

Full Length Research

Understanding the small world of Guskolo abusers in Jos, Plateau state: A Chatman's theory of normative behavior theory perspective

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This study explored the knowledge systems shaping Guskolo abuse in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria, through the lens of Chatman's Theory of Normative Behavior. A qualitative methodology was employed, involving in-depth interviews with 23 active Guskolo users and observational fieldwork in key usage hotspots. Thematic analysis revealed three critical knowledge dimensions: (1) prior knowledge of drug formulations and minimized health risks, (2) experiential knowledge of economic strain, bodily effects, and self-medication benefits, and (3) procedural knowledge of peer-led initiation and usage rituals. These systems collectively create a closed epistemic environment where lived experience and social transmission override formal health information, perpetuating information poverty. The findings demonstrate how cognitive, embodied, and behavioral knowledge interact to maintain normative boundaries, with experiential knowledge serving as the most resistant to change. Recommendations emphasize culturally embedded interventions, including: peer-led harm reduction programs that leverage existing "social types," experiential learning opportunities to reshape bodily associations with drug use, and community co-designed messaging that works within rather than against local pharmacologic understandings. The study advances Chatman's framework by revealing how knowledge systems not just social ties sustain small worlds, offering a predictive model for assessing community permeability to external information. Policymakers and health workers must address all three knowledge domains to effectively disrupt substance-use norms in closed communities.

Keywords: Guskolo abuse, normative behavior, experiential knowledge, small worlds, epistemic norms

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INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse persists as a critical public health and socioeconomic challenge in Nigeria, exerting detrimental effects on individual well-being, family structures, and community stability (Maccido, 2024). Among the concerning substances gaining prominence is *Guskolo*—an inexpensive, locally produced alcoholic beverage prevalent in urban slums and impoverished neighborhoods (Dantong, 2018). Due to its unregulated composition and high ethanol concentration, *Guskolo* consumption is associated with severe medical consequences, such as hepatic cirrhosis, neuropsychiatric conditions, and acute fatalities (Sunday et al., 2023). Alarming, its use remains pervasive, disproportionately affecting socioeconomically vulnerable groups in regions like Jos, Plateau State, where limited economic opportunities and systemic marginalization exacerbate the crisis.

The abuse of *Goskolo* extends beyond a public health concern; it represents a multifaceted social issue intricately linked to factors such as poverty, unemployment, peer influence, and the cultural acceptance of harmful practices. Individuals who engage in *Goskolo* consumption often belong to tightly connected social subgroups referred to as small worlds, a sociological construct denoting micro-communities with shared epistemic norms and behavioral codes (Poole, 2023). These small worlds are frequently marked by social isolation, deep-seated mistrust of external actors, including healthcare professionals and formal institutions, and the reinforcement of behaviors that may undermine individual and collective well-being. Gaining insight into the knowledge systems, belief structures, and information-seeking behaviors within these groups is therefore essential for designing targeted and effective intervention strategies.

Chatman's Theory of Normative Behavior offers a valuable theoretical framework for exploring how knowledge influences information that is sought, withheld, or ignored within marginalized communities. The theory posits that individuals within a small world rely heavily on group knowledge, norms and social types to determine what constitutes useful or acceptable information (Madakiet al, 2025). In the case of *Goskolo* abusers, this may explain the resistance to health warnings, the perpetuation of misinformation, and the lack of engagement with support services. By applying this theory, researchers can gain deeper insight into the socio-cultural and informational dynamics that sustain *Goskolo* abuse in Jos.

This study, therefore, seeks to understand the small world of *Goskolo* abusers in Jos, Plateau State, by examining their knowledge of the substance, the norms that influence their behavior, and their patterns of information use and avoidance. Through this exploration, the research aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on substance abuse, information behavior, and community health, while providing evidence-based recommendations for more effective health education and outreach programs.

Statement of the Problem

Despite widespread awareness campaigns and increasing reports of the dangers associated with illicit alcohol consumption, the abuse of *Goskolo* continues to rise in Jos, Plateau State. *Goskolo*, a locally brewed and unregulated alcoholic substance, remains prevalent in low-income neighborhoods where its low cost and potent effects make it a popular choice among vulnerable individuals especially youths, the unemployed, and those facing social or economic hardship. Health professionals and authorities have raised concerns over its detrimental effects, including liver and kidney failure, impaired mental functioning, addiction, and death (Sunday et al., 2023). Yet, many users persist in their consumption, often dismissing the associated health warnings.

This persistent abuse raises critical questions about the kinds of knowledge and beliefs held by *Goskolo* abusers, and the role of their social environments in shaping their attitudes and behaviors. There appears to be a disconnect between public health messaging and the actual reception and use of such information by individuals within these communities. What is largely missing in current interventions is an understanding of the "small world" these individuals inhabit defined by Chatman's Theory of Normative Behavior as a close-knit group with its own epistemic norms, values, and barriers to external information (Weiss, Ghosh & Johnson, 2025).

The core problem this study addressed is the lack of in-depth understanding of how *Goskolo* abusers' knowledge/epistemic norms influences how they acquire, interpret, or reject health-related information within their social networks. Without exploring the internal logic of their behaviors (knowledge) rooted in shared experiences, group identity, and social norms interventions may remain ineffective. Therefore, there is a need to explore the informational and normative world of *Goskolo* abusers in Jos to inform better strategies for public health education and behavioral change.

Objective of the study

The objective of this study include:

1. To identify taxonomy of knowledge that influences the acceptance/rejection of health-related information within the small world of *Goskolo* Abusers in Jos, Plateau State.

Literature Review

The studies reviewed in this section consistently highlight how Chatman's theories of small worlds, normative behavior, and life in the round shape information-seeking behaviors across different populations. A key convergence is the resistance to boundary-crossing when seeking information whether among Nigerian Catholic clergy (Dankasa, 2017),

China's ethnic minorities (Zhu & Du, 2020), or Finnish hikikomori youth (Haasio, 2021). These groups prefer insular, trusted sources (peers, cultural insiders, or religious authorities) over external information, reinforcing Chatman's argument that social norms and group identity dictate information acceptance. Additionally, cultural and religious beliefs strongly influence perceptions of information credibility, as seen in Nigerian cancer patients' reliance on traditional healers (Madaki et al., 2025) and Indigenous communities' protective secrecy (Roy & Shiroma, 2021). These findings collectively confirm that small-world dynamics restrict information flow unless external knowledge aligns with internal norms.

While the studies support Chatman's core propositions, they also reveal contextual divergences in how her theories apply. For instance, Roy & Shiroma (2021) challenge the negative framing of information poverty in Indigenous contexts, arguing that secrecy and deception serve protective cultural functions rather than indicating deprivation a contrast to Chatman's original deficit-based model. Similarly, Madaki et al. (2025) and Haasio (2021) differ in how trust in alternative information sources manifests: Nigerian cancer patients distrust orthodox medicine due to supernatural beliefs, whereas hikikomori youth distrust mainstream society due to social alienation. Furthermore, while Zhu & Du (2020) and Dankasa (2017) confirm that small-world inhabitants avoid boundary-crossing, the degree of rigidity varies ethnic minorities in China may cross boundaries in emergencies, whereas clergy adhere more strictly to insular sources. These contrasts highlight that cultural, religious, and situational factors mediate the applicability of Chatman's theories, necessitating context-sensitive adaptations.

Methodology

A Qualitative Case study design was adopted for this study focusing on young Guskolo-alcohol addicts in Jos metropolis, Plateau State, Nigeria. Twenty three (23) young Guskolo-alcohol addicts aged 18-25 years were purposively sampled from four major markets in Jos metropolis. Snowball sampling technique was also employed to locate participants. Thematic content analysis was used to analyze the data collected.

Result

Taxonomy of Knowledge that influences acceptance/rejection of health-related information by Guskolo Addicts in Jos, Plateau State

Objective	Themes	Sub-themes
Taxonomy of knowledge about Guskolo among addicts in Jos, Plateau State	1. Prior Knowledge	1.1 Guskolo types and content of Guskolo
	2. Experiential Knowledge	1.2 Health consequences
	3. Procedural Knowledge	2.1 Economic consequences
		2.2 Intoxicant
		2.3 Pain Reliever
		3.1 Self-propelled
		3.2 Initiation by friends

This study found the taxonomy of knowledge about Guskolo among addicts in Jos, Plateau includes Prior, Experiential and Procedural knowledge types. The study revealed three distinct but interconnected knowledge types shaping Guskolo use behaviors:

Prior Knowledge: to include recognition of different Guskolo formulations and active ingredients and health Consequences: Awareness of potential physical/mental harm. **Experiential Knowledge:** to include economic impact which translates to firsthand understanding of financial drain from addiction, intoxicant effects that is the bodily knowledge of highs and withdrawal symptoms and the pain relief effect that is subjective experience of self-medication benefits. Finally,

Procedural Knowledge: to include the initiation pathways which is related to peer-led introduction vs self-driven experimentation?

The study reveals three interconnected knowledge systems—prior, experiential, and procedural—that collectively shape Guskolo use patterns in Jos, Plateau State. These knowledge types reflect both cognitive and social dimensions of information behavior, aligning with Chatman's Theory of Normative Behavior. Participants demonstrated folk pharmacological knowledge, recognizing different Guskolo formulations by potency, ingredients, and sensory qualities, consistent with Moreta-Herrera et al.'s (2023) explanatory model of health behavior. While some acknowledged health risks, most minimized them, exemplifying normalization theory (Foster et al., 2025) and Chatman's concept of small-world norms overriding external warnings.

Experiential knowledge emerged as particularly influential, encompassing economic impacts, bodily effects of intoxication/withdrawal, and self-medication practices. This aligns with Bourgois and Schonberg's (2009) findings on embodied knowledge in marginalized communities, where lived experience outweighs biomedical information. The study also identified procedural knowledge transmission through peer-led initiation or self-experimentation, consistent with Rodríguez-Ruiz and Espejo-Siles' (2024) work on social learning. These pathways, mediated by key "social types," reinforce insularity through observation, storytelling, and informal instruction, perpetuating drug use as both coping mechanism and social identity.

The study's findings reveal a sophisticated, self-reinforcing knowledge ecosystem that perpetuates the closed nature of Guskolo users' social world. These three knowledge systems - prior, experiential, and procedural - function interdependently to create what might be termed an "epistemic fortress" that maintains information poverty in several key ways. First, the system operates through a circular validation process: prior knowledge filters incoming information based on existing beliefs, experiential knowledge provides subjective confirmation of those beliefs through bodily and economic effects, and procedural knowledge ensures these understandings are faithfully transmitted to new members through established socialization patterns. This creates a perfect closed loop where external information struggles to gain traction unless it can penetrate all three knowledge barriers simultaneously.

The implications for understanding normative boundaries are profound. Cognitive knowledge (prior) establishes the conceptual framework, embodied knowledge (experiential) provides the visceral "proof" of these concepts, and behavioral knowledge (procedural) translates them into daily practice. Together, they form concentric layers of defense against external information, with experiential knowledge often serving as the most impenetrable barrier because of its deeply personal, physically-felt nature. This explains why traditional top-down health interventions frequently fail - they typically target only the cognitive level (prior knowledge) through factual information campaigns, while ignoring the more powerful experiential and procedural dimensions that actually maintain substance use behaviors.

For intervention design, these findings suggest a paradigm shift from information delivery to knowledge integration. Effective approaches would need to: (1) acknowledge and work within existing folk pharmacologies rather than dismissing them, (2) create opportunities for new, positive embodied experiences that can compete with drug effects, and (3) identify and collaborate with key "social types" who control procedural knowledge transmission. The study's major theoretical contribution is demonstrating how Chatman's small world concept operates not just through social networks, but through integrated knowledge systems that maintain their own internal logic and validation mechanisms. This expanded understanding could inform research beyond substance use, potentially applying to any insular community where specialized knowledge systems sustain alternative worldviews and practices.

Theoretical Implications for Chatman's "Small World" Construct

This study provides empirical support and theoretical expansion of Chatman's Theory of Normative Behavior by demonstrating how prior, experiential and procedural knowledge function as normative mechanisms that sustain the insularity and coherence of the Guskolo-using community. These knowledge types collectively construct epistemic boundaries that filter external information, validate experience-based knowledge, and transmit behavioral norms aligning with Chatman's constructs of selective information use, lived experience as authority, and behavioral scripting. The findings also reinforce Chatman's concept of information poverty, illustrating how knowledge hierarchies suppress dissonant information, delegitimize institutional sources, and prioritize peer-led routines. Furthermore, the study advances Chatman's framework by introducing the embodied nature of experiential knowledge and identifying self-driven initiation into the small world, thus highlighting the role of individual agency alongside social structures. Overall, the study redefines small worlds not only as social systems but as epistemic communities governed by interdependent knowledge forms that regulate perception, behavior, and resistance to external change.

Expanding the Theoretical Scope of Chatman's Framework

This study contributes two key theoretical refinements to Chatman's model:

The embodied dimension of experiential knowledge introduces a phenomenological perspective, emphasizing the role of physical and emotional sensations in shaping informational worldviews (an area not fully addressed in Chatman's predominantly sociological orientation).

The presence of self-initiated pathways in procedural knowledge suggests that individual agency may also play a role in norm adoption and knowledge acquisition, expanding the focus beyond collective social influence to include more personalized entry points into the small world.

Implications for the Concept of Small Worlds

This research demonstrates that small worlds are not just maintained through social ties but are fundamentally sustained by interconnected epistemic systems distinct yet interdependent forms of knowledge that collectively shape members' reality. Each knowledge type serves a critical normative function:

1. Prior Knowledge (Filtering Function) – Determines what external information is accepted or rejected based on group-aligned beliefs.
2. Experiential Knowledge (Validation Function) – Authenticates truth claims through lived experience, overriding external expertise.
3. Procedural Knowledge (Transmission Function) – Codifies behavioral norms through socialization, ensuring continuity.

The dominance of a particular knowledge type (e.g., experiential over prior) may dictate how permeable or resistant a small world is to outside influence. This insight provides a predictive framework for future research, suggesting that interventions must strategically engage with the most influential knowledge form to effectively penetrate closed information ecosystems.

This study thus expands Chatman's theory by revealing how cognitive, embodied, and behavioral knowledge systems collectively enforce normative boundaries (a crucial consideration for policymakers and researchers addressing insular communities)

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study offers a nuanced understanding of Goskolo abuse in Jos, Plateau State, through the lens of Chatman's Theory of Normative Behavior, revealing how distinct but interconnected knowledge types (prior, experiential, and procedural) serve as normative tools that sustain the closed, insular small world of users. These knowledge forms not only shape the perceptions, behaviors, and risk evaluations of individuals within the group but also function as mechanisms of boundary maintenance that reinforce information poverty and resistance to external interventions. By extending Chatman's framework to include the embodied and individualized dimensions of knowledge, the study underscores the importance of culturally and contextually informed approaches in addressing substance abuse. Targeted interventions must recognize the epistemic systems at play within such communities to effectively challenge misinformation, promote trust in health information, and disrupt the normative cycles that perpetuate harmful practices.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations and their implementation strategies based on the finding of this study:

Recommendations

1. Establish Peer-Led Health Education and Support Programs

Implementation Strategy

- Identify and train former/recovering Goskolo users as peer educators.
- Equip them with harm reduction and counseling skills.
- Conduct regular outreach using local languages and culturally appropriate materials.
- Partner with NGOs and health agencies.

- Involve users in co-creating relatable messages based on lived experiences.
- 2. Develop Culturally Relevant Public Awareness Campaigns
 - Disseminate through trusted local channels (e.g., radio, street drama, local influencers).
 - Focus on correcting myths, reducing stigma, and promoting help-seeking behavior.
 - Provide vocational training and micro-financing through partnerships with local institutions.
- 3. Address Socioeconomic Drivers Through Livelihood Support
 - Set up community hubs combining skills development, recreation, and counseling.
 - Offer ongoing psychosocial support to ensure sustained recovery.

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