

Chapter 6: Exploring Drug Abuse in relation to Unintended Early Pregnancies Among Learners at a Selected Masvingo Tertiary Institution.

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Abstract

Drug abuse is a public health and educational issue in Zimbabwe's Tertiary Institutions as they have produced unsafe sexual practices, which ultimately lead to unplanned pregnancy. This study aimed at finding out the effects of drug abuse on unwanted pregnancies of learners in a selected tertiary institution in Masvingo Province of Zimbabwe. It used problem behaviour theory as the guiding theory with a qualitative phenomenological design. A total of 20 participants were selected namely learners, lecturers, college counsellors and learner affairs personnel through purposive sampling method. Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and a document analysis, with thematic analysis, were used to collect the data. Results showed that drug abuse affected learners' judgement, led to less safer negotiation, more transactional and unprotected sex relations and put learners at risk of unwanted pregnancy. Integrated interventions involving substance abuse, comprehensive sexuality education, psychosocial support and improvement of institutions' policies are necessary to address the identified challenges, the study concluded. Joint action between tertiary institutions, the government, communities and parents and health providers is recommended for promoting learners' wellbeing.

Keywords: Drug abuse; Early pregnancies; Masvingo; Learners; Tertiary institutions; Zimbabwe.

1. Introduction and Background of the Study

Drug abuse not only in Nigeria but around the world has become a major global public health, educational and socio-economic problem and especially higher and tertiary educational institutions have become grounds of influence for learners on drugs of many psycho-active effects. Moving to higher education post-secondary school can come with a new set of freedoms, peer pressure, coursework, cost and new experiences that can make learners more susceptible to substance use (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC, 2024] and World Health Organization [WHO, 2024]). Poor academic performance, mental health issues and violence have been linked to substance use for a long time and growing evidence shows that drug use also leads to risky sexual behaviours by youth which in turn puts them at risk for unintended pregnancies (WHO, 2024; United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2023). Yet, with all the efforts at prevention, drug abuse among young people and teenagers has been rising all around the world. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2024), in 2022, around 292 million people globally use drugs illegally, marking a 20% rise in the past decade. Cannabis is the most used illegal drug and alcohol, tobacco, meth, cocaine, prescription drugs and synthetic drugs are still taking an impact on millions of youth. One population particularly at risk is learners in universities and colleges as young people frequently go through developmental,

emotional and environmental changes that can stimulate experimentation with alcohol and drugs (UNODC, 2024). They can affect the cognitive functioning, lower inhibitions and raise impulsive decision-making, which makes them more vulnerable to risky sexual activity and unplanned pregnancies (WHO, 2024). Unplanned pregnancy is still a significant worldwide reproductive health problem. The world health organization (2024) estimates that every year, approximately 21 million adolescent girls aged 15-19 years get pregnant in low and middle income countries, only half of which are intended. While many tertiary learners are just over the age category for adolescents, there is evidence that unintended pregnancies are prevalent to women aged 18-24 years as they tend not to use contraceptives regularly, drinking alcohol, drug abuse and sexual relationship due to pressure (UNFPA 2023). These pregnancies can lead to disrupted schooling, risky abortions, psychological suffering, social stigma, financial difficulties, and decreased job prospects and career potential (WHO, 2024).

In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), youth are still affected by gender inequity in substance abuse as well as by high levels of unintended pregnancies. The African Union (2024) indicates that a combination of factors such as rapid urbanisation, unemployment, poverty, weak family support systems, and increased illicit drugs' availability have led to the rise of drug use among youths in the region. Various research work done in African Universities shows that the use of alcohol, cannabis, crystal methamphetamine, codeine containing-medicines, and other psychoactive substances among students is rising and results in impacts on judgment and even risky sexual behaviour (UNODC, 2024). Hence an increase in unintended pregnancies among university/college learners is a concern because of the negative effects it expected to have on education, health and socio-economic. The drug and substance abuse of youths which has been on the increase is not a Zimbabwean phenomenon. In recent days, there have been reports of greater availability and use of alcohol, cannabis, crystal methamphetamine ("mutoriro"), broncleer cough syrup, codeine containing medications and other drugs among youth, particularly in urban areas and tertiary institutions, (Zimbabwe Civil Liberties and Drug Network [ZCLDN] 2023, Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Health and Child Care [MPSEHC] 2024). In Zimbabwe, drug and substance abuse have been identified as a priority by the Government of Zimbabwe through the multiagency approach called the National Drug Master Plan, among other agency laws and policies pertaining to access to drugs and substance abuse prevention, rehabilitation, and law enforcement (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Health and Child Care, 2024). However, the small rises in drug-related cases among young adults indicate that current interventions need to be made more robust, especially in higher and tertiary education. Zimbabwean tertiary institutions promote youth services viewings spaces where young adults from various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds come together where they can have relative freedom from parental supervision and pressure while they are also under academic, financial, emotional and social pressure (UNFPA Zimbabwe, 2023; WHO, 2024). These factors may lead to drug and alcohol experimentation, particularly in the presence of negative peer influences, stress, and a lack of sociological and emotional support (UNFPA Zimbabwe, 2023; UNODC, 2024). Learners who are abusing drugs are at increased risk of having unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), as they may be unable to make informed choices around sexual relationship, negotiate condom use and refuse sexual relations that are coerced or via substance abuse (WHO, 2024; UNFPA, 2023). Learners who fall pregnant while undertaking tertiary education are often subject to classroom interference, stigmatisation, psychological issues, financial illiquidity, and leaving of academic programmes in some cases (UNFPA, 2023; UNESCO, 2023).

While the issues of drug abuse by youths have garnered growing attention in Zimbabwe, the impact of substance abuse on unintended early pregnancies at tertiary education institutions remains largely inadequately explored, despite the fact that a growing number of learners in this age group have

experienced substance abuse (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Health and Child Care, 2024; Zimbabwe Civil Liberties and Drug Network [ZCLDN], 2023). Studies to date have mainly targeted the incidence of drug use, the criminal justice response to drug use, and adolescent pregnancies in secondary schools, resulting in little knowledge about the lived experiences of tertiary learners and stakeholders in institutions when it concerns experiences of the intersection of drug abuse and unintended pregnancies (WHO 2024, UNODC 2024). Moreover, little research has been conducted on the perceptions and experiences of lecturers, counsellors, and learner affairs staff regarding the effectiveness of institutional responses to these co-occurring problems (Belihu et al. 2024, Ebrahim et al. 2024). Given this background, the purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the impact of drug abuse on unintentional pregnancies of learners in a selected tertiary institution in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. This research was carried out using a qualitative approach of a phenomenological nature which takes Problem Behaviour Theory as the guide in the analysis stage to gain in-depth understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants related to how substance abuse is related to unintended early pregnancies (Jessor, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is anticipated that findings would bring evidence to policy making, boost institutional counselling and health promotion programmes and greatly inform the design of complete multi-sector interventions incorporating substance abuse prevention, reproductive health education and psychosocial support within tertiary education institutions in Zimbabwe (WHO 2024; UNESCO 2023; Mptech 2024).

Research Questions

1. What forms and patterns of drug abuse are experienced by learners at the selected tertiary institution?
2. How does drug abuse influence learners' sexual decision-making and contribute to unintended early pregnancies?
3. What strategies can tertiary institutions implement to reduce drug abuse and prevent unintended early pregnancies among learners?

2. Literature Review

The literature review examines the forms and patterns of drug abuse among tertiary learners, its influence on unintended early pregnancies, and intervention strategies adopted to address these challenges. A funnel approach is employed, beginning with the global context, narrowing to Sub-Saharan Africa, and finally focusing on Zimbabwe. This organisation provides a contextual understanding of the problem while identifying the empirical gap that informed the present study.

2.1 Forms and Patterns of Drug Abuse among Learners in Tertiary Institutions

Drug abuse in tertiary learners is an emerging issue worldwide and a public health concern due to their negative impact on health, academic achievement and socio-psychological functioning. The shift to higher education brings with it new levels of autonomy, peer pressure, academic demands, economic issues, and less parental oversight, which can lead to increased experimentation with psychoactive drugs. From 2013 to 2022, drug use all over the world increased by 20% with an estimated total of 292 million people using drugs in 2022 per the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2024). Cannabis continues to be the most popular illegal substance abused among tertiary students, and alcohol is by far the most commonly used substance owing to its low cost, availability and social acceptability. Likewise, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) states that substance abuse among young adults leads to poor academic performance, risky behaviors, violence, poor mental state and impaired

judgment. In the Sub-Saharan African context, high rates of unemployment, poverty, drug-related offenses and the breakdown of the family structure have exacerbated drug abuse among university students (African Union, 2024; UNODC, 2024). People frequently abuse alcohol, cannabis, crystal methamphetamine and tramadol, codeine-based medicines and other prescription drugs, and peer pressure, curiosity, emotional distress and academic stress are all important factors noted to contribute to drug abuse (African Union, 2024; WHO, 2024). Such trends have led to rising instances of academic failure, mental health issues, violence, and risk-taking sexual behavior among university students (WHO, 2024; UNESCO, 2023; UNODC, 2024). The problem of drug abuse has become a great challenge in education and health in Zimbabwe. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Health and Child Care (2024) reports crystal methamphetamine (mutoriro), cannabis, alcohol, broncleer cough syrup and medicines containing codeine, as the most commonly abused substances by adolescents and young adults. The government has displayed its commitment to prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and public awareness through the National Drug Master Plan (2024–2030). According to Zimbabwean studies, drug abuse among tertiary learners can also be attributed to peer pressure, poverty, emotional stress, home instability and academic stress (Belihu et al. 2024; Ebrahim et al.2024). But there was a notable lack of qualitative research on reported lived experience of learners in teacher education institutions in Masvingo Province, hence the relevance of this study.

2.2 Influence of Drug Abuse on Learners' Sexual Decision-Making and Unintended Early Pregnancies

Research has shown that there are strong links between drug abuse and risky sexual behaviour in young adults. Cognitive function, levels of self-control and impulsive decision-making are impaired with the use of psychoactive substances, which makes individuals more likely to use unprotected sex, have multiple sexual partnerships, engage in transactional sex and sexual coercion (WHO, 2024). Alcohol and drug abuse, therefore, raise the risk of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) for young people. Unintended pregnancy is persistently high among young women in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) (UNFPA, 2023), and alcohol use and drug abuse in LMICs have been linked to inconsistent use of contraceptives, and risky sexual behaviours. There are also indications in Sub-Saharan Africa that substance abuse is associated with negative sexual and reproductive health indicators. Alcohol and psychoactive drugs are linked to the transmission of HIV, gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and unintended pregnancies by the African Union (2024). Recent research in Zimbabwe shows that alcohol and illicit drug users reported lower and occasional common use of contraceptives as well as having multiple sexual partners compared to those who reported not drinking alcohol or taking any drugs (Belihu et al.2024). Unintended pregnancies of female learners often result in school dropped out, financial difficulties, psychological torture and social stigma. Considering these concerns, few qualitative studies have been conducted to determine how the tertiary learners view the connection between drug abuse and unplanned pregnancies, especially teacher education institutions.

2.3 Strategies for Reducing Drug Abuse and Preventing Unintended Early Pregnancies

Research and practical experience on addressing issues of drug abuse and unintended early pregnancies consistently highlight the need for comprehensive, integrated interventions that address these issues. Internationally, WHO (2024) and UNODC (2024) advise integrating services for substance use prevention with mental health services, comprehensive sexual education, counselling, peer education, life skills development, and readily accessible reproductive health services. There is evidence of a decrease in substance abuse and an improvement in the health and wellbeing of learners in institutions with integrated prevention programmes in place. Efforts to encourage and raise awareness of

prevention, counselling services, HIV prevention programmes, peer education and multisectoral collaboration between government, families, communities, religious bodies, health care providers and law enforcement agencies have improved responses to prevention across Sub-Saharan Africa (African Union, 2024). To complement these, Zimbabwe has adopted a National Drug Master Plan (2024–2030) and several tertiary institutions have institutionalized counselling units, life-skills programmes and peer education programmes. However, there are challenges to these interventions that include underfunding, counselor shortages and limited rehabilitation services, as well as stigma in accessing psychosocial services (Nkomo et al., 2024). Hence, it is recommended that institutional policies be reinforced, psychosocial support services be developed, comprehensive sexuality education be integrated, and partnerships be developed between educational institutions, Government Ministries, parents, communities and health-care providers. Based on the literature reviewed, the status of drug use among tertiary learners is still at high level which is a major determinant of risky sexual behaviour and unplanned pregnancies (WHO, 2024; UNFPA, 2023). While there have been studies on prevalence, determinants and consequences of drug abuse, the majority of studies conducted have been quantitative in nature (UNODC 2024; African Union 2024). Limited qualitative studies have looked at the personal experiences of learners, lecturers, counsellors and learner affairs partners of the phenomenon of drug abuse and unintended pregnancy among teacher learners in Zimbabwe, especially in Masvingo Province (Belihu et al. 2024, Ebrahim et al. 2024). This study seeks to fill this gap by giving a fuller qualitative insight into this phenomenon, drawing upon the Problem Behaviour Theory (Jessor 2018).

3. Theoretical Framework

The Problem Behaviour Theory (PBT) by Richard and Jessor Shirley (1977) and widened by Jessor (1987, 1991, 2018) guided this study. This theory provides the understanding of complex relationships between different kinds of risk behaviours and the influences of individual, social and environmental factors among adolescents and young adults (Jessor, 2018). This study is appropriate for the reasons, drug abuse has been linked to risky sexual behaviours that may lead to unintended pregnancies amongst learners in tertiary education institutions, as noted by WHO (2024); and UNFPA (2023). Problem Behaviour Theory suggests that health-compromising behaviours like substance use and abuse, risky sexual behaviors, delinquency and other problem behaviors are rarely independent but are in some way related, sharing some common psychosocial determinants (Jessor, 2018). As such, learners falling victim to drug abuse are more likely to participate in activities like using condoms, multiple sexual partnerships and unprotected sexual intercourse, which are associated with unintended early pregnancies (WHO, 2024; UNFPA, 2023). The theory is based on three related systems – personality system, perceived environment system and behaviour system (Jessor, 2018). The personality system entails personal values and beliefs, aspirations, coping skills, and risk-taking attitudes. Those under academic pressure, going through monetary challenges or coping with emotional difficulties may fall prey to drug abuse, affecting their judgment and risk-taking sexual choices (WHO, 2024; UNODC, 2024). The perceived environment system emphasizes the role of peer, family, institutional and community norms on behavior (Jessor, 2018). Student drug use and risky sexual relations activities can be fueled by different factors in tertiary education institutions, such as peer pressure, the availability of drugs, and the absence of support systems (African Union, 2024; WHO, 2024). Therefore, the behaviour system is the actual, observable behaviours that come from a confluence of personal and environmental factors such as drug abuse and risky sexual behaviour (Jessor, 2018). Problem Behaviour Theory also states that behaviour is influenced by the ratio of risk and protective factors. Peer pressure, poverty, academic stressors, lack of parental supervision, and access to psychoactive substances are risk factors for substance abuse and risky sexual behaviors (African Union, 2024; WHO, 2024). On the other hand, protective factors such as the availability of effective counselling services, good family relationships,

school and institutional policies, broad sexuality education, and positive peer support can mitigate involvement in these practices (Jessor, 2018; UNESCO, 2023). In the Zimbabwean context, the theory offers a suitable explanation for the escalation of drug abuse among tertiary learners, as socio-economic issues, unemployment, peer pressure and psychosocial stress are seen as facilitating drug abuse use (Ministry of Primary and secondary education of health and child care, 2024; Zimbabwe chikwawa learning development network, 2023). This may impact learners' judgment leading to greater risks of unsafe sexual activities and unintended pregnancy (WHO, 2024; UNFPA, 2023). This theory is particularly relevant to this study as it acknowledges that unintended early pregnancies have been caused from the interaction between behavioural, psychological and environmental influences rather than a single cause (Jessor, 2018). Problem Behaviour Theory was created in a Western context and does not address the larger contextual issues of poverty and gender inequality; but for the purposes of this study is appropriate as it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how drug abuse can contribute to risky sexual behaviour and unintended early pregnancies amongst learners in tertiary education institutions (Jessor, 2018).

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Paradigm

This study was guided by the interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and understood through individuals' lived experiences and interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The paradigm was appropriate because the study sought to understand how learners and key institutional stakeholders perceived the influence of drug abuse on unintended early pregnancies within a tertiary education context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interpretivism enabled the researcher to explore participants' subjective meanings and experiences rather than measure predetermined variables, thereby providing rich insights into the social and behavioural dimensions of the phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2018).

4.2 Research Approach

The study adopted a qualitative research approach because it sought to generate an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations regarding the relationship between drug abuse and unintended early pregnancies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research allows researchers to explore complex social phenomena within their natural settings while capturing participants' perspectives in their own words (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach was suitable because it provided detailed explanations of behaviours and experiences that could not adequately be captured through quantitative methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

4.3 Research Design

A phenomenological research design was employed. Phenomenology focuses on understanding the essence of individuals' lived experiences concerning a particular phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design enabled the researcher to explore how learners, lecturers, college counsellors, and learner affairs personnel experienced and interpreted the relationship between drug abuse and unintended early pregnancies (Neubauer et al., 2019). It also provided participants with opportunities to describe their experiences freely, thereby generating comprehensive accounts of the meanings they attached to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

4.4 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis to ensure methodological triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method because they enabled participants to describe their experiences in detail while allowing the researcher to probe emerging issues (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Focus group discussions were conducted with learners to obtain shared perspectives on drug abuse, peer influence, and unintended early pregnancies (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Document analysis complemented these methods through the review of institutional records, including counselling reports, disciplinary records, learner welfare documents, institutional policies, and health education materials. The use of multiple methods enhanced the credibility and completeness of the findings by allowing evidence from one source to corroborate that obtained from the others (Patton, 2015).

4.5 Sampling Technique

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who possessed direct knowledge and experience of drug abuse and unintended early pregnancies within the institution (Patton, 2015). Purposive sampling was considered appropriate because phenomenological studies require information-rich participants capable of providing detailed descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation rather than statistically representative samples (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.6 Sample Size

The study involved 20 participants drawn from four participant categories:

- 12 Learners
- 3 Lecturers
- 3 College Counsellors
- 2 Learner Affairs Personnel

This sample size was considered adequate for phenomenological inquiry because it enabled the researcher to obtain rich, in-depth information while allowing data saturation to be achieved (Guest et al., 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.7 Justification for Participant Selection

Learners constituted the largest participant group because they possessed first-hand experiences of campus life and were directly exposed to factors associated with drug abuse and unintended early pregnancies (Patton, 2015). Lecturers were selected because of their continuous interaction with learners and their ability to observe behavioural and academic changes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). College counsellors were included because of their professional responsibility for counselling learners experiencing psychosocial, substance abuse, and reproductive health challenges (WHO, 2024). Learner affairs personnel were selected because they oversee learner welfare, discipline, policy implementation, and institutional support services (UNESCO, 2023). The inclusion of these participant groups facilitated data triangulation by incorporating both lived experiences and professional perspectives (Patton, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

4.8 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step framework.

4.8.1 Familiarisation with the Data

Audio-recorded interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly read alongside field notes and documentary evidence to develop a thorough understanding of the data before coding commenced.

4.8.2 Generating Initial Codes

Meaningful statements relevant to the research questions were systematically identified and assigned initial codes. Similar ideas across interviews, focus groups, and documents were grouped together to facilitate subsequent analysis.

4.8.3 Searching for Themes

The initial codes were examined for relationships and grouped into broader categories representing recurring patterns. These categories formed the basis for the preliminary themes emerging from the data.

4.8.4 Reviewing Themes

The preliminary themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the complete dataset to ensure that they accurately represented participants' experiences and addressed the research questions. Themes that overlapped were refined, merged, or discarded to improve coherence. (This step follows Braun & Clarke's framework and logically fits between searching and defining themes.)

4.8.5 Defining and Naming Themes

Each theme was clearly defined and named according to its central meaning. The final themes were interpreted in relation to the reviewed literature and Problem Behaviour Theory, ensuring that the findings reflected participants' lived experiences while addressing the study objectives.

4.8.6 Writing the Report

The findings were presented narratively using illustrative participant quotations and evidence from document analysis. The discussion integrated the findings with existing literature and the theoretical framework to produce coherent interpretations of the influence of drug abuse on unintended early pregnancies.

4.9 Trustworthiness of Data

The trustworthiness of the study was enhanced using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation involving interviews, focus group

discussions, and document analysis, as well as member checking (Patton, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability was achieved by maintaining an audit trail documenting methodological decisions and analytical procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Confirmability was ensured by grounding interpretations in participants' narratives rather than researcher bias, while transferability was enhanced through detailed descriptions of the research setting, participants, and research procedures, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.10 Ethical Considerations

The study took note and undertook the ethical aspects of research with human subjects as per recognised guidelines of conducting research on human subjects (Creswell & Poth, 2018; British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2024). Data collection started with approval from the institution and ethics clearance obtained (BERA, 2024: Approval and ethics clearance). The participants were given the information on the purpose of the study and the informed consent was obtained voluntarily (BERA 2024: World Medical Association 2013). Using pseudonyms and identification codes (BERA, 2024), confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. The participants were notified that they may stop taking part at any time for no cost (BERA, 2024; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher stored all research materials such as audio recordings, transcripts, field notes and institutional documents securely on password protected electronic devices and on lockers, only accessible to the researcher (BERA, 2024). Due to the nature of topics such as drug abuse and unintended pregnancies, the interview and discussion were done with respect and any participants who needed psychosocial support linked to counselling services within the institution (WHO, 2024; BERA, 2024).

5. Discussion and Findings

This section presents and discusses the findings on the influence of drug abuse on unintended early pregnancies among learners in a selected tertiary institution in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe. Findings were generated through document analysis, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews involving learners, the College Counsellor and the Residence Warden. The triangulation of these data sources enhanced the credibility of the findings by allowing convergence of evidence from institutional records and participants' lived experiences. The discussion is organised into three themes corresponding to the research questions and interpreted in relation to existing literature and Problem Behaviour Theory.

5.1 Theme 1: Forms and Patterns of Drug Abuse Experienced by Learners

The study found that alcohol was the most abused substance, followed by cannabis (mbanje), crystal methamphetamine (mutoriro), prescription drugs and tobacco products. Document analysis revealed that alcohol-related incidents constituted the majority of disciplinary and counselling cases, indicating that substance abuse is a significant learner welfare concern. Focus group discussions showed that learners often abused drugs because of peer influence, academic stress and social pressure.

One learner remarked:

"Alcohol is the drug most commonly used because it is easy to obtain and many learners see it as part of campus life."

The College Counsellor similarly observed:

"Most learners who seek counselling for substance-related problems begin with alcohol before progressing to stronger drugs."

The convergence of documentary evidence and participants' experiences suggests that alcohol serves as a gateway substance, exposing learners to other forms of drug abuse. These findings agree with UNODC (2023) and WHO (2024), which identify alcohol as the most widely used psychoactive substance among young adults because of its accessibility and social acceptance. Likewise, studies by Ebrahim et al. (2024) report that peer influence and academic pressure are major predictors of substance abuse among university learners. These findings support Problem Behaviour Theory, which posits that substance abuse is shaped by interacting personal, social and environmental factors.

5.2 Theme 2: Drug Abuse and Unintended Early Pregnancies

The findings revealed that drug abuse contributes to unintended early pregnancies by impairing judgement and increasing risky sexual behaviour. Document analysis showed that most pregnancy-related counselling cases were associated with reports of alcohol or drug use during social gatherings. Participants explained that intoxication reduced learners' ability to negotiate safer sexual practices and increased vulnerability to unprotected sexual intercourse

A learner explained:

"After drinking, some learners make decisions they later regret, including having unprotected sex."

The Residence Warden confirmed:

"Learners under the influence of alcohol often become vulnerable to risky relationships, especially during weekend social events."

The consistency of evidence from documents, focus groups and interviews demonstrates that substance abuse and risky sexual behaviour are closely interconnected. These findings are consistent with WHO (2024) and UNFPA (2023), which report that alcohol and drug use increase impulsivity, reduce condom use and heighten the risk of unintended pregnancies among young adults. Similarly, Moyo and Maphosa (2021) found that substance abuse is a significant predictor of risky sexual behaviour among Zimbabwean youths. The findings therefore reinforce Problem Behaviour Theory, which argues that health-risk behaviours often occur simultaneously because they share common psychosocial determinants.

5.3 Theme 3: Institutional Strategies for Reducing Drug Abuse and Preventing Unintended Pregnancies

The study established that integrated institutional interventions are essential for reducing drug abuse and preventing unintended early pregnancies. Document analysis revealed existing counselling and awareness programmes, although participants indicated that these interventions required strengthening through sustained implementation and broader learner participation. Respondents recommended peer education, comprehensive life skills education, improved counselling services and stronger collaboration with health professionals.

The College Counsellor stated:

"Preventive counselling and life skills education should be strengthened before learners develop serious substance abuse problems."

The Residence Warden added:

"Learners need continuous guidance, not only disciplinary measures, if institutions are to reduce drug abuse and unintended pregnancies."

The results imply that intervention should shift from punitive processes to a prevention strategy that is holistic which supports informed decision making and resilience. The results also support the Problem Behaviour Theory as discussed by UNESCO (2023) and WHO (2024) which involves comprehensive health promotion programmes, that will include not just counselling services, but also sexuality education and psychosocial support in higher education institutions. This section used the findings of the study as three themes related to the research questions. The results indicated that alcohol was still the most common substance abused by tertiary learners and that drug abuse exposes them to risky sexual behaviour and impaired judgement which results in unintended early pregnancies (UNODC, 2024; WHO, 2024). The study also highlighted the need for combined institutional strategies focusing on counselling, life skills education, peer support and more comprehensive sexual and reproductive health programmes, which could help mitigate these challenges (UNESCO, 2023; Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Health and Child Care, 2024; WHO, 2024). Overall, the findings agree with existing literature and Problem Behaviour Theory that drug abuse and unintended early pregnancies are related problems which need co-ordinated prevention programmes in tertiary institutions (Jessor, 2018; UNFPA, 2023; WHO, 2024).

6. Conclusion

The study finds that drug abuse among students in tertiary institutions is an intricate and dynamic issue with different types and patterns of drug use by learners. Document analysis, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews highlighted that pupils are involved in the use of a range of drugs and alcohol was identified as the most popular, followed by the use of cannabis (mbanje), crystal methamphetamine (mutoriro), prescription drugs, tobacco and vaping products and poly-drug use. The results indicate that the use of some substances seems to have been characteristic to students' population while others are emerging drugs that need to be addressed with urgency by institutions. The study also reveals that drug abuse among tertiary learners is not individual but rather a product of a multitude of social, psychological, academic and environmental factors that influence them. Peer pressure, the need for social acceptance, academics stress, emotional problems, financial pressures, greater independence

on the part of the youth from family oversight and the availability of the drugs were recognized as key issues. Results show that while some students are substance users and their experiences and experimentation with substances may fuel pastime use, others enter a phase of substance use that develops into their dependence and regular habitual consumption. The study additionally reveals that the tendencies of drug abuse by the tertiary learners are very much correlated with learner's lifestyle and also the experience that he had. Common patterns identified were: weekend/recreational use, exam use, stress consumption, peer exposure and polydrug abuse. The findings here show that drug and other substance abuse among learners is not a national matter of learners' choice, but is also influenced by the environment of the educational institution as well as that surrounding it. The study also highlights the fact that drug abuse has serious consequences in the academic, social, psychological and sexual wellbeing of learners. Learners who use substances end up compromising their judgement, self-control and decision making, making them susceptible to engaging in risky sexual practices, sex infections and unwanted pregnancies. This shows the connectivity of risk behaviours among young people and substantiate the assumptions of Problem Behaviour Theory, which revealed that risk behaviours like substance abuse and risky sexual activity tend to be clustered together since they may have common influences. They indicate that tertiary education centres need to stop being reactive and disciplinary, and start developing prevention and support systems. The effective responses shall encompass ongoing programmes for drug abuse awareness, easy outreach to counselling and psychosocial services, peer support mentoring, life skills education, sexual and reproductive health promotion, and good integration of institutions, health care services, families and community actors. Finally, drug abuse among students in the tertiary education should be treated within the context in which learners function: a social and developmental context. Sustainable approaches should therefore be based on empowering learners with knowledge, learning to cope, on resilience and on supporting environments for responsible decisions. Imbarking on a comprehensive strategy for learner wellness encompassing substance abuse prevention, mental health care and sexual health education, is critical to minimise drug related harms in Zimbabwean tertiary learners and to facilitate academic success and healthy lifestyles.

7. Recommendations

From the results of this research, the following recommendations are put forward to mitigate drug abuse and unplanned early pregnancy among the learners of tertiary education institutions. Tertiary institutions need to reinforce institutional policies and programmes addressing prevention of drugs abuse and enhancing healthy lifestyle for learners. These include the expansion of counseling facilities, the integration of comprehensive life skills education (CLSE), bolstering peer education venues, and having frequent awareness creation campaigns on drug abuse and SRH. Early identification and referral systems should also be put in place by institutions to cater to the needs of learners with substance abuse issues and to ensure that intervention programmes are preventive, supportive and learner centred instead of just punitive. Zimbabwe government needs to invest more in tertiary institutions in terms of financial, technical and human resources for the implementation of the National drug prevention policies. There is need to increase investment to learner counselling services, rehabilitation, mental health services and youth friendly reproductive health services. The government ministries should also improve co-operation with educational institutions so that the national policies on drug abuse and unintended pregnancies can be effectively carried out and monitored regularly. It is recommended for Parents/Guardians that they keep regular contact with their students in their tertiary education and make sure to offer them emotional, moral and financial support continuously. They should promote responsible conduct, inform them about drug abuse or risky sexual practices and collaborate with tertiary institutions if there is any issue related to behavior. Through proactive and positive parenting, parental involvement can help identify substance abuse early and offer learners assistance in making

healthy decisions. Recommendation for Healthcare Providers / Community Organisations: Healthcare, community, faith based and NGO organisations and tertiary institutions should work in partnership to come up with health education programmes, counselling services, rehabilitation programmes and awareness campaigns to learners. This partnership should serve to advance healthy lifestyles, decrease the stigma of seeking reproductive health services, increase access, and introduce robust support networks within the community for learners who are using drugs and alcohol. Learners are encouraged to actively participate in counselling programmes, life skills education, peers' support and awareness raising programmes organized by their institutions. They should learn strategies for dealing with academic pressure and personal difficulties, learn to avoid being pressured by peers who are using drugs and alcohol, and learn to request assistance from a professional in case of any emotional or substance related issue arises. Additionally, learners should be informed in the way they make decisions about their sexual and reproductive health which will help to minimise risks of unintended pregnancy. Recommendation for Future Research: Future research should be able to be expanded on this research so that several tertiary institutions from different provinces of Zimbabwe could be included to create findings that are even broader and more representative. In addition, mixed-methods and longitudinal research could be adopted to analyze how substance use patterns evolve and their impact on learners' future reproductive behaviours and performances in subsequent years. Besides these, future research into effective institutional intervention programmes aimed at decreasing drug abuse and unintended early pregnancies among tertiary learners can be done such as counselling and Comprehensive Life Skills Education programmes, peer education program, rehabilitation program.

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