. Notwithstanding the presence of procarcinogenic components in cannabis smoke, a limited number of appropriately performed and analyzed epidemiologic studies have failed to demonstrate an increased risk for either lung or upper airway cancer in association with cannabis smoking, although evidence is mixed regarding the risk of heavy, long-term use (Tashkin 2013).

There are other complications that may arise as a result of cannabis use. For instance, one study has reported there is evidence that cannabis use is associated with harms, such as inflated stroke, inflammation of lungs, anxiety, psychosis, depression, mania, low birth weight problems and behavioral issues (Spackman *et al.* 2017). Furthermore, there is indication that cannabis use in some individuals may be connected with serious mental illness, such as psychosis, mania, and major depression (Borges *et al.* 2016; Gibbs *et al.* 2015; Lev-Ran *et al.* 2014; Ruiz-Veguilla *et al.* 2012).

Apart from the health risk associated with cannabis use, studies have also shown that most former consistent users reported quitting cannabis use due to getting into trouble, being ordered into drug treatment and/or being drug tested (Friese 2017). Past irregular users mostly reported that they disliked the somatic effects of cannabis and did not feel it enhanced their social interactions or activities (Friese 2017). Also, some studies (e.g., Suerken *et al.* 2016) conducted among college students show that students, who use cannabis, reported significantly lower GPAs, on average than non-users. Even students who used cannabis infrequently exhibited lower academic performance. Students who increased cannabis use had the lowest adjusted average GPA, at 0.25 points lower than non-users (Suerken *et al.* 2016).

In a study conducted to ascertain the motivation for cannabis use, Renata and colleagues found that respondents used cannabis for a number of reasons, including enhancement, social, conformity, coping, and expansion (Renata *et al.* 2013). They observed that the enhancement motives were assessed as the most, and conformity motives as the least salient motives among all groups of substance users (Renata *et al.* 2013). Among college students, cannabis craving is associated with cannabis use among students who frequently use it. Craving is related to and may impact academic effort and motivation (Phillips *et al.* 2015).

Some studies claim that family background, peer pressure and attendance of social function are among the reasons for cannabis smoking (e.g., [Shehu & Idris 2008](#)). Also staying awake to read at night, stress relief among others, have been found to be the reason why people use cannabis and other related substances ([Oshodi et al. 2010](#)). Also, enhancement of social interaction has been a reason behind cannabis use ([Friese 2017](#)). Further studies have pointed out that cannabis use enhances spiritual euphoria. In one of these studies [Lorencova \(2011\)](#) noted that:

The data from 155 respondents shows that users of both marijuana and alcohol scored significantly higher in the mysticism dimension of spirituality than those who only drank alcohol. People who mentioned that the specified spiritual feelings resulted from drug use are significantly more spiritual than those who do not associate their experiences with any drugs (p. 180).

Another review study conducted to determine the validity of Cox and Klinger's ([Cox & Klinger 2004](#)), motivational model of alcohol use as a framework for reviewing research on motives for using alcohol, cannabis, and tobacco shows that people used cannabis for enhanced creativity and positive effects. These are seen as positive enhancers. While others like coping and conformity are seen as negative enhancers ([Cooper et al. 2015](#)).

In Nigeria, [Klantschnig \(2014\)](#)'s study provides insight on the history of cannabis use. There is also a study that examined political dynamics and drug policies ([Klantschnig 2016](#)). Some other attempts at the study of cannabis have been in the form of measuring the effects of cannabis use on haematological parameters, concluding that cannabis usage results in marked differences in some haematological parameters which may lead to inflammation, reduced immunity and ability to fight infections by the users, compared to nonuser ([Eledo et al. 2015](#)). Much of these studies are quantitative in nature. For instance, there is one that investigated factors responsible and effects on academic performance ([Shehu & Idris 2008](#)) and another, on prevalent and associated factors in substance use ([Oshodi et al., 2010](#)).

Additionally, there seems to be a few qualitative studies, which include studies on police crackdown with the use of violence and implications on the health of cannabis

users (Ediomo-Ubong 2018), and also on exploring the trends in substance use among undergraduates of private universities (Akingbade & Oluwaseun 2018).

Despite these attempts at understanding the effects of cannabis on its users, its use persists. This study sets out to fill this gap by exploring the factors responsible for the continued use of cannabis, using qualitative methods. This method will provide robust, emic, lived experiences of cannabis users.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is functionalism. Evidence from the finding further suggests that people have continued to use cannabis because of the relative function it performs for them. This also lends support to Malinowskian theory of needs which is basic to his functionalism. Malinowski's theory of needs is fundamental to his functional approach to culture; it is the theoretical declaration connecting the individual and society. It is a simple notion: culture exists to meet the basic biological, psychological, and social needs of the individual.

Malinowski viewed function in a physiological sense: "Function is defined as the satisfaction of an organic impulse by the appropriate act. Form and function, obviously, are inextricably related to one another" (1944:83). Malinowski developed the physiological analogy further. For example, he argued that if we were to describe how a normal lung operates, we would be describing the form of the process, but if we attempt to explain why the lung is operating in a certain manner then we are concerned with its function.

Methods

Area of the study

The locus of this study was Awka, the capital of Anambra State, Nigeria. The researcher has lived for many years in this city. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic, cultural, and religious country with three major ethnic groups (Hausa/Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba) and over 200 minor ethnic groups (Ugwu & Dumbili 2021). Awka, with an estimated population of 337,618 people (National Bureau of Statistics 2011) is in South- Eastern Nigeria. It is a metropolitan city located on a major highway connecting two other cities, and it hosts both government and private institutions and businesses (Ugwu & Dumbili 2021).

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected between November 2018 and June 2019. The researcher conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with participants chosen purposively from the acquaintances and others selected through snowballing. The selection criteria included present cannabis use and readiness to participate willingly. The author gave no incentives to the participants. The participants were five women aged between 23 and 33 years and 13 males aged 19–46 years. These included 4 public transport drivers, 6 University students, 2 truck loaders, and 6 civil servants.

The participants were aware that the researcher and the gatekeeper are friends. This study got ethical approval by the Anambra State Ministry of Health (Ref: MH/AWK/M/321/354), and the author obtained oral consent before the interviews. The participants were assured of confidentiality (Ugwu 2019). The interviews were conducted in English (the formal Nigerian language) and lasted between 40 and 80 min. the author sought permission from the participants and the interviews were recorded with a digital device. Part of the specific questions asked included: ‘would you reveal why you use cannabis?’, ‘How long have you been using cannabis?’, ‘Have you had any challenges since you started to use cannabis?’, ‘How were you able to face the challenges?’, ‘With the challenges in mind, do you still use cannabis?’, ‘Could you disclose why you have continued to use cannabis?’ These and many other probes were used to get deep into their narratives.

Data collected were transcribed and read repeatedly while listening to the record. This was done several times to ensure that the transcription accurately reflected what was recorded. Transcripts were then subjected to manual descriptive coding to generate themes. The themes combined with the analyses of participants’ lived experiences are presented below.

Findings

The findings of this study as presented below are reflections from the responses from the cannabis users’ interviewees. The users (participants) are drawn from different spheres of life, and this narrative is based on their experiences as cannabis users. Two major themes, coping strategy and enhancements emerged.

Demographics of the Participants (fieldwork 2019)

Gender	Male 13	Female 5			Total 18
Age	19 - 46	23 – 33			
Occupations	Civil servants 6	Students 6	Drivers 4	Truck Loaders 2	Total 18

Coping Strategy

Easing life challenges

Most of the participants confirmed that coping with challenges of life is seen as one of the reasons they use cannabis. Users believe that cannabis has helped them through some challenges, especially in days of despondence and lack of faith in the happenings of this world. As such, when faced with a difficult situation, users fall back on cannabis. At this stage, there is the need for social bonding of users who are trapped in the same situation, as they share their experiences to encourage one another. In the opinion of a female participant, it is even encouraging as sharing of experiences helps smoothen the severity of some situations.

Sometimes you feel you are all alone. You feel rejected, dejected. You see yourself looking out for comfort. You get across your cohorts and it is all about sharing experiences. As we inhale and re-inhale the thick smoke, cracking jokes on who can inhale all the smoke, you see yourself being free, free from the worries of this world, thinking the sensation would last forever (female, 29 years).

The story of another participant confirms the use of cannabis as a coping mechanism. He traveled from a different part of the country and is finding it difficult. All he remembered was that no matter your ethnic disposition, cannabis users do not segregate. As such when he came new, he decided to look out for cannabis users. And he believed his intuition did not fail him. He has these to say:

As soon as I came down here, I smelled a different environment. I did not know whom to talk to. Everybody does not just like my present. But I know there are people..., if I find them, I will be better. I had to go to the garage (motor park), where you can easily locate them. It was a matter of patience. It was on that kind of occasion that I met a person who has been a source of comfort (male, 34 years).

Data from the participants give the impression that using cannabis helps to face life challenges. This prepares their mind to find solace in cannabis instead of facing their challenges head-on. Ideally, they agree that using cannabis only provides temporary relief.

Averting fear

Data suggest that among the reasons for cannabis use is for the prevention of fear. Some who work in violent prone places more often use cannabis to help them cope. Furthermore, those whose work is susceptible to application of force in dealing with people are likely users of cannabis. It is evident cannabis makes users vulnerable to risky behavior which ordinarily could be avoided under normal circumstances. Most of the participants are of the opinion that cannabis makes use fearless and as such, removes shyness from one's face. It makes you do what you may have thought you could not do. In his words, one of the participants has this to say:

The type of work I do is the type that you need to be hard. I have a weakness; in that I feel for people. But when I am on drugs, no mercy, I feel inhuman. I do not mind anybody. It makes me high that I can destroy things for any slight provocation (male, 43 years).

Similarly, another participant's narrative corresponds with this narrative, albeit in a different work situation. He uses cannabis not only to withstand hooligans who will always extort money from him but to help stay put while on the road. He believes that cannabis makes him face the daily troubles on the road. Below are his words:

You know I am a driver. I looked for work many years after school before I mustered courage to start commercial driving. I *dey vex* when I am disturbed by these *agboro* guys [he refers to hooligans that always extort money from commercial drivers]. Not only that. Sometimes I think about accidents. But when I smoke, it makes me feel no shaking. I feel nothing. (male, 40 years).

One of the female participants corroborates the above as she recalls that she is always fearless whenever she takes cannabis. She notes that sometime in her life, she has done ridiculous things as a result of morale from drugs.

Before I got admission, I had written exams several times but was not successful. My parents are no longer interested in me. They favored the younger ones. As a result, I have to do many things to sustain myself. I joined some commercial sex workers but I am always afraid of meeting someone that I know. That's why I joined them to smoke. After smoking, I don't mind if my brother is standing by (female, 33 years).

Fascinatingly, the participants' accounts show that cannabis makes them fearless when used. It may have been that the users are fraught with low self-esteem and it is only when they are on the drug that they can weigh up. Thus, they see cannabis as a source of emotional stability.

Enhancements

Sexuality

Most of the participants are of the belief that cannabis is good for sexual health. They see cannabis as an enhancement drug that can ease sexual anxieties that can make one not to last longer. Thus, cannabis boosts sexual desire and provides sustained energy during coitus. Although most of them believe that cannabis enhances sexuality, they feel the sensation differently. A female participant state:

There was a day I wanted to have fun with my friend and I told him that I was coming. When I got to his house, I was surprised that he cooked joll of rice. Both of us ate together, but I kept demanding for more. Before I knew it, I began to feel horny. I could not hide my feelings. I could not remember what actually happened but I remembered I could not let him go (laughs). I ended up spending the night in his house. He later told me what he used to cook the rice anyway (female, 33 years).

In a manner that depicts the above narrative, a male participant agrees that cannabis works for him during sex. Although he states that moderate use is the best if you want to achieve maximum sexual satisfaction. He believes that most of the time, it is even better if you cook with it than smoking it. These are his words:

It is not good to take it much when you want to have sex. It is even better to cook with it. Sometimes my girl and I eat the food together and you don't need to beg her much after she has taken it from the food (male, 44 years).

This narrative is interesting as it brings out the issue of what quantity and how best to use it to ensure good results. Although, he could explain where he got the knowledge, he had used it in different ways before concluding which quantity and usage type works best for him.

Improved work stamina

Data show that cannabis is used for sustained work energy. According to most of the male participants, they always use cannabis because it enables them to have more strength for their work. Most of these participants engage in works that demand more time and energy and as such, taking cannabis enlivens them. According to a male participant, he can work from morning to night when he is on drugs. While he gets strength from it, he is of the opinion that you ought to eat very well. This admonition implies that he smokes rather than cook with it. When asked why he would always eat well before he takes it, he explained that it could make you very hungry and therefore restless and lack concentration.

Each time there is a truck to offload; I always like to take drugs (marijuana). Your pay depends on how you work. If you are lazy, you will end up not achieving anything that day. And you know that this work is not always regular. So, I smoke so that I can have more strength and do more work, but you have to eat well too. In short it makes me work like *jaki* (male, 39 years).

Interestingly, he, like others, does not feel it is the food they eat that sustains them. This could have been obvious when he cautioned that one ought to eat well before smoking it.

Hair growth

Cannabis serves as enhancements to hair growth among women. Thus, indicating the application of cannabis for beauty purposes. Data from all the women show that they have used it in one way or the other to enhance their hair growth. While the preparations differed, there is unity of purpose as to the efficacy of it. A female participant's account confirms this narrative:

Although I take it, it is also used for hair...yes; I have used it to grow my hair. There was a time all my front hair got cut after I braided "Ghana" weaving and I applied it to remedy my hair loss. It works (female, 25 years).

Furthermore, another participant has this to say:

I use it for many things. Among them is for my hair. I use it often because it makes my hair strong and soft. I have suffered hair loss before I was introduced to it as a cure. I began to use it and it works for me (female, 30 years).

When inquired about how it is used as hair growth enhancement, data show that it is prepared and applied on the hair scalp via a number of ways. For instance, some would grind it and mix with hair cream, which is then applied to the hair. Others would grind and mix with water to form a paste and apply accordingly. A participant has this to say:

It is not difficult to prepare. All you need to do is just grind it well. Then mix it with hair cream and start applying it. When I lose my hair, I apply it always, at least every morning. After sometime, I will do retouching and continue to apply before I braid again (female, 29 years).

Also, another female participant confirms the position when she states:

It can be used in a number of ways but I think it is better to use it alone. That is, you grind it to powder and mix with water. Then stir until it forms a paste. Leave it for one day and start applying (female, 23 years).

All of the women learned about the use of cannabis as hair growth enhancement through different sources. Some of the participants stated that they learned from pharmacists, while others became aware of the efficacy of cannabis on hair growth from the salon where they make their hair. Still, a number of them learned from a combination of those sources. One of them learned from a Fulani woman who sells herbal hair remedies. Below, a participant describes how she came to learn about it.

I learned it from one of my friends. Although she said she has never tried it, her friend, a pharmacist, told her that it could be used to grow hair. So, because I have access to it, I decided to give it a trial. Also, I heard about it in the salon but that was later I started using it (female, 23 years).

More so, another participant's account is as follows:

It was one Fulani woman that sells herbs. One day my friend and I were passing by and she asked us to buy hair medicine for hair. I looked at her like someone who is not well. My friend told me that they (Fulani women) used to sell good herbs for hair growth. We decided to buy it. My friend speaks their language, so she was able to know what is used in preparing the medicine (female, 29 years).

The narratives from the female's point out the fact that cannabis is used as a hair enhancement drug. Even though they are all aware of this, they came to know through different channels. While some of them have used it, others dwell on the information given to them by people who claim to have used it.

Discussion

Despite the unlawfulness of cannabis in Nigeria, its use has persisted. Using qualitative methods, this explores cannabis and cannabis use motives in Awka, Southeast Nigeria. Qualitative methods have a long history of creatively understanding social construction of reality as actors are bound in actions that the meaning can best be interpreted by them.

Evidence of the study further suggests that cannabis is used as a coping mechanism. The findings affirm that the users depend on cannabis to cope with differing life challenges. There are situations that demand solace in and cannabis supplies this, becoming a mediating agency between life and life situation. This conforms to some earlier research on cannabis use (Renata *et al.* 2013; Cooper *et al.* 2015).

Users also put the emotion of fear to control when they are under the influence of cannabis. This implies that cannabis serves to suppress fear, thereby making the user vulnerable to avoidable risks. The finding supports earlier research. For example, Lev-Ran *et al.* (2014) conclude, cannabis use, and predominantly heavy cannabis use, may be linked with an increased vulnerability to risk. Furthermore, Hall (2015), in a study to determine changes in the evidence on the adverse health challenges of cannabis, concludes that the epidemiological literature in the past 20 years show that cannabis use upsurges the risk of accidents.

Findings of this study further reveal that cannabis is used as an enhancement drug. The participants were of the opinion that it served as sexual enhancements. It supplies sustained energy during sexual activities. Additionally, it boosts energy during work. Those who labeled their work activities as requiring “hard labor” confirmed cannabis efficacy in improving their strength and thereby making their work easier. Moreover, most of the females were of the opinion that cannabis is a good drug for enhancing hair growth. By applying it on the scalp of the hair and the entire hair, the hair is protected from regular cuts, sustaining the growth. The finding corroborates earlier studies that identified cannabis as an enhancement drug (Oshodi *et al.* 2010; Friese 2017; Cooper *et al.* 2015).

Conclusion

This study presents the psychosocial factors supporting persistent cannabis use among residents of Awka, Southeast Nigeria. Despite the policy prohibiting drug use, its use has continued to increase. The increase in unhealthy use of cannabis portends danger to the health of the users and the society at large. Having a robust empirical understanding of the motivation for the use of cannabis becomes more expedient.

It is expected that as cannabis is illegal, there would be limited access to it. However, this is not so. The findings suggest that there is an unlimited access to the drug. This, points to the weakness of drug policies in Nigeria and demands rigorous understanding of these policies to check the increase in the abusive use of cannabis. As such, there is the need to ask more questions on the law prohibiting cannabis use in Nigeria. This would help in the reduction of ill-health and social vices associated with cannabis use.

The limitation of this study stems from limited coverage and small sample size which cannot guarantee nomothetic assumption. It is in this light that the need for wider and larger samples is required for more empirical understanding of persistence cannabis use and challenges in Awka, southeast Nigeria.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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