

Exploring Psychoactive Substance Use among Secondary School Learners in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province

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ABSTRACT

This research sought to explore psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners in Bulawayo Metropolitan province. The constructivism research philosophy with qualitative research approach and constructivist grounded theory design were used to enable an in-depth exploration of the rise of psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners in Bulawayo Metropolitan province. Purposive sampling and theoretical sampling techniques were employed in the selection of a rich data source sample. Open-ended questionnaires and structured interview guides were employed for in-depth generating data from a sample size of 40 participants (30 secondary school learners psychoactive substance users and 10 parents of substance users) in Bulawayo district determined by theoretical saturation. An iterative and simultaneous process data analysis approach was used to analyse data which was qualitatively presented. The results of this study revealed and concluded that secondary school learners experienced addiction to psychoactive substances, mental health disorders. Secondary school learners indicated that persistent substance use affected their attention, memory, and decision-making abilities leading to poor academic performance. Results also disclosed that secondary school learners were struggling with managing their emotions after taking psychoactive substances. They also experienced mood swings, irritability, impulsivity recklessness and aggression as well as risk of suicidal thoughts. The study recommended that there is need for the educational or community psychologists and psycho-counsellors to provide counselling and therapy to the secondary school learners using family therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy and client centred therapy. There is need for the government to strengthen law enforcement efforts to combat drug trafficking and distribution to prevent the availability and accessibility of psychoactive substances in communities and secondary schools. Education campaigns need to target both adults and secondary school learners to help to reduce the stigma around addiction and encourage individuals to seek help. There is need for the government to develop an independent school curriculum to educate secondary school learners on the effects of substance abuse, addiction problems, and prevention strategies. Finally, there is need for the adoption of the proposed Unhu/Ubuntu Psycho-counselling Model (UUPCM) to address psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners (see fig 3)

Keywords: Psychoactive substance use, learners, secondary schools, Unhu/Ubuntu Psycho-counselling Model (UUPCM), family therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy and client centred therapy.

INTRODUCTION

Psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners is a global public health, educational, and social concern that transcends income levels, cultures, and geographic regions. Adolescence is a developmental stage characterised by heightened curiosity, peer influence, identity formation, and susceptibility to risk-taking behaviour, which places secondary school learners at particular risk of experimenting with alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, inhalants, and other mind-altering substances (García-García et al., 2021). Several researchers from different parts of the world have reported a high prevalence rate of psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners (Chisom, Ohaeri, Iyanuoluwa & Oluwatoyin, 2022; Enriquez-Guerrero, Barreto-Zorza, Lozano-

Vélez & Ocampo-Gómez, 2021). In Europe, alcohol and tobacco remain the most abused substances among secondary school learners, although cannabis and new psychoactive substances are showing an upward trend (Ozeylem et al., 2021). In Spain, a cross-sectional study of 1,298 secondary school learners aged 12 to 16 found prevalence rates of 14% for alcohol, 15% for tobacco, and 3% for cannabis, with consumption strongly associated with the immediate social environment, peer norms, and weak risk perception among learners (García-García et al., 2021). In Norway, a large-scale repeated cross-sectional survey involving over 415,000 secondary school learners between 2014 and 2022 found that while alcohol intoxication remained relatively stable, the prevalence of cannabis and other illicit drug use rose considerably among upper-secondary school boys (from 13.3% to 17.6%) and girls (from 8.8% to 12.8%), with socioeconomic disadvantage emerging as a significant predictor of increased risk, particularly among girls (Myhr et al., 2024).

In United States, a survey of 7,705 high school students in grades 9–12, found that 31.6% of learners reported use of tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, or misuse of prescription opioids, with alcohol (19.5%), electronic vapour products (15.4%), and marijuana (12.8%) being the most prevalent substances (Brener et al., 2022). A multi-country study of 57,825 secondary school learners in Asia found a generally high prevalence of alcohol, tobacco, and drug use, which was strongly associated with peer bullying, loneliness, and the absence of close friendships (Ozeylem et al., 2021). In the Philippines specifically, a survey of in-school learners found that illicit drug use, including cannabis and methamphetamine, was significantly associated with family-level, peer-level, school-level, and community-level risk factors, with drug education emerging as a protective factor (Pengpid et al., 2025). Other common drivers of substance use in Indian high schools include peer pressure, broken families, emotional and physical abuse, and curiosity, often resulting in addiction (Gebresilassie, Hadush & Gidey Lemma, 2020; Joseph, Varghese & Vr, 2021). A study by Aderibigbe, Stewart, Hirdes & Perlman (2022) in Canada identified certain psychoactive substances use by high school learners as major contributors to risky sexual behavior, poor academic performance, cardiovascular and neurological disorders.

Within Africa, evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa consistently points to a substantial rising burden of substance use among secondary school learners, driven by poverty, urban migration, weak regulatory enforcement, and the ready availability of alcohol and illicit substances. A multi-country analysis of school-going learners aged 11 to 18 across eight Sub-Saharan African countries found substantial variation in the prevalence of alcohol, marijuana, and amphetamine use, with individual, family, and peer-level factors all significantly associated with substance use (Kugbey, 2023). In Tanzania, a school-based cross-sectional survey of secondary students found that 9.7% of learners reported psychoactive substance use, primarily cannabis and alcohol, with peer influence cited by 82.7% of users as the main driver, alongside consequences such as misbehaviour, unprotected sex, and perceived long-term harm (Gift & Mweya, 2024). Research has shown that Ethiopian secondary school learners take drugs as a stress reliever against poverty and unemployment (Basha, Tefera, Tilahun & Amede, 2023). In South Africa and Nigeria, findings show that good financial background, more pocket money, high financial difficulties, availability and accessibility of substances, and psychological factors (low self-esteem, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder) contributed to secondary school learners' involvement in psychoactive substance use (Khoza & Shilubane, 2021; Mohale & Mokwena, 2020; Okogbenin & Kucharska, 2021). Consequently, findings from Abate, Chekol & Minaye (2021) presents that psychoactive substance abuse in Ethiopian high schools led to a range of short and long-term psychiatric complications, such as addiction, stress, depression, anxiety, suicide and even psychosis. Similarly, psychoactive substance uses among secondary school learners in South Africa caused a devastating impact on communities, resulting in increased violence, robberies, unemployment and the need for more rehabilitation centres (Mohale & Mokwena, 2020; Khoza & Shilubane, 2021).

In Zimbabwe, the problem of psychoactive substance abuse among secondary schools' learners has grown to become an integral part of our contemporary society, and more worrisome is the recent surge in the rate of involvement of the learners in this damaging phenomenon (Chikuvadze & Saidi, 2023; Izuka, 2023; Mandura, 2023). The problem has shifted from traditional substances like alcohol and mbanje to new and cheaper synthetic drugs such as crystal meth (guka), bronco, codeine cough syrup, and methamphetamine (Gunda & Mbwirire, 2020). The Zimbabwe National Drug Master Plan 2021-2025 and reports by UNICEF Zimbabwe indicate that secondary school learners are increasingly being recruited into drug use. Media reports and Ministry of Primary

and Secondary Education disciplinary data show that bases and drinking spots around schools have become recruitment points. Although Zimbabwean authorities are leaving no stone unturned in the fight against drugs (Mandura, 2023), there is an increase of alcohol and drug abuse among secondary school learners. A study by Pinias & Enia (2023) in Zimbabwean secondary schools found that learners abuse a wide range of psychoactive substances, including marijuana, tobacco, mutoriro (crystal methamphetamine), inhalants such as aerosols and solvents. Reports said secondary school learner addicts involve dipping diapers, bleach products in boiling water and inhaling the vapours as intoxicants (Chikuvadze & Saidi, 2023). Most of psychoactive substances are commonly abused or traded under a variety of Street names such as – Mbanje, Ganja, Dope, Weed, Blunt, Grass, Pot, Boom, Spliff, Mary-Jane, Skunk, and Kiff (Maraire & Chethiyar, 2020).

Reports collected by UNICEF, working alongside government departments, Zimbabwe Civil Liberties and Drug Network, and Youth Advocates Zimbabwe, indicate that secondary school learner expulsions linked to drug and substance use have been rising, with an estimated 60% of affected subsequently dropping out of school altogether (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2023). Secondary schools in Zimbabwe's major urban areas have reported rising cases of drug-related suspensions, violence, and school dropouts among teenager students. The use of psychoactive substances such as marijuana/mbanje, codeine-based cough syrups, broncleer (a cough syrup containing codeine and other substances), methamphetamines (also known as mutoriro, dombo or gaga), musombodhiya (a homemade concoction or cocktail of various substances including illicit drugs, alcohol, and other chemicals), njengu (a homemade concoction of illicit drugs particularly a mixture of heroin and cannabis or marijuana) and opioids has increased leading to a rise in crime, poverty, health issues, and psychological disorders (Dzenga, 2023; Chikuvadze & Saidi, 2023). Some local studies revealed that learners at various secondary schools were expelled after school authorities found illicit drugs in their bags during a school trips or lessons (Dlamini, 2023; Mandura, 2023). Statistics compiled in 2021 by the Zimbabwe Civil Liberties and Drug Network revealed that 60 % of psychiatric admissions were due to drug abuse but 80 % of these were secondary school learners including schoolgirls (Dlamini, 2023).

Banda (2023) observes that despite considerable global scholarly attention to substance use among secondary school learners, enduring gaps remain in Zimbabwean research and policy response noting the socioeconomic structural disadvantages that push young people towards substance use as a coping mechanism. Mugari (2024) similarly documents those new and emerging forms of drug and substance use to continue appearing in Zimbabwean secondary schools despite existing interventions. Chikuvadze et al. (2022) found that peer counselling programmes are not being implemented with sufficient consistency to meaningfully curb psychoactive substance use in secondary schools. Aligning to that, clinical evidence from Zimbabwean rehabilitation facilities shows that relapse among secondary school learners recovering from psychoactive substance dependence is common (Muzingili & Taruvinga, 2025) opening an opportunity for this study to explore psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners.

However, there are still many myths surrounding the issue of psychoactive substance use among secondary schools' learners. Common assumptions include; 'only poor secondary school learners abuse drugs', 'drugs make teenager boys more confident or masculine', and 'once suspended the problem is solved'. These myths hinder effective and prevention and intervention. There is, therefore, a need to explore the real causes, patterns, and lived experiences of psychoactive use among secondary school learners to design constructive text-specific strategies. This study is grounded in the Heritage-Based Education 5.0 goal of producing learners who are healthy, disciplined, and innovative.

Statement of the problem

Despite the implementation of the Zimbabwe National Drug Master Plan (ZNDMP 2020 to 2025) and Treatment and Rehabilitation Guidelines of Alcohol and Substance Use Disorder of Zimbabwe (TRGASUD ZIM), cases of psychoactive substance abuse among secondary school learners continue to rise (Dzenga, 2023; Kabonga et al., 2026). The statistics on psychoactive substance abuse among secondary school learners in Zimbabwe increase yearly despite measures implemented by various stakeholders to fight the pandemic (Dlamini, 2023; Kabonga et al., 2026; Dzenga, 2023; Chikuvadze & Saidi, 2023; Muzingili & Taruvinga, 2025). UNICEF Zimbabwe (2023) reports a rising trend of school expulsions linked to drug and substance use, with a substantial

proportion of expelled secondary school learners never returning to complete their education. Existing Zimbabwean literature on psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners is dominated by small-scale, single-school studies rather than large, representative investigations (Chidarikire et al, 2021; Pinias & Enia, 2023). Research in Zimbabwe are predominantly based on anecdotal evidence, and that there is no national monitoring system to establish the true nature and extent of psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners (Marandure et al, 2023). There is a clear empirical gap concerning the nature, patterns, drivers and lived experiences of psychoactive substance use specifically among secondary school learners in Zimbabwe (Chikuvadze & Enia,2023; Muzingili & Taruvinga, 2025). It is against this backdrop that the present study seeks to explore psychoactive substance use secondary schools' learners, that is, to move beyond generalised or anecdotal understandings of the problem towards a systematic, evidence-based analysis of its nature, extent, underlying causes, and consequences, in order to inform more effective, context-appropriate prevention and response strategies.

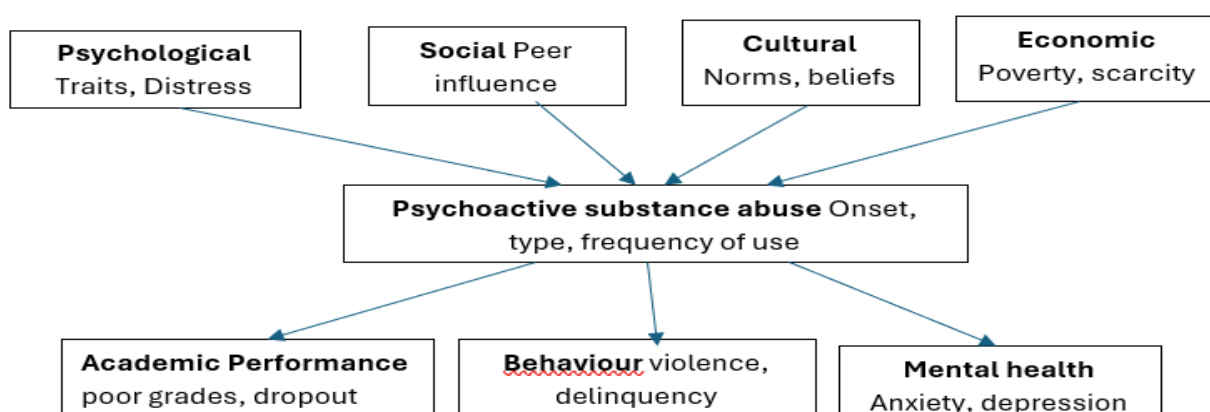
Research questions

1. What are the psychological, social, cultural, and economical factors that influence psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners?
2. Which are the experienced consequences of psychoactive substance use on the academic performance, behaviour, and mental health of secondary school learners?
3. How can the rise of psychoactive substance use be reduced among secondary school learners?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Generally, psychoactive substance abuse is the use of a substance to modify or control mood or state of mind in a manner that is illegal or harmful to oneself or others (Chisom, Ohaeri, Iyanuoluwa & Oluwatoyin (2022). Psychoactive substance use disorder (SUD) is a mental health problem that alters an individual secondary school learner's brain function and behavior, leading to the inability to control the use of substances such as alcohol, tobacco, and other illicit drugs or prescription medications (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2020). According to the American Psychiatric Association (2000) psychoactive substance abuse is described as a maladaptive pattern of substance use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress. Psychoactive substance or drug is an illicit chemical agent if taken into the body and can cause physiological and psychological changes (Aderibigbe, Stewart, Hirdes & Perlman, 2022). Psychoactive substances can be classified into Central Nervous System stimulants, depressants, or hallucinogens (Zapata, Matey, Montalvo & Garc'ia-Ruiz, 2021) Psychoactive substances causes substance related disorders which are categorized as psychoactive substance use disorders, psychoactive substance induced intoxication and withdrawals, and substance induced mental disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Basha et al, 2023). Therefore, psychoactive substance use disorder is a maladaptive pattern of substance use leading to a significant impairment or distress (Zachar, First & Kendler, 2022; Zapata, 2021).

Fig 1: Conceptual framework for psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners



Source: Designed by Chitsa, B (2026) based on a synthesis of determinants and effect insights from the literature on psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners

This study conceptualises psychoactive substance use as the outcome of four interacting determinant domains; psychological, social, cultural, and economic, which in turn shapes three interrelated effects on secondary school learners: academic performance, behaviour, and mental health (see fig 1 above).

Determinates

Psychological factors.

At the individual level, personality traits, low self-efficacy, poor emotional regulation, and psychological distress increase secondary school learners' vulnerability to psychoactive substance use. Trucco's (2020) found that individual-level traits interact with socialisation contexts to shape use trajectories, while alcohol use itself has been shown to alter teenager brain development in ways that further compromise emotional regulation and decision-making, creating a reinforcing cycle between psychological vulnerability and continued use (Lees et al., 2020).

Social factors.

Peer relationships, family functioning, and school bonding constitute the social domain of the framework. Peer pressure, exposure to peers who use substances, bullying victimisation, and loneliness have all been strongly associated with substance use among secondary school learners across diverse settings (Ozeylem et al., 2021). A recent systematic review and meta-analysis of adolescent substance use in Africa found that non-familial social networks and family-level factors, such as having a friend or family member who smokes, were significantly associated with substance use among African secondary school learners (Jumbe et al., 2025).

Cultural factors.

Cultural norms, traditional beliefs, and community attitudes shape both the initiation of and response to substance abuse. In a study of South African rural secondary schools, substance use and its treatment were frequently understood through cultural and spiritual lenses, including attributions to witchcraft, which shaped whether families sought biomedical or psychosocial help for affected secondary school learners (Mafa et al., 2022). Similarly, Jumbe et al. (2025) found that cultural norms around masculinity significantly influenced substance use patterns among male teenagers.

Economic factors.

Poverty, unemployment, and broader socioeconomic marginalisation constitute the fourth determinant domain. Banda (2023) argues that structural economic disadvantage, characterised by poverty pushes secondary school learners toward substance use as both a coping mechanism and, at times, a livelihood strategy. Nyatsanza et al. (2025) similarly situate teenager drug abuse within a broader context of socio-economic marginalisation and identity crisis, arguing that economic precarity is inseparable from the psychological and cultural dimensions of substance abuse.

Effects

Academic performance.

Substance abuse has been consistently linked to declining academic performance, truancy, and school dropout among secondary school learners. A study Gunda and Mbwirire (2020) found that drug and substance abuse was directly associated with poor academic performance and school dropout among affected secondary school learners, a pattern corroborated by national data showing that a substantial proportion of Zimbabwean secondary school students expelled for drug-related offences never return to complete their education (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2023).

Behaviour.

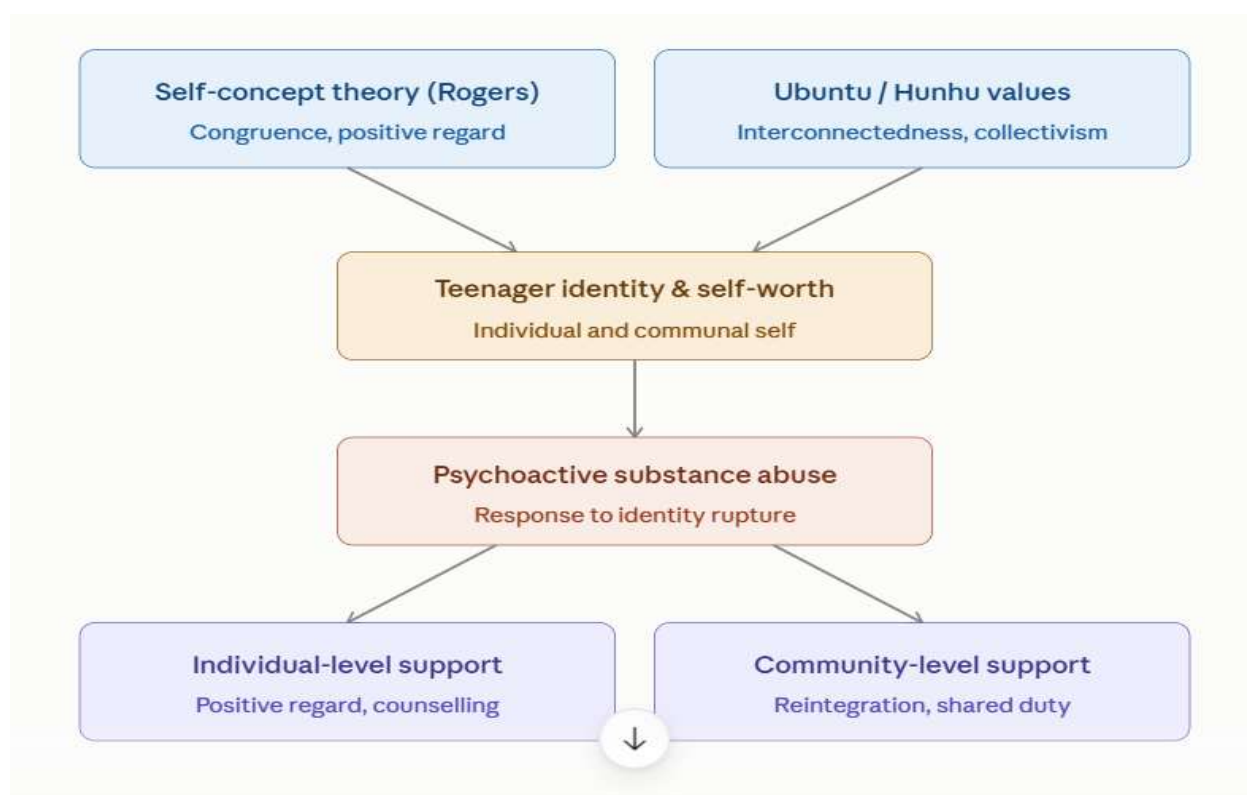
Beyond academics, psychoactive substance abuse among secondary school learners is associated with a range of negative behavioural outcomes, including aggression, violence, delinquency, and early or forced marriage (Gunda & Mbwirire, 2020). Behavioural consequences also extend into recovery, with relapse itself constituting a significant behavioural outcome shaped by gender and post-rehabilitation support (Muzingili & Taruvinga, 2025).

Mental health.

Finally, substance abuse carries significant mental health consequences. Jumbe et al.'s (2025) found that approximately 30% of reviewed African studies reported associations between substance use and mental health problems among secondary school learners, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. These psychological harms are compounded by the direct neurodevelopmental effects of substances such as alcohol on the teenager brain (Lees et al., 2020; Shadung et al., 2024). This conceptual framework positions psychoactive substance uses among secondary school learners as a construct shaped simultaneously by psychological vulnerability, social relationships, cultural meaning-making, and economic precarity. As a result, this affects secondary school learners' academic trajectories, behaviour and mental health.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Fig 2: Theoretical Framework: Self-Concept Theory and African Ubuntu Values in Understanding Psychoactive Substance Abuse among secondary school learners



Source: Designed by Chitsa, B (2026) based on a synthesis of self-concept theory by Carl Rogers and African Ubuntu values in understanding psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners.

This study is theoretically anchored in two complementary traditions: Carl Rogers' humanistic self-concept theory, which explains substance abuse vulnerability at the level of the individual psyche, and the African relational philosophy of Ubuntu/Hunhu (humaneness/humanity or the quality of being human), which situates identity, wellbeing, and responsibility within the community rather than the individual alone. Combining these two perspectives allows the study to avoid the limitation of relying solely on an individualistic Western theory,

which risks overlooking the deeply communal way in which African secondary school learners construct identity and experience belonging (see fig 2 above).

Self-Concept Theory (Carl Rogers)

Rogers' person-centred theory holds that individuals possess a self-concept, an organised set of beliefs about who they are, which they continually strive to keep congruent with their actual experience and with an 'ideal self' they aspire to become (Bakkal & Tabbas (2022). Where significant others impose rigid conditions of worth (approval contingent on meeting others' expectations), incongruence develops between the adolescent's self-concept and their lived experience, producing anxiety, low self-esteem, and psychological distress. Within this framework, psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners can be theorised as a maladaptive attempt to reduce this incongruence, numb the distress of a devalued self-concept, or seek acceptance where unconditional positive regard has been lacking at home or school. The self-concept theory by Carl Rogers (1951) proposes that if there is no congruence between the secondary school learner's ideal self and the self-image, it can negatively affect self-esteem and result in the rise of psychoactive substance abuse (Maraire & Chethiyar, 2020). Rogers (1951) describes the ideal self as what a secondary school learner would like to be, and if what the learner wants to do does not match with self-image, it results in low self-esteem and causes psychoactive substance abuse (Rogers 1951; Macheka & Masuku, 2019). If there is also congruence between self-image and ideal self, then, congruence can be reached and self-actualization achievable (Rogers, 1951; Maraire & Chethiyar, 2020) hence no psychoactive substance abuse.

Looking into psychoactive abusers, they face numerous life stressors which destroy their self-concept and cause psychoactive substance abuse (Pitfull, 2017). One of the causes of psychoactive abuse among secondary school learners is the feeling of self-worthlessness (Maraire & Chethiyar, 2020). Most psychoactive substance abusers are those with crushed hopes (Mahiya, 2016). With the harsh economy, academic stresses, frustration, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, secondary school learners suffer from incongruence between ideal self and self-image and ended up burying their sorrows in drug abuse to avoid the harsh reality of their situation (Macheka & Masuku, 2019). Rogers (1959) highlights that low self-esteem, self-worthlessness, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder are some of the major factors leading to teenager psychoactive substance abuse (Mahiya, 2016; Nhunzvi et al., 2019). Based on Rogers' self-concept theory, peer pressure, limited knowledge about drug abuse, broken families, emotional and physical abuse by family members destroy the secondary school learner's self-concept and contribute to psychoactive substance use (Maraire & Chethiyar, 2020; Rugoho, 2018).

African Ubuntu/Hunhu Values: Identity, Interconnectedness, and Collective Responsibility

Where Rogers locates the self within the individual secondary school learner psyche, Ubuntu (Hunhu) locates the self within community: 'a person is a person through other persons.' Ubuntu is built on principles of relationality, interconnectedness, collective accountability, and reciprocity, holding that an individual secondary school learner's identity, worth, and wellbeing are inseparable from the wellbeing of the family and community around them (Udah et al., 2025). Applied to mental health and social intervention, Chigangaidze (2021) argues that Ubuntu reframes healing as a fundamentally relational process, occurring through networks of family, community, and shared responsibility, rather than through individual insight alone, and calls for its formal incorporation into clinical practice addressing behavioural and emotional disorders. Ubuntu/Hunhu lens can be used to understand substance abuse among secondary school learners as caused by the breakdown of communal support structures rather than individual pathology alone (Chikoko & Rugaranganda, 2020).

Integration of the Two Theories

For secondary school learners, the self-concept that Rogers describes is not formed in isolation but is itself constituted relationally, through family, peer, and community regard, consistent with Ubuntu. Consequently, this study theorises psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners as arising at the intersection of two ruptures: an internal rupture, in which conditions of worth imposed by parents, teachers, or peers produce incongruence and diminished self-concept (Rogers); and a relational rupture, in which economic hardship,

family instability, or community neglect weaken the interconnectedness and collective responsibility that Ubuntu holds as essential to a learner's sense of belonging and worth (Chikoko & Rugaranganda, 2020; Uda et al., 2025). Read together, the two theories suggest that effective prevention and response to psychoactive substance use among secondary schools' learners must operate simultaneously at both levels: restoring unconditional positive regard and healthy self-concept at the individual level, and restoring communal reintegration, shared accountability, and collective care at the family, school, and community level. This dual theoretical lens directly informs the concepts, interview guides, and intervention-relevant recommendations of the present study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychological, social, cultural, and economical factors that contribute to psychoactive substance use in secondary school learners

Various studies in developed and developing countries identified different categories of causes that influence the rise of psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners which includes psychological-related, sociological-related and economical-related causes (Chisom et al, 2022; Enriquez-Guerrero et al, 2021; Okogbenin & Kucharska, 2021; Mohale & Mokwena, 2020).

Psychological-related cause

Research in South Africa and Nigeria discovered that psychological-related factors (such as low self-esteem, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder) contributed to secondary school learners' involvement in substance use (Khoza & Shilubane, 2021; Mohale & Mokwena, 2020; Okogbenin & Kucharska, 2021). Thus, secondary school learners turn to alcohol in a misguided attempt to cope with problems such as stress, boredom, mental health issues like anxiety, childhood trauma or depression (Mohale & Mokwena, 2020). In Ethiopia, secondary school learners take drugs as a stress reliever against poor self-esteem, self-distorted, self-worthlessness, crushed hopes and frustration (Basha, Tefera, Tilahun & Amede, 2023; Nhunzvi, Galvaan & Peters, 2019). In developing countries, findings present that secondary school learners with coping difficulties in school due to academic stress and poor performance have a high chance of abusing psychoactive substances (Khoza & Shilubane, 2021; Mohale & Mokwena, 2020; Okogbenin & Kucharska, 2021).

Social-related causes

Study by Magidson et al (2017) in South Africa presents that some of the causes to be associated with psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners were peer pressure from friends using substances, lower income, or a parent being unemployed. Other common drivers of teenager substance abuse in Ethiopia and India include peer pressure, broken families, emotional and physical abuse by family members, and often resulting in addiction (Gebresilassie, Hadush & Gidey Lemma, 2020). In Nigeria, some of the social-related factors that influence the rise of teenager psychoactive substance abuse were unhealthy family background such as illegitimate relationships, broken homes, alcoholic parents or involvement of parent in antisocial and illegal activities (Raimi, Funmilayo, Major, Okoyen & Bilewu, 2019). Thus, psychoactive substance abuse is a problem caused by situations related to the family or social and peer situations, among which intra-family abuse, violence, and bullying contributed more on the rise of psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners (Enriquez-Guerrero et al, 2021).

Other studies show that learners of alcohol-dependent parents are four times at risk of developing alcoholism and psychoactive substance abusers when compared with the general population (Sheila, 2020; Basha et al, 2023). In South Africa, excessive alcohol use by parents increases the risk of illicit psychoactive substance use by secondary school learners (Muchiri & Dos Santos, 2018). Poor parenting or neglect contributes abundantly to the rise of psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners. Secondary school learners whose parents employ less control of their deviant behaviors are more likely to abuse psychoactive substances. In South Africa, less parental strictness and affection, poor parental monitoring, emotional support, and negative evaluation led to increased tendencies for misuse of alcohol and other psychoactive substances (Muchiri & Dos Santos, 2018). Thus, secondary school learners who are exposed to these life challenges may find succor in the

‘streets’ with their associated deviant and risky behaviors, such as psychoactive substance abuse (Abate, Chekol & Minaye, 2021).

Economical related problems

In South Africa and Nigeria, findings show that good financial background, more pocket money, high financial difficulties, availability and accessibility of substances contributed to secondary school learners' involvement in psychoactive substance abuse (Khoza & Shilubane, 2021; Mohale & Mokwena, 2020; Okogbenin & Kucharska, 2021). Thus, South Africa had failed to address the root causes of psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners such as the availability of cheap alcohol and weak regulations, inadequate controls on alcohol marketing and poor controls on liquor sales (Khoza & Shilubane, 2021). Some studies in developing countries identified one of the significant risk factors for psychoactive substance abuse among secondary school learners as poverty (Abate, Chekol & Minaye, 2021; Muchiri & Dos Santos (2018).

Access has been identified as an important factor, which might be the reason why secondary school learners are mostly represented in the prevalence of inhaled substances and domestic product use such as gasoline, cough syrup, cleaning fluids, spray paint, and computer keyboard cleaner (Chadi, Bagley & Hadland, 2018; Agberotimi, 2018). Thus, substance availability in the community and in secondary schools is one of the major causes of the rise of psychoactive substance abuse among learners. In Lafia Metropolis, availability may be viewed in terms of the ease at which the psychoactive substance is procured (Ikoh, Smah, Okwanya, Clement & Aposhi, 2019) as well as the effect of advertisement (Idowu, Aremu, Olumide & Ogunlaja, 2018). Some illicit substances such as alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis are readily available and affordable in most Nigerian streets, and this makes it easy for secondary school learners to access them (Agberotimi, 2018).

Cultural-related causes

Culture; understood as the shared traditions, rituals, beliefs, and social expectations of a community; plays a significant role in shaping whether and how secondary school learners' experiment with and sustain psychoactive substance use (Jumbe et al., 2025). One recurring cultural factor is the role of rites of passage, festivals, and hospitality norms in normalising early substance exposure. Awoniyi (2023) examined how Nigerian cultural traditions, including coming-of-age rituals, festival drinking customs, and social expectations around hospitality, create pressure on secondary school learners to consume alcohol and other substances from a young age, arguing that such practices, while culturally significant, simultaneously normalise use and increase accessibility for learners. Closely related is the cultural framing of alcohol consumption as a marker of maturity or social belonging; Dumbili and Swahn (2024) found that Nigerian teenagers increasingly adopt lifestyles and drinking rituals that valorise heavy alcohol consumption and normalise intoxication as an accepted part of teenage social life.

Religious and spiritual belief systems constitute a second important cultural dimension, functioning in some contexts as a protective cultural resource. In Nigeria, Falade et al. (2022) found that adolescents receiving treatment for psychoactive substance use reported significantly lower religiosity and spirituality scores than their non-using peers, suggesting that strong religious and spiritual identity, deeply embedded in many African cultural contexts, may buffer secondary school learners against substance use. Mafa et al. (2022) found that substance uses and addiction in South Africa were frequently attributed to witchcraft and spiritual causes, which shaped whether families pursued biomedical or traditional-spiritual routes of help-seeking, sometimes delaying appropriate intervention. A third cultural dimension concerns the erosion of communal structures of care. Chikoko and Rugaranganda (2020), applying an Ubuntu/Hunhu lens to substance abuse and risk behaviour among secondary school learners in Harare, argued that the breakdown of the culturally embedded communal support systems that Ubuntu/Hunhu traditionally provides, rather than individual pathology alone, explains why marginalised teenagers turn to substances, since the loss of interconnected family and community regard removes a key cultural buffer against risk behaviour.

Effects of psychoactive substance abuse on the academic performance, behaviour, and mental health of secondary school learners

Psychological effects

According to Mochrie et al (2020) secondary school learners can take anything that they think will keep them euphoric or sedated leading to an increase of organic psychosis. A study by Raimi et al (2019) presents that number of negative cognitive, psychosocial or mental health consequences including psychiatric disorders have been linked to psychoactive substance abuse among secondary school learners with strong evidence. Aderibigbe et al (2022) present that secondary school learners who abuse psychoactive substances are more likely to develop addiction, as their brains are still developing and are more susceptible to the rewarding effects of substances. Psychoactive substance abuse among secondary school learners can increase the risk of developing mental health disorders like depression, anxiety, and psychosis, especially in vulnerable individuals (Mochrie et al, 2020). Another psychological effect of psychoactive substance abuse among secondary school learners is cognitive impairment (Khoza & Shilubane, 2021). Thus, chronic substance abuse can affect attention, memory, and decision-making skills, leading to poor academic performance and reduced cognitive potential (Mohale & Mokwena, 2020). According to Okogbenin & Kucharska (2021) learners abusing psychoactive substances can suffer from emotional dysregulation. Thus, secondary school learners who abuse substances may struggle with managing emotions, leading to mood swings, irritability, and increased stress (Oztaş et al, 2018). Moreover, psychoactive substance abuse can increase the risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviours, especially in teenagers with pre-existing mental health conditions (Aderibigbe et al, 2022).

Educational effects

Drug use consequences are perceived as affecting academic performance and health of secondary school learners (Enriquez-Guerrero et al, 2021). Thus, psychoactive substance consumption affects academic performance, decreases concentration, and increases poor performance among students. Some of these secondary school learners end up dropping out of school adding to the rising rate of unemployment (Abate, Chekol & Minaye, 2021). Recurrent psychoactive substance abuse results in a failure to fulfill major obligations at school such as repeated absences or poor school performance, suspensions, or expulsions from school. Educational effects of psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners in Nigeria include truancy, absenteeism, cultism, poor study skills and poor memory with many of them resorting to cheating during examinations (Johnson et al, 2017). Therefore, substance use gives secondary school learners a false sense of security and self-confidence in their studies. Psychoactive substance abuse can lead to a decrease in motivation and interest in academic activities. Moreover, substance abuse can affect the development of critical thinking and problem solving skills (Izuka, 2023). According to Enriquez-Guerrero et al (2021) chronic psychoactive substance abuse can lead to long-term brain damage, affecting educational and career opportunities in the future.

Dysfunctional behavioural effects

The use of psychoactive substances among secondary school learners generates adverse effects on the individual, family, and development (Enriquez-Guerrero et al, 2021). One of the main dysfunctional behavioural effects of psychoactive substance abuse among secondary school learners in South Africa is an increase in crime (Muchiri & Dos Santos, 2018). Thus, many individuals who are addicted to drugs resort to criminal activities in order to finance their addiction. This can lead to an increase in theft, burglary, and even violent crime in communities where psychoactive substance abuse is prevalent (Izuka, 2023). The potential consequences of harmful use of psychoactive substances include road traffic accidents or injuries, juvenile delinquency, and risky sexual behavior that predisposes harmful infections such as HIV (LeTendre & Reed, 2017). Persistence psychoactive substance abuse among secondary school learners leads to arrests for substance-related disorderly conduct like physical fights (Bonkat-Jonathan & Tongs, 2021). In India, Fatima (2017) presents that one of the most effects of psychoactive substance abuse among high school learners is anti-social behavior. This makes the taker behave abnormally, contribute to immoralities such as armed robbery, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV AIDS and many other societal vices (Adesida, Quadri & Adediji, 2022).

Health effects

Psychoactive substance addiction can lead to physical and mental health problems, including heart disease, liver damage, and depression (Dzenga, 2023; Abate et al., 2021). According to Khoza & Shilubane (2021) psychoactive substances such as 'Njengu' are dangerous substances due to its potent mix of opioids and other illicit drugs. The use of psychoactive substances has been linked to various health problems, including addiction, overdose, and long term damage to the brain and body (Bonkat-Jonathan & Tongs, 2021). Musombodhiya is considered a dangerous and potentially deadly substance due to its unpredictable and toxic mix of ingredients (Dlamini, 2023). The results indicated that Musombodhiya and mutoriro's abuse has been linked to various health problems, including organ damage, addiction and even death (Khoza & Shilubane, 2021; Mohale & Mokwena, 2020; Okogbenin & Kucharska, 2021). Psychoactive substances can also lead to an increased risk of HIV and other infectious diseases, as drug users may engage in risky behaviors such as sharing needles (Mandura, 2023). Thus, psychoactive substance abuse causes damage to health by producing cancer, HIV-AIDS, or respiratory diseases, and behavioral problems (Enriquez-Guerrero et al., 2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research paradigm

A research paradigm is a set of interrelated philosophical beliefs that shape how a researcher perceives reality, generates knowledge, assigns value to that knowledge, and, ultimately, selects a methodology to investigate a phenomenon (Pretorius, 2024). This study adopted constructivism research paradigm which views that reality is actively constructed through human cognition, language, culture, and social interaction (Fodouop Kouam, 2024). Ontologically, constructivist paradigm allowed this study to generate multiple realities from participants based on their lived experiences, social interactions, and cultural contexts (Pretorius, 2024). It allowed the participants to construct meanings and understandings of reality through their experiences, interactions, social relationships and particular contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Guided by constructivist epistemology, truth was co-constructed through the interaction between the researcher (a central instrument in the research process) and the participants (Fodouop Kouam, 2024). Thus, constructivism paradigm allowed the researchers to engage in reflective practices to interpret the nuanced meanings embedded in participants' accounts and openly acknowledged their subjective involvement in shaping the findings. Based on constructivist axiological assumptions, this paradigm was useful for discerning the meanings that individual participants attached to their psychoactive experiences (Burns et al., 2022). It treated the researcher values and reflexivity as integral to the research process (Pretorius, 2024).

Research approach

Qualitative research approach was appropriate for this study helped the researcher to understand the participants' meanings, experiences, perceptions, behaviours, interactions and social processes in depth and in their natural contexts (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). In this spirit, qualitative research approach allows the researchers to produce the thick (detailed) description of participants' feelings, opinions, and experiences; and interprets the meanings of their actions (Mohajan, 2018; Rahman, 2017).

Research design

The most appropriate research design for this study was constructivist grounded theory that recognizes that theory or reality is constructed through interaction between researcher and participants and through interpretation of participants' accounts (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Schmitt and Heilemann, 2021). Constructivist grounded theory emphasised initial and focused coding, constant comparison, memo writing, theoretical sampling and theoretical integration during the research process (Charmaz, 2020). This design allowed simultaneous data collection and analysis, theoretical sampling, constant comparison, memo writing and flexible coding.

Population

In this study, the population was comprised of secondary school learners who abused psychoactive substances and their parents in Bulawayo Metropolitan province secondary schools. The total target population was 200 (150 secondary school learners and 50 their parents) potential participants from selected secondary schools across Bulawayo Metropolitan province as provided by provincial school heads' substance use reports of 2020 to 2025. The provincial educational office assisted the researcher to identify secondary schools with learners who experienced and abusing psychoactive substances in Bulawayo Metropolitan province. The researcher used this population because it was a source of rich information for the study. Parents were biological parents and guardians of secondary school learners who experienced and abusing psychoactive substances in Bulawayo Metropolitan province. As prescribed by Charmaz and Thornberg (2021), the chosen population was conceptually relevant, meaning that its members were positioned to have lived through, witnessed, experienced or otherwise had insight into the psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners in Bulawayo Metropolitan province, since the credibility of the emergent theory rests on the richness and relevance of participants' experiential accounts. Therefore, secondary school learners and their parents in Bulawayo metropolitan province were chosen on the grounds that they were only individuals who had directly lived the psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners and could generate theoretically meaningful data.

Participant Recruitment

Setting. Participants were drawn from Bulawayo Metropolitan province secondary schools with learners who experienced and abusing psychoactive substances in Zimbabwe.

Sampling frame and access. Initial access was negotiated through the relevant Provincial Education Director and Schools Inspector, following formal permission from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. School Heads at eligible schools were approached first as institutional gatekeepers, both as key informants and as a route to identifying secondary school learners who experienced and abusing psychoactive substances.

Sample

This study used a purposive and theoretical Sampled selected secondary school learners who abused psychoactive substance and parents who voluntarily responded to the open-ended questionnaires and interviews. It was governed by the emergent, iterative logic of theoretical sampling and ultimately determined by the point at which no new properties, categories, or relationships arise from further data collection (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). A sample size of 40 participants (30 secondary school learners who abused psychoactive substances and 10 parents) in Bulawayo Metropolitan province was determined by theoretical saturation where no new or relevant information seemed to image. The sample size of this rigorous qualitative and grounded theory study remained provisional and subject to revision as data analysis proceeded (Sim et al, 2018). The sample size was a small group of knowledgeable and informative secondary school learners who abused psychoactive substances and parents in Bulawayo Metropolitan province secondary schools. As prescribed by Hennink and Kaiser's (2022), this study reached data and thematic saturation within a range of three to five interviews and open-ended questionnaire member checking for the same participants examining narrow research questions, offering an empirically grounded benchmark that CGT researchers can use to justify an initial sampling target. In this regard, Mohaja (2018) and Gustafsson (2017) maintain that grounded qualitative researchers investigate in-depth small, distinct groups as the researcher will be concerned with understanding the social phenomena from the participants' perspective. Therefore, the emphasis was on theoretical sufficiency rather than statistical representativeness.

Sampling procedure

Purposive and Theoretical sampling techniques were used in this study which occurred in two interconnected stages: purposive sampling at the beginning and theoretical sampling as the analysis develops. The researcher initially used purposive sampling to identify secondary school learners who had direct experience of

psychoactive substance use and could provide information relevant to the research questions. For example, initial inclusion criteria used required participants to:

- fall within the researcher-defined secondary school age range; biological parent or guardian of the secondary school learner abused psychoactive substances;
- have direct experience of using one or more psychoactive substances;
- be able and willing to discuss their experiences;
- reside within the selected geographical setting, for instance, Bulawayo Metropolitan province;
- provide appropriate assent/consent in accordance with the approved ethical protocol.

Purposive sampling was appropriate because psychoactive substance abuse might constitute a sensitive or hidden population, making probability sampling difficult and potentially inappropriate.

Then, theoretical sampling was the principal sampling strategy used once initial categories began to emerge whereby emerging categories from initial analysis directly inform the selection of subsequent participants so that the developing theory can be refined and its properties fully elaborated (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Therefore, purposive sampling technique helped the researcher to identify participants who were able to provide information-rich accounts, which in turn strengthened the methodological rigor and trustworthiness of the study.

Data Collection instruments and procedures

The semi-structured interview for parents of the secondary school learners who experienced and abusing psychoactive substances in Bulawayo Metropolitan province was the principal data generating instrument in constructivist grounded theory because it balanced a flexible guide of open-ended questions with the freedom to probe, follow up, and pursue emergent lines of inquiry that a fixed open-ended questionnaire cannot accommodate. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to keep the conversation focused on the research questions while retaining autonomy to explore participant-driven insights as they arose. As prescribed by King et al (2025), CGT interviews typically helped the researchers to begin with broad, open-ended prompts and increasingly incorporate more focused, theoretically driven questions as initial coding and constant comparison generated categories that require further exploration. The semi-structured format was more conversational and informal, putting participants at ease and increased their chances to disclose authentic experiences and interpretations on the psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners in Bulawayo Metropolitan province. Open-ended questionnaires, for secondary school learners who experienced and abusing psychoactive substances in Bulawayo Metropolitan province, were used in this constructivist grounded theory study and allowed participants to respond in their own words which made them a valuable complementary tool for accessing participants' subjective meanings, a central concern of constructivist inquiry (Bogetz et al., 2020). Open-ended questions helped the researcher to elicit. As noted by Conry-Murray et al. (2024), open-ended items generated richly textured qualitative data through systematic, transparent and reflexively documented coding procedures based on thematic analysis and produced trustworthiness data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis used in this constructivist grounded theory (CGT) design was an iterative, simultaneous process in which coding, comparison, memo-writing, and further sampling continually inform one another until a substantive theory was constructed (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Metelski et al., 2021). It was this combination of procedures that justified CGT data analysis as a single, integrated methodological process rather than a sequence of separate techniques (Metelski et al, 2021). Therefore, this data analysis process allowed simultaneous data collection and analysis, theoretical sampling, constant comparison at every analytic stage, reflexive memo-writing, and a flexible two-stage coding system as the defining operational features that distinguish CGT analysis from more linear qualitative approaches (Bobbink et al., 2024).

The constant comparative method underpins every stage of CGT analysis. For instance, incidents, codes and emerging categories were continuously compared against one another, and against new data, to identify similarities, differences, and gaps that refine the developing analysis (Bobbink et al., 2024; Charmaz &

Thornberg, 2021). This method empowered this study to collect and analyze data at the same time and allowed the researcher to concentrate on subsequent data collection of the issues that appear analytically significant rather than pursuing a fixed and pre-determined line of inquiry (Bobbink et al, 2024). Coding in CGT typically proceeds through an initial (open) stage and a focused stage and may extend to theoretical coding once core categories are established (Giles et al., 2016; Metelski et al., 2021). Initial coding assisted the researcher to fracture the data into small segments, often line-by-line, to remain close to participants' own words and to resist imposing preconceived concepts on the data. Focused coding followed to allow the researchers to use the most frequent or theoretically significant initial codes to sift, sort, and synthesize larger batches of data into tentative categories (Giles et al., 2016). This coding system gave the researcher of this study a room to move back and forth between codes and data as understanding deepens.

Memo-writing was treated in this CGT as an analytic tool to capture the researcher's evolving thinking about codes, categories, and their interrelationships as analysis proceeded (Bobbink et al., 2024; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). It allowed the researchers to document what occurred during data collection, articulate emerging concepts, and create an auditable trail that links the final theory back to specific analytic decisions on the psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners in Bulawayo Metropolitan province. Theoretical sampling and saturations were used to develop and refine emerging categories, until no new data or relationships were observed (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022; Metelski et al., 2021).

Research ethics

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, biological parents and secondary school heads on behalf of secondary school learners, before data collection since majority of participants included secondary school learners as minors discussing illegal substance use. The researcher explained the nature of the study, conditions, risks and benefits of the study to the participants without jeopardising their privacy as well as encouraging their voluntary participation. Participants were assured that they would not be prejudiced or victimised whether they agree to participate or not. The participants were told that they are allowed to withdraw their response without prejudice. In this study, anonymity was achieved by not putting names on the closed-ended questionnaires. The participants were assured that all research information given by them would be treated in strict confidence. Moreover, confidentiality was guaranteed by making sure that the generated data would not link to individual respondents by name. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly observed by using codes/pseudonyms instead of real names, that interview notes and transcripts were kept in a locked cabinet and protected files. In this study, participants were not exposed to such harm. Maintenance of privacy, confidentiality and anonymity during the interviews and completion of closed-ended questionnaires to prevent psychological harm were observed. The interviews were done at a specific and convenient time arranged with the participants to prevent psychological harm.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Psychological, social, cultural, and economical factors that contribute to psychoactive substance abuse among learners in secondary schools

Findings from this study revealed and concluded that psychological-related causes contributed to psychoactive substance abuse among learners in secondary schools were stress, boredom, anxiety, childhood trauma, depression, poor self-esteem, self-distortion, self-worthlessness, crushed hopes. Results from the study revealed and concluded that the social-related factors caused psychoactive substance abuse in Bulawayo Metropolitan province secondary schools were peer pressure from friends using substances, broken families, emotional and physical abuse by family members, alcoholic parents, bullying, domestic violence, poor parenting or neglect. Findings from the study revealed and concluded that economical-related factors caused psychoactive substance abuse among learners in secondary schools were good financial background, more pocket money, availability and accessibility of psychoactive substances, inadequate controls on alcohol marketing and poor controls on drugs or liquor sales. The results also revealed that availability, accessibility, and an increase of inhaled substances and domestic product use such as Fizzi drinks, cough syrup and cleaning fluids caused psychoactive substances abuse among learners in Bulawayo Metropolitan province secondary schools. Findings from the study

revealed and concluded that cultural-related factors also caused psychoactive substance abuse among learners in secondary schools were family festivals, coming-of-age rituals, festival drinking customs, and social expectations around hospitality, create pressure on secondary school teenagers to consume alcohol and other substances from a young age. Cultural framing of alcohol consumption as a marker of maturity or social belonging, adoption lifestyles and drinking rituals that valorise heavy alcohol consumption and normalise intoxication as an accepted part of adolescence social life were also some cultural factors caused psychoactive abuse among learners in secondary schools.

Effects of psychoactive substance abuse on the academic performance, behaviour, and mental health of learners in secondary schools

Secondary school learners who participated in this study revealed that they experienced addiction to psychoactive substances, mental health disorders like depression, headache, psychosis, shivering, oversleeping and loss of power. Participated secondary school learners who abused psychoactive indicated that persistent substance abuse affected their attention, memory, and decision-making abilities leading to poor academic performance. Findings from the participated secondary school learners who abused psychoactive substances revealed that they were struggling with managing their emotions after taking psychoactive substances. They also experienced mood swings, irritability, impulsivity recklessness and aggression as well as risk of suicidal thoughts. Results from the participated secondary school learners who abused psychoactive substances revealed that the psychoactive substance consumption affected their academic performance, decreases concentration, and increased dropping outs of school. Participated secondary school learners indicated that substance taking led to their suspensions or expulsions from school, truancy, absenteeism, poor study skills, poor memory, and decrease in motivation and interest in academic activities.

Secondary school learners and parents who participated in this study revealed that dysfunctional behavioural effects of psychoactive substance abuse were an increase in criminal activities such as theft, burglary, violent crime and juvenile delinquency. Participants also indicated that persistent substance abuse influenced risky sexual behavior that predisposed to harmful infections such as HIV and led to arrests for substance-related disorderly conduct like physical fights. Secondary school learners who participated in this study revealed that persistent psychoactive substance abuse had been linked to various health problems. Participants also indicated that they experienced health problem such as chest pains, vomiting, addiction, respiratory diseases, organ damages such as lungs and liver, chronic headache, psychosis, shivering, oversleeping and loss of power.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this study was to explore psychoactive substance use among secondary school learners in Bulawayo Metropolitan province. Based on the above findings and conclusions this study recommends that;

- There is need for the community and educational psychologists and psycho-counsellors to provide counselling and therapy to all learners in secondary schools using family therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy and client centred therapy.
- Community and educational psycho-counsellors need to address the root causes of psychoactive substance abuse such as psychological-related, social-related cultural-related and economical related causes through workshops and drug abuse initiative campaigns to empower teenagers to break the cycle of psychoactive substance abuse.
- There is need for high family morals and strong religious beliefs to be taught to learners in secondary schools, families and communities to protect them from the use of substances.
- Family-based interventions such as positive parenting, negative attitude towards substance use, moral values, and parental disapproval of substance use can be used to reduce the psychoactive substance abuse among learners in secondary schools.
- There is need for the government to strengthen law enforcement efforts to combat drug trafficking and distribution to prevent the availability and accessibility of psychoactive substances in communities.

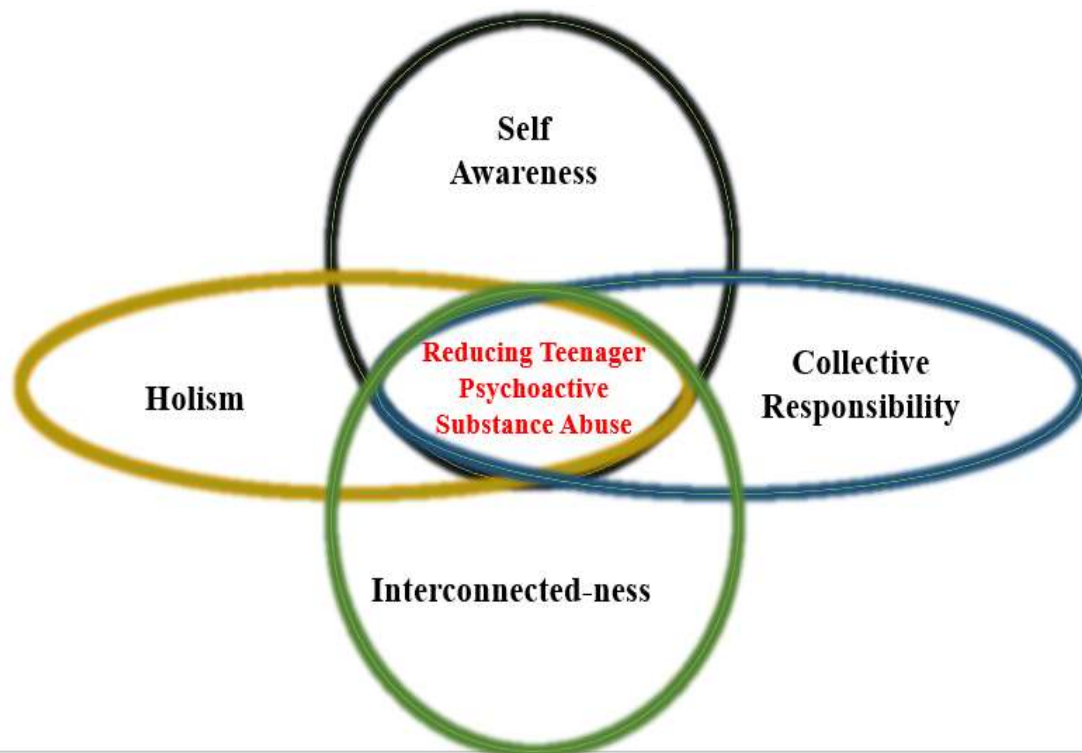
- Communities, schools, churches and government need to increase public awareness about the dangers of psychoactive substance abuse among secondary school learners. Education campaigns need to target both adults and learners to help to reduce the stigma around addiction and encourage individuals to seek help.
- There is need for the government to develop an independent school curriculum to educate school children on the effects of substance abuse, addiction problems, and prevention strategies. This can be done using school-based interventions such as awareness and sensitization programs, creating drug abuse prevention clubs, and positive school environment to reduce the rise of psychoactive substance abuse among secondary school learners.
- There is need for the adoption of the proposed Unhu/Ubuntu Psycho-counselling Model (UUPCM) to address psychoactive substance abuse among learners in secondary schools (see fig 3)

Intervention Model

The Unhu /Ubuntu Psycho-counseling Model (UUPCM) for use in communities and secondary schools is proposed below to advance the adoption of recommendations presented above to address psychoactive substance abuse among learners in secondary schools. The proposed Unhu/Ubuntu psycho-counseling model (UUPCM) provides culturally responsive psycho-counseling and community-based interventions focusing on Unhu/Ubuntu to reduce psychoactive substance abuse among learners in secondary school, promoting holistic well-being and community resilience (Makhurane & Magano, 2022; Moore & Moore, 2003)). Thus, UUPCM for substance abuse secondary school learners integrate values, principles and practices into counseling process focusing on Unhu/Ubuntu to address psychoactive substance abuse and promote holistic healing and recovery (Hansén, 2010; Barlestrery, 2023).

Inspired by African values of identity and interconnectedness, community and collective responsibilities, UUPCM can create a platform where psycho-counseling process must incorporate cultural identity and values; involving community members, family members, traditional leaders to address individual and collective needs such as psychological, economic and social needs in order to address psychoactive substance abuse among secondary school learners (Barlestrery, 2023; Moore & Moore, 2003). Therefore, UUPCM model is grounded in the human-centered psycho-counseling approach and triangulation of culturally responsive principles to reduce psychoactive substance abuse among learners in communities and schools using the following components: Self-awareness (focus on exploring cultural identity and values), collective responsibility, interconnectedness (focusing on Unhu/Ubuntu) and Holism.

Fig3. The proposed Unhu/Ubuntu Psycho-counseling Model (UUPCM) to address psychoactive substance abuse among learners in secondary schools



Source: Chitsa, B (2026)

Self-awareness

Addressing psychoactive substance abuse among learners in secondary schools would be enhanced by self-awareness of psychoactive substance abuse. It is recommended that there is need to increase self-awareness about the dangers of psychoactive substance abuse. Using community outreach and engagement as well as psychoactive awareness campaigns, Educational and Psycho-counselor needs to assist the secondary school learners who abused psychoactive substance to explore their cultural identity, values and beliefs in relation to psychoactive substance abuse. The counselors need to help secondary school learners to recognize their strengths, weaknesses and motivations as well as identifying triggers and patterns leading to their psychoactive substance abuse. To achieve self-awareness, the psycho-counselor fosters self-reflection and introspection among learners who abuse psychoactive substance to promote personal growth or Unhu/Ubuntu and healing.

Collective responsibility

It is recommended that with the help of family-based interventions such as positive parenting, negative attitude towards substance use and parental disapproval of substance use, educational and psycho-counselors need to involve family members and community members to reduce psychoactive substance abuse among learners in secondary schools. Thus, the psycho-counselors need to involve family members in counseling sessions as well as engaging community leaders, elders and peers in the counseling sessions. Counselors need to foster social support and accountability as well as empowering peers to support recovery of secondary school learners who abused psychoactive substance.

Interconnectedness (Ubuntu)

Through community engagement approaches, psycho-counselors need to engage community members and organizations targeting both adults and secondary school learners to help to reduce the stigma around addiction and encourage individuals to seek help. Based on the African principle that 'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu/Munhu munhu navanhu' (A person is a person through other people), psycho-counselors need to emphasize the involvement of community and relationships during the counseling sessions to reduce the rise of psychoactive substance abuse among secondary school learners.

Counselors need to identify and engage influential community members in the counseling sessions to reduce substance abuse and relapse rates.

Holism (holistic approach)

Since the use of workshops and drug abuse initiative campaigns to empower secondary school learners to break the cycle of psychoactive substance abuse, psycho-counselors are required to apply holistic approach of counseling which address physical, emotional, social and environmental needs of the learners who abused psychoactive substance. During counseling sessions, psycho-counselors need to address physical (health and wellness), emotional (coping mechanisms and mental health), social (family, community and social networks) and environmental (lifestyle and situations) needs to reduce the rise of psychoactive substance abuse among learners in secondary schools.

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