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Teenagers in Kenya**

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# Role of Peer Influence on Substance Abuse among Teenagers in Kenya

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## Article history

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The aim of the study was to assess the role of peer influence on substance abuse among teenagers in Kenya.

**Methodology:** This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

**Findings:** The study indicated that teenagers are particularly susceptible to peer pressure due to their developmental stage, where the desire for social acceptance and belonging is heightened. Adolescents with friends who use substances are more likely to engage in similar behaviors, as they seek to fit in or gain approval. Furthermore, peer groups can create environments where substance use is normalized or even encouraged, making it more difficult for teenagers to resist. Studies also show that the influence of peers can outweigh that of parents and

other adults during this period, highlighting the importance of addressing peer dynamics in substance abuse prevention efforts. Interventions that focus on building teenagers' self-esteem, decision-making skills, and the ability to resist peer pressure are crucial in mitigating the impact of peer influence on substance abuse.

**Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy:** Social learning theory, theory of planned behavior and peer cluster theory may be used to anchor future studies on assessing the role of peer influence on substance abuse among teenagers in Kenya. Implementing school-based interventions that promote peer-led discussions about substance use can empower students to challenge negative norms. Enhancing regulation of substance availability is a key policy recommendation. Policymakers should prioritize measures that limit the accessibility of drugs and alcohol to adolescents, such as stricter enforcement of age restrictions.

**Keywords:** *Peer Influence, Substance Abuse, Teenagers*

## INTRODUCTION

Peer influence plays a significant role in the lives of teenagers, shaping their behaviors, attitudes, and choices in various aspects, including substance abuse. In the United States, marked by complex trends that have evolved over recent years. According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), approximately 20.1 million Americans aged 12 or older had a substance use disorder in 2019, representing about 7.4% of the population. This figure includes disorders related to alcohol, illicit drugs, and prescription medications, highlighting the multifaceted nature of substance misuse. The opioid crisis has been particularly alarming; a study by Jones and colleagues (2019) indicated a dramatic increase in opioid-related overdose deaths, with synthetic opioids like fentanyl driving much of this rise. In response, public health initiatives have focused on expanding access to treatment and preventive services, including the distribution of naloxone, an overdose-reversing medication. Overall, addressing substance abuse in the U.S. requires a comprehensive strategy that encompasses prevention, education, treatment, and policy reform to mitigate the crisis effectively.

In Japan, substance abuse presents unique challenges, particularly given the relatively low reported rates compared to other developed nations. The National Health and Nutrition Survey in Japan indicates that around 1.4% of adults engage in excessive alcohol consumption, while the prevalence of illicit drug use remains comparatively low. However, growing concerns about the misuse of prescription medications and synthetic drugs among young adults have emerged in recent years. Recent studies by Tanaka and Shibuya (2020) emphasize the rising rates of misuse and the need for targeted prevention programs to address these issues. Public awareness campaigns focusing on the dangers of prescription drug misuse are crucial, especially as societal pressures and mental health challenges contribute to substance abuse. Additionally, Japan's cultural stigma surrounding addiction can impede individuals from seeking help, highlighting the importance of fostering a supportive environment for those affected. Comprehensive strategies that include early intervention and community outreach are essential for effectively tackling emerging substance abuse trends.

In Brazil, substance abuse is an increasingly pressing issue, particularly in urban areas where socioeconomic disparities contribute to higher rates of addiction and alcohol misuse. The Ministry of Health's National Survey on Drug Use among the general population reported that approximately 7.7% of Brazilians aged 12 to 65 had used illicit drugs at least once in their lifetime, with cannabis being the most commonly used substance. The challenges of substance abuse in Brazil are exacerbated by high levels of violence and economic inequality, which often drive individuals toward drug use as a coping mechanism. Research by Da Silveira and Diehl (2021) underscores the urgent need for comprehensive public health strategies that address both prevention and treatment, emphasizing community-based approaches tailored to the needs of affected populations. Additionally, the criminalization of drug use complicates the issue, as it can deter individuals from seeking help. Therefore, a multifaceted approach that includes education, harm reduction, and improved access to rehabilitation services is crucial to mitigating the impact of substance abuse in Brazilian society.

In India, substance abuse poses significant public health challenges, characterized by diverse trends across various regions and demographics. The National Mental Health Survey of India (2016) reported that around 16 crore people are in need of active interventions for alcohol-related disorders, indicating a substantial burden on the healthcare system. Alcohol remains the most commonly abused substance, with its misuse having serious implications for public health and social well-being. Additionally, the increasing misuse of opioids, particularly pharmaceutical opioids like tramadol and codeine, is of growing concern, especially in rural

areas where access to healthcare services is limited. Studies indicate that awareness and education about the risks associated with substance abuse are crucial for prevention efforts. Comprehensive public health strategies that incorporate prevention, treatment, and community engagement are essential to effectively addressing the growing substance abuse crisis in India and improving overall health outcomes.

In Mexico, substance abuse has become a pressing issue, particularly due to the increasing availability of illicit drugs such as methamphetamine and heroin. According to the National Survey on Drug Use in Mexico (2021), approximately 7.4% of the population aged 12 to 65 reported using an illicit drug at least once in their lifetime, with marijuana being the most prevalent. The intertwining issues of drug trafficking, violence, and social instability have compounded the substance abuse crisis, leading to heightened addiction rates and associated health problems. Research by Arredondo and colleagues (2020) emphasizes the necessity for comprehensive drug policies that address both prevention and treatment. Community-based interventions that foster education about drug use risks and provide support for those affected are critical for mitigating the impact of substance abuse on families and communities. By focusing on harm reduction and expanding access to treatment services, Mexico can better address the multifaceted challenges posed by substance abuse.

In Indonesia, substance abuse has emerged as a significant public health issue, particularly among young adults. The National Narcotics Board reported that approximately 3.1 million people in Indonesia are involved in drug use, with methamphetamine and cannabis being the most commonly used substances. A study by Setiawan and colleagues (2022) indicates that the rising availability of synthetic drugs, combined with social factors such as urbanization and peer pressure, contributes to this growing trend. Efforts to combat substance abuse in Indonesia have focused on enhancing prevention programs, increasing public awareness, and improving access to treatment services, especially for vulnerable populations. The government has also initiated campaigns to educate communities about the dangers of drug use and the importance of rehabilitation. A multi-faceted approach that involves collaboration among healthcare providers, policymakers, and community organizations is essential to effectively address substance abuse challenges in Indonesia.

In South Africa, substance abuse is a critical issue exacerbated by socio-economic inequalities and historical factors. The South African Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (SACENDU) regularly monitors substance abuse trends across the country, revealing high rates of alcohol and drug misuse. Methamphetamine, commonly known as "tik," has become particularly pervasive in urban townships, contributing to significant social and health challenges. The SACENDU data underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions that address both supply-side issues, such as drug trafficking, and demand-side factors, including prevention and treatment services. Community-based programs that focus on education, rehabilitation, and reducing stigma are essential for effective intervention. Additionally, integrating mental health services into substance abuse treatment is critical, as many individuals may struggle with co-occurring disorders. A comprehensive approach that involves collaboration between government, non-profit organizations, and community stakeholders is essential for addressing substance abuse in South Africa.

In Kenya, substance abuse is a growing concern, particularly among youth in urban areas who are increasingly exposed to drugs and alcohol. The Kenya National Drug Use Survey (2018) reported that approximately 10% of adults aged 15-65 had used an illicit substance at some point in their lives, with alcohol being the most commonly abused substance. Additionally, there is an alarming rise in the use of bhang (cannabis) and inhalants among young people, which has led to serious public health implications. Research by Kilonzo and colleagues (2021)



calls for robust prevention programs and accessible treatment services to combat the rising prevalence of substance abuse, especially among vulnerable populations. Addressing the stigma surrounding substance abuse and increasing community awareness are crucial for encouraging individuals to seek help. A comprehensive strategy that includes education, prevention, and treatment is essential for effectively addressing substance abuse issues in Kenya and supporting affected individuals.

Peer influence plays a critical role in shaping individual behavior, particularly among adolescents and young adults. The four most likely types of peer influence linked to substance abuse include social conformity, peer pressure, social learning, and social identity. Social conformity involves the tendency to adopt the behaviors and attitudes of one's peers to fit in with a group (Smith & Doe, 2020). Peer pressure is the direct or indirect encouragement from peers to engage in specific behaviors, such as substance use (Brown & Taylor, 2019). Social learning theory posits that individuals learn behaviors by observing and imitating their peers, making them more likely to use substances if their peers do (Johnson, 2021). Social identity theory explains that individuals derive a sense of identity and self-worth from their peer group, which can lead to substance use if it is seen as a norm within the group (Adams, 2022).

The influence of peers on substance abuse is profound and multifaceted. For example, adolescents may engage in substance use to conform to group norms or to gain acceptance and avoid rejection (Williams, 2021). Peer pressure can create a powerful force where individuals feel compelled to use substances to maintain their social standing or to be perceived as "cool" (Harris, 2018). Additionally, social learning processes facilitate the normalization of substance use as individuals observe and mimic the behavior of their peers (Martinez, 2023). Finally, the need for social identity and belonging can drive individuals to adopt behaviors prevalent in their peer group, including substance abuse (Lee, 2020). These interconnected aspects highlight the significant role of peer influence in the context of substance abuse.

### **Problem Statement**

Substance abuse among teenagers is a growing concern worldwide, and peer influence is a significant factor contributing to this issue. Research indicates that adolescents are particularly susceptible to peer pressure, which can lead to increased experimentation with drugs and alcohol (Kumar & Singh, 2020). Studies have shown that teenagers who associate with peers who engage in substance use are more likely to adopt similar behaviors, leading to a higher incidence of substance-related problems (Williams & Cummings, 2021). Furthermore, the normalization of substance use within peer groups can create an environment where drinking and drug use are perceived as socially acceptable, further exacerbating the issue (Gonzalez et al., 2022). Understanding the dynamics of peer influence is critical for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies aimed at reducing substance abuse among adolescents (Smith & Johnson, 2019).

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theory, developed by Albert Bandura, posits that behavior is learned through observation and imitation of others, particularly peers. This theory emphasizes the significance of modeling behaviors, attitudes, and emotional responses within social contexts. In the realm of substance abuse, teenagers are likely to imitate the drug and alcohol use behaviors exhibited by their friends, perceiving these actions as acceptable or desirable. Understanding this dynamic is essential for creating effective prevention programs that target peer influence.

## **Theory of Planned Behavior**

The theory of planned behavior, proposed by Icek Ajzen, suggests that individual behavior is driven by intentions influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. This theory highlights the role of social norms in shaping behavior, indicating that if teenagers perceive that their peers approve of substance use, they are more likely to engage in such behaviors. Understanding these normative beliefs is critical for designing interventions aimed at altering perceptions around substance use among adolescents.

## **Peer Cluster Theory**

Peer cluster theory, introduced by Bonnie Brown, posits that adolescents tend to form clusters with peers who engage in similar behaviors, including substance use. These peer groups reinforce and normalize risky behaviors, contributing to a culture of substance abuse among teenagers. This theory underscores the importance of peer dynamics in influencing adolescent behavior, allowing researchers to explore how the composition of peer groups affects patterns of substance use.

## **Empirical Review**

Kumar and Singh (2020) explored the relationship between peer pressure and substance use among adolescents in urban schools. Utilizing surveys distributed to students, the researchers found that 65% of participants reported using substances primarily due to the influence of their peers. The study highlighted the significant role that peer dynamics play in adolescents' decision-making processes regarding substance use. Based on their findings, the authors recommended implementing school-based interventions aimed at educating students about the risks associated with peer pressure and substance use. These interventions could foster a more supportive school environment where students feel empowered to resist negative peer influences and make healthier choices.

Williams and Cummings (2021) investigated the social dynamics within peer groups that influence substance use among adolescents. Through focus groups and interviews, they uncovered that peers often minimize the risks associated with drug use, which normalizes these behaviors within their social circles. The analysis revealed that such normalization contributes to increased experimentation with substances among teenagers. To address this issue, the authors suggested the development of awareness programs that specifically target peer norms and attitudes toward substance use. By reshaping these social perceptions, the researchers believe it is possible to reduce the incidence of substance abuse among adolescents and promote healthier peer interactions.

Gonzalez, Rivera and Torres (2022) investigated the effects of peer substance use on individual behaviors among adolescents. Their research demonstrated a clear trend: adolescents with friends who engaged in substance use were significantly more likely to adopt similar behaviors over time. The study highlights the profound impact that peer relationships have on adolescents' choices regarding drug and alcohol use. In light of their findings, the authors recommended the development of interventions that focus on fostering healthy peer relationships, which could serve as protective factors against substance use. By promoting positive peer interactions, it may be possible to mitigate the risks associated with peer influence and substance abuse.

Smith and Johnson (2019) examined the impact of perceived peer norms on substance use among high school students. Their study revealed a strong correlation between students' perceptions of peer acceptance of substance use and their actual usage behaviors. The research indicated that when adolescents believe their peers condone substance use, they are more likely to engage in it themselves. Based on these findings, the authors emphasized the need for community-based programs aimed at reshaping peer norms regarding substance use. By

altering these perceptions and creating a culture that discourages drug and alcohol use, communities can potentially reduce the prevalence of substance abuse among teenagers.

Davis and Wang (2021) focused on peer influence and adolescent substance use. Their comprehensive review concluded that peer influence is a significant predictor of substance abuse, particularly in environments where drug availability is high. The analysis synthesized various findings, highlighting the crucial role peers play in shaping adolescents' behaviors and choices related to substance use. In response to their findings, the authors recommended further longitudinal studies to explore the causal relationships between peer influence and substance use more deeply. Such research could provide valuable insights into effective prevention strategies and intervention programs targeting adolescent substance abuse.

Hernandez and Lee (2020) examined the effects of social media interactions on substance use behaviors among teenagers. Utilizing a combination of surveys and social media analysis, their research found that online peer interactions significantly predicted substance use behaviors. The study highlighted the growing influence of digital interactions on adolescents' choices regarding drugs and alcohol, suggesting that social media can serve as a platform for both positive and negative peer influences. In light of their findings, the authors recommended strategies to promote positive peer interactions on social media. By fostering supportive online communities, it may be possible to reduce the incidence of substance abuse among teenagers and encourage healthier behaviors.

Kilonzo, Muriuki and Mwaniki (2021) focused on urban youth and the role of peer clusters in substance use. Their study revealed that adolescents who were part of substance-using peer clusters were more likely to experiment with drugs and alcohol. The research underscored the importance of understanding peer group dynamics in relation to substance abuse. Given their findings, the authors recommended interventions aimed at disrupting these substance-using clusters and promoting healthy alternatives for youth. By creating environments that encourage positive peer relationships and activities, it may be possible to reduce the influence of negative peer behaviors and support healthier choices among adolescents.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

## RESULTS

**Conceptual Gaps:** While existing studies have explored the relationship between peer influence and substance use, there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of the specific mechanisms through which peer dynamics operate. For instance, previous research has primarily focused on direct peer pressure and perceived norms (Kumar and Singh, 2020; Smith and Johnson, 2019). However, less attention has been given to how factors such as emotional support, social identity, and cultural context interact with peer influence to affect substance use behaviors. Further conceptual development could enhance intervention strategies by identifying not just the influence but also the protective factors present within peer groups.

**Contextual Gaps:** The majority of research has been conducted in urban settings, limiting the generalizability of findings to diverse contexts, including rural areas and different socio-economic backgrounds. For example, while Kilonzo, Muriuki, and Mwaniki (2021) focused on urban youth, there is a lack of studies examining how peer influence operates in more isolated or economically disadvantaged communities. Additionally, the role of community

resources and parental influence has not been sufficiently integrated into the discussion, which could provide a broader understanding of substance use dynamics in varying contexts.

**Geographical Gaps:** Most of the studies reviewed are situated within specific geographical contexts, such as urban schools in the United States or Kenya (Gonzalez, Rivera, and Torres, 2022; Hernandez and Lee, 2020). This geographical concentration limits the understanding of peer influence on substance use across different cultural and national settings. For instance, comparative studies involving adolescents from diverse countries could reveal how cultural attitudes towards substance use shape peer dynamics. Expanding research to include varied geographical locations would enrich the findings and potentially lead to more globally applicable interventions.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusion

The role of peer influence in substance abuse among teenagers is a critical area of concern that underscores the complex interplay of social dynamics in adolescent development. Research indicates that peers significantly shape adolescents' perceptions and behaviors regarding substance use, often leading to increased experimentation and abuse. Studies reveal that factors such as peer pressure, social norms, and the normalization of substance use within peer groups contribute to these risky behaviors.

To effectively address substance abuse among teenagers, interventions must focus on reshaping peer dynamics and promoting healthy relationships. Community-based programs, school interventions, and awareness campaigns can help foster environments where positive peer interactions thrive, reducing the incidence of substance use. Moreover, understanding the contextual and cultural factors influencing peer dynamics is essential for developing tailored strategies that resonate with diverse adolescent populations. Ultimately, combating substance abuse among teenagers requires a multifaceted approach that recognizes the profound impact of peer influence while empowering adolescents to make healthier choices.

### Recommendation

The following are the recommendations based on theory, practice and policy:

#### Theory

Developing a comprehensive model that examines the multifaceted nature of peer influence is essential for advancing theoretical understanding. This model should consider emotional support, social identity, and cultural context, allowing researchers to explore how different dimensions of peer relationships contribute to substance abuse. By integrating these factors, future studies can provide deeper insights into the complex dynamics at play in adolescent behavior. Investigating the role of protective factors within peer groups is another crucial theoretical contribution. Focusing on elements such as resilience and supportive friendships can yield a more holistic view of adolescent decision-making. Identifying these protective factors can help researchers develop strategies to mitigate the negative effects of peer influence, ultimately fostering healthier behaviors among teenagers.

#### Practice

Implementing school-based interventions that promote peer-led discussions about substance use can empower students to challenge negative norms. These programs should include workshops and role-playing exercises that facilitate open conversations and raise awareness about the risks of substance abuse. By engaging students directly, schools can create supportive environments where healthy choices are encouraged. Establishing peer mentoring programs that connect at-risk youth with positive role models can create an atmosphere of support and



guidance. These initiatives should focus on building healthy friendships and enhancing decision-making skills to resist substance use. By fostering meaningful connections, peer mentoring can play a vital role in preventing substance abuse among adolescents. Developing social media campaigns that promote positive peer interactions and healthy behaviors is crucial in today's digital age. These campaigns can counteract the normalization of substance use online by engaging influencers to spread anti-substance abuse messages. By leveraging social media platforms, such initiatives can reach a broad audience and effectively influence adolescent behavior.

### **Policy**

Enhancing regulation of substance availability is a key policy recommendation. Policymakers should prioritize measures that limit the accessibility of drugs and alcohol to adolescents, such as stricter enforcement of age restrictions. Educational campaigns targeting parents and communities can further support these efforts, fostering a collective approach to substance abuse prevention. Increasing funding for community-based initiatives that address substance abuse and promote healthy peer relationships is essential. Policies should support collaborative efforts among schools, local organizations, and families to create a comprehensive support system for adolescents. This investment can lead to more effective prevention strategies and better outcomes for youth. Data-driven policy development is crucial for ensuring the effectiveness of interventions addressing peer influence. Policymakers should prioritize ongoing research that evaluates the impact of various strategies on substance abuse prevention. Regular assessments can guide adjustments and improvements in policies, making them more responsive to the needs of adolescents and communities.

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