

Occult Beliefs among Adolescents in a Culturally Embedded Context: Evidence from Secondary School Students in Kitui County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Background: Occult beliefs, including beliefs in witchcraft, supernatural forces, divination, and mystical practices, remain significant components of many cultural belief systems and may influence adolescents' perceptions, experiences, and psychological functioning. Despite increasing interest in supernatural beliefs globally, limited empirical attention has been given to the prevalence of occult beliefs among secondary school students in Kenya, particularly within culturally rich contexts such as Kitui County. **Objective:** The study aimed to investigate the prevalence of occult beliefs among secondary school students in Kitui County, Kenya.

Methods: The study employed a cross-sectional research design among secondary school students from selected public schools in Kitui County. Data were collected using an adapted version of the Revised Paranormal Belief Scale (RPBS). A sample of 248 students participated in the study. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, analysis of variance, and chi-square tests to examine prevalence patterns and demographic differences in occult beliefs.

Results: The findings indicated that occult beliefs were prevalent among students, with 61.3% demonstrating moderate levels of belief, 25.4% reporting strong belief, and 13.3% indicating no belief. Occult belief and meaning were predominantly moderate (65.7%), while exposure and experience showed substantial moderate and high levels. Form level, religious affiliation, living arrangements, and parental involvement in occult practices were significantly associated with students' levels of occult belief, whereas age, gender, and school type showed no significant associations.

Conclusion: Occult beliefs are common among secondary school students in Kitui County and are shaped by social, cultural, and family contexts. The findings highlight the need for culturally sensitive educational and counselling interventions that support adolescents' understanding of belief systems and psychological development.

Keywords: Occult beliefs; adolescents; secondary school students; paranormal beliefs; Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

Occult beliefs refer to beliefs and practices that attribute events, experiences, or outcomes to supernatural or hidden forces that extend beyond conventional scientific explanation. Such beliefs encompass phenomena including witchcraft, astrology, divination, spiritualism, magic, and communication with supernatural entities. Although advances in science and technology have transformed many aspects of modern society, paranormal and occult beliefs continue to exist across diverse cultural settings and remain an important aspect of how individuals construct meaning, explain uncertainty, and interpret life experiences (Tobacyk, 2004). Rather than representing isolated irrational beliefs, occult beliefs are often embedded within broader cultural, religious, and social systems that influence how individuals understand themselves and the world around them.

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage characterized by rapid cognitive, emotional, and social changes that contribute to identity formation and the search for meaning. During this period, young people are

increasingly exposed to diverse belief systems through their families, schools, religious institutions, peer groups, traditional practices, and digital media (Steinberg, 2019). As adolescents seek explanations for uncertainty, success, misfortune, and personal experiences, they may adopt or explore beliefs that reflect both cultural traditions and contemporary social influences. Previous studies have shown that paranormal beliefs are associated with multiple psychological and sociocultural factors, including culture, education, cognitive style, personality traits, religiosity, and exposure to social information (Drinkwater et al., 2021). Consequently, understanding occult beliefs among adolescents requires consideration of the broader social and cultural environments within which these beliefs develop.

Within many African societies, beliefs concerning witchcraft, ancestral spirits, divination, and supernatural causation continue to influence interpretations of health, relationships, success, and adversity. These beliefs often coexist with religious teachings and scientific explanations rather than replacing them. Anthropological and psychological studies have demonstrated that supernatural beliefs remain deeply embedded within many African communities and continue to influence social behaviour, health-seeking practices, and interpersonal relationships (Ashforth, 2005; Ohaeri, 2006). Adolescents growing up in such environments are likely to encounter these belief systems through family traditions, community narratives, and everyday social interactions, making the study of occult beliefs particularly relevant within African contexts.

Prevalence of Occult Beliefs

Research conducted across different cultural settings indicates that paranormal and occult beliefs remain relatively common among both adolescents and adults, although their expression varies according to cultural background, religious orientation, education, and social context. Surveys conducted in Europe and North America have consistently shown that substantial proportions of young people endorse beliefs in astrology, psychic abilities, ghosts, precognition, spiritual healing, or other supernatural phenomena (Irwin, 2009). Rather than disappearing with modernization, these beliefs often coexist with scientific reasoning and conventional religious beliefs, suggesting that individuals frequently draw upon multiple explanatory frameworks when interpreting everyday experiences.

Recent empirical evidence also indicates that paranormal beliefs are associated with a range of psychological and social characteristics. A systematic review by Drinkwater et al. (2021) concluded that paranormal beliefs are influenced by complex interactions among cognitive processes, personality characteristics, cultural experiences, and environmental influences rather than by a single explanatory factor. Similarly, Rutjens et al. (2022) argued that beliefs lacking strong empirical support frequently emerge within broader systems of meaning that help individuals manage uncertainty, explain ambiguous experiences, and maintain psychological coherence. These findings suggest that occult beliefs should be understood within their wider cultural and psychological contexts instead of being viewed solely as irrational or isolated beliefs.

Evidence from African countries similarly demonstrates the continuing influence of supernatural beliefs in everyday life. Studies have documented the persistence of beliefs in witchcraft, ancestral spirits, and spiritual causation across many communities, where such beliefs continue to shape interpretations of illness, misfortune, and interpersonal conflict (Ohaeri, 2006). These beliefs are often reinforced through cultural traditions, community practices, and religious narratives and may influence how adolescents understand personal experiences and social relationships. Consequently, the prevalence of occult beliefs among young people should be interpreted within the cultural environments in which they are socialized.

Occult Beliefs among Secondary School Students in Kenya and the Research Gap

In Kenya, supernatural beliefs remain evident within many communities despite increasing urbanization, formal education, and technological development (Ashforth, 2005). Beliefs concerning witchcraft, spiritual powers, ancestral influence, and supernatural protection continue to influence social interactions and explanations of everyday events in many parts of the country. Previous anthropological research has shown that traditional belief systems frequently coexist with Christianity, Islam, and other religious traditions, resulting in multiple frameworks through which individuals interpret success, illness, conflict, and misfortune (Olupona, 2014).

Adolescents may therefore be exposed to diverse and sometimes competing explanations of reality through their families, religious institutions, schools, peers, and media.

Although studies have examined paranormal beliefs among university students and adults in different countries, empirical evidence focusing specifically on occult beliefs among Kenyan secondary school students remains limited. Existing Kenyan literature has largely concentrated on cultural beliefs, traditional healing practices, religious behaviour, or mental health, with relatively few quantitative studies examining the prevalence of occult beliefs among adolescents or their relationship with subjective well-being. This represents an important knowledge gap because adolescence is a formative developmental period during which belief systems and psychological well-being continue to evolve.

The present study therefore sought to examine the prevalence of occult beliefs among secondary school students in Kitui County and to investigate the relationship between occult beliefs and subjective well-being. By focusing on adolescents within a Kenyan cultural context, the study contributes to the limited empirical literature on occult beliefs among young people and provides evidence that may inform educational practice, mental health interventions, and future research on adolescent belief systems.

Research Gap and Purpose of the Study

Although previous studies have examined occult beliefs among secondary school students in different regions of Kenya, important gaps remain. First, much of the existing research has focused on urban counties such as Nairobi, with limited attention given to rural counties where traditional belief systems may remain more influential. Second, studies conducted in Kenya have provided evidence of the existence of occult beliefs among students, but there is limited empirical information regarding the prevalence and levels of these beliefs specifically among secondary school students in Kitui County.

Kitui County provides an important cultural context for examining occult beliefs because it is predominantly inhabited by the Kamba community, where traditional beliefs involving witchcraft, divination, and supernatural explanations have historically influenced social and cultural practices (Keyes, 2002). Despite the continued relevance of these belief systems, limited research has established the extent to which secondary school students in Kitui County endorse occult beliefs. This creates a knowledge gap regarding the prevalence of occult beliefs among adolescents within this specific cultural setting. Therefore, the present study aimed to address this gap by investigating the prevalence of occult beliefs among secondary school students in Kitui County, Kenya. Specifically, the study sought to determine the extent to which students endorsed occult-related beliefs and provide empirical evidence on the distribution of these beliefs within the secondary school population..

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a cross-sectional descriptive survey design to determine the prevalence and levels of occult beliefs among secondary school students in Kitui County, Kenya. A descriptive survey design was considered appropriate because the study sought to establish the extent to which occult beliefs were present among students and to describe variations in the level of endorsement of such beliefs within the study population. Unlike experimental designs that involve manipulation of variables, a cross-sectional descriptive approach allows researchers to collect information from respondents at a single point in time and provide a snapshot of existing beliefs, perceptions, and experiences within a particular social context. This design is commonly applied in educational and psychological research where researchers seek to understand the distribution of attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, or experiences among specific populations. In the current study, the design enabled the researcher to quantify the prevalence of occult beliefs among secondary school students while considering the cultural context in which such beliefs develop and are transmitted.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Kitui County, located in Eastern Kenya. The county is predominantly rural and semi-arid and is largely inhabited by the Kamba community, whose cultural traditions have historically incorporated various spiritual explanations regarding health, misfortune, success, and social experiences. Traditional beliefs relating to witchcraft, divination, ancestral influence, charms, and supernatural forces continue to form part of the broader cultural environment within which many individuals interpret life events. Kitui County was selected as the study area because of the continued relevance of traditional belief systems within the community and the limited empirical attention given to occult beliefs among adolescents in rural Kenyan settings. Secondary school students represent an important population for examining such beliefs because adolescence is a developmental stage characterized by identity formation, exploration of personal values, and increased influence from family, peers, media, and cultural environments (Steinberg, 2019). Therefore, examining the prevalence of occult beliefs among students in Kitui County provided insight into how these belief systems are reflected among young people within a culturally significant setting.

Population and Sample Size

The target population consisted of 4,418 secondary school students enrolled in ten purposively selected public secondary schools distributed across five educational zones in Kitui County. Public secondary schools were selected because they provide access to students from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, allowing the study to capture variations in belief patterns among adolescents within the county. A sample size of 250 students was determined and selected for participation in the study. The sample was considered adequate for estimating the prevalence of occult beliefs and generating reliable descriptive statistics (Makunda et al., 2024). After data collection, all returned questionnaires were subjected to screening to identify incomplete responses and inconsistencies. Two questionnaires were excluded due to substantial missing information, resulting in a final analytical sample of 248 students.

Sampling Procedures

The study utilized a multistage sampling procedure involving purposive and proportionate stratified sampling techniques. In the first stage, ten public secondary schools were purposively selected from five zones within Kitui County. The selection of schools was guided by the need to include institutions from different geographical areas and settings where students were exposed to diverse cultural and social influences related to belief systems. In the second stage, students were selected from the participating schools using proportionate stratified sampling. Each school formed a sampling stratum, and the number of students selected from each institution was determined according to its student population size. This procedure ensured that larger schools contributed proportionally more participants while smaller schools remained represented within the sample. The final selection of students considered representation across different class levels to ensure that the sample reflected the experiences of students at various stages of secondary education. This approach enhanced the representativeness of the sample and reduced the possibility that findings would be influenced by experiences from only one category of students.

Measurement of Occult Beliefs, Validity and Reliability

Occult beliefs were measured using an adapted version of the Revised Paranormal Belief Scale (RPBS) developed by Irwin (1993). The instrument was selected because it provides a comprehensive assessment of beliefs related to supernatural and paranormal phenomena. For the present study, items were adapted to reflect concepts relevant to the Kenyan cultural context, including beliefs related to witchcraft, supernatural forces, spiritual practices, divination, magic, and other forms of occult phenomena. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. Higher scores represented stronger endorsement of occult beliefs. Individual item scores were summed to generate an overall occult belief score for each participant. The total scores were subsequently categorized into levels of occult belief (no belief, moderate belief, and strong belief) to determine the prevalence of occult beliefs among the students. Content and face validity of the instrument were established through expert evaluation and contextual adaptation. The questionnaire was reviewed by research supervisors and experts in psychology and education to assess whether the items adequately captured occult beliefs among secondary school students and whether the wording was culturally appropriate and understandable for the study population.

A pilot study was conducted among 20 secondary school students in Juja Constituency, Kiambu County, before the main data collection. The pilot study assessed the clarity of questionnaire items, the suitability of response options, and the overall feasibility of administering the instrument among adolescents. Findings from the pilot were used to refine unclear items before the final administration. Reliability of the occult beliefs scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The adapted occult beliefs instrument produced a reliability coefficient of $\alpha = .81$, indicating good internal consistency and confirming that the items consistently measured the construct of occult beliefs among the respondents.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Before data collection, approval was obtained from relevant research and educational authorities. The researcher visited the selected schools and administered self-report questionnaires to students during scheduled school sessions. Participants were provided with instructions on how to complete the questionnaires and were informed that participation was voluntary. For students below 18 years of age, parental or guardian consent was obtained, while student assent was sought before participation. Adequate time was provided for completion of the questionnaires, after which the completed instruments were collected and prepared for analysis. The collected data were coded, entered, cleaned, and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 27. Data screening was conducted to identify missing responses, errors, and inconsistencies before analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the prevalence of occult beliefs among the respondents. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to determine the proportion of students falling within different levels of occult belief, while means and standard deviations were computed to describe overall belief scores. The prevalence of occult beliefs was presented using categorical levels based on the total occult belief scores. These categories enabled interpretation of the extent to which students endorsed occult-related beliefs and provided a clear representation of the distribution of occult beliefs within the study population.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), while research authorization was granted by the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Additional permission was obtained from the Ministry of Education, the Kitui County Director of Education, and the principals of the participating schools. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the research, their right to decline participation, and their freedom to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. For students below the age of 18 years, parental consent and student assent were obtained before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. No personally identifying information was collected from participants, and completed questionnaires were securely handled and stored. The study also ensured sensitivity in addressing occult beliefs because such beliefs may be connected to cultural traditions, personal experiences, and family backgrounds. Therefore, respondents were encouraged to provide honest responses without fear of judgment or negative consequences.

RESULTS

Response Rate and Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 presents the response rate and demographic characteristics of the study participants. Of the 250 questionnaires distributed to secondary school students in Kitui County, all were returned. Following data screening and cleaning, two questionnaires were excluded due to substantial missing data, resulting in a final sample of 248 respondents and an effective response rate of 99.2%. This response rate was considered adequate for statistical analysis and enhanced the reliability of the study findings.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 248)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	84	33.9
	Female	162	65.3
	Prefer not to disclose	2	0.8
Age (years)	Mean (SD)	17.17 (1.01)	
	Median (IQR)	17 (16–18)	
	Range	15–20	
Class Level	Form 2	12	4.8
	Form 3	102	41.1
	Form 4	134	54.0
School Type	Public day school	123	49.6
	Public boarding school	125	50.4
Religious Affiliation	Christian	235	94.8
	Muslim	5	2.0
	Traditional African Religion	8	3.2
Living with Parents/Guardians	Yes	225	90.7
	No	23	9.3
Parents/Guardians Practice Occult Beliefs	Yes	103	41.5
	No	123	49.6
	Not sure	22	8.9

As shown in Table 1, the respondents had a mean age of 17.17 years (SD = 1.01), with ages ranging from 15 to 20 years. Female students constituted the majority of the sample, while most respondents were in Forms 3 and 4. The sample was almost equally distributed between public day and public boarding schools. Christianity was the predominant religious affiliation, and the majority of students reported living with their parents or guardians. Nearly half of the respondents indicated that their parents or guardians practiced occult beliefs. Collectively, these characteristics suggest that the study sample adequately represented secondary school students from diverse educational and family backgrounds within Kitui County.

Prevalence of Occult Beliefs among Respondents

The prevalence of occult beliefs among secondary school students was examined through two dimensions: occult belief and meaning, and occult exposure and experience. These dimensions were assessed to establish the extent to which students endorsed occult-related beliefs and whether they reported experiences or exposure associated with occult phenomena.

Occult Belief and Meaning among Respondents

The findings indicated that most students demonstrated moderate levels of occult belief and meaning. As presented in Table 2, 163 students (65.7%) reported moderate levels of belief, while 50 students (20.2%) recorded

low levels of belief. A smaller proportion of students, 35 (14.1%), demonstrated high levels of occult belief and meaning.

Table 2

Distribution of Occult Belief and Meaning among Respondents

Level of Occult Belief and Meaning	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Low Belief	50	20.2
Moderate Belief	163	65.7
High Belief	35	14.1
Total	248	100.0

The findings suggest that occult beliefs formed part of the belief systems held by a considerable proportion of students, although the majority expressed these beliefs at a moderate level rather than strong endorsement. This indicates that students differed in the extent to which they attached meaning to occult-related ideas and interpretations of supernatural phenomena.

Occult Exposure and Experience among Respondents

The distribution of occult exposure and experience among students showed a relatively balanced pattern across the three categories. As shown in Table 3, 90 students (36.3%) reported moderate levels of occult exposure and experience, followed closely by 88 students (35.5%) who reported high exposure and experience. Students with low exposure and experience accounted for 70 respondents (28.2%).

Table 3

Distribution of Occult Exposure and Experience among Respondents

Level of Occult Exposure and Experience	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Low Exposure	70	28.2
Moderate Exposure	90	36.3
High Exposure	88	35.5
Total	248	100.0

These results indicate that although not all students reported direct exposure or experiences related to occult phenomena, a substantial proportion had encountered or interacted with occult-related ideas, practices, or experiences to varying degrees.

The relatively high proportion of students reporting moderate and high exposure suggests that occult-related phenomena were present within the social environment of many respondents.

Overall Prevalence of Occult Beliefs among Respondents

The overall prevalence of occult beliefs was determined by combining the measured dimensions of occult belief among respondents.

The results presented in Table 4 show that the majority of students demonstrated moderate levels of occult belief, with 152 respondents (61.3%) falling within this category. A further 63 students (25.4%) reported strong levels of occult belief, while 33 students (13.3%) indicated no belief.

Table 4

Overall Prevalence of Occult Beliefs among Respondents

Overall Level of Occult Belief	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
No Belief	33	13.3
Moderate Belief	152	61.3
Strong Belief	63	25.4
Total	248	100.0

The findings demonstrate that occult beliefs were present among most students, with only a small proportion reporting complete absence of such beliefs. The dominance of moderate belief levels suggests that occult beliefs existed among students but varied in intensity, with fewer students demonstrating strong endorsement of occult-related ideas.

Demographic Differences in Occult Beliefs among Respondents

To examine whether occult beliefs differed across demographic characteristics, age was analyzed using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), while categorical demographic variables were examined using chi-square tests. The demographic factors considered included gender, form/class level, school type, religious affiliation, living arrangements, and parental or guardian involvement in occult practices.

Age Differences in Occult Beliefs

The results indicated that students' age did not significantly differ across the three occult belief categories. Students in the no belief category had a mean age of 17.3 years (SD = 1.19), those with moderate belief had a mean age of 17.2 years (SD = 0.997), while students with strong belief had a mean age of 17.1 years (SD = 0.921) (See table 5).

Table 5

Age by Occult Belief Group

Occult Belief Group	N	Mean $\pm$ SD	Median	Min	Max	ANOVA F (df)	p-value
No belief	33	17.3 $\pm$ 1.19	17	15	20	0.693 (2,245)	0.501
Moderate belief	152	17.2 $\pm$ 0.997	17	15	20		
Strong belief	63	17.1 $\pm$ 0.921	17	15	20		

The one-way ANOVA showed that these differences were not statistically significant, $F(2,245) = 0.693$, $p = .501$. This implies that age was not associated with variations in occult belief levels among the students. Students

across the adolescent age range represented in the study showed relatively similar patterns of occult belief regardless of their chronological age.

Association between Demographic Characteristics and Occult Beliefs

The association between categorical demographic characteristics and occult beliefs was examined using chi-square analysis. The results showed that gender was not significantly associated with occult belief levels, $\chi^2(4) = 4.23$, $p = .376$. Similarly, school type was not significantly related to occult belief, $\chi^2(2) = 0.27$, $p = .873$, indicating that students from public day and public boarding schools demonstrated comparable levels of occult beliefs.

Table 6

Demographic Characteristics and Overall Occult Belief

Demographic	No belief	Moderate belief	Strong belief	X ²	df	p-value
Gender				4.23	4	0.376
1	11	46	27			
2	22	104	36			
Form				29.60	4	0.000059
2	1	1	10			
3	8	65	29			
4	24	86	24			
School type				0.27	2	0.873
1	15	76	32			
2	18	76	31			
Religious affiliation				25.57	4	0.000039
1	33	150	52			
2	0	1	4			
3	0	1	7			
Parents/guardian				26.77	2	0.000002
1	33	145	47			
2	0	7	16			
Parents/guardian practice occult				32.58	4	0.0000015
1	7	52	44			
2	23	87	13			
3	3	13	6			

However, significant associations were observed between occult beliefs and several demographic characteristics. Form/class level showed a significant association with occult belief, $\chi^2(4) = 29.60$, $p < .001$. Religious affiliation was also significantly associated with occult belief levels, $\chi^2(4) = 25.57$, $p < .001$. Additionally, students' living arrangements demonstrated a significant relationship with occult beliefs, $\chi^2(2) = 26.77$, $p < .001$. Further, parental or guardian involvement in occult practices was significantly associated with students' occult beliefs, $\chi^2(4) = 32.58$, $p < .001$. These findings indicate that while some demographic characteristics such as gender and school type did not differentiate students' occult beliefs, factors related to educational level, religious background, family environment, and parental practices were significantly linked to students' endorsement of occult beliefs.

DISCUSSION

The present study established that occult beliefs were prevalent among secondary school students in Kitui County, with the majority of respondents demonstrating moderate levels of belief (61.3%), followed by strong levels of belief (25.4%), while only a small proportion reported no belief (13.3%). These findings indicate that occult beliefs constitute part of the broader belief systems through which many adolescents interpret experiences, uncertainty, and events within their social environments. The predominance of moderate belief suggests that students may engage with occult ideas to varying degrees rather than adopting them as absolute explanations of reality. This pattern reflects the complex nature of adolescent belief formation, where supernatural explanations may coexist with religious teachings, formal education, and emerging critical reasoning.

The findings can be understood within the developmental context of adolescence, a period characterized by identity exploration, cognitive maturation, and the search for meaning. During this stage, young people increasingly attempt to understand personal experiences, social relationships, success, failure, and unexplained events around them (Steinberg, 2019). Belief systems provide frameworks through which adolescents organize and interpret such experiences. Therefore, the moderate level of occult belief observed in this study may reflect adolescents' attempts to negotiate between different sources of knowledge, including family narratives, cultural traditions, religious teachings, and modern educational perspectives. Similar observations have been reported in studies of paranormal beliefs, which suggest that supernatural beliefs often coexist with scientific and religious worldviews and form part of broader cognitive and cultural systems through which individuals interpret reality (Irwin, 2009; Lindeman & Aarnio, 2007).

The finding that a substantial proportion of students reported strong occult beliefs is particularly important within the cultural context of Kitui County. In many African societies, supernatural explanations remain embedded within social and cultural interpretations of health, misfortune, success, and interpersonal relationships. Traditional belief systems often provide explanations for events that may appear uncertain or difficult to understand within everyday experiences (Ohaeri, 2006). Studies of African societies have similarly shown that beliefs related to witchcraft, ancestral influence, divination, and spiritual forces continue to shape interpretations of personal and social experiences and are transmitted through families and communities (Ashforth, 2005; Olupona, 2014). The prevalence of occult beliefs among students in Kitui may therefore reflect the transmission of cultural meanings through families and communities rather than merely individual-level preferences. Adolescents develop their understanding of the world within social contexts, and family discussions, community practices, and shared narratives may influence how they perceive supernatural phenomena.

The distribution of the occult belief and meaning subscale further supports this interpretation. Most students (65.7%) demonstrated moderate levels of belief and meaning, while only 14.1% reported high levels. This suggests that occult beliefs among students are present but are generally expressed with varying degrees of intensity. Previous studies have shown that paranormal beliefs are multidimensional and differ in strength, ranging from casual acceptance of supernatural possibilities to strong conviction in occult explanations (Irwin, 2009; Tobacyk, 2004). The current findings therefore suggest that students' engagement with occult beliefs should not be viewed as a uniform phenomenon but rather as existing along a continuum influenced by personal experiences, cultural exposure, and social learning processes.

The findings on occult exposure and experience provide further insight into how such beliefs may develop among students. More than two-thirds of respondents reported moderate (36.3%) or high (35.5%) levels of exposure and experience with occult phenomena. This demonstrates that occult-related ideas are not only cognitive beliefs but are also encountered through students' social environments. Exposure may occur through family conversations, community practices, peer interactions, traditional narratives, and media content. Previous research has suggested that repeated exposure to supernatural beliefs and culturally shared narratives may influence how individuals interpret ambiguous experiences and assign meaning to everyday events (Irwin, 2009; Drinkwater et al., 2021). However, exposure does not necessarily indicate unquestioned acceptance; rather, individuals may interpret such experiences through different psychological and cultural frameworks.

The demographic findings further demonstrate that occult beliefs among students are shaped more by social and cultural influences than by basic demographic characteristics. Age was not significantly associated with occult belief levels, suggesting that small variations in chronological age within adolescence may not substantially influence endorsement of occult beliefs. Although adolescence is associated with cognitive development and increased independence in thinking, belief formation appears to depend more strongly on contextual influences such as family, culture, and personal experiences (Steinberg, 2019; Drinkwater et al., 2021). Similarly, gender and school type were not significantly associated with occult beliefs, indicating that such beliefs cut across male and female students and different school environments.

However, significant associations were observed between occult beliefs and form level, religious affiliation, living arrangements, and parental or guardian involvement in occult practices. These findings highlight the importance of socialization processes in shaping adolescent beliefs. Family environments represent one of the earliest sources through which young people acquire explanations about the world, including interpretations of supernatural events. Where occult-related beliefs are discussed, practiced, or emphasized within family and community settings, adolescents may be more likely to encounter and adopt similar explanatory frameworks. This observation is consistent with anthropological literature, which emphasizes that belief systems are socially transmitted through cultural practices, family interactions, and community traditions (Ashforth, 2005; Olupona, 2014).

The findings contribute to the limited empirical evidence on occult beliefs among secondary school students in Kenya, particularly within rural cultural contexts such as Kitui County. While previous studies have examined paranormal and supernatural beliefs in different populations, fewer have focused specifically on how such beliefs are expressed among adolescents within African communities where traditional and religious belief systems coexist. The results demonstrate the need for greater attention to young people's belief environments and the social processes through which such beliefs develop. Understanding the prevalence of occult beliefs does not require dismissing cultural perspectives but rather recognizing how these beliefs influence adolescents' interpretations of their experiences and interactions with their environment.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that secondary schools in Kitui County strengthen guidance and counselling services to address students' beliefs, fears, and experiences related to occult phenomena. Since a considerable proportion of students demonstrated moderate and strong levels of occult belief, school counsellors should be equipped with appropriate knowledge and culturally sensitive approaches to help students process their beliefs without creating fear, stigma, or conflict with their cultural backgrounds. Counselling programmes should focus on promoting critical thinking, emotional regulation, healthy coping strategies, and evidence-based interpretation of life experiences, particularly where occult beliefs may influence students' academic engagement, relationships, or psychological well-being.

The study further recommends greater involvement of parents, guardians, religious leaders, and community stakeholders in creating supportive environments for adolescents. Since parental practices and family contexts were significantly associated with students' levels of occult belief, interventions should recognize the role of the home environment in shaping young people's belief systems. Schools and communities should promote open discussions that allow students to express their concerns and experiences while encouraging constructive approaches to dealing with uncertainty, stress, and challenges. Such efforts should avoid dismissing students'

cultural experiences but instead encourage balanced understanding that supports their emotional and psychological development.

Limitations of the Study

The study was conducted among secondary school students from selected public schools in Kitui County, Kenya; therefore, the findings may not be generalized to all adolescents in Kenya, particularly those in private schools or other regions with different cultural and social backgrounds. In addition, the study relied on self-reported information obtained through questionnaires and focus group discussions. Given the sensitive nature of occult beliefs and practices, some students may have been hesitant to disclose their actual beliefs or experiences due to fear of judgment, social expectations, or concerns about confidentiality. The cross-sectional design used in the study limited the ability to determine changes in occult beliefs over time or establish causal relationships between students' background factors and their belief patterns. Although the study incorporated both quantitative and qualitative approaches to enhance understanding of the phenomenon, occult beliefs are complex and deeply influenced by cultural, family, religious, and personal experiences that may not be fully captured through the research instruments used.

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