

Drug Abuse Among Youths In Eswatini: Causes And Possible Intervention Strategies

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Abstract

The escalating prevalence of drug abuse among youths in Eswatini poses a significant threat to development, education, and public health, reflecting broader trends in Southern Africa. Despite increased attention on the rising prevalence of drug abuse in Africa, limited qualitative research captures the lived experiences and contextual factors of drug abuse among youths in Eswatini. To address this gap, this research explored the determinants of drug abuse among youths, identified drug types, and informed context-specific prevention strategies. A phenomenological approach, grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, was adopted to enhance the appreciation of participants' multiple realities. Semi-structured interviews with youths and a focus group discussion with parents were conducted for data collection. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed individual, home, school, sociocultural, and environmental factors as determinants of drug abuse. Notably, the study identified Lea and Rocky as emerging drugs of concern. Parental inclusion illuminated holistic insights into home and societal influences in multilevel interventions. Findings propose targeted training and education, community-based interventions, and national-level initiatives. Conclusively, drug abuse is multifaceted, which is critical for stakeholders designing Eswatini context-specific interventions.

keywords: drugs, youths, eswatini, interpretivist paradigm

Introduction

Drug abuse is a modern, pervasive problem that has affected most communities throughout the world. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) World Drug Report, 284 million individuals aged 15 to 64 took drugs globally in 2020, a 26% rise from the decade before, according to Vienna (2022). The incidence of substance addiction among young people is concerning, and it is a global public health concern (Somani & Meghani, 2016). This implies that younger generations are mostly responsible for the increased prevalence of drug usage. Thus, Vienna (2022) claims that "drug use among youth has increased; current drug use rates are now higher than those of earlier generations in many nations."

The rising prevalence of drug use is causing changes in consumption patterns and trends that have a detrimental effect on young people. According to Morgan et al. (2022), there is a high correlation

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between the initiation of drug use and a number of factors, including academic performance, financial independence, employment, criminal behavior, suicidal thoughts, and physical and mental health, including traumatic stress, despair, and anxiety.

Drug abuse in Africa can be likened to a cancerous ulcer that progressively changes and becomes more hazardous over time. The significant increase in drug usage that has happened throughout Africa over the past 10 years, particularly in countries like South Africa and Nigeria, can be attributed to the addictive properties of crack cocaine, which can be up to 90% pure (Njuho & Davids, 2010). Tracing the trends and patterns of drug misuse throughout time reveals concerning changes that necessitate the formation of a united front in Africa to combat this issue. Although young people in Africa consume less alcohol on average than in more developed regions, there is evidence in the region that suggests alcohol consumption is increasing at a faster rate (UNFPA (2017)). The rapid rise in drug abuse among youths necessitates awareness and an emergent reaction. Today, due to drug abuse, we are raising a wasted generation of irresponsible and immoral people. Adamu et.al (2019), propound their study, 'Nigerian youth drug use has given the country a reputation for moral bankruptcy with its youths frequently labelled as "decadent" and "wasted generation," in need of collective revitalization and saving'. Drug misuse has long been known to interfere with normal brain function, leading to irrational and risky behaviour in users, consequently, Zinyama, (2019) posits, that in South Africa, drug addiction is connected to crime, aggressive behaviour, risky sexual behaviour (which increases the chance of HIV infection and STIs), poor health, and psychological consequences on families.

Therefore, if we want to manage the surge, we must comprehend the dynamics of teenage drug consumption and the reasons behind. Rummage (2019) indicated that the most common demographic groups consuming illegal substances in South Africa were youths, and people of black African descent, due to ease access to drugs, lax parental supervision, violence, and high rates of unemployment and poverty.

According to the UNFPA (2017), Eswatini is experiencing a significant demographic shift, with a rapidly growing youth population and a declining birthrate. While the youth are central to the country's future, they face overwhelming challenges, particularly in the form of widespread drug abuse. Ndlangamandla (2013) notes with concern the alarming rise in alcohol consumption among youths as young as 15 years old, especially during weekends in Mbabane and Manzini, which have become hotspots for drinking. An example of this trend is the MTN Bushfire Festival, originally meant to celebrate music, culture, and the exchange of ideas, but now often turning into a gathering where young people indulge in alcohol, drugs, and engage in immoral behaviors.

The rapid increase in drug and substance abuse is having a detrimental effect on the nation's moral fabric, social structure, and culture. This situation demands urgent and informed intervention (Dlamini and Makondo, 2017). Majola (2023) highlights the alarming statistics, reporting that in 2020, approximately 14,474 individuals in Eswatini consumed an estimated 3.3 metric tons of cocaine (both crack and powder), based on population size and usage patterns. Beyond identifying the root causes of youth drug abuse, this research aims to present a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon to underscore the critical roles of the government, civil society, and families in mitigating drug abuse within communities. Given these pressing concerns, this study is crucial in guiding stakeholders particularly the government in the development of policies aimed at reducing drug abuse among young people.

Research questions

The study was directed by the following research questions;

1. What are the determinants of drug abuse among youths in Eswatini?
2. Which drugs are commonly abused by youth in Eswatini?
3. What are the most effective strategies for preventing drug abuse?

Research objective

To explore determinants of drug abuse among youths in Eswatini, identify commonly abused drugs and examine effective strategies for prevention integrating both parental and youth perspectives.

Theoretical framework

This study adopted Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (1979), which organizes the contexts of development into five nested levels of external influence: the Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem (Psychology Notes Headquarters, 2019). According to Guy-Evans (2024), the Microsystem consists of bi-directional relationships, meaning that individuals within the environment can influence the child and vice versa. For example, a child whose family, friends, or schoolmates engage in drug use may be more susceptible to peer influence. The Mesosystem, as described by Psychology Notes Headquarters (2019), refers to the system of interconnections between different Microsystems. This includes linkages such as those between home and school, peer groups and family, or family and community. It highlights how a child's neighbourhood, school, and relationships with parents and teachers are interconnected. In the Exosystem, the child is not directly involved, but they are still affected by the interactions within this system. For instance, a child may be influenced by their parents' work schedules, which could be long due to overtime needed to meet basic needs (Paquette & Ryan, 2009).

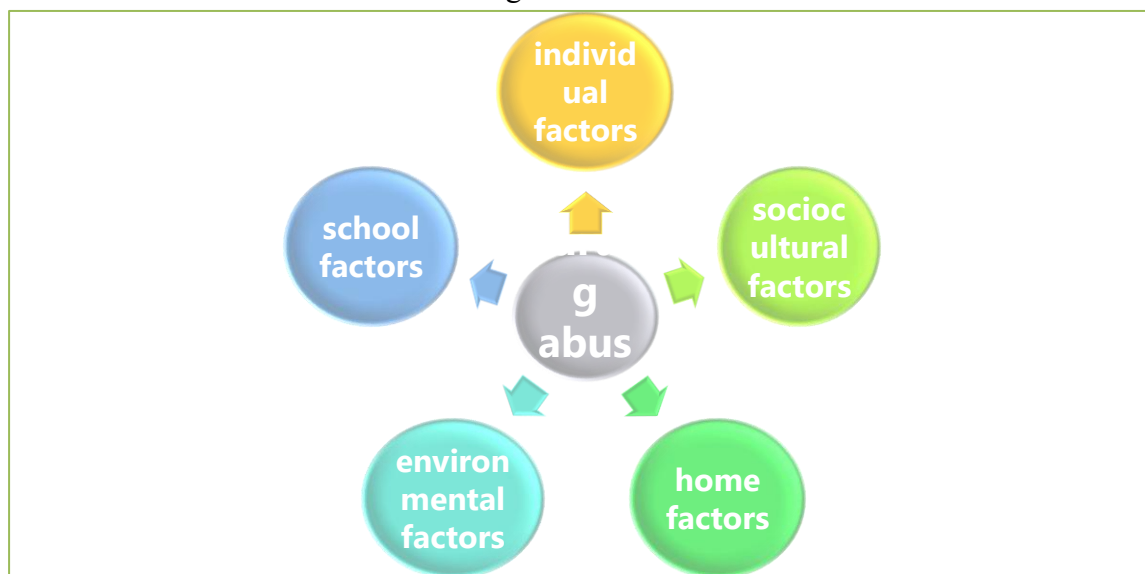
The Macrosystem, according to Paquette & Ryan (2009), represents the outermost layer and includes cultural values, customs, and laws, which have a cascading impact on the other layers. For example, cultural attitudes toward drug abuse can influence individual behaviour and societal norms. Bronfenbrenner (1994) explains the Chronosystem as encompassing changes or consistency over time in both the person and their environment, such as shifts in family structure. In today's technologically advanced world, changes in drug use patterns have occurred, with drugs becoming more sophisticated and increasingly irresistible to youth. The Ecological Theory is particularly relevant in this context, as it accounts for the multifaceted influences that shape individual behaviour.

Literature review

The progression of the drug abuse phenomenon was laid out based on the conceptual framework highlighted below

Figure 1

Determinants of Drug Abuse



Source: Compiled by the authors

Individual factors of drug abuse include heredity, history of abuse and homelessness. A genetic cause is sometimes postulated when parents of delinquents themselves are violent or manifest other forms of antisocial behavior or psychopathology such as alcoholism and substance abuse (Loeber & Stouthome-Loeber, 1986). Genetics predicts an individual's behavior, the drug abuse traits just as criminality, they lay dormant and then manifest later in life. Ali & Tariq (2020) conducted a study to identify factors which contributed to the prevalence of alcoholism and drug addiction among sexually abused women in an ultra-conservative society. An abused person engages in drug abuse to escape their trauma, hurt and pain. Childhood abuse and homelessness are independently associated with substance use (Ararso, et.al 2021). Most youths are living with relatives who are abusive, emotionally, physically, etc., to numb pain and emotions, they engage in drug abuse. According to Somani & Meghani (2016), 74% of children and young adults living on the street were found to be drug addicts. Drug abuse can cause one to be homeless or to engage in substance abuse because of the pressures of living in the streets.

Home factors of drug abuse could include family structure, negligence and alcoholic parents. According to Mhlongo (2005), family factors can influence the genesis of adolescent drug abuse and behavioral problems, where poor relationships with parents and inadequate child rearing practices being closely linked to adolescent substance and drug abuse. The increase in the number of working females means that children are unattended, or maids are the ones who are looking after the children in the absence of mothers (Kundwei & Mbwirire, 2020). Nui, (2022) posits that insecure attachment patterns and parental response styles in parent-child interactions have a significant relationship with adolescent alcohol addiction. The parents' lack of interest, attention and monitoring permits youths to engage in drug abuse to cope with neglect and loneliness. Kundwei & Mbwirire (2020) indicated that some students were into drugs because their parents or guardians used drugs. Having parents who abuse drugs drives a child to adopt similar behaviors and attitudes as significant others are role models.

School factors of drug abuse include academic challenges, lux school environment and high rate of law-breaking. According to Martin (2005) behavior associated with youthful drug users included run-ins with adult authorities, participation in crime, counter-cultural or 'underground', lifestyles, truancy and poor academic performance. Poor academic performance can lead to stress among youths which can trigger drug abuse. Attending schools with high rates of lawbreaking impacts the individual. Sabia (2016) notes that attending schools with a more delinquent culture and lower levels of school dedication increased risk of violent involvement for immigrant youths' whereas native-born youths' violent involvement was relatively unchanged.

Sociocultural factors of drug abuse include social media platforms, culture and political and economic instability. Many television critics say that most teenagers are prone to adopt features of the models, because the adolescent is at an age period of doubt and insecurity (Kundwei and Mbwirire, 2020). Fanaticism among the youths could lead them to imitate their celebrity role models portrayed in movies and music videos. Some cultures are permissive, marula products also feature in traditional ceremonies, such as the Baganu ceremony, celebrated annually where people gather with their King and Queen Mother to celebrate (Murphy & Pelsner, 2018). Siphepho, Dlamini & Nxumalo (2013) highlight how the marula fruit is healthy hence most Swazis including children are motivated to drink leading to abuse of the privilege. Peer pressure and exposure to drug-related marketing activities are predisposing factors for adolescents to initiate drug abuse (Somani & Meghani, 2016). Peer drinking behavior and attitudes toward alcohol or other substances can also have an impact on adolescents (Nui, 2023).

Environmental factors of drug abuse include social settings, and a nation's socioeconomic status. According to Somani & Meghani (2016) adolescents reported starting drug use at 11 years and younger, they accessed the substances from friends, at home, shops or street vendors. Drug abuse and criminality have been linked to the availability of guns, gangs, drug-markets, overcrowding, and a lack of recreation. Crime watch (2023) alludes that drug trafficking and dealing is attributed

to the increased rate of unemployment, especially among youths, which is driven by different socio-economic factors. According to Zulu (2020), striking is that the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report, revealed that Eswatini cultivated illegal herb on 1 500 hectares of land. Cannabis cultivation give income to many families, hence increasing availability of the drug.

Type of drugs use by youth in Eswatini

Technological revolution has influenced modification of drugs used by youths. *The drugs mostly used by adolescents are cigarettes, tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, glue, paint, paint thinners, aerosols and polish remover* (Mhlongo, 2005). Youths are using readily available household products such as glue, gasoline, spray paint, deodorant etc. which are mostly household products. According to Crime watch (2023) the most prevalent illegal drug is cannabis as most youths are being involved in the peddling and use of the drug. *Eswatini is a major cultivator of high-quality cannabis in Southern Africa, with thousands of hectares devoted to this cash crop* (Global Organized Crime Index, 2023). According to Majola (2023) Eswatini has over 14 000 users of cocaine countrywide as it is finding its ways across South African and Mozambiquan borders. Alcohol is being abused by youth in Eswatini, Gugu & Makondo (2017) posits that in rural areas, they grow marijuana and brew alcohol, youths indulge because of availability.

Effective prevention strategies for drug abuse

Effective prevention strategies for drug abuse are crucial in safeguarding the future of the next generation. Addressing the drug abuse crisis requires a coordinated and responsive approach, enabling relevant stakeholders and the broader society to develop practical solutions aimed at mitigating this issue (Nhapi, 2019). According to Vienna (2022), the UNODC World Drug Report underscores the importance of engaging key stakeholders such as civil society, governments, and the international community in efforts to protect societies by strengthening prevention, treatment, and tackling the illicit drug supply. In Rwanda, community policing is a strategic approach that fosters collaboration among community members to address the root causes of crime and social disorder (Gonis, 2018). Community members serve as ambassadors of the police, actively contributing to crime prevention and safety efforts.

Ettekal and Mahoney (2017) highlight that organized out-of-school activities represent a valuable microsystem encompassing a wide range of youth programs, such as sports, academic clubs, service projects, and faith-based groups. These activities play a crucial role in keeping young people engaged and away from risky behaviors, including drug use. Somani and Meghani (2016) argue that policy reforms at all levels are essential to reducing access to drugs and increasing support for public awareness campaigns about the dangers of drug abuse. They also stress the importance of media involvement in these efforts. As Somani and Meghani (2016) emphasize, the media has the power to influence societal perceptions and behaviors, making it an essential tool for fostering positive change in the fight against drug abuse.

Methods

This research adopted an interpretivist paradigm, which primarily collects qualitative data from participants (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). A qualitative approach was used, guided by a phenomenological research design, which focuses on understanding phenomena as they are experienced or lived by individuals (Sundler et al., 2019). The researchers posited that the phenomenon of drug abuse has multiple realities and interpretations, as knowledge is inherently personal and subjective. Purposive sampling was employed to select 11 parents and 2 young people with rich knowledge of drug abuse. In this study, the deep detailed first-hand encounters, community observations or peer-related experiences give experiential insights into the determinants, types of drugs and prevention strategies in relation to drug abuse is 'rich knowledge'. Subsequently, snowball sampling was applied to the two youths, a method in which one participant refers the researcher to additional potential interviewees (Bhattacharjee, 2012). This approach was

chosen because drug users, especially youths who often abuse drugs in peer groups, represent a vulnerable population, and snowball sampling helped identify other willing participants.

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with parents as a primary data collection instrument. In this method, a selected group of individuals engages in an in-depth discussion of a particular topic, guided by a professional external moderator (Van Eeuwijk & Angehrn, 2017). The researchers also carried out semi-structured interviews with the youths, providing participants the opportunity to express their views in depth (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Data was analysed thematically. The researchers began by familiarizing themselves with the data through listening and rereading notes, transcribing recorded materials, and following the framework set by Braun & Clarke (2006). Thus, Braun & Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis was employed which allowed the researchers subjectivity, in-depth and reflexivity engagement with collected data. Patterns, trends, and themes were identified to ensure a systematic and rigorous interpretation of the data.

The study was conducted with careful attention to ethical considerations during data collection. Participant identities were kept anonymous, ensuring that the collected information could not be traced back to individuals. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were clearly informed about the study's purpose and nature. Privacy was maintained, and data was stored securely, used solely for research purposes. Confidentiality was emphasized, with sensitive information not being disclosed. To encourage honest and candid responses, participants were reassured that the data would be handled with the highest degree of confidentiality.

Inclusion criteria

- In this study the inclusion criteria was
- Voluntary participation from willing participants who gave informed consent to participate in the focus group and interviews.
- Youths aged 15 to 24 living in Eswatini either with peer knowledge or first-hand experience of drug abuse.
- Parents or custodians of youths with observable knowledge of youth drug use in their household or community.
- Participants willing to participate in audio recorded discussions or interviews.

Results And Discussion

The data will be presented and discussed using excerpts from youths, denoted as [Y], and from parents, denoted as [P]. Similar responses were grouped and synthesized into a single representative extract.

The first research question sought to reveal the determinants of drug abuse among youths in Eswatini, the following themes emerged and are first presented in a table.

Major themes	Subthemes
1. Individual Determinants	Experiences of abuse Peer Approval and Seeking Attention Stress copying Mechanism
2. School determinants	Relaxed School Environment Academic challenges Limited extra-curricular activities
3. Home determinants	Broken homes Loose security at home

4. Sociocultural determinants	Abuse of Cultural Events
5. Environmental determinants	Influence of Media Unemployment

Source: compiled by the authors

Individual determinants

This study identified the individual as a key determinant of drug abuse, with subthemes including, experience of abuse, attention seeking behaviour and stress copying mechanism.

Experiences of Abuse

The data indicate that experiences of abuse may contribute to drug use among youth. This was expressed by the youth participants, as highlighted below

[Y2, Y3, Y4, Y6] Ukhandza ukutsi usisi uya abhuseka from ekhaya, kulabo malume. Uyareshwa so ngalondlela ukhandza umntfwana sekatsike ... aah angisena bani, kuncono ngitsatse naku ngoba malume ngiphilisa mpilo naye, so kuze mine ngithokhona kuba right kuncono ngiti drug' ("You will discover that the girl is experiencing abuse at home, including sexual abuse by her uncles. As a result, she is deeply troubled and feels isolated. With no one else to turn to, she begins using drugs as a way to cope with the trauma."

[Y4, P2, P8] "Abuse... yes, it happens in relationships. Sometimes, women turn to alcohol to cope with the emotional or physical abuse they experience from their partners. Similarly, some men may feel overwhelmed by their relationships and use alcohol as an escape. It can go both ways."

It can be inferred that youths who experience any form of abuse are more likely to develop substance abuse problems as a way to numb emotional pain. Harrison et al. (1997) found that physical and sexual abuse were associated with an increased likelihood of using alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs. Similarly, Bensley et al. (1999) reported a correlation between a self-reported history of abuse and both drug and alcohol use among youth, including early initiation of substance use. Young people who face abuse often turn to drugs as a coping mechanism to escape emotional distress and social difficulties.

Peer Approval and Seeking Attention

The data also revealed that some youths use drugs as a means to gain approval from their peers.

[P2, P6, Y8] We are judged by our peers based on everything we do. Whether it's taking drugs, smoking, or other actions, people form opinions and assign grades to us. There's constant pressure to fit in and prove your intelligence, especially when you want to become the center of attention at school.

[P1, P6, P9] They may act out to get your attention. This happens because they want to feel noticed. A child might feel that their parents are not paying enough attention to them and, as a result, might do things to capture their parents' focus especially when the parents are always busy with work.

It can be inferred that adolescents engage in drug use as a means of projecting a desirable social image, attaining status, and garnering attention, often embracing the label of being 'rebellious' or 'deviant.' From the perspective of parents, youth behavior such as mischief or self-harm is interpreted as a deliberate attempt to attract attention. Correspondingly, Maupa and Abioha (2017) observe that young individuals partake in substance abuse both to seek recognition and to alleviate familial stress. Consequently, involvement in drug use can be understood as both a coping mechanism to escape underlying problems and an implicit plea for support or intervention.

Stress Coping Mechanism

Another subtheme of personal determinants is stress coping mechanisms. Sometimes, youths turn to drug use as a way to cope with stress. They may believe that using drugs is their best option, but this often leads to more problems. Over time, this can result in addiction.

[Y1, Y5, Y6, Y8] In Swaziland, we grew up being told about 'tibi tendlu' (family secrets). Things can happen to me that I cannot disclose, we keep it family issue. This is how people used to cope with issue

es. I had a friend who would say "ngishisa tinkinga" makabhema ('I'm burning my problem' when she smoked). It's the situations we go through like rape, physical abuse or neglect that leads people finding comfort in drugs.

[Y2, Y4, Y8] Stress obviously, usually the school kids become stressed with their academics and background. Obviously, stressed when they see their peers with better things, ukhandza batsi yooo (they will think) ...to distract ourselves kubona abanye abantfwana ba so (seeing others like this) let's take drugs. Some because they don't have enough income, prefer drugs as a distraction.

Therefore, young people often resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms to escape life's challenges. This finding aligns with Masiye and Ndhlovu (2016), who identified personal and emotional issues driven by poor parent-child relationships, easy access to drugs and alcohol, and peer pressure as key contributors to substance abuse. Similarly, Mhlongo (2015) noted that adolescents who are depressed, struggle with low self-esteem, or feel socially isolated are particularly vulnerable to developing serious alcohol and drug problems. These stressors commonly lead youths to engage in maladaptive behaviors such as substance abuse as a means of coping.

School determinants

Another major theme that emerged from our first research question was the influence of school-related factors. Schools are not uniform in their environments some provide conditions that may foster drug abuse among students. The subthemes discussed below highlight specific aspects of school settings that can create an environment conducive to drug abuse..

Relaxed School Environment

As previously indicated, certain schools exhibit inadequate control mechanisms, thereby creating an environment more conducive to drug abuse among learners. A notable example can be found in Manzini, where a particular high school was colloquially referred to as the "Zoo" due to the pervasive disorder and lack of effective governance within the institution. This reputation underscored the severity of the disciplinary issues present. The following are selected remarks from participants on this matter:

[Y6, Y7, Y8] "In schools, certain behaviors often become normalized. As someone who went through high school, I've seen how it happens—what begins as a habit can quickly turn into a trend, and eventually, a widely accepted standard. For example, students smoking tobacco or weed behind the toilets, unnoticed by teachers or school authorities, becomes just another part of the daily routine."

[P10, P11] Some students are increasingly unruly one was caught with bottles of wine in their bag and, when questioned, revealed that friends had helped buy the alcohol. These were final-year students meant to be preparing for exams. The school's response was to send them home with no punishment, asking them to return once sober. In another case, a group of boys were found at a bar wearing raincoats to hide their uniforms, but a fellow student spotted them and reported it with photographic evidence.

It can be assumed that some schools are too lenient to effectively monitor students' activities. Additionally, teachers' behavior and attitudes toward students can contribute to drug and substance abuse among learners (Dlamini & Makondo, 2017). Therefore, when the school environment is overly permissive, drug abuse among students becomes more likely.

Academic Challenges

Another notable factor that can lead children to drug abuse is academic difficulty. This may stem from poor instruction by teachers or from the child's own learning challenges, prompting them to turn to drugs as a coping mechanism.

[Y4, Y7, Y8] "Some young people drop out of school due to drug abuse, especially when they are unable to manage it effectively. Often, they turn to drugs as a way to escape academic pressure and feelings of failure."

[Y6, Y7] "Young people often use drugs in high school and college to boost confidence and mood. They believe substances like marijuana enhance focus and intelligence, leading to regular use and eventual abuse."

As highlighted above, youths who faced academic challenges used drugs as an escape route. Academic failure may increase risks of drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and delinquency (Abdul Jalal, 2005). Youths who face academic challenges end up being school dropping-outs to escape embarrassment. Dlamini & Makondo (2017) posits that school environments pushed students to abuse drugs, stressful name-calling by teachers, big school such that one hides within crowds and instead of punishment, teachers made fun of intoxicated learners. Relaxed schools are training grounds for drug abuse, serious security and monitoring is required.

Limited Extracurricular Activities

Young people naturally enjoy being active and engaged. They are drawn to play and recreation, making access to recreational facilities essential. Providing a variety of sports and activities helps keep them occupied in positive ways, reducing the likelihood of drug involvement.

[Y1, Y3, Y7, Y8] The mind always needs to be busy, boredom cause youths search for fun, which is found in things that make them high, like drugs. During school trips youths consume drugs in food like the muffins, snacks, sweets, alcohol in non-transparent juice-bottles. Alcohol is trending among youths for fun and vibe. In this age if you don't drink, you're considered as having no 'vibe'.

[P11] One day, after lunchbreak a teacher caught a student having some popcorn instead of going to study. The teacher took the popcorn forcefully, after a struggle the student handed over the popcorn. He went to the staffroom, shared with his friends, later some got sick and behaved strangely as they consumed popcorn that had been mixed with marijuana.

Presumably, unoccupied time for youths led to boredom. They will look for something to give them vibe which is drugs.

Home determinants

In this study, most participants illuminated how the home influenced the development of drug abuse. Themes that emerged include,

Broken homes

Nowadays, it is common for parents to divorce and sometimes involve their children in their conflicts. This can have a negative impact on the children, sometimes leading them to turn to drug abuse. Some young people shared their thoughts on this issue:

[Y6, Y7, Y8] We're from broken families, where there is one parent, either the mother or father or sometimes with a stepparent. Parents don't have time with their children, they're busy chasing after money. We've no-one to talk to, so drugs help us cope and forget our parents' fights, divorce and absenteeism.

[Y9, P10, P11] Most children are from broken families, being raised by single parents or and a stepparent such that you'll find that they're coming from homes with challenge becomes their burden. To find comfort, love and peace, they turn to drug abuse.

It can be inferred that broken homes contribute to youths engaging in drug use. Similarly, children raised in fragmented family environments may seek to fill the emotional void left at home by forming connections with peers outside the family (Maupa & Obiaho, 2017). Savignac (2009) found that juveniles from broken homes exhibited higher rates of drug abuse and problematic

behaviors such as classroom indiscipline, running away, and truancy. Additionally, Maupa and Obiaho (2017) suggest that children raised by divorced or single parents often turn to drugs or alcohol as a means of escaping their home problems. Children from families marked by conflict, divorce, or single-parent households frequently use substances to cope. It is crucial for parents to understand that their actions profoundly affect their children's emotional well-being.

Poor Parenting Practices

Sometimes, parents can be too lenient and fail to adequately monitor their children. This lack of supervision may create opportunities for children to engage in harmful behaviors, such as drug abuse. Parents often overlook the fact that parenting is a full-time responsibility that cannot be delegated or neglected.

[P3, P6, P7, P8, P9] You find that we are too busy most times such that we don't monitor our children, we are always out and about. Also, you find that mothers and fathers are now busy with tik tok such that they don't have time for the child.

[Y1, Y2, Y6, Y7] Most of the drugs abusers have absent parents. In some cases, the parents are alive yet not present. They give the child everything but don't follow up on the kid's activities. No-one monitors the children; to escape their challenges they choose drugs.

It can be inferred that lax security and supervision at home contribute to an increased likelihood of drug abuse. In line with this, Dlamini & Makondo (2017) found that many participants reported their parents were frequently preoccupied with work, leaving little time for family interaction. Similarly, Maupa & Obiaho (2017) argue that single parenting can sometimes lead to neglect, as single parents often spend extended periods away from their children due to work or business obligations. This absence results in insufficient monitoring, supervision, and guidance. In an environment where parental control is weak, young people may be more vulnerable to engaging in drug abuse.

Sociocultural determinants

According to this study, the major themes that emerged as sociocultural determinants of drug abuse among youths were

Abuse of Cultural Events

The misuse of cultural events emerged as a contributing factor to drug abuse, as highlighted by the participants.

[P2, P4, P7, P8] It's known that during buganu (marula ceremony) the number of children in classes drops. Back then it wasn't as serious as it is now, it's like everyone is free to drink. The narration and principles of buganu have changed, it's now including the underaged, hence destroying our culture. The family structure is destroyed, everyone participates, with mothers being promiscuous and the children getting drunk.

[Y1, Y7, Y8] Marula events occur between February and March, alcohol will be plenty such that everyone is allowed to drink, even kids. In high school we used to carry buganu in big bottles...we'd hide them, teachers wouldn't get to know anything.

Cultural events can be seen as playing a significant role in shaping behaviors related to drug abuse. In particular, a breakdown in the social structure, particularly within the family unit and its role in instilling moral values in the younger generation, has contributed to the rise of drug abuse (Shibalika, 2021). Additionally, Dlamini and Makondo (2017) highlight that *maganu*, a traditional beer once considered sacred and revered, is celebrated by the Swazi monarchy, making its consumption prestigious in Swaziland. However, the growing permissiveness within certain cultures has led to the erosion of cultural moral fibers, further facilitating the spread of drug abuse.

Gangsterism

In Eswatini, a growing trend known as gangsterism is emerging. This phenomenon resembles a cult, with strict rules that all members are required to follow. One of these rules involves the use of drugs, which is often a condition for joining the group. As a result, children who become involved in these groups are pressured or forced into drug use.

[Y3, Y5, Y8] There is that issue of gangsterism that has become familiar among the youths. We have 26 gangs and 28 gangs, where the youths are being pushed to drugs. The gangs have different principles e.g. the signs, tattoos, and drugs they should use. These gangs start in jails and spread influence outside jail.

[P1, P4, P8] now adays people are misinterpreting the bible on alcohol issues. It has become a spiritual issue that is passed on to generations. Also, there is the issue of gangsterism 28 and 26 gangs gaining momentum among youths, resulting to strange behaviors including abuse drugs.

As highlighted by the above narratives, it can be presumed youths who get initiated in gangsterism get involved in drug abuse. Similarly, Gilman et al. (2014) posits that gang membership amplified substance abuse due to peer influence, economic reliance of gangs on drug trade profits, which simultaneously fuels usage among members and communities they operate in (Howell and Griffiths, 2018). Gang affiliation pressures members to conform to group behaviors like drug abuse.

Using Drugs to Treat Certain illnesses

Some youth use drugs like marijuana because it is believed it treats certain ailments like asthma. Unfortunately during this process they get addicted and end up abusing them.

[P1, P4, P7, P11] Traditionally marijuana is known to have medicinal properties for diseases like asthma. It was also used to alleviate pain for those who got injuries and serious pains.

[Y6, Y7] I have asthma, and I was told to use insangu (marijuana) as medicine, where I w boiled and drunk. After my first experience, I stopped the medication. I know someone who used insangu asthma treatment, they got to a point where they were addicted to the medicine. The effects were like those of smokers.

As highlighted by the quotations above, certain drugs are used for self-medication. The study found that some teenagers grew up believing that marula alcohol is used to cleanse the stomach (Dlamini & Makondo, 2017). This suggests that traditional knowledge has long recognized the medicinal properties of certain plants. Unfortunately, such knowledge is often misapplied or misused

Environmental determinants

The environment in this study emerged as a theme for determinants of drug abuse among youths. Subthemes include,

Influence of Media

The data revealed that media influence is one of the contributing factors to youth drug abuse

[Y4, Y6] "We're a generation full of knowledge, but that can be a double-edged sword. For example, I'm listening to a Ricky Rick song and see someone smoking a hubbly it looks trendy, so I think, 'Why not try it?' The problem is, we often explore things without fully understanding them first."

[P1, P3, P5, P9] "Maybe it's the influence of social media people watch things on TikTok and do them just for content. Role models also play a big part. Your child might follow a certain personality, and if that person smokes weed or hubbly, the child may think it's acceptable too. For example, when artists like Maphorisa or DJ Tira show it in music videos, kids might think it's trending."

The excerpts above highlight the significant role media plays in promoting drug abuse among youths in Eswatini. Martin (2005) argues that popular entertainment whether on screen or through audio channels often presents harmful lifestyles such as drug use, sexual irresponsibility, and defiance of parental authority in a glamorous and appealing manner.

Unemployment

Unemployment emerged from this study as the most commonly cited factor contributing to drug abuse among youths, as reported by the participants.

[Y5, Y7, Y8, P2, P6] *"When we're unemployed, boredom drives us to seek distraction. We often look for a 'vibe' something to fill the emptiness and it's usually found around the shops where others hang out, smoking and drinking. With nothing productive to do, idleness leads us to join in, and once intoxicated, we feel like we've found that vibe we were searching for."*

[Y2, Y4, Y5, Y7] *As young people, we often believe that farming marijuana will bring us quick money. But many of us end up using it ourselves, which can lead to poor decisions even crime due to being under the influence. I find myself thinking, "Ngifundzile kodvwa angite umsebenzi" ("I'm educated but unemployed"), so I look for ways to earn an income, like growing and selling marijuana. Unfortunately, in the end, we often end up consuming it ourselves, even mixing it into food.*

It can be inferred that drug use and trafficking among young people is often driven by economic hardship. In alignment with this view, Dlamini and Makondo (2017) found that participants in their study reported using profits from marijuana cultivation to finance their education and purchase livestock. Marijuana farming has become a common and normalized source of income for many youths in the country. Furthermore, Khutsala Artisan (2021) notes that a significant number of young Swazis engage in drug abuse, deviant behavior, criminal activities, and excessive alcohol consumption primarily due to idleness and lack of opportunities. Many young people turn to drugs as a means of coping with unemployment, alleviating boredom, and creating a sense of social engagement.

4.2 Types of drugs used by youths in Eswatini

The second objective of the study established the types of drugs commonly used by youths in Eswatini.

Table 1

Types of drugs commonly used by youths in Eswatini

Drug	Description by Participants' (Parents and Youths)
Marijuana	farmed, traded, used and consumed in food like popcorns, muffins
Alcohol	purchase whine, whisky, spirits
Tobacco/cigarettes	Farmed in the country, vendors are not age strict, they access cheap cigarettes and e-cigarettes.
Shoe glue	Purchased on the street markets and shops
Nyaope	Mix quite of substances including ARVs
Benzine	misused for intoxication
Spirit, sanitizer	Consumption of alcohol-based spirits or sanitizers
Cocaine	Illegally imported into the country
Crystal meth	Crystal or ice-like substance
Rocky	Snowflake-like substance burnt and inhaled
Lea	Mixture of sprite, cough syrup, and codeine for intoxication
cough syrups	Overdose of cough mixtures for intoxication

Source: Compiled by the author

The types of drugs used by youths appear to be broadly similar across countries. Mohasoa and Mokoena (2017) identified nicotine, cannabis, alcohol, and heroin as commonly used substances among young people. Similarly, Shibalika (2021) noted that youths often resort to legal

and affordable substances such as alcohol, cigarettes, inhalants, and cough syrup. Gotsang et al. (2017) also reported the use of marijuana, cocaine, glue, mandrax, and alcohol among youths. However, the present study identified two additional substances Rocky and Lea that had not been previously documented in the literature.

4.3 Effective Strategies for Preventing Drug Abuse

Our last research question sought to come up with effective strategies to help prevent drug abuse among the youths of Eswatini. The following strategies were identified.

Major theme	Sub-theme
Training and education	Raising awareness about drug abuse among all ages Psychoeducation
Community-based interventions	Community Security Enforcement Establishing Vibrant Recreational Centre for Youths
National level prevention initiatives	Government to create employment opportunities Government led partnerships Enforcing strict penalties
Parental involvement in children’s lives	Parents should create relationships with their children Parents modeling Positive Behaviour

Source: Compiled by the author

4.3.1 Training and education

Participants suggested training and education as a major theme on effective strategies for preventing drug abuse. Subthemes derived include.

Raising awareness about drug abuse among all ages: from this study was proffered as an effective strategy for preventing drug abuse as most participants exclaimed,

[P5, P7, P9, P11] Awareness to fight substance abuse is needed. Singasukuma sigwalu ‘mgwaco kuvele kuvakale kutsi sitsi no to drugs (if we arise and fill the streets so that it can be heard that we are saying no to drugs) campaigning as parents.

[Y5, Y6, Y8] We need to talk more of the causes, like give lessons on radios, televisions...everywhere, the youth that haven’t started using drugs should know the causes and how to prevent and what to do when you find yourself in the situation.

Awareness-raising is widely recognized as an effective prevention strategy. Supporting this, Gotsang et al. (2017) emphasize the role of awareness campaigns in prevention, highlighting that television and print media should focus on educational content about drug abuse rather than inadvertently promoting it. Such initiatives empower young people with essential knowledge. Similarly, Shibalika (2021) notes that the Drug Enforcement Commission, through its Institution of Learning Programme, conducts awareness campaigns in schools to educate learners about the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse. The media plays a vital role in promoting awareness, and celebrities can contribute by participating in drug education campaigns across various platforms.

Psychoeducation

Psychoeducation emerged as the fourth strategy potentially effective in preventing drug abuse. Participants emphasized that:

[Y1, Y4, Y5, Y6] Group programs can be designed, where they can make use of drug abuse survivors and volunteers to be peer educators as well as provide education on drug abuse.

[Y6, P2, P5, P8, P9] As parents we should also be coached and trained in good parenting as well as get updated on the generational gap so that we may be able to understand the child for us to be able to help them. For us parents, when a child acts outside our values all we say is, ngitawushaya' (I'll beat you).

It can be inferred that psychoeducation may serve as an effective prevention strategy. In line with this, Masiye & Ndlobvu (2016) found that sensitizing youth and providing them with guidance and counselling could help reduce incidents of drug abuse. On the other hand, Shibalika (2021) argues that teachers often lack the necessary skills to identify and manage drug abuse, highlighting the importance of psychoeducation. Therefore, programs focused on crucial topics such as youth development, effective parenting, and drug abuse should be developed to educate parents and guardians.

4.3.2 Community-based interventions

This study highlights community-based interventions as an effective strategy for preventing drug abuse. Identified subthemes include:

Community Security Enforcement

Participants noted that community-based security enforcement has become a key strategy in addressing youth drug abuse.

[Y5, P3, P7, P20, P11] We can make use of the neighborhood police, who'll monitor activities, raid farms and drugs sellers. Communities can unite against stores that sell alcohol and cigarettes to underaged people. Strictness on ages is needed. Any community member or stranger selling drugs to our children must be taken to task.

It can be inferred that community-based security enforcement may be effective in preventing drug abuse. Supporting this idea, Gonis (2018) suggests that Rwanda implemented a program aimed at eradicating drug abuse called "Neighbors' Eye" (locally known as *Ijisho ry'umuturanyi*), where local people actively watched over one another. Communities should revisit past practices, as Moyo (2018) describes, where unity prevailed, responsibilities were shared, and children were nurtured collectively, embodying the essence of *ubuntu* and vigilant guardianship. Through collective efforts, communities can act as ambassadors for law enforcement by reporting information to combat drug abuse.

Establishing Vibrant Recreational Centre for Youths

Another strategy suggested by the participants was establishing vibrant recreational centres for youths.

[Y1, Y3, Y5, Y8] "Engaging the youth through recreational activities and establishing sports centers where they can participate in community tournaments will keep them occupied and away from drugs."

[Y3, P10, P11] "Schools should keep children engaged at all times, as idle moments can lead to mischief, including drug use. Social groups and clubs in both schools and communities should be established to keep the youth occupied."

Recreational centres for youth play a significant role in reducing drug abuse. This is supported by Shibalika (2021), who highlights that engaging young people in structured activities helps steer them away from substance use in the district. Similarly, Masiye and Ndlobvu (2016) emphasize that participation in sports and clubs such as anti-drug campaigns, anti-AIDS programs, debate, drama, and wildlife conservation raises awareness and helps prevent drug abuse by keeping youth actively engaged. Recreational activities are essential for redirecting young people's focus

from drugs and delinquent behaviours. In the absence of such facilities, youths may face boredom and excessive free time, increasing the risk of substance abuse..

4.3.3 National level prevention initiatives

It was found that national-level prevention initiatives were effective strategies for preventing drug abuse. The subthemes that emerged include:

Government to create employment opportunities

Some participants believed that young people are falling into the trap of drug use due to unemployment, as the saying goes, "An idle mind is the devil's workshop." They therefore suggested that the government should create more employment opportunities for the youth, which could be achieved by incorporating vocational training into school curricula.

[Y2, Y5, Y8] We need practical intervention, government should create jobs and projects for us. The government should empower us with the ability to make money...something to keep us away from drugs.

[Y2, Y3, Y8] Sometimes waiting for the government to create jobs can take forever. Youths should be encouraged to work hard, use their skills and taught about self-employment.

It can be argued that when the government creates opportunities, a significant number of youths will find employment, thereby reducing idleness. In support of this, Silverman et al. (2016) highlight the vital role of employment in combating poverty and its potential in addressing issues such as drug addiction. By providing financial support for projects, creating job opportunities, and fostering entrepreneurship, the government can help alleviate the stress associated with unemployment and empower young people to contribute positively to society.

Government led partnerships

Another strategy proposed by the participants to combat drug abuse was the establishment of government-led partnerships. In this approach, the government would collaborate with a variety of stakeholders, including local communities, healthcare organizations, law enforcement, and educational institutions, to create a united front against drug abuse. This collaborative effort would pool resources, expertise, and support to effectively tackle the issue from multiple angles, ensuring a more comprehensive and coordinated response.

[P1, P3, P6, P8] The government should be in the forefront in creating partnerships with stakeholders that work with children...NGOs, teachers, health providers, etc. E.g., a collaboration between parents and teachers...children believe in their teachers a lot. This could help in creating a united front in fighting drug abuse.

[P10, P11] Children spend most of their times in schools, if age-appropriate education on drugs can be offered in schools it might help prevent drug abuse among the youths in the nation.

If the government takes the initiative to form partnerships with various stakeholders, drug abuse could be effectively prevented. Vienna (2022) highlights the need to encourage stakeholders including civil society, governments, and the international community to strengthen efforts in drug treatment, prevention, and combating the illegal drug trade. Collaboration among youth-focused stakeholders can play a key role in supporting anti-drug abuse initiatives. For instance, the Ministry of General Education (MoGE) has been collaborating with the Drug Enforcement Commission to deliver preventive education in schools (Shibalika, 2021).

Enforcing strict penalties

Participants suggested enforcing strict penalties to those who will be found selling drugs to minors. These penalties will act as deterrents to be offenders.

[P1, P5, P11] The thing is they know they'll get a bail, if they get arrested for selling drugs. Maybe if they know they won't get out of prison they'll not take chances. The offences should not be bailable.

It can be argued that enforcing stricter laws may serve as an effective strategy for preventing drug abuse. In line with this, Ondieki and Mokuia (2012) emphasize the importance of parents and schools taking a strong stance against drug use among students, while suggesting that the government should reconsider the legal drinking age, recognizing that some high school students are over 18. Additionally, Masiye and Ndlobvu (2016) highlight that in Zambia, prevention efforts focus on law enforcement against offenders, complemented by anti-drug clubs, life-skills training, and counseling. Stricter regulation and enforcement concerning the production and importation of drugs are crucial for reducing their availability, distribution, and consumption.

4.3.4 Parental involvement in children's lives

This study revealed that parental involvement in children's lives could be effective for preventing drug abuse. The following subthemes emerged.

Parents should create relationships with their children

Participants expressed the belief that parents should maintain strong relationships with their children. When a child is distant from their parent, they may seek attention elsewhere, which can be risky. In such cases, parents may be unaware of the influences or environments their children are exposed to.

[Y2, P5, P10] As a youth I'm also a mother...being a friend to my son, giving him attention made him open about his friends etc. Parents should create a platform where you can talk about anything...also stay or move with your child when work transfers you to keep the bond.

[Y3, Y6, Y8] Guide children's activities... spend enough time...create friendship with your kids let them open about their friends...you can control their circle and activities.

It can be believed that parents creating positive relationships with their children can strengthen bonds. A child given attention is happy, stress-free and assured of parental support. Ondieki and Mokuia (2012) found that drug-free children not only felt closer to their parents but considered it important to get along with them. Similarly, Mhlongo (2015) alluded that inadequate child rearing practices and poor relationships with parents were closely connected to youthful drug abuse. Thus, strong relationships with children yield good behaviors.

Parents modeling Positive Behaviour

It is natural for children to view their parents as role models, a concept supported by Bandura's observational learning theory. According to this model, children often learn behaviors by observing and imitating those around them, especially their caregivers. It is deeply concerning, then, to witness adults using drugs in front of children, as this can send harmful messages and negatively influence the children's behavior and development. Some participants had this to say

[P1, P4, P7, P11] As parents, we must be mindful of our actions, as children often mimic what they see. It's important to model healthy lifestyles and coping strategies, especially when dealing with stress. Teach them the value of communication and seeking help, rather than resorting to harmful habits like drugs. Ultimately, being a positive role model is crucial, as everything they witness will leave a lasting impression on their memory..

[Y2, Y6, Y8] Children are exposed to many things in societies, adults smoking and drinking alcohol but the parents to shape their child's life by exposing them to good behavior...you can't drink and smoke in front of your child and expect to kuta (reprimand) him makayenta (when doing) what they saw you doing. Families just need to be involved in children's lives and be positive role models.

It can be assumed that when parents serve as positive role models, drug abuse can be prevented. Supporting this view, Shibalika (2021) argues that if adults, such as parents and grandparents, engage in drug abuse, the youth in that family are more likely to misuse similar or different substances. For example, when parents and other family members abuse substances, children may develop a variety of emotional, behavioural, cognitive, and social issues (Mhlongo, 2015). Therefore, it is essential for parents to set a good example, as children tend to observe and imitate

their behaviour. Following recommendations have been proposed in order to overcome the situation ;

Parents: Be present, recognize factors that may lead to rebellion or drug abuse, and serve as relatable role models. Address children's concerns with empathy, rather than relying on rigid disciplinary methods. Understand their struggles and guide them positively.

Community/Schools: Focus on preventing drug abuse through life skills training, career guidance, counselling, and recreational activities. Schools should provide professional support and a safe environment, especially for those from troubled backgrounds.

Policymakers/Government: Implement stricter laws to regulate drug sales and protect minors from exposure. Focus on reducing drug availability and addressing the issue at its roots through effective legislation. Further research into the prevalence and severity of drug abuse is essential to highlight the urgency of prevention efforts among youth.

Conclusion

This study utilized an ecological approach to examine youth drug abuse. It found that while youths engage in drug use, there is a lack of sufficient research on its prevalence and incidence. Several factors were identified as key determinants of drug abuse. However, many practitioners and organizations focus solely on eliminating drug abuse without addressing its underlying causes. Understanding these causes is essential for developing effective prevention strategies and interventions. Youth drug use is a complex issue that requires a multifaceted approach, including prevention, treatment, and support programs. Most importantly, youths should not be seen only as victims but also as agents of change. Empowering them to take control of their own lives can help reduce drug use and promote a healthier future.

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